



THE
BOY
I GREW
UP
WITH

NYT BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TIJAN

THE BOY I GREW UP WITH

T I J A N

CONTENTS

Prologue

1. Heather
2. Heather
3. Channing
4. Heather
5. Heather
6. Channing
7. Heather
8. Heather
9. Channing
10. Channing
11. Heather
12. Heather
13. Heather
14. Heather
15. Channing
16. Heather
17. Channing
18. Heather
19. Heather
20. Heather
21. Heather
22. Channing
23. Heather
24. Heather
25. Channing

26. Heather
27. Channing
28. Heather
29. Heather
30. Heather
31. Heather
32. Heather
33. Channing
34. Heather
35. Heather
36. Heather
37. Channing
38. Heather
39. Heather
40. Heather
41. Heather
42. Heather
43. Channing
44. Heather
45. Channing
46. Heather
47. Heather
48. Channing
49. Heather
50. Channing
51. Heather
52. Heather

53. [Heather](#)
54. [Channing](#)
55. [Channing](#)
56. [Channing](#)
57. [Heather](#)
58. [Heather](#)
59. [Channing](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[A note](#)

[Fallen Crest Bonus Scene](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also by Tijan](#)

[Crew](#)

[Logan Kade](#)

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Ebook cover image by Luis Rafael Photography

Paperback cover image by Franggy Yanez

For my sister.

For Jonah.

PROLOGUE

HEATHER

First grade

CHANNING MONROE IS A SELFISH PRICK.

I could think that because I'd heard my mom use the phrase. If adults said it, so could I. So I said it, to his face. And I glared. I didn't care who overheard me.

Until I heard: "Heather Jax!"

I tried to explain to Mrs. Buxton that he wanted to use my Trapper Keeper, but it was *mine*. I wasn't giving or sharing or loaning, and when he'd growled at me, that's when I hit him in the head.

A girl has a right to defend herself was another phrase popular with my mom. I mean, she said it when she was grumbling to herself and smoking on our new house's front porch.

But back to what happened earlier today.

Mrs. Buxton sided with Channing, *for the first time ever*.

She never sides with Channing. He's trouble, with a big T. See? Grammar. I'm learning. But anyway, he gets into trouble more than me. I only get in trouble when it has to do with him.

Go figure.

But I guess violence "wasn't the answer."

I disagreed. So did Channing. He told me after class that violence could end any fight. That made it seem like it was *always* the answer. He whispered that to me at recess, and then he gave me a weird look.

He stepped back, eyeing me, and before I could ask what was wrong with him, he hit me square in the chest. "You're it!"

He took off running.

So did I.

Game on, sucker.

I chased him down, tackled him, and got in trouble *again*.

Mrs. Buxton was everywhere! Or the chaperone for recess was, but still. Ev-er-y-wh-errrrre.

After that, I had to promise something to get out of trouble. At that point, I was willing to promise anything, but when I told her I'd give Channing one of my brother Brandon's old Trapper Keepers, she gave me a weird look too.

Then she knelt down and whispered in my ear, "That's very kind of you, Heather. Not everyone has the necessities at home."

Necessi...teeth?

I didn't know what that had to do with me needing new teeth, but I'd say anything to get out of a phone call to my

parents.

I was thinking about that promise as I got out of bed that night to go to the bathroom. I needed to ask Mom about where Brandon's old ones were. She'd been gone all day, even after supper and when we went to bed.

I didn't know where she went. Her bags and clothes were gone too, but I heard voices as I slipped into the hallway. That meant Mom was home.

She was talking to Dad.

I needed to pee, then go tell her about the Trapper Keeper thing. If I didn't do it now, I'd probably forget, and she never got out of bed before we went to school. Mrs. Buxton would follow up with her threat and call home. No way, no sir!

I was halfway to the bathroom when I heard my dad. "I am not disrupting their life any more than it's already going to be."

"Come on." A female voice.

I paused. That wasn't Mom.

I didn't know who that was.

"You're not thinking straight," she continued. "Heather—"

"If you're going to tell me Heather is young, that she'll bounce back, you can leave this house right now. Their lives are going to be uprooted enough. I'm not pulling them out of one school and putting them in a different one."

"You don't have a choice. The district line—"

My dad overrode her, again. He was speaking so harshly.

"Manny's is on the border. We moved here because of her mother. I will not disrupt her life *again* because of her mother.

I have friends in the county office. I will pull in favors if need be, but I am not moving my children—not unless they decide they want to change.”

Wait.

What...?

HEATHER

PRESENT DAY

*I don't even want to say how much later this is. I'm old. That's
when.*

Mid-twenties.

Or early-twenties.

Around that time frame.

You don't need to know any more.

I'm old.

That's it.

Wait—not that old.

I mean...

We're done here.

“GET OFF HIS DICK!”

Those words, being screamed at—hold on, I have to roll over—at six in the morning were what woke me up. I'd had a whole three hours of sleep—three hours after I sent my night manager home and said I'd close Manny's, and three hours after I took pity on my entire night staff and sent them home

too. I'd decided drinking a bottle of bourbon and cleaning was the ultimate adulting job to do.

Stupidest. Adult. Ever.

"Ugh." I groaned as I pulled myself to a somewhat upright position. I couldn't fully sit up because my stomach was threatening to come out of my mouth. Letting my head fall with gravity was the best option for not spewing out the two pieces of toast I'd had before falling into bed three hours ago.

I am an idiot.

"I mean it!"

A second scream, followed by a thump from below me.

"Get off his dick! Get your dick out of her, you, you, you classless vixen!"

"Holy fuck, Brianna—"

"It's Rebecca! Proper names are just respectful."

"Rebecca—holy shit!" my brother roared.

Then came a crash, a second thump, and "STOP!"

"Get her out of here!" said a new voice, more shrill.

Even upstairs I could tell the new girl didn't have the twinge of hysteria the first girl had. She wouldn't cut it—not long term, not with my brother. Brandon moaned constantly about not finding his "girl," but the truth was, he found her in a new female about three times a week. And I knew that because he brought them home to the house I shared with him—the house he and I had lived in all our lives.

We were both adults now. We *should've* moved out and into our own places, but neither of us ever brought up the topic. Though, mornings like this, I was tempted to.

”HEATHER! HELP ME!”

The T-rex roared. I almost felt the floorboards move. No. I peered closer. That was just dust. My breath made it move.

I tried to yell back, but a garbled burp left me instead, and I nodded to myself.

Totally can do this.

Oh yes.

My older brother needed my help fighting off his two one-night stands.

“HEATHER!”

“Shut up,” I yelled back, finally heaving myself up and toward the door.

Wait. Backtrack. Grab the robe.

I slept in the nude. We didn’t need that very awkward and uncomfortable scene—clearly it already was all kinds of that.

I was up and making it down the stairs, trying not to tip over, but I wasn’t quite prepared for what I walked into.

I could see Brandon’s bare ass in his doorway as he held a towel in front of his dick. Thank God.

I must’ve grunted or made some sound because he looked over, and the relief was evident. His whole face relaxed, and his shoulders seemed to lower.

“Can you help me?” He nodded toward his room, moving over so I could see.

His bathroom door was shut, the light showing underneath.

There was only one girl in the room, so I assumed the other had taken flight. She showed some smarts. Maybe he

could keep her around for a second night.

But the Get-Off-His-Dick girl was a problem.

Hands on her hips, she stood with frayed and frizzy blond hair that was either a bad attempt at an eighties hairstyle or she was embracing the lion part of “I am woman, hear me roar.” Either way, this girl wasn’t one to screw over—dilated eyes, beet red face, and very bright and slightly smudged red lipstick.

No hate against the red lipstick. I’m a fan of it myself, but it’s a weapon. And this girl had so much of it caked on that she was going for the desperate/stalker/you-better-fear-me-because-I’ve-got-a-slasher-knife-in-my-backpack-and-I-put-three-tracking-devices-on-you-before-you-even-talked-to-me vibe.

I shifted back and gave Brandon a side-eye look. “Really?”

He rolled his eyes and shrugged. “What? She was hot that night.” He muttered under his breath, “And I was tanked.”

“Heather.” The girl flicked some of her hair off her shoulder in a haughty motion. “You can understand my frustration here, can you not? He courted me. He wined and dined me, and now I *keep* finding him with a new girl every night.” Her lip curled, and she threw a sneer at the bathroom door. “He could do better too. I’m at least an eight. She’s a six.”

“I heard that!” Something thumped against the inside of the bathroom door. “You’re psychotic!”

“I’m not psychotic. I take offense to that. I’m very classy.”

“You’re delusional.” The bathroom girl huffed. “I’m calling the police!”

Oh.

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

That gave me a jolt. Some of my hangover dissipated. “Let’s not be hasty here.” I raised my voice. “Right? No police need to be called.”

Who wanted police called to their house? Hello. No one. Certainly not me. That’d been instilled at an early age by a chain-smoking mama before she ditched me, and enforced by an on-again-off-again boyfriend who had more than his fair share of run-ins with the cops. Not to mention, cops. They were cops.

No one needed that attention.

I turned and glared at Brandon. “This is your problem. Why am I fixing it?”

He gestured to the crazy girl with a brisk wave. “I can’t do anything with her. She’s not moving. If I touch her...”

Fuck. Shit. Fuckety shit, shit, shit. I had a whole slew of curses in my head, but he was right. Somewhat. This girl was the type to call assault if he touched her arm. She was talking like she had such class, but it was all bullshit.

And how had she gotten in here?

“You.” I pointed at Psycho Girl.

“Me?” She adopted an innocent drawl, and just like that, the stalker vibe vanished. She even smoothed a hand over her hair, attempting a demure look. “You must see my side of this. I mean, it’s not proper etiquette to court one woman and then be involved in a sex tryst with a *whore* behind my back.”

Shit like that set my teeth on grinder.

I started for her. “It’s time to go. Now.”

“I’m calling the cops!” The girl inside the bathroom hollered again. “So doing it. Right now. My finger’s on the nine as I’m speaking.”

“And you!” I went to the door and slammed a fist against it. “You call the cops here and you’re banned from Manny’s.”

I considered that the ace up my sleeve.

She gasped through the door, “What?”

Manny’s is the bar and grill Brandon and I run. It was our dad’s, named after him, but when he decided retirement and an RV caravan were his next mission in life, we took it over. I’m the official owner, but Brandon runs the bar. It’s another reason we’re both in this house. It’s right behind the place that is our life.

Well...

Full disclosure here: Manny’s is more my life than Brandon’s. He goes clubbing. He has friends. He has one-night stands, as is annoyingly obvious right now. This is because he’s more okay with letting the night manager close the bar for him, while I still struggle—hence three hours ago.

All that to say, I don’t issue threats like that lightly.

No matter who was inside Brandon’s bathroom, it would suck for her not to be allowed in Manny’s. I’m not being cocky; I’m being factual. Our place is popular in a town that houses a whole heap of millionaires. Most social circles enjoy getting drunk there.

She sniffled, and a low, guttural growl followed. “You wouldn’t.”

I would, and she knew it. So did Get Off His Dick, and I locked eyes with her. One problem done, the second soon to follow.

“You gotta go,” I said it flatly, and then waited.

“But...” She started to rally up a protest, but I shook my head.

“I mean it.” I jerked my thumb toward the door. “You have a problem with Brandon, you bring it up to him later, when he’s fully clothed. You can be mad at him. I don’t give a rat’s ass, but not here, not on my time, and not when you know his dick is in some other girl.”

“I didn’t.”

I raised an eyebrow, and she stopped herself.

Her eyes lowered. “I thought he liked me.” She sniffled, but no guttural growl came after. Her tone changed. There was no bullshit, no act. She was really hurt, and I looked back to Brandon.

The girl in the bathroom wasn’t immune either. She murmured a pitying, “Oh.”

A flicker of regret flared over Brandon’s face for a moment. His head dropped, and he coughed, clearing his throat. “I know this might be hurtful...”

The sad girl vanished, and her head whipped back up. “You *don’t care!*”

Nope. It was an act. We were all suckers.

Her eyes went wild. She jabbed her finger in the air at him, and then she launched.

I saw it coming the second he opened his mouth, and I was ready. Stepping forward, my shoulder hit hers, slamming her body into the closet doors.

“Move, Brandon!” I yelled.

He lunged around me, and I kept going with my momentum.

Grabbing her arm, I steered her to the hallway and placed a hand on her back, walking her toward the door before she realized she was being manhandled out of the house.

“But—what?”

“Time for you to go.” I kept a smile in my voice.

Pet the hair. Make her feel good. *Yes, yes. We’re just going out here for a present. That’s all we’re doing.* That’s the feeling I gave her until I had the door open and could deliver one more hard nudge to her back.

She almost stumbled to the porch, and I would’ve felt bad, seeing how bewildered she was, but the girl was crazy. When she was completely outside, I stood in the doorway and crossed my arms over my chest. I was a medium-height lady with tanned and toned legs and a kimono robe that stopped just below my vagina.

I knew how I looked.

I could do crazy too. Hell, some of the time I did. That look works, usually, but it wouldn’t right now. Instead I pulled out my tough-bitch boss look and lifted my head, looking down my nose at her.

“You think you’re scary. You’re not.” Scary was going an entire life without a mom. That was tough. “You think you’re tough. You might be, but you’re not in this situation. Not

against me.” I wasn’t mincing words. “You pull that shit, and you’re exiled from Manny’s too.”

“But—” she sputtered.

“You know my brother’s reputation. He sleeps with everyone, and don’t tell me he made you all these sweet promises, because the one thing he *isn’t* is a liar. He’s no liar. He might be a whiny manwhore at times, but he doesn’t say pretty words to pretty girls that he doesn’t mean. It’s not in his DNA.”

I would know. I share it.

I motioned behind her to the sidewalk that connected our house to Manny’s and the empty alley that went past to the parking lot.

“Get out of here, and I don’t want to see you around—for a week at least.”

“Heather—”

I shut the door, and to add insult to injury, I locked it. “Don’t piss me off. I’m the wrong Jax to tangle with.”

She must’ve had some smarts because I heard her sigh, and a second later her heels clicked against the front porch as she left.

“Hey. Thanks.” Brandon was back in the doorway of his room, boxers on now.

I heard his bathroom door open behind him and waved a tired hand.

“Yeah, yeah.” My hangover slammed back in place, tenfold. I rubbed at my temples and started for the stairs. “Do me a favor? Stop bringing your girls here.”

He chuckled, watching me move upstairs. “I owe you. I’m sorry, Heather. I really am.”

I was too tired to acknowledge that, but a different thought came to me. “Download a ringer that sounds like police sirens. Maybe we can use it later to scare her away?”

He laughed. “Only if you do too.”

Yeah. Yeah, maybe I would.

A second later, his door shut, and I heard him crooning to his remaining girl.

I hit the second floor, turning to my room.

Letting my kimono robe fall, I crawled under my covers, my blessed and heavenly covers. That’s when I rolled over to see a pair of dark male eyes staring back at me. They turned into smoldering bedroom eyes, and then a smirk and a smooth drawl came out.

“Feel like screwing around?”

HEATHER

““G et out.”

I had three different reactions at once.

One, my body instantly turned into a warm, toasty, throbbing red button—the type you see in the movies that the president has to push to start a world war. That was me, but it wasn't to start a war—just an explosion. That's how I always felt whenever my on-again, off-again ex showed up. Two, annoyance. I had just gotten rid of one of Brandon's bedmates. I didn't need to deal with the one I'd had since we were kids. By the time we were in fifth grade, Channing was crawling into my room and bed multiple times a week. The kissing, then making out, then having sex started much later, at an appropriate-but-probably-still-too-early age.

And the last reaction: my stomach had some definite upheaval gusto. I clamped my mouth shut as a surge of throw up started traveling upward.

“Mmmmmm!” I hummed in warning, shoving the covers back and dashing for my bathroom.

I got there just in time, but no throw up. I was just dry heaving, which was almost worse because my stomach kept trying to empty itself, but couldn't.

I felt a footstep on the floorboards behind me before a hand came to my forehead. A gentle touch smoothed my hair from my face and pulled it all back in a low ponytail. He grabbed one of my bands from the cabinet and pulled my hair through, securing it without making it too tight.

He'd done this a time or two. Or twenty.

He sank down next to me, and I wiped the back of my hand across my mouth. "You're a pro at that."

His smirk was there, but gentler. "Been doing that for you for years. I should be by now."

Channing Monroe.

This is usually the time when the girl cringes from embarrassment as the guy she's in love with sees her at her worst, sick over a toilet. Not me. And not this guy.

He'd been "mine" in some form or other almost my whole life. To say our trek together had been one with upheavals, peaks, climaxes, and downfalls—that'd just be an understatement.

I thought we'd gotten our shit together, and I thought we were on the marrying track, but then we broke up again last year. We were currently at the stage where we were together in bed, but not out of it.

I didn't know how I felt about that, to be honest.

But at this moment, he was the only person I wanted in that bathroom with me, and he could see it in my face.

Once I softened, one of his drool-worthy dimples showed, and he reached for me.

"Come on." He lifted me up, with the same gentleness as before, and pulled me into his lap, my back to his chest. His

arms came around me, but they didn't lock in front of me. He turned so our feet were around the toilet, so if I needed to lurch forward... Which I did just now.

I leaned over the toilet and waited for my stomach to stop its useless heaving.

He rubbed my back the entire time, and when I was done, I leaned into him.

“What are you doing here?”

His arms tightened a little around me, and his hand rubbed over my leg. I was buck naked in his arms. I should've dressed, but I didn't have the energy.

His breath felt good on my neck as he answered. “I was up with the guys. I missed you.”

Meaning: he'd either been fighting or drinking with the group of guys he considered more family than family.

I lifted one of his hands to inspect the knuckles, rubbing a thumb over them. “They don't look bruised up.”

His body tensed, all six feet of pure muscle.

Channing had a face for the fashion runways, a body of tattoos that could appear in any magazine, and an attitude that made him a leader among the rowdiest and most criminally inclined. He was whip smart, ruthless, cunning, cocky, and had a charming side that had started some of our fights. He could be *too* charming at times, putting his name on a lot of girls' to-do lists. It'd been a problem for us since we were kids, and though it'd gotten better over the last few years, I knew women came onto him regularly.

But being transparent here, that wasn't the cause of our problems lately.

His voice was quiet. “I wasn’t fighting.”

I turned and tried to smell his breath. There was a slight trace of bourbon, but that might’ve been mine. “You don’t seem drunk either.”

He chuckled, his eyes studying every inch of my face. He did this when he was trying to figure out where I was going with my statements and if that’d take us into a fight. We acted like we were married and in our sixties by now.

His thumb went to my mouth and pressed there, softly. “I really was just hanging out with the guys. Cruz came over, said you closed for him. I gambled, thought maybe you’d be up—or not.” That dimple again. “I was hoping just to slide in next to you.”

I sighed, and his thumb caressed my cheek before his hand returned to my leg. I moved back, resting in his arms again.

“I *was* sleeping, but Brandon had a girl problem.”

His chuckle soothed me. “I heard. I slipped past, but not before I saw his ass. Your brother needs to work out more.”

“He would take offense to that.”

“No, he wouldn’t.”

He was right.

“He’d agree with me.”

I agreed with that too.

Brandon was older, but he looked up to Channing. A lot of people did.

“You feeling better?” His hand moved to my stomach, and I closed my eyes, enjoying the warmth there.

I felt my stomach settle. “I think so.”

His arms tightened around me, and he stood, lifting me with him.

Channing grew up fighting. He'd been doing it since elementary school when his two friends tried to steal my Halloween candy. He stole theirs instead, and the whole friend status between those guys changed to best friends. Boys. I didn't get it. They'd followed him ever since that day, and now he was considering retiring from an underground fighting ring that operated in Roussou.

Because of that, he could easily lift me, so I just closed my eyes and enjoyed the feeling as he carried me to bed.

He placed me between the covers, tucking them over me.

He disappeared into the hallway. I heard him go downstairs. The fridge opened, and a moment later, he returned with a glass of water. He set it on the nightstand next to me.

“You want mouthwash?”

I nodded, and he grabbed it, along with a cup and a little bowl I had left on the counter. I sat up, cleaned my mouth out, and sipped my water as he took everything back to the bathroom. A second later, he returned. Both doors were shut, and he pulled the drapes over my window so no sunlight could get through. It cast the room into darkness, and I heard the familiar sounds of him shedding his clothes.

The sheet lifted behind me, and he curled up around me.

God.

Moments like this, my heart burst with love for him.

I loved how he held me, carried me, took care of me. I loved how his hand curved over my thigh and then fell to my

stomach, and how a part of me wanted him to slide it between my legs, but I knew he wouldn't. He knew I didn't feel good, so this morning wasn't about the sex I knew he'd originally come for. It was about comfort, and as I felt him slide his leg between mine and tangle our hands together, I knew he was about to fall asleep.

"I'm glad you came over." The words slipped out before I knew I was going to say them.

His arms tightened, just a fraction. "Me too."

I felt him smile against my shoulder, and his thumb rose up to touch my nipple before falling back to my stomach.

"Rest, Heather. We can talk later."

CHANNING

C hrist.

What was I doing here?

A hurricane railroaded me. That's how I felt waking up.

I was in Heather's room. I looked over to find her curled away from me. Glancing down, I learned my dick was ecstatic to see her.

She'd been sick last night, or—checking my phone—a few hours ago. She was breathing deeply now, and she looked better. She wasn't pale anymore.

The plan had been to give her space. *Had been*, the operative words there.

“Hmmm?” Heather rolled toward me, her eyes still closed. She was still sleeping.

Man. Just looking at her, I ached—in more than one way.

The tug-of-war between staying away and being drawn to her was a real struggle for me. I hated being broken up, but it was what it was. That was the rotation for us right now. And I knew I shouldn't, but I reached over and smoothed my hand over her cheek. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen in my life. I'd thought it when I was in third grade, and I

thought it now. I've liked Heather since first, but I think I liked that Trapper Keeper more. Third grade was when my real smarts hit me. It never changed after that, and it never diminished. Heather was the shit. She was the girl all other girls wanted to be, or should be. The woman was hella loyal, sexy as fuck, smarter than anyone I knew, and she had the mouth to suck my dick off or kick my ass to the curb, literally.

She wasn't one to fuck over, and I felt the same shame, guilt, and anger roll around inside me like I always did.

Here's a secret: I know the root of our problems, but Heather doesn't.

She just loves me, and that's her curse, because she shouldn't. I'm the worst goddamn asshole for her.

Not wanting to give in and kiss her awake, then slip inside her, I forced myself to grab my stuff and ease out of her room.

"Hey, loser."

I jerked the door shut more than I wanted to, and twisted to glare at Brandon. He was at the bottom of the stairs, in almost the same get-up as myself. Only he was half-clothed, and I wasn't.

I tiptoed down the stairs, pulling my shirt on first. After getting the jeans and everything else, I itched my face with my middle finger. "Fucker."

He smirked, following me as I went to the coffee pot and filled a cup. He leaned against the fridge, drinking from his.

"So you're a surprise." He seemed to think about that and amended, "Okay. Maybe not such a surprise." He indicated upstairs with his mug. "I didn't know Heather had anyone up there."

I topped my cup off with some creamer and glared again. “Because she shouldn’t have just anyone. It would be me, me alone. Right?” That all came out cocky—but no, seriously. “Right?”

Brandon laughed, rolling his eyes. “My sister’s too good for you, Monroe.”

I grunted. That was one thing we agreed on. I was tempted to salute him with my coffee, but he didn’t deserve it. Though he *was* a fucker I’d grown up with and loved like a brother too.

I glanced up. I’d been listening for any sounds of Heather moving up there and didn’t hear any. She must’ve stayed asleep.

“You had a scrape with Stalker B?” I asked. “I overheard when I snuck in.”

He almost choked, some of his coffee sputtering out. “What?” His face drained of color. “You’re joking. Right? About the stalker comment. Right?”

I shook my head. “One of my guys slept with her one night, and it took him a long time to shake her.” I grinned. This was my revenge for him calling me *loser*. The rest I deserved. “You’re fucked, buddy.”

He coughed, pounding his chest. “How long is long? And who?”

“Congo.”

Congo was one of my ride-or-die friends, and he wasn’t a guy to get stalkers. Might’ve been connected to his bald head, hands that looked like he ate trees for breakfast, and his seriously mean face. He was one of my most trusted guys, but

he was just plain mean-looking. There was no other way to describe him.

I enjoyed telling Brandon this.

Brandon Jax was nice, but he tended not to give Heather enough credit. Call me overprotective or whatever, but that always burned me. She'd taken Manny's on when their dad abandoned it—and abandoned them. They thought of it differently, but the SOB had done just that. He took off in an RV caravan with a bunch of retired buddies, and the last I heard, they'd all set up shop in Florida. Brandon didn't want to deal with the real work of Manny's, so Heather did.

It was the same quality that allowed her to keep loving me.

She should've walked away from me years ago.

Brandon groaned. "How long, Channing?"

I smiled now, saluting him with my coffee. "It took him a year. How many times did you sleep with her?"

"Oh my God." He looked as if he'd been stabbed in the gut. His hand cradled his stomach. "Twice. I was with her twice."

I laughed. "Yeah. You're fucked."

"This isn't funny, Channing."

I sipped my coffee. "It is from my view."

"Shiiiiit."

He tipped his head back, a long groan coming from his throat. His hands went to his hair and balled up in fists. It was then that his bedroom door opened and a girl came out, slipping her arm through a shirt. Her hair was a little messy,

and her jean skirt still unbuckled. She carried flip-flops in her hands.

“I’m ready to—” She looked up and saw me, and her voice trailed off. “Go...”

It was the same chick who’d been hitting on my cousin last night. She paled, and I grinned. This would be fun.

I raised my mug to her. “We had a wager where’d you end up after Scratch sent you packing.” My eyes slid to Brandon, then back to her. “Didn’t know it’d be here, but it makes sense. Going from Tuesday Tits to Manny’s.”

She gulped, but I didn’t care. The stalker was funny. But this girl, she hopped from bed to bed looking for the next guy to bankroll her life.

“Channing.” Her head lowered, and so did her voice. “Please.”

“What’s going on?” Brandon looked between the two of us. “Chan?”

“She’s just a one-night regret, right?”

“What?”

I relented. “She was at the bar last night. Hit on me first, then Chad, Linc, and the last one who said no was Scratch. She kept asking for a threesome.” She was squirming. The back of her neck was red, and I loved it. “Right? Said you’d always dreamed about doing two of me, and my cousin was good enough.”

“Stop.” Another soft plea.

Brandon’s mouth flattened, and he touched her back. His tone almost matched hers. “I’ll give you a ride home.”

She looked up, her eyes grateful. She nodded, then stormed out of the kitchen, avoiding me. Brandon stayed put and winced as the screen door slammed behind her. He ran a hand down his face, and handed over his coffee.

I took it as he murmured, “She was at your bar?”

I put his coffee on the counter, moving to refill my cup. “She’s a regular.”

He grimaced. “Fuck.” Then he nodded, clapping me on the shoulder. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

I relaxed just as he swatted my shoulder again, spilling my coffee.

Swearing, I dumped it in the sink and threw him a dark look. “Really?”

He chuckled, grabbing his car keys and heading out. “That’s for whatever dick thing you do next.”

“Fucker!” I yelled after him, but not too loud in case Heather was still sleeping. I doubted she was, though, and after rinsing my cup and Brandon’s, I wasn’t surprised to hear her bedroom door open upstairs.

A pair of tanned feet came down the stairs, and a short pair of jean shorts—just how I liked them—were next. She’d pulled on the white tank that dipped low into her cleavage without a bra. I knew she’d put a bra on later, but for now, I enjoyed the view.

She was perfect.

“How are you feeling?”

She groaned, coming next to me and reaching for the coffee. “This morning sucks.”

I'd already checked before I slipped from the bed, but I needed to do it once more. Grabbing a loop on her shorts, I tugged her over and pressed a hand to her forehead. She wasn't burning up. Her color was normal. She looked a little flushed, but that was probably just from waking up. They didn't have the air conditioner on, so her room could get heated.

She yawned, rubbing at her eyes, standing between my legs.

"You feeling better?"

She nodded, her eyes still closed and still yawning. Around it, she mumbled out, "Aah. Ank u." She finished, and a cute little grin showed. She repeated, "Yes. And thank you for taking care of me last night."

I nodded, falling silent.

A normal boyfriend/girlfriend would talk about the evening before. How it was. What we did. How we felt. What made us laugh. What pissed us off. You know, general couple conversation.

We weren't boyfriend/girlfriend. We were ex-boyfriend/girlfriend.

My chest swelled up.

I wanted to talk to her about all that. I almost thirsted for it.

The rules weren't clear because no matter what our status was, I couldn't stay away. The whole emotional sharing/supporting you thing—that was a bunch of gray for us.

So I just stuck to what I knew wouldn't mess up our rules.

I did the guy thing and pointed to my crotch. "I'm excited to see you."

She snorted, but rested back against me. “Right. Well, your dick needs to get sad because I’m in no mood for a ride.”

See? Fucking hilarious and feisty at the same time. Pun intended.

I nuzzled her neck. “I’m pretty sure I can get you in the mood for *any* ride.” I ran my hand down her side and paused on her thigh.

Just this small touch, this small interaction, and my body was buzzing.

I really would have to let her go or I’d have her bent over the counter in a few seconds, but...not yet. Not yet. Not now. Not ever. But shit didn’t roll that way.

“Sure about that?”

My hand dipped under her shorts and rested just above her clit.

Her whole body leaned into me, her head falling to my shoulder. I held her up until she tensed, pulling away.

“It’s too early,” she protested.

I chuckled, letting her go. “It’s after ten in the morning.”

“What?” She whipped around. “No way.”

I nodded, fighting the urge to grab her again, and gestured out their kitchen window. Manny’s had been up and running since early that morning. Despite her inability to let go, Heather had people in place to take the reins when she wasn’t around. This morning wasn’t any different. The parking lot was full. It was nearing brunch, and then lunch after that. The only time Manny’s was slow was two to three, and then the high school crowd trickled in.

“Suki opened,” I told her.

She yawned, her shoulders relaxing.

“It’s fine.”

Ah, screw it. I reached for her and pulled her back to me.

A moan-groan slipped from her. She rested against me like before. “Don’t you have a teenage sister to stalk? Make sure she’s alive?”

I did, and—and nothing. Goddamn. She was right.

I didn’t respond, but Heather felt my shift. She turned to fully face me, sliding her arms around my waist. Tipping back, her eyes searched mine.

My pops went to prison a while back, and I became Bren’s guardian. It’d been a rocky road since then, and in a week, she was starting her last year of high school. I had one more year before she could claim adulthood and do whatever she wanted. To say I hadn’t been the best brother until that day two years ago was an understatement. Along with Heather, I tended to let my sister down. A lot.

More than a lot.

But unlike Heather, who could conquer the world if she managed to leave me in the dust one day, my sister depended on me.

“Hey.” Heather’s tone softened. She tapped my forehead. “Think of it this way. Your mom is gone. Your dad is gone. You’re still here, so you can’t really do any worse than them. Right?”

She knew what I was thinking, like always.

But she didn’t know all of it.

There was a lot of bad shit in my life. I could be dangerous. I was worse when I was younger, but I was getting better. I *would* be better.

I had to.

I have a sister to raise, whether she wants me to or not.

Heather was waiting for me to respond, but I couldn't go there. That was the emotional sharing/supporting gray area for us. Sex was different. Sex was something we both needed, like water. It was how we were, but the emotional sharing, that was a privilege I didn't let her in on. It wasn't fair.

There was a small bit of space between us, so I grabbed her hips and pulled her flush against me.

She felt how much I wanted her, and I smirked, dropping my mouth to just an inch above hers. "How about a quick dip?"

She groaned, but she was already twining her arms around my neck. I grabbed her legs and hoisted her up. We both knew I was joking.

There was never a quick dip when it came to Heather.

"You can be so crude sometimes."

I smacked her on the ass, carrying her up the stairs.

I was crude for a reason.

HEATHER

FIRST GRADE

“**W**hat’s wrong?” Channing asked me.

One of Brandon’s old Trapper Keepers dropped to the ground with a thud. I had shoved it at him in the hallway earlier. A bag dropped next. A jacket. Then Channing himself. He slid down next to me, his back to the little lockers we were given.

I was sitting against mine, far enough down the hallway that I could still see the principal’s office.

I gestured to the office. “My dad’s in there. He’s fighting.”

“Why?” Channing kicked the Trapper Keeper out of the way, his knees pulling up. He leaned forward and locked his hands around them, staring at me.

All the girls in school liked him.

I mean, I guess I could understand why.

He was cute. Dark blond hair. I don’t know—how do you describe when you know a boy is cute? He’s just cute. But he was a pain in my ass. (Another phrase my mom liked to use.) He didn’t throw things at other girls, poke them, laugh at them, get their names put on the board. He only did that to me.

Pain. In. My. Ass.

Though maybe I should stop thinking like my mom. I mean...

I frowned at him. "They want us to go to Fallen Crest."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "We moved there. My mom wanted to open a restaurant."

Should I tell him? We were, like, mortal enemies—like in the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles way. I was a kick-ass turtle, and he was Shredder.

I dropped my head toward my lap and whispered, "She left last night."

I tensed, waiting for...something. I didn't know what. Questions? For him to blame me, maybe?

There was quiet instead, and I lifted my head to look at him.

He stared at me, his face totally blank, and then he shrugged. "Is it wrong that I wish she'd taken my dad with her?"

Um... I don't know.

He shrugged again. "Don't sweat it. Parents aren't that super, in my opinion."

"What do you mean?"

"I like my mom, but..." He shook his head. "Don't get like other kids and start thinking the parent who left is Santa Claus or something. Your mom left. Get over it. Stick with the one who stayed."

"Channing—"

He stood, grabbing his bag, his Trapper Keeper. He looked down at me. “I’m sorry about your mom, but if she left, she’s a bitch. She’s not worth remembering. If they hurt you, they never are.”

He turned and went to his locker, my brother’s Trapper Keeper tucked under his arm.

HEATHER

PRESENT DAY

Channing took off after coming. Literally.
But I wasn't expecting him to stick around.

Once he turned his phone on, the barrage of texts and alerts started. A lot of people depended on him so...yeah...it wasn't long until I saw his taillights.

It was still midday before I went to Manny's, crossing the small gravel alley and back area to reach the rear door of the restaurant.

There were a few trees for shade and five or six picnic tables set up. It used to be our only outside seating area, but last summer we did a renovation and expanded a side sitting area in the front. Because of that, the back part wasn't used as often anymore.

But it was occupied today, and I spied a bunch of high-schoolers there, though none who had dark, doe-like eyes, a long dark mane of hair, and a kick-ass attitude. No one whose name started with a B and ended with an n, and whose older brother had just left my bed.

No one that I *knew* wouldn't have been blowing his phone up. Bren rarely texted and even more rarely called. I wasn't sure if she carried her phone on her half the time.

Recognizing one, I weaved over to him. “Alex Ryerson.”

He was a punk kid and looked like the typical jock type, but I didn’t know if he was actually an athlete or not. He ran a crew in Roussou, and I knew he’d tangled with Channing’s sister on more than a few occasions.

He turned, and a lecherous sneer started to form.

I waved my hand. “Stop. I don’t want to hear it.” He usually had some pickup line.

Because I was talking to their leader, all other conversations stopped. Heads turned our way—even some of the kids I thought were from Fallen Crest.

Not to stereotype, but most people from Fallen Crest were rich. Or they were getting richer as I aged. Most kids from Roussou were not, and they wore a hardened exterior. It was in their eyes, the way they walked, even how they failed to react when violence came their way.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him.

A cocky smile spread over his face, and he held his arms out, stepping away so his back was toward the group. He raised his voice, letting them know he was speaking for them. “Hanging out. We got a week left. It’s still summer, Ms. Jax.”

I snorted. Cripes. Now he was calling me my mother’s name.

I looked at every single person. Oh yeah. I counted maybe eight girls from Fallen Crest—I could tell by the fear in their eyes—and the rest were Roussou.

“You all Ryerson’s crew?”

I knew the boys who hung out with Channing’s sister. They were *not* Ryerson crew. They’d been best friends since

elementary and middle school; that was the way Roussou people were.

They weren't here.

I wasn't sure if I should be relieved or worried.

Most of the crowd nodded in response to my question. The Fallen Crest girls edged away. Seeing their uncertainty and their second-tier fashion choices, I figured they weren't from Fallen Crest Academy. That was the private school in town. The other school was Fallen Crest Public, where these girls likely attended, just like I had.

"Look," I told Alex. "You guys start any fighting and you're banned. You got it?"

"Of course, Ms. Jax—"

"I'm not fucking around, Ryerson. One fight and I'll get a cop to park in this lot for his coffee breaks. Understand me?" I shifted closer, my eyes level and hard. But I didn't need to do anything more than issue my threat.

He got it. His smirk faded and his tone changed too. "If we fight, we'll leave. Promise."

That was good enough for me, so I headed inside.

I'd gone two steps through the door before I heard my brother behind me. "You're kinda all about banning people lately, huh?"

I threw him a glance but kept moving down the hallway to my office. "That was a high school kid slightly above being in a gang, and the other was your stalker. Are you really complaining?"

I pushed open the door to my office.

Brandon followed me in, shutting it as Suki, our day manager, rolled back from behind my desk. Her eyes lit up, and she almost jumped to her feet.

“Are you here for the day?”

It was obvious what she wanted.

Suki had first come to us a stand-in chef, but once I needed more and more help, she began taking over some other duties. Years had passed, and after we hired another couple cooks, she’d become our day manager.

And because I knew what Suki was really asking, I nodded. “Go ahead. Go forth and make gourmet magic, my Day Manager SparkleDust.”

She cocked her head to the side.

Suki liked cooking, but she was the furthest thing there was from a pixie.

She was built like a tank: short and muscular. She and Brandon had wrestled one night, and though he denies it, everyone saw her pin him. Short, black, spiked hair and the most sensible and environmentally friendly clothes (complete with hemp sandals and a bag made by orphans in Kenya)—she was our hippy-esque work family member. If she had a sense of humor, I hadn’t seen it yet, but I didn’t care.

She was one of mine. I take care of mine.

Which led me to say, “If you want a night off, go for it. I’m closing for Cruz tonight.”

Brandon perked up. “You closing for me too?”

“No.” I scowled. “I already did my sisterly duty for you this morning, and speaking of...”

I brought Suki up to date on my two ultimatums. We kept a Shit List in the drawer, and as I added their names, she grunted.

Oh yeah. There was one more thing about Suki.

“Suki saw that coming a long time ago.”

She spoke about herself in the third person. Almost all the time.

“Hey.” Brandon frowned at her. “I take offense to that.”

She pointed up at him, her head coming to just above his stomach. “You should. That girl had wacko eyes.” Her fingers made circles in the air beside her head. “Wacko.”

“Oh.” Brandon smiled sweetly down at her. “Like the ones you have right now?”

Suki growled. “Like the ones you about to have.”

This was going nowhere good. “Enough,” I barked out. “If you’re going to fight, do it out of my office.”

Brandon held up a finger. “We all use this office.”

I pointed to the card table set up in the corner and the three folding chairs resting next to it. “That’s your office. Not here, not when there are raised voices.”

“Um...” A new voice—a new soft voice, thank goodness.

I considered sending prayers up when I looked to the now-open door. Recognizing one of my senior servers, I rolled back my chair. “What’s up, Ava?”

She was in her senior year at Roussou, but she had earned her spot as one of my head waitresses. And everyone had a soft spot for her. How could you not? Always kind. Hardworking. A petite girl with wispy blond hair.

She wrung her hands. “We’re out of tomatoes and bacon.”

Suki held her hands up. “Cruz was in charge of inventory this week.”

She still should’ve checked everything, and I didn’t think he actually was in charge, but we *had* had a rush yesterday. I was surprised there wasn’t more we needed to pick up.

“Suki can do a list, see what else we need to get.” Yep. Third person.

“Thank you,” I told Ava. “I’ll run out to get some quick.”

“I can go.” Brandon raised his hand. “Bar’s not super busy right now.” He grabbed his keys. “How many do we need?” he asked Ava as he left, shutting the door behind him.

Suki had already ducked out, and once that door shut, I heard the sound I loved.

Dishes clanging.

People walking up and down the hallway, going to the bathroom, going to the back room, going outside.

The doors opening and closing.

The bell welcoming new customers through the front, thanking them on their way out.

Conversations. Laughter. A few shouts here and there.

It was the sound of a busy Manny’s.

I had a friend addicted to running, but living here, working here, being here—this was *my* obsession.

CHANNING

Kansas was playing over Quickie's sound system when I pulled up, and the music paused as I was getting out of my truck.

The gas clerk's voice came over the speaker: "Just for you, Channing. Saw you coming in."

I waved. "Thank you, man."

The guy gave me a nod through the window and a thumbs-up before putting the music back on.

"You're a rock star in Fallen Crest too?"

Shit.

I hadn't noticed them, but looking across the pumps, I now saw Dex Richter and some of his usual guys with him. I blamed the post-pussy bliss of being with Heather for my distraction, because it was blaringly stupid of me not to notice the Harleys.

Stupid and dangerous.

"Richter." I greeted him exactly as I felt about him—like he was a permanent pinecone up my ass, because he was. He didn't care for me either.

Maybe it was because he was jealous I was so much prettier than him. By far. Or maybe it was because my crew kept his motorcycle club from dominating Roussou, or maybe—I had no idea. I'd kicked his ass a few times when we were young. It could be that. The prick had a memory that didn't let go of anything, including grudges.

His club wanted in on Roussou. I was stopping him.

We would war one day.

But he was not someone I wanted to deal with today. I'd just left Heather. We were on good terms, so far.

I had things to do. People to see.

After first tracking down my little sis to make sure she was still living and hadn't killed anyone or gotten pregnant (not totally joking there), I needed to check in with my cousin. Heather wasn't the only prestigious business owner in my life. Tuesday Tits, the bar I ran with my cousin, might cater to a rougher crowd—okay, significantly rougher crowd—but it was profitable.

But this guy...this fucker... I had a sinking feeling all those productive plans were about to go up in smoke.

His biting laugh confirmed it as he walked around to my truck, putting a foot on the back end and resting his arms over the corner, his hands dangling. His entire stance was casual, as if we were friends.

We weren't friends.

“You don't sound too thrilled to see me. What's the problem, Monroe? My guys are some of your regular patrons.”

They were, but that was at *my* bar where there were rules they had to follow. You enter Tuesday Tits, you're in my

world. You play by my rules. No violence. No MC politics.

“I appreciate their business. I do.” I flashed him a grin. “Speaking of Fallen Crest, this isn’t your usual stomping grounds. What are you doing over here?”

Richter and his guys, along with about fifteen others, made up a local chapter of the Red Demons. They were based out of Frisco, a neighboring town thirty miles northwest of Roussou and northeast of Fallen Crest. While they stopped in Roussou regularly, I knew they didn’t mix it with the elite in Fallen Crest.

“You’re not the only one with relations here.”

“Yeah?” I reached for the pump.

“I have a cousin who got married today.” He indicated his guys. “We were just at the service.”

“Really?” I skimmed them over. They wore their usual jeans, boots, and leather cuts. “You guys dressed up, huh?”

Richter narrowed his eyes.

I couldn’t stop myself, though I needed to. I had no backup if something went down, and I doubted the gas clerk could help. I was a good fighter, but there were five of them, and two looked over three hundred pounds. If they got a hit in, it’d stun me. And that was *if*, a big if, they didn’t just pull out a gun.

“Saw your little sister at a party recently.”

He said that so casually, like we were discussing the weather.

I hadn’t known how much I hated the word *sister* coming out of his mouth until he said it.

“Really?” I cooled my tone.

He nodded, a grin flaring for a second. “Oh yeah. I was surprised, but she and her guys rolled right in. They partied for a while. She’s tight with that Shaw kid, huh?”

“They’re in the same crew.” *Why is this asshole talking about my sister?* “What’s the angle here, Richter? What are you doing? You’ve got kid sisters. You want me to start telling you about them?”

There it was.

The smugness faded. His jaw tightened, and he straightened up from my truck.

“I can do that, if that’s the game you’re playing,” I added.

He swallowed, and his pasted-on smile came back. He held his hands up and made a point about stepping back.

“I’m not intending anything. I swear. I was just mentioning them because they remind me of you and Jax. I remember how you two were back in the day.”

The gas finished, and I turned to take the nozzle out.

I finished and glanced back. “You don’t need to be talking about her either.”

A forced laugh. “Holy fuck, Monroe. You’re testy. I’m not angling for anything.”

“You’re not over here to shoot the shit with me. I know that much. You’re bringing up my sister, then Heather. You’re talking like she and I are done, and you know that’s not the case.”

My eyebrows went up. “Is this about *your* woman?” I shot back. “Lynna was in Tuesday Tits last week, but I didn’t notice her going home with anyone.” I paused. “That night.”

He'd tensed up at her name.

A second later, he shook his head, moving back another step. "I came over to start a conversation. That's all."

I studied him.

"You're probing." I spoke clearly. "Why are you probing?"

His eyes narrowed. Just then, the bell on Quickie's door jingled, and one of his guys came out from inside.

Our "conversation" was done almost as quickly as it had started up.

His guy grunted his name as he walked past us, and all of them got on their bikes. They paused, but Richter waved them on. One by one, they pulled out of the lot.

Richter held back, staring at me, but he was edging toward his bike now. And like other times, a different look came over him once his MC was gone. The sliminess faded, and he sounded genuine when he said, "I know you and I don't..." He hesitated. "...work well together."

Work wasn't the word I would've used.

He was smart. He was connected. That made him dangerous.

He'd been circling the waters for a long time now. This was just the first time *outside* of Tuesday Tits that we'd talked in years. The last time had been across battle lines a few years ago when I told him his MC could drive through Roussou. They could eat in Roussou. They could drink in Roussou, but they couldn't claim Roussou as one of their territories.

It wasn't anyone's, but if it had been, I'd have had to step up and claim it. I just hadn't because I didn't want to. That road would be violent. People would die.

“Look, Channing.” His hand gripped the back of his neck. A frustrated vein stuck out from his forehead. “I’m not the enemy you seem to think I am—my guys too. We like Roussou. I have family in Fallen Crest. I don’t understand why there’s this rub between us.” He shrugged, a small smile appearing as he put on his sunglasses. “Who knows. Maybe one day we could become friends?”

Friends.

“Your MC beat up one of my crew two years ago,” I pointed out.

He shrugged. “You guys got us back. You beat up one of my guys.”

I flashed him a hard grin. “I’m thinking that’s why we can’t be friends—and the whole thing where you want to run drugs through Roussou. There’s that too.”

He got on his bike. “Yeah. That too. But other than that, I think we should grab tea one day.” He laughed, starting it up and held up two fingers in a salute, heading out.

Watching him go, an uneasy feeling settled in my chest. That war might be coming sooner than I’d realized.

He’d just given me a warning, in his way. He knew my weaknesses: Heather and Bren. He was letting me know he knew.

I was still standing there when I heard Quickie’s greeting bell again.

“You need me to call the cops?” It was the gas clerk, standing outside the door, holding it open.

I almost laughed. Even if I’d had a bullet in me, I wouldn’t have wanted that. I started for him. “Nah. They went to 10.

They don't know the cops started ticketing there last week."

The clerk laughed, easing up as I got to him.

He went inside first and moved behind the counter. "Lots of speeding tourists around these parts."

Yes. Yes, there were. I went to grab a Red Bull before I paid. As I was returning to the front, a black truck roared into the lot, and two idiots jumped out from the back. I say idiots because normal, rational, thinking people wouldn't be back there, not when the truck was going so fast it had to careen to a stop.

Actual smoke lingered over the tire tracks.

The guy was ringing me up when the door pushed open, and the kids who entered saw me. They braked suddenly.

"Channing!"

Her eyes were wide, but they weren't scared.

They should've been scared.

Inside I cursed, but outwardly, I just sighed and said, "Bren."

My sister had just entered the building.

"Hey."

Her three crew guys came in after her. She stopped in front of me, and they all traipsed around her. Each gave me a different head nod. The taller one moved his head down, "Channing." A note of awe was in his voice, but he kept it going.

The shorter one looked up at me, his eyes widening, but he lifted a finger to his forehead in a small salute. He followed

the taller one. Finally Bren's best friend paused next to her. Cross Shaw looked between the two of us.

She shook her head, just slightly, and he nodded to me too. "Hey, Channing."

He moved along, but Bren's eyes lingered over my shoulder a second before looking back up. I had a feeling Shaw was standing a short distance behind me, making sure she didn't need his backup.

Her mouth pressed together before she cleared her throat. "Hey." She was wearing a leather coat, jeans way too fucking tight, and a tank way, way too fucking tight.

She was Heather, but with a bigger chip on her shoulder and darker hair. And she didn't smoke. Thank God.

I wanted to give her my jacket so it'd be like a straitjacket around her, but instead I offered her a closed-mouth smile.

"Were you in Frisco last weekend? At a party?"

She didn't move. She barely blinked.

She showed no emotion, but I'd surprised her. I knew my sister. She was stone cold, but she wasn't a big partier, and if she'd gone to Frisco, I needed more information. That wasn't normal for her.

I waited.

A few seconds passed. She wasn't going to answer.

"Bren."

She shrugged. "Not as far as I remember. Why?"

Her crew had gotten their drinks and food. They came back, standing around us. Shaw stood the closest to her. The

shortest one went to the register, with the taller one behind him, but both were paying attention to our conversation.

“Did you guys party in Frisco last weekend?” I asked them.

I wasn’t paying Shaw any attention. He was like Bren. He wouldn’t give anything away, but the others shared a look.

The taller one narrowed his eyes, his tone confused. “Yeah. Just Zellman and me.” He nodded to Bren. “B didn’t. She hung back with Cross.”

“Why are you asking?”

Cross was the one who’d asked, but I spoke to Bren. “Richter said he saw you there.”

At the name, all of them straightened up. They were more alert now.

They were well aware who Richter was, and what it meant if he or any other Demon brought up their name. It was a challenge and a threat rolled into one.

I sighed internally, because there wasn’t much else I could do.

Bren did her own thing. She wasn’t a kid I could put structure on. If I did, she’d bolt. She knew it. I knew it. Everyone in her crew and this town knew it. She wasn’t a smart-mouthed teen, or a sarcastic brat. She’d just seen way too much for her age, and I knew I’d contributed to that.

Love her; I reminded myself that again. Just love her. She needed all the unconditional support I could give her, and I hoped to hell I could pull her back into being my kid sister, because as it was—I glanced at her crew. She was more theirs

than mine, and the reason was pretty damn simple. They were there for her. I hadn't been.

But I would be now. Fucking hell, I would be now. I *had* been.

"Be safe." I waited until they nodded their response before I moved around to the register. I gestured to them. "I got their stuff."

The first two whooped. The taller one, Jordan, lifted his fist to pound my shoulder, realized who he was about to touch, and moved his fist up in a half-salute. "Thanks, Channing. You're the best."

"Hells to the yee-ah." Zellman, the shorter one, pumped his energy drink at me, backing out of the store with Jordan following. They had bags of food in hand too.

Shaw held back. He did the same thing as before, glancing to Bren before holding up his coffee. "Thank you." He followed his friends out to their truck.

Bren was the only one who hadn't grabbed food or anything to drink. Her hands slid into her pockets and she murmured, "Thank you."

She started edging back out the door.

"Bren." I stopped her. "Get something to eat."

Without meeting my eyes, she snagged whatever was closest to her and tossed it to the clerk. He scanned in the candy bar, and she took it back.

Without a backward look, she joined her crew outside.

"That'll be \$85.63."

I cursed, but handed over the credit card. I forgot they'd filled up with gas.

Shaw and Bren jumped into the back of the truck, with the other two in the cab, and after a second wave to me, they tore out of there.

For the Roussou badass I was known to be, I felt like the biggest pansy at that moment.

HEATHER

THIRD GRADE

“**P**ssst, Heather.”
Channing leaned over to poke my arm during class.

I frowned at him, rubbing my arm. “Stop.”

I was seriously so tired of getting in trouble. Every time. It had been Mrs. Buxton two years ago. Then Mrs. Landish. Now it was Mr. Graves. As soon as school started, Channing started making jokes about his name. He said one of his dad’s friends had died and he was a metal worker. He asked our teacher if he knew what would be on his tombstone.

Mr. Graves didn’t respond, so Channing declared, “Rust in peace!” Then he laughed some more and looked at me. “And his name was Rusty too.”

Trouble.

That was Channing.

I wasn’t getting in trouble again. No way.

He poked me a second time, ducking his head and giving me that shy-but-cute grin.

I tried to ignore his sparkly, twinkling eyes. Whenever he wanted to pick on me, his eyes got that look—like the light

danced in them.

I fixed a scowl on my face and poked Channing back.

“Ouch! Stop harassing me, woman!”

I could’ve smacked him. He had that wicked look on his face, and he’d purposely raised his voice.

I leaned over and hissed, “You’re so dead, Channing Monroe.”

“Dead?” His grin went up a notch. “Like dead as in I need to go the GRAVE dead?!”

“Channing! Heather!” the teacher said sharply. Then he just sighed. He was tired. “Don’t make me write your names on the board.”

I shrank in my seat and looked at the two names already written there. Norm Mire and Matthew Shephardson. They were both friends of Channing’s, and I knew whatever they’d done to get in trouble was because of him.

Channing shot his arm in the air. He didn’t wait to be called on. “If you’re going to put my name on the board, can you make it cool? Something different. Like Ben?”

I closed my eyes. There was more coming. There always was.

Mr. Graves didn’t say anything for a moment, then I heard the squeak of the marker on the board. He was actually writing BEN on it.

Channing waited till he was done and added, “And my last name is Dover. Like a dove. The bird.”

Mr. Graves finished, adding the last name.

Why he did it, I had no idea. Channing's name was always up there. Our teacher was probably bored that day. He added my name and stepped back. He stared at the names.

Channing, Norm, and Matthew were the only ones laughing.

I didn't get it.

But Mr. Graves expelled a curse word, one of the bad ones, and quickly erased Channing's made-up name.

"Channing Monroe, I am calling your parents at the end of the day."

Channing just snickered, slumping down in his chair. Shooting me a look, he muttered, "Like they care."

I shook my head. "I would care," I said.

He gave me that weird look again. He blinked a few times. "You're my best friend."

And then I felt that weird look, on my insides.

It was...

...different.

HEATHER

PRESENT DAY

Security was preparing to drag a drunk out of Manny's two days later.

He was kicking and screaming. The cops had just arrived, their blue and red lights circling through the window. Brandon was arguing with the guy, trying to talk sense into him, ignoring the bottle of whiskey he'd brought in. But that wasn't all.

A couple had started fighting at table three.

We all saw it happening. They came in every Saturday, but even I didn't know why. The girl was pissed every single time, her arms crossed over her chest. The guy looked beaten down, his shoulders hunched. And though they were the same height, he seemed bent over, permanently.

Tonight, it seemed she'd had enough. She flung her breadstick to her plate, shoving away from the table. As she got up, her chair fell into the back of a child. The kid started crying. His mother got upset, while the woman went storming outside.

And we can't forget the breadstick, because it didn't stay on the plate. That woman flung it with such force that it

bounced off and landed in a guy's hand as he walked past her table.

He blinked, shocked to find a breadstick in his hand, and stopped watching where he was going for a second—long enough to walk into one of my servers, who then dumped the tray of food she was carrying onto the back of the angered woman who'd started the entire chain of events.

I saw it all, and without blinking an eye, I grabbed the woman's arm and urged her in the direction of the bathroom, murmuring, "We're so sorry about that."

She was writhing with anger, so I patted her arm and added, "And don't worry, that kid you hit? I won't tell his mother you're back here, or the guy your breadstick hit. Accidents happen, right? I'm sure a gift certificate will smooth it over."

She tensed. I felt her getting ready to argue.

I hushed her, soothingly. "I'll talk to the mother on your behalf. I'm sure no damage was done. I'll make her nice and happy, get her out the door before she can think about a lawsuit."

Cruz, the night manager, saw us coming. He took in her messy attire and opened the bathroom door. I steered her in, patted her arm, and offered one more reassuring smile.

"I have your back, sweetie. No worries." A wink, a little click of the tongue, and I watched as the anger began to fade and the corners of her eyes pinched in worry.

I closed the door as she turned on the water.

Cruz shook his head in amusement.

"What?"

He pointed down the hall to the back section of Manny's. "I saw the whole thing, and you didn't pause for one second." As he walked away, he added under his breath, "Legend, Heather. Legend."

It took a second before it clicked.

I saw it all, stepped in, and handled the customer most likely to cause a problem for Manny's later. And I did it without thinking.

It was second nature for me.

I was protecting my home, like protecting my family. And almost like it was cosmic timing—or the fact that it'd been two days since I last saw him—Channing walked in the front door.

Family. Channing was it, whether I wanted him or not.

His gaze met mine, and like almost every time I saw him, my body began to react.

Sometimes I felt hatred. Sometimes pain. Sometimes relief. Not this time. This time I wanted him. It might've been only two days, but I hungered for him, and knowing Cruz would handle things for me, I headed straight for Channing.

He was standing by the side door.

Seeing the look in my eyes, he began grinning that damn half-smirk, which showed his dimple. Cruz glanced toward me. He'd been speaking to Channing, but Channing wasn't paying attention.

It was him and me. No one else.

The world had ceased to exist, and the world knew it.

Cruz nodded as I approached and said, "I'll close tonight."

I didn't respond.

Channing kicked open the side door and moved over to let me pass. As I walked by, his hand went to the small of my back and he said for me, "Appreciate it, Cruz."

Then we were outside.

His hand fell away.

We didn't speak. We walked past the teenagers lounging in the chairs I'd once used for my smoke breaks. We ignored the people enjoying the picnic tables in the back. I led the way up the porch and into the front of my house.

Channing spoke once we were inside. "Pack a bag."

I stopped on my stairs. "What?"

He was watching out the door, his lips pressed tight. "Let's go to my place." His head swung toward me, his eyes darkened with intent. "I don't want to hold back. Not tonight." He didn't move, but I felt the room shrink. The air left, and he added, "I want to fuck you hard."

Lust exploded in me.

It'd been a small ember, but his words struck the match. Now it was a bonfire, warming me instantly, and I nodded, swallowing on a dry mouth. "A bag it is."

As we left the house, I knew he'd wait for me as I locked the door. I knew he'd wait for me to lead the way down the stairs. I knew he'd touch my back, a small touch of support even though both of us knew I didn't need it.

There was so much I knew he would do, and it was that feeling, knowing another like the back of my hand, that I relished.

I was in sync with him.

When we got to his truck, I got in on the passenger side. He went to the driver's side and without a word, the engine started. The windows rolled down, because he knew I liked the wind versus air conditioning. And because he knew I liked a certain way, he drove that route out of Fallen Crest.

When he pulled into his driveway, he circled to the back of his house. The front was littered with motorcycles—his and his friends'—but as we went inside, I was glad to hear no one was there. We were alone.

Channing pulled the door closed behind me and went to the kitchen.

I followed after him. “Bren's not here?”

He snorted, filling a glass of water from the fridge. “She either sneaks in or she's with her crew. You know how it is.”

That right there.

To crew or not to crew. This was our fight—one of the constants that'd been with us forever. And I knew what I was starting, but I decided to start it anyway. The words were out almost before I realized I was going to say them.

“No, Channing.” I spoke low and quiet. “I don't know.”

Yes, we were going into the emotional stuff we usually avoided. I had to, but I didn't know why. It felt right. At that moment, it felt not right to go straight to the sex, though I still hungered for him.

His eyes found mine over the rim of his glass. He lowered it slowly. His throat moved as he swallowed, and I moved to the kitchen island to have something to lean against.

“Come on, Heather.” His statement was a rasp.

I shook my head. “I wasn’t in a crew in high school.”

“Neither was I.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes because there was so much history in the room with us. All the old anger, resentment—it was all rolling around in my stomach, and I struggled to keep it contained. It was right there alongside everything I loved about him too.

I glanced to the floor. “Moose and Congo became your best friends in fifth grade. Your crew started then, and don’t lie to me. You know it as much as I do.” I waited. Tense.

He didn’t say anything, slowly putting his water glass back into the fridge, and then he turned and leaned his back against it. His eyes were smoldering again. His arms crossed over his chest a moment before they fell and slid into his pockets. The movement drew his jeans down an inch, and I could see the muscles there, the ones I *knew* like the back of my hand.

God.

He was gorgeous.

His eyes were fierce, his cheekbones partially shadowed. His shirt fit perfectly to his chest, showcasing what years of training and fighting had given him. But he wasn’t just looks. And he wasn’t just rakish charm.

He cared for and protected the oldest crew in Roussou, the one he’d formed to help my friend. He did it for me. He didn’t give two shits about them. They were outsiders. They weren’t Roussou, and that’s how it was in Roussou, but he’d given a shit about me. He did it for me.

He formed the first crew, and the crew system was born. It’d been like that ever since.

I understood the reasoning behind them.

Roussou was hard. You had to be tough to survive, but there was another bit I didn't understand. That was the part of me that wasn't Roussou, where I was Fallen Crest. The part of me that loved Channing, but wasn't in his crew. I could never bring myself to join.

And it was that part that was pushing at him now.

"You're okay with her running around with those guys?"

"No," he shot back. "But I understand how it is. I was never home either."

The heat traveled up, warming the back of my neck. "It's not normal, Channing. She's a teenager. She needs structure."

He scoffed. "You're starting with me about this? You ran your house because the only place your dad left Manny's for was the horse track. And you know my history. We didn't have structure."

"She's your sister. She's hurting."

"I'm aware." His eyes darkened, and he pushed off the fridge. He stalked toward me. His voice was low and eerily smooth. "I want to yell at her. I want to scream at her. I want to ground her and lock her in her fucking room, but I can't. Because she's just like me. I push, and she'll go. She won't come home, and what am I supposed to do then?"

A headache formed behind my temples, because this was how we were. We'd switched roles. If I pushed him to be more of a parent to Bren, he reminded me of the consequences. I would fall back and remember this wasn't my fight. And even though I was in his house, and I was going to sleep in his bed, we were technically not together. Bren was not my business.

And when I remembered that, I felt all the same emotions I always did.

I shouldn't be here.

Channing was trying to parent a teenager. I had to step back. If I saw Bren, I needed to be the chill girlfriend I'd always been. She didn't need my input either, because Lord knows she hadn't been listening to any from Channing. Why would she listen to me?

I didn't know Bren that well. I should have. I'd been around all of Channing's life, but it was *his* life, not hers. He hadn't been around her for so long either. He'd left their home around the time their mother was getting sick and not long after that she died. I knew his dad had been an asshole to him. Channing would never tell me the details of that, but it'd been bad. Really bad.

After Channing left, he never moved back.

"Maybe I should just go home."

He sighed, coming over and putting his hands to my shoulders. "No, Heather. Stay." His voice gentled, and he pulled me to him, wrapping his arms around me, his head burying in my neck.

The spark reignited. The sizzle was refreshed, and just like that, it was Heather and Channing again. The separation was gone.

He rocked me a little, tightening his arms, and his lips brushed against my skin. "We fight, then we go to bed. It's what we do; I don't want you to leave. Please don't leave."

My heart broke a little. I should've moved out of the way, but now that I was in his arms, I knew I wouldn't do that.

I was weak.

Was it weakness? Was that my problem?

Whatever it was, my arms were up and around his neck. I pushed up on my tiptoes.

I whispered against his chest, "I love you."

He dropped a kiss to my neck and whispered, "I love you too."

He picked me up. He carried me to his room.

I don't want to say we fucked. It's a hard way to say it, but sometimes I was hard. Sometimes he was too. And tonight, that's how we were. It wasn't soft, gentle, or beautiful. It was rough. It was demanding.

Channing claimed me. He answered a primal need inside him. I knew it because I saw it as he was deep in me, and I recognized it because it was in me too.

He was mine. That's just how it was.

CHANNING

My phone woke me, and I quieted it before even looking at who it was. Heather was still sleeping, her naked back curved away. The sheet had fallen down to her hip, showcasing her spine and hair.

I had to stop and take a breath. This girl was fucking gorgeous.

I wanted to reach over and smooth a hand down her back, knowing she'd roll over and open her legs for me, but I resisted. Barely. I sat up, turned the fan on to cover some of my noise, grabbed my phone and some clothes, and headed for the bathroom.

The hall was dark and, no surprise, so was Bren's room. Her door was closed, but I knew my sister, pain in the ass that she was. She wasn't in there. I studied her closed door a moment, knowing I'd have to track her down, then continued into the bathroom.

Switching the light on, I put my phone on speaker and answered. "What's up?"

"We have a problem."

I was pulling on my boxer briefs, but I paused. Moose's voice was serious, the deadly serious tone I didn't like to hear.

“What’s up?” I repeated.

I could hear yelling in the background as Moose continued. “Chad brought in someone we’re going to have a problem with, and Congo kinda went apeshit.”

Chad was a surprise. He didn’t like to bring problems to the crew, but Congo wasn’t. He tended to explode at any little thing.

“Okay.” I pressed the screen and saw it was a little after four in the morning. “You don’t happen to know where my sister is, do you?”

If my sister wasn’t in her room, she was with her crew. And crews talked.

“I don’t. There was a party out at Belshield Field, but none of us went. She might’ve gone there. You want someone to track her down?”

I frowned. “Nah. Where are you?”

“The warehouse.”

“Okay. I’ll be there in a little bit.”

“Got it, boss.”

I just rolled my eyes. I hated being called that, but it fit.

Moose was laughing as he hung up.

After finishing dressing, I washed and put my phone in my back pocket, heading back into the hallway. I tapped lightly on Bren’s door. “B?”

No answer. I wasn’t expecting anyone, but I opened it and waited to hear any breathing. Nothing. I flicked her light on. Her bed was made, and empty.

I wasn't going to text her this time. I'd find her another way. I had to get going if I didn't want to find a dead body when I got to the warehouse.

I didn't want to wake up the neighborhood, so I backed out the truck and waited until I was in the alley and with the lights turned away from the house before turning them on. They would've flooded my bedroom and woken Heather.

After taking back roads so no cameras could follow me, I pulled into the long driveway that led to my warehouse. There were so many trucks and bikes there, I couldn't tell who all was around. Half the vehicles were there for storage or parts.

I kept this warehouse and another for our crew's private hangout spot. We'd also purchased the twenty acres around it, and while I'd like to say nothing bad happened here, that wasn't true. There was a reason I wanted privacy.

Point being: I walked inside and a guy was bleeding on the floor.

It didn't faze me. I only asked, "He dead?"

I didn't spare Congo, Chad, or Moose a glance as I went to the guy. He was breathing, but they were slow and shallow, wheezing. Blood seeped out of a large cut near his eye.

I turned to study my guys. "Who is he?"

Congo rushed in first, "He was messing with Chad's mom. You know how she is, being old and shit—"

Moose cut him off, literally stepping in the way so he couldn't see me. He growled, "Walk. Calm down."

Moose was next in line after me in our crew. He was my most trusted, and when one of us spoke, Congo had to fall in line. Though he didn't like it. He had the quickest fuse. When

lit, there was always an explosion, and if we hadn't been in the warehouse, I wouldn't have let him go. As it was, when he stalked out the door and we started hearing crashing sounds, no one moved an inch.

We'd just wait until the sounds stopped.

Besides the crashing and Congo's growl, the only other sound we could hear was the guy's breathing, which was more and more labored. He'd have to go to the hospital. Soon.

Chad sighed. "This is my fault."

Another crash.

Slam!

Thud!

The guy moaned, raising his head. He tried to open his eyes. "What—who?" He groaned again, his head falling back down. One sudden whoosh of breath, and he was out.

Chad went over, kneeling and pressing two fingers to the guy's neck. He relaxed a beat later. "There's a pulse."

For now.

Chad looked at me, showing the same remorse I saw in Moose's eyes.

I was still waiting to be told what the fuck had happened, but I was starting to guess. I shook my head. "He scammed your mom?"

Chad nodded, standing and heading over again.

I clipped him in the back of the skull. "Goddamn redhead."

He ducked out of the way, but there was no edge to my words. This wasn't the first time Chad's temper had gotten him in trouble. And Lord knows, I couldn't say a word. I was

like a caged animal, prowling around until I got a good release—whether from sex or a fight, I wasn't too picky. I liked doing both.

“Tell me what happened and who that guy is,” I ordered.

If Chad was mad, the scam must've been bad. He had a temper, but unlike Congo, Chad *loathed* fighting. Once he started, though, he was like the Hulk. Chaos and destruction followed him.

“His name's Brett Marsch,” Chad said with a sigh. “He scammed a bunch of the residents at the nursing home.”

Chad's mom was forty-nine when she'd had him. He was the second youngest of twelve kids—good old Catholic family. It was probably ten years later when she got dementia, and I knew things had gone downhill after that. Chad's dad had been hitting the bottle harder and harder every day, and somehow checking in with Mama Gold had become Chad's job, or he felt it was. His older sisters visited their mom regularly too.

“He pretended to volunteer there, and he opened credit cards in a bunch of their names before skipping town.”

I gestured to the guy. “How'd he get *here*?”

Chad grimaced. “I might've told him to get his ass back here or I'd go after his woman. I heard he had someone here.”

Moose swore under his breath.

Fucking hell. There went my good mood. “What do you mean?”

We didn't threaten women or kids. That was a solid rule for us.

He winced again. “I know. I know. I never meant it.”

We were the New Kings Crew, and we didn't bluff. Ever. That was our reputation. And it was solid too.

He held his hands up, hissing as he tried to open his fingers all the way. "But I wouldn't have followed through, or..." His head hung down. "I would've figured a way to not make it so bad. But it worked." He gestured to the guy. "He came back to town. Moral dilemma closed."

I could've... No, I did.

I punched him in the face.

He went down. *Thud*. It was an abrupt drop.

Moose didn't react, only raising an eyebrow.

Chad didn't get up. He rolled to his back, watching me warily.

I pointed to the door. "Get out of here. Get out of town while you're at it." I nodded toward the guy. "I doubt your mom and the other residents were the first and only people he's scammed, and I doubt he's alone."

Everyone had a team in Roussou. If you didn't, you got swallowed up. You get tough, or you get the fuck out.

"Can I come back in?" Congo hollered from outside the door.

He sounded sheepish, but still pissed, and those mixed tones were enough to make us all pause. We shared a grin. Moose was the biggest, towering over us at six feet five inches and generally looking like he could eat boulders for every meal, and Congo was a smaller version of him. Both were bald. Only Congo was the shortest in our crew at five six. That didn't affect how tough he was.

"Yeah," I called.

He looked down as he came in. “Sorry. I was worked up.”

Moose began explaining. “Chad brought the guy here and —”

Congo cut in, “He wasn’t answering his questions quick enough, so I...”

I nodded, knowing how the guy had gotten beat so badly.

Chad was asking the questions. The guy wasn’t answering. Congo got mad, starting hitting him, and then Chad took on Congo. Moose probably sat back and ate popcorn.

What was I doing still thinking I wasn’t qualified to raise a teen? I already had two others right here.

“I stopped Congo from going too far,” Chad concluded.

I nodded, hearing my guess affirmed.

“Congo didn’t like being stopped, so those two roughed each other up after that. They were at it till you got here.”

I raised my eyebrows at Congo. “Couldn’t settle?”

Guilt flared briefly before he locked it down. “My grandmum’s in that nursing home too. If she could talk, he would’ve swindled her too.”

The guys quieted after they’d said their bit.

“Okay.” I nodded toward the door. “You guys think your hands need stitches?”

They both looked down, flexed their hands, and winced.

Chad replied, “I’m fine.”

Congo nodded. “Me too.”

I jerked my head again. “Head to the bar then. Check in with Scratch.”

“What are you going to do?” Chad frowned.

“Credit cards?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“So those can be turned off and reported as a scam, right? Your mom’s credit is fine.”

“Yeah, but—”

He wanted answers. I’d get that for him, but I didn’t need to worry one of my guys would end up in prison for manslaughter.

I jabbed my finger at the door. “Go. I’ll take care of him.”

Congo was already there. He paused, waiting for Chad, who followed him out, but slowly and with his head down, and not before staring at the guy for another minute.

“We’ll take care of it.” Moose moved toward both of them, urging them out. He disappeared through the door after them, but a moment later, he came back in.

He moved to stand next to me. “What are you planning?”

I studied the guy. “Help me get him to your truck.”

We’d deal with him, but he needed medical help first.

He grunted, and together, we lifted him, taking him to the back of Moose’s truck. He closed the tailgate as I went around and locked up the warehouse.

He was staring at one of the bikes when I came back out.

“I heard Dex Richter is trying to patrol Roussou,” he said.

I grunted this time.

I hadn’t told him about my last run-in with Richter. I would, just not now.

I tapped the back of Moose's truck. "Take him to the hospital. Make sure Rena is working. She'll know how to handle him." I pulled out a bill and handed it over. Sometimes a bribe was the best way. "For her silence."

"Where are you going?"

I flashed him a grin, going to my truck. "I've got a delinquent to track down."

"You could've sent the guys to find her."

I shook my head, getting inside. "Nah. This time I want to find her on my own." I held up two fingers as my truck roared past him. "I'm out, brother."

CHANNING

There were three places my sister could've been.

One was sleeping at Jordan's place—he was the leader of her crew. He had a storage building, similar to my warehouse, but it was at his family's place. Edging down his driveway to the building, I didn't see her truck there. I didn't want to deal with any questions, so I eased right back up the driveway, turning my lights on as I cleared the woods around their land.

Another spot was her best friend's house.

Bren and Cross Shaw were best friends like Heather and I had been growing up—minus the sex, at least as far as I knew. Heather and I had started doing it early, way too early, but the last I'd heard, Bren and Cross were still just friends. That was a conversation I wasn't sure I wanted to have with her—not that she would participate. I imagined me sitting there, explaining what it meant if a bee's stinger went inside the female bee and how little bees were created, and that whole scenario seemed so wrong.

Bren was smart. She'd practically raised herself because I knew our dad had been worthless the last few years, and while she'd had a boyfriend for some of that time, she hadn't gotten pregnant.

Heather told me she'd seen Bren buying condoms, so at least safe sex was a topic I didn't need to cover.

Fuck. Did I?

When I arrived at the Shaw house, I didn't see his truck or my sister's, so that meant she was at the third place.

I didn't know if Bren knew I knew about this last one.

I'd discovered it one night around three in the morning when I woke up for a piss and realized she was gone. I'd sent out a full-crew alert, and it took ten minutes. Moose found her. Or he found her truck parked on the steep bank.

I drove there tonight, going up the gravel road, up the hill to the small clearing.

She wasn't alone.

Shaw's truck was parked behind hers, and I hesitated before turning off my truck.

Here's the truth of my situation: I have no fucking idea what I'm doing.

There was overlap between my father and me between the time he was having legal problems and when he actually went to prison. And even before I got the official guardianship over Bren I'd started paying attention, so this wasn't the first year of me taking care of her. It'd been a couple, maybe more, but I was still clueless. Or I felt clueless.

I'd been shitting bricks this whole time.

She was seventeen. I'd left the house when she was four. There were times I'd stayed with them, but for the most part, I was gone. She didn't grow up knowing me, not really. She grew up probably hearing Dad bitching about me, so I got it. I really did. I understood why she'd looked like she would

rather eat poison when the judge gave me guardianship over her.

Dad owned the house we grew up in. When he went to prison, the bank took the house.

That meant Bren lost her home.

I didn't get it until that first night I found her here, because if you go down the steep bank and across the road, right there is the house we grew up in.

Or she grew up in.

I chose to leave. She was forced out.

That first night, when I crept up on her, saw her sitting there watching the house, I almost fell to my knees. She'd been crying. They weren't loud tears or a meltdown. It didn't even look like she knew she was crying.

One tear after another left her eyes and slid down her face, and she didn't react. Not a bit.

She sat, stone-faced, and she barely blinked.

It was a swift kick to my junk.

I'd taken her from her home. No wonder she hated me. I hated myself a little bit too that night, and this night was almost no different.

I had to check on her. I had to. If I didn't, I would worry all night, so I crept into the woods—like Brandon's stalker—and got just close enough to see them.

They were sleeping, arms hugging themselves, one curled toward the other with a whiskey bottle between them.

A small bit of pride flickered in me. Again, not the best role model here, but she was a Monroe, that's for sure.

I eased back. I got in my truck, started it, and went back home.

Heather was sleeping, the fan still blowing. She must've woken at some point because her tank top was on now, along with a pair of panties, but no pants or shorts. I curled in around her, skimming a hand over her tiny underwear. I loved the lacy white ones, or the pink ones. Most guys like red or black because that means sex, but I liked the white and pink better. They were the ones Heather liked the best, so when she had them on, I knew she felt comfortable.

She probably knew I'd left for the crew. She was probably frustrated, but I didn't care right now. Everyone I loved was okay.

Heather. Bren. My crew.

I'd deal with the other shit later.

HEATHER

FIFTH GRADE

Today was the worst day. Ever—to infinity. Past that even. The worst ever, ever, ever, ever.

“What’s your problem?”

I screamed, jumping back, and felt my face heat up.

Channing was at his locker, pulling books out and stuffing them into his bag. I’d been the one not looking where I was going. He’d been there the whole time.

He laughed before stuffing more of his books into his bag.

“Wait.” I pointed at the bag. “What are you doing?”

I couldn’t hold back the edge of hysteria in my voice, though so far I’d managed not to burst into tears. Barely. Now they were threatening to spill. I’d just been told one friend was leaving. I couldn’t lose another one.

I couldn’t lose Channing.

He smirked, though it didn’t go to his eyes. They looked sad. “They finally figured out I’m smart, and they’re moving me up a year.” He shrugged, turning back to his locker.

“Wait. What?”

“Yeah.” He stopped cleaning out his locker and stared at it. His hands were at his side, balled into fists. “They’re moving

me up a grade, said it'd be fine with my age. Or something like that.”

“What?!” I jerked forward. I didn't think. I kicked his bag across the hallway and slammed his locker shut. “No! NO! You're not smart. What are they thinking?”

Channing jumped back and stared at me. His eyes were big. He frowned. “It's not my call, Jax. My mom said yes, and I gotta move everything to the next hallway. Someone else is getting my locker.”

No.

No.

No!

Now I was the one with my hands in fists, and they were pressing right against my legs.

My friend Tate had just told me she was moving to Fallen Crest. Said her dad got a promotion and her family thought there were better stupid schools there.

“No.” I growled.

I probably looked crazy. But Tate was leaving, and now Channing was going up a grade. We wouldn't be in the same classes anymore.

I. Was. Sick. And. Tired. Of. Everyone. Leaving. Me.

I crossed my arms over my chest in a huff. So there!

“We'll still have recess and lunch together.”

I heard the sadness in his voice, but I didn't care. Everyone was leaving *me*. Yes, Channing was moving up a grade, but whoop-de-doo for him. He was *so* smart. Smarter than the rest

of us? Well, maybe. He always had the top scores, but still. This was about me.

“You could’ve fought it,” I snapped.

He stared at me and let out a sigh.

He couldn’t have. He’d just told me that. Parents have all the say sometimes, and it’s not fair.

“I did,” he murmured, his head dropping again. “They said it was better for me.”

I felt something tightening. Building... Building... I was going to snap. Letting out another growl, I slammed my hands against his locker. Others all around us looked over.

I stormed off. Stopped. Reared back and kicked the locker next to me.

Okay, that felt better. A little bit. Not really, but it’d have to do.

I kicked it again, and a door opened behind me. “Heather Jax, that is not appropriate—”

I took off running.

Yeah, well, life wasn’t appropriate sometimes.

People needed to stop leaving me.

HEATHER

PRESENT DAY

The fan had been on.

When I woke up during the night, I knew why his side of the bed was empty. It hadn't made me mad, but it frustrated me. He only turned the fan on when he needed to sneak out for the crew. It wasn't Bren. She was different. She was precious, but his crew... That was a different story.

Three days passed before he texted me.

Three days after I'd snuck out, while *he* slept. Both of us knew I was frustrated, but for three days neither had reached out to the other.

I was in my office at Manny's, looking at my phone, when his text popped up.

Channing: How are you?

That's what he asked, but we all knew what he wanted.

It was code for: are you still mad at me? I know why you're mad. You know why you're mad, but I miss you. And follow that up with: I miss you and I'm scared of emotional talks, so let's have sex. I can feel close to you that way. So, is the coast clear?

If he had texted the very next day, I would've ignored with ease. But this was day three.

Day three and I was missing him too. He was my best friend. How could I not?

I should've deleted the text, but dammit.

Three stupid days, and I was surrendering.

I was spineless. That's what I was.

Letting out a curse, I called Samantha. She'd been my other best friend since my Fallen Crest glory days. I needed strength not to text Channing back. I hoped she'd give it to me, but when she answered, the moment her face popped up on my phone's screen I knew I was in trouble. Black hair, almond eyes, a stunningly beautiful face, and she was glowing. I'm sure it was the light behind her, but there was a damn halo around her head.

I sighed. "You're actually glowing."

She laughed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Don't tell Mason. He thinks I'm miserable, and he's going overboard with making sure I have all the food he can think of. We have one freezer full of cookie dough ice cream and a fridge drawer of just pickles."

Samantha was pregnant, and while I loved her dearly, her happiness was like a fist being forced down my throat. It got all the way to my stomach, grabbed hold, and yanked.

I blinked back sudden tears.

I hated those things, but fuck it. She was happy. She was pregnant. She was loved.

My reason for calling didn't seem so important now, "How are you?" I asked instead.

Everything had been swept away. It was like the bad shit moved aside and all the good shit replaced it inside of me.

Knowing how happy Sam was, I was filled with a sudden desperation to see Channing.

But before that, Sam and I would talk.

She was six months along. Happy. Eager. And in love. Despite all of Sam's demons and haunts, I always knew she'd end up happy.

She asked how I was and I caught her up on everything except two things: the ache inside of me and my relationship with Channing. After we hung up, I texted him.

Me: Want to come over tonight?

Channing: Fuck yeah.

Channing: I have to stay for closing. I'll be over after.

A pause. Then,

Channing: Missed you.

I grinned stupidly; I couldn't help myself.

Then there was a knock at the door. Brandon poked his head around.

“Suki and the cook are fighting.”

Of course. It was a day that ended with y.

Time to get back to work. I stood up. “Over what?”

“She saw him with a dull knife.”

She was the *manager*. I shrugged. Made total sense.

HEATHER

It was almost three in the morning. I had a history with this time in the morning.

Cruz would've closed Manny's, but I'd opted to stay. I wanted to be working instead of twiddling my thumbs at home.

Until we finished. That was an hour ago.

Channing was coming over, and the waiting was putting me on edge. Oh, who was I kidding? Since our chat this afternoon, I couldn't get Sam's face out of my mind. Mix that with Channing coming over, and there was an extra layer of nerves lining my insides.

Dread. Excitement. Envy. Grief.

Love.

There was that too.

I didn't want to deal with any of it.

I looked around my room at home. I could clean? I considered it, but I wasn't sure if Brandon was downstairs or if he'd gone somewhere else for the night. I'm sure he left a note if he had, but I didn't want to chance a run-in. He'd been

watching me all evening with a cocked eyebrow. He knew something was up. He just kept his mouth shut.

I had a good brother.

But I still didn't want to talk to him right now.

The air conditioner wasn't on, so my window was open, though no breeze came in. I glanced over to my nightstand at the bottle of Jack. I'd already had two shots, and I didn't want any more. I *was* going to sleep. Was. Was. Was.

My mind *was* going to do what it wanted.

I let out a sigh.

No matter how much I tried to ignore how he affected me, it was useless. He'd worked his way under my skin in first grade. He'd declared us best friends in third. We held hands in fifth. We shared our first kiss in seventh, and he'd been a headache ever since.

Then I heard a single crunching sound outside my window, and even though my room was on the second floor, I turned my head. I knew whose head would pop through my curtains, and there he came.

A feeling of right filled me.

Channing hauled himself through my window, stepped once on the floor, and was in my bed in a heartbeat. He'd practiced that motion countless times since we were kids. Whether we were fighting or not, he had never stopped coming over.

And like so many nights before, I rolled to my side and faced him. "Hey."

His lazy smile washed over me, matching my insides, as I'd started to relax the second I'd heard that small crunch.

His eyes weren't relaxed, though. They were alive and fierce.

His dimple showed as he faced me. "Hey."

"You're hyper."

His eyes narrowed briefly. "I'm jacked up on adrenaline." He turned his back and held his hands up to inspect them. He brushed his thumb over his knuckles, and I didn't need the moonlight to see the blood there.

I winced. "Is that dry?"

"Yeah."

I didn't ask for details.

"What?"

"Huh?" I glanced at him.

"What's going on? You're sighing more than normal." His eyes darkened. "You're pissed I snuck out the other night?"

I raised my eyebrows. He knew I was. That was a stupid question.

He smiled. "Can I tell you what it was about?"

I shook my head against the pillow. "Please no. I don't want to get pissed at you all over again."

He laughed softly. "Fair enough, but I think you'd understand if I told you."

I gave him a look.

He laughed again, reaching for me, curving his arm around my waist. He pulled me against him.

"This is nice. I've missed you. *Fuck*. I've missed you."

I opened the door the last time at his place. I'd pushed it open, talking about the "issues" and now he was continuing. We weren't going right to the sex. We were doing the talking, the touching, the cuddling, the moments that made us yearn for each other. We were doing the whole "best friendship" thing.

And of course, just as I thought that, his foot started tapping. I stifled a grin.

Or not. Maybe we were going another way.

The edge was leaving him because he was with me, but he wasn't relaxing. An image of a caged and restless tiger came to mind. Beautiful to look at, but he needed to run, rumble, or hunt.

His eyes took on a lustful glint. His hunting was going to be me.

I readied myself.

He snaked his other hand between us. His thumb traced the inside of my palm, and my body started to warm.

"What are we doing?" I asked.

Some of my own restlessness pushed forward. I spoke before I realized I was talking.

He laughed. "Pretty sure you know." He shifted to his back, his hand pulling out from behind me. He moved our palms to my stomach and let go to edge beneath my shorts. His fingers spread wide, and he waited.

Goddamn.

This guy.

I looked at him, really looked at him.

Full lips. A strong jaw. High and chiseled cheekbones. Eyes that promised so many dark and lustful pleasures.

I throbbed between my legs. My breaths grew shallow. My body had warmed, needing him, but something beneath that wasn't letting me ignore it. Not anymore. It'd been with me all night.

It wasn't going to be overlooked anymore.

Channing and I always fought over his crew involvement. I'd stepped away when his dad went to prison, so he could focus on raising Bren. But there was another reason we broke up last year.

It was the one thing that made me jealous of Samantha.

Maybe that was why I texted him back.

Maybe I just wanted...

No. I couldn't go there. Not yet.

Still, I grabbed his hand and pulled it out of my pants. I rolled off the bed to my feet in one movement, and my hands found my hips.

I panted slightly as I met his gaze.

"What are you doing?" He sat up, his white shirt fitting so perfectly and deliciously. I pulled my gaze away.

"I—" I didn't know.

God, it hurt. My entire chest was trying to implode inside of me.

"Heather."

He moved to the edge of the bed. Rubbing a hand over his face, he then raked it through his hair.

“We’ve been in and out of each other’s beds a lot lately,” I rasped out.

Was I actually going here? Really? Me, who hated talking about the real issues? Me, who hated *feeling*?

Shit. I was.

A wall slammed over his eyes. His face became masked. “Yeah.”

It happened so quickly. Years of baggage did that.

“Do you think we should talk about *why* we broke up this last time?”

My voice was a whisper. I couldn’t help myself. I was pissing my pants here.

A flicker of emotion exploded in his gaze, but he turned away. His head went down. I knew I’d hurt him. I was hurting too. I felt a knot in my throat, thinking about *it*.

“We break up for different reasons all the time,” he murmured. “We both know why we broke up this last time.”

Yep. Here we were.

The ground was moving underneath me. I wanted it to stop, and I could make it stop. I could drop the conversation, go to him, touch him, kiss him, pull him down over me, and it would be done. We might not bring it up for days, weeks, even months.

We could go that route. We were experts at avoiding the real issues.

But...

It.

She wasn’t an it.

I was done. I don't know why, but I was tired of ignoring *her*.

I was tired of ignoring how my insides had been ripping over every morning since. "I lost her too, you know?"

I was tired of ignoring how I'd never be the same *since* her.

"I know." He looked back, turning only halfway, his face still masked.

I closed my eyes.

I sat beside him, an inch of space between us. In some ways, this signified our relationship. We were both there, but not together. We were on our own, not connected and not touching.

I needed to stop thinking about this.

It just hurt. That was all.

"We both lost our daughter," I said, my throat raw.

He sucked in his breath, straightening up. "I know." He reached for my hand, his arm going under me as he lifted me onto his lap. His head rested against my shoulder, and he kissed me. He held me tight, and his entire body let loose a deep sigh.

I felt him relax around me.

There. She'd been brought up. She wasn't something we were ignoring.

It hurt, but it felt...necessary.

It felt...better.

But my throat was burning, and though my chest felt lighter, I wasn't ready for the next step: talking.

I just sat. He just held me. And after a while, the air in the room seemed to ease.

His arms loosened.

The tension in me lifted slightly, and I could feel him underneath me. Every inch of him. I could feel his gaze on me. He'd come in here with a need to claim me, and that was still there, but it had shifted. It had morphed into a different need. I knew this, because I was feeling it too.

Unable to stop myself, I moved so I could comb my fingers through his hair.

His eyes closed, savoring my touch until I swung my legs around to straddle him. I leaned over. His eyes opened, and there was so much love swimming there. He saw how much I needed him. God help me, I needed him.

I felt his hand sliding up the back of my legs, and he pressed into me. My chest was at his neck, his hands were at my hips now, spanning my waist, and he nodded.

I moaned as his hand moved up my back, under my tank top, and the other hand lowered my sleeping shorts just enough. He cupped me, and as our gazes held, a finger slipped inside.

I gasped, melting farther into him. His arm tightened around my waist. He held me, looking up and holding my gaze captive as his finger stroked me. A second joined it, and I grabbed his shoulders.

It felt so damned good, always so damned good—because this was what we were good at—and he kept sliding them in and out, going farther and farther in. I clutched him now. My fingers curled, my nails sinking into his skin, and I bit my lip.

I started to close my eyes, wanting to surrender completely to the storm he could give my body, but he said, “Don’t!”

His eyes blazed at me, and I nodded.

He wanted to see me come. He wanted to see my pupils dilate, and I hated and loved when he did this.

He made me vulnerable in the rawest state I could be in—completely exposed as he watched me.

A third finger moved in, and I lay against him, still sitting up.

Face to face. Nose to nose. His eyes kept flicking to my lips, but he wouldn’t kiss me. If he did, my eyes would close, and he couldn’t watch me. He couldn’t see the hold he had over my body, inside and out, and because of that, I grazed my lips over his.

He moaned, but pulled back.

“Not fair,” he ground out, his fingers surging high and pausing.

I felt them close to my stomach, and I gasped, but held still.

God.

Please.

They were almost where she had been.

He moved them around, then pulled them out, only to thrust in again.

“Chan,” I moaned, my head falling back, my eyes closing again.

“Heather,” he growled, gripping the back of my neck, making me watch him.

Oh—oh—oooh.

I felt the climax rising, building slowly. Channing grinned, slowing down, and I groaned.

I hit his shoulder with a fist. “You dick.”

He was drawing this out.

He chuckled, but he gave in, moving to kiss my shoulder.

I started to ride his hand. I couldn't help myself any longer. I had to release, and my breasts began to brush his chest. With a growl, Channing ripped my shirt off. He tossed it to the side and cupped one of my breasts. His thumb tweaked my nipple, sending sensations all through me.

I wanted to come. I wanted it so bad, and I reached down, holding his wrist in place so I could ride him the way I wanted to. I wanted to have control, but a soft chuckle caressed me as he moved up, his lips finding mine before he said, “No, no.”

“You're such an asshole.”

Letting go of my breast, his other hand went to my waist, and he gripped me close, standing in the same motion.

I squeaked, my arms going around his neck, and my legs wrapping around his waist. He walked me back, holding me against the wall, and then his mouth found mine. But this time, there was nothing soft about it. No teasing graze, no slight nip. This time, his lips opened over mine in a hard kiss, a brutal kiss, and one I succumbed to gladly.

I shifted higher against him, as if we really were having sex, and it wasn't just his fingers in me. Holy shit, I wanted that—so fucking bad.

“Channing!”

He laughed again, pulling back so he could watch me. He had a dark and primal look on his face, one I knew always lurked under the surface, and he stroked me harder. He wasn't holding back anymore.

My release was coming.

My legs clenched around him, and I leaned my head back, helpless and only wanting what was coming—and then I exploded. My body shuddered in his hold.

He didn't give me time to acclimate to the sensations coursing through me. Shoving his pants down and mine, he pushed inside me, and I groaned.

And I stopped thinking about *her*.

HEATHER

FIFTH GRADE

“**W**ho are you trick-or-treating with?”

We were preparing to leave the house when my dad asked that question. I had his green robe on with a dozen stuffed cats either glued, taped, or shoved into the pockets, and my hair was in three giant rollers on top of my head. I had explained the whole premise of the costume three times to my dad, and every time, he ended up looking down at his lap with his shoulders shaking.

I wrinkled my nose. “That stupid Channing Monroe.”

“I thought you two were friends.” He stifled more laughter, locking the door behind us.

I got it. It was hilarious.

Insert eye roll here, please.

I huffed out, “We are, but...still.”

I was just sore. Tate had gone trick-or-treating with her friends in Fallen Crest, because that’s where she lived now. I felt like a loser. She hadn’t even asked me to go with them.

“Tell me again about the idea for your costume,” he said as he crossed the porch.

“We were supposed to pick costumes for each other that show what we’re going to be when we’re old—like, twenty-five.”

“Old.” We separated to go to our car doors. He coughed as I climbed in. “Yes. Twenty-five is old.”

“It’s almost ancient, Dad.”

“Of course.”

“Anyway.” I climbed in, rearranging some of the cats so my seatbelt wouldn’t crush them. He started the car, and I continued, “He picked mine. He thinks I’m gonna be a cat lady.”

“And what did you pick for Channing?”

“That one was a little hard because I had three choices. He’s either going to be a rock star, a criminal, or a serial killer. He gets in so much trouble, it has to be one of those three.”

“Of course.” Again with the lip smashing. His hands tightened around the steering wheel. “So, which did you pick?”

“The obvious one.”

“Which is?”

“Serial killer.” *Duh.*

When we pulled up to Channing’s house, I saw him and was out of the car in a flash. “You’re supposed to be a killer guy!”

He stood up from the front step and smirked. His hair was slicked back, and as he raked his fingers through it, chain bracelets slid down his arm. He wore a ripped muscle shirt with a leather vest over it, and leather pants on the bottom.

Three long chain necklaces hung down his chest, one with a cross at the end.

He cocked his head back, his thumb hooked into the waistband of his pants. “Come on. You really think I’m going to be a serial killer?” He waved a hand over himself. “I’ll be a rock star, hands down.”

“You cheated!” I growled, reaching for one of my cats. Ripping it from the duct tape, I chucked it at him. “I’m not going trick-or-treating with you now.”

The window rolled down on my dad’s car. “Things okay?”

“Yeah!” Channing yelled, scooting around me so he was first to the car. His hand found mine behind his back, and he squeezed it. “We’re still in negotiations over my costume, but we’ll be fine, Mr. Jax. My mom will call you when we’re done tonight.”

Dad moved his head to the side, a better angle to see me. “Heather?”

“Yeah, Dad?” Channing was almost killing my hand.

“Are you okay?”

I gritted my teeth and used both of my hands to crush his. When he howled in protest, I smiled sweetly at my dad. “I’ll be fine.”

Channing was the devil—I should’ve made him dress like that—but I didn’t have any backup trick-or-treating plans. Rock star would have to do.

As soon as my dad left the driveway, I shoved Channing away. “You’re a moron.”

“Come on, Heather.”

I paused at his tone. It wasn't cocky like normal. He seemed embarrassed.

"I don't want to dress like a criminal or a killer. A rock star is much cooler." He looked away.

I picked at my robe. "What do you think this is? You think I'm Alanis Morissette here? I'm in a freaking robe with cats taped all over. Cat lady does not equal cool, but I played by the rules. *I'm* not a cheater."

He rolled his eyes. "It's funny. You're not going to be a cat lady."

That made me feel better, but I was still sore. It had been his idea to pick each other's costumes.

"Okay. Okay." He held his hands up, walking toward me. "How about we go trick-or-treating like this, and I'll give you some of my stash?"

Well... That held promise. "Give me a third of your candy, and it's a deal."

"What?" His eyes rounded. "No way."

"Half your stash."

He narrowed his eyes, his head tilting to the side.

"The longer you wait, the higher I go..." I chided softly.

"A third." He held his hand out. "Final deal."

"Half or no deal."

"Heather!" he whined, then groaned as his head fell back. "Fine. I'll give you half."

I shook his hand. "We got a plan of action to hit these houses?"

“Huh?”

“I mean, come on.” I put my hands on my hips—or on one of the cat heads. “We need back-up costumes so we can hit the houses twice.”

He mulled that over a moment, sticking his bottom lip out until suddenly he snapped forward. “Hold on.”

He ran inside, the screen door slamming behind him. A moment later, I heard him running back.

His mother yelled from inside, “What are you doing with my new sheets, Channing?!”

He burst through, throwing the screen door open like it was made of air. Dropping the sheets at my feet, he produced a black marker and scissors and yelled back, “Nothing, Mom!” He turned to me. “Run!”

Three hours later, we’d hit all of Roussou twice and were walking down the tracks back to Channing’s house. Our bags were huge. The double costumes had worked. Plus, our second pass had hit the houses late, and most people wanted to get rid of their candy. Roussou wasn’t getting the customers it used to get, which was awesome!

“Stop right there, you two.”

A low growl came from behind us.

We turned to find two guys there, one in a reaper costume and the other in prison garb. In a way, they were the serial killer and criminal I’d picked for Channing. Talk about cosmic coincidence.

Both wore masks, and the bigger one growled, “Give us the candy, you losers.”

Losers?

Fu—nk this sh—at.

Yeah. Funk this shat.

My dad was on me about the swearing, but seriously. He wasn't here.

FUCK THIS SHIT! I yelled too. "Ahhhh!"

Both guys took a step back.

Channing was watching me, frowning. "Don't get all crazy."

I howled at all of them. "I bargained hard for that candy. They're not taking it."

The serial killer and criminal shared a look, but neither said a word. Their shoulders rolled back and the taller one raised his head. He coughed. "I mean it. Give us the candy."

All right. Game on, FUCKER!

I was all about the swearing now. In my head.

I braced my feet and dropped my bag. I was in the ghost sheet so I reached down and pulled out the robe.

"Wha—" The shorter one frowned. "What are you doing?"

I ripped off two of the cats. "I'm going to pelt you with them, you asshole!"

"Don't call me asshole!"

"ASSHOLE!"

"Man," he whined, looking at his friend. "Nor—" He shut up suddenly, blasting his lips together and shooting us a look.

Nor? Nor what?

Then I heard Channing laughing next to me. "You losers."

Everyone looked at him.

“Chan?”

He motioned to me. “Put the cats away. We’re not the losers. They are.”

Both guys groaned. “Come on, Channing.”

Channing walked forward, his hands forming fists at his sides, and he shook his head. “You can try to take our candy.” He waited a beat. “But I’m going to take yours instead.”

“Chan, we were just messing around.”

“Time’s up!”

“What?” The bigger one started running backward. “You didn’t tell us we had a time limit.”

Channing started chasing. “I didn’t, because I’m not a LOSER!”

All pretense was gone. The serial killer/reaper and criminal took off running. Channing was right after them.

“Channing!” I yelled. “What do you want me to do?” We had two and a half garbage bags of loot. I couldn’t carry them and chase after him too.

He yelled back, “Just hold on. I’ll be right back!”

And ten minutes later, he was. With two more bags.

We’d hit the motherload.

“What?” I asked as he tossed one of the bags to me. I caught it. The sucker was heavy.

He gave me a crooked grin, using the back of his arm to wipe over his forehead. He panted. “That was Norm and Matt. Idiots. They thought they could steal from me.”

“They’re your friends.”

He shrugged, dropping his bag to the ground and rifling through it. “They’re my best friends after tonight.” He kept looking through his stash, but I was watching him.

I saw the darkening over his eye and stepped up to him. “You’re going to have a black eye?”

He paused, looking up.

I winced, seeing his face full force now. Half of it was going to be black and blue. It was already swelling up. I knew about bruises and stuff. My older brother was a hothead. Or so my dad said.

“I’m fine.”

I touched one of the bruises and hissed.

Why I hissed, I had no idea. Channing didn’t even move.

A stony look came over him. “I’m fine, Heather.” He took in my robe again. “You still think you’re going to be a cat lady?”

I grinned, shaking my head. “I think I’m going to be an accessory instead.”

“A bracelet? You mean that?”

“No.” I nodded to him and the two bags he’d brought. “An accessory to a criminal like you.”

Channing laughed. I laughed. And as we walked the rest of the way to his house, the candy in bags thrown over our shoulders, Channing reached out and took my hand.

We held hands the rest of the way.

Don’t tell anyone.

CHANNING

PRESENT DAY

Heather brought *her* up two nights ago.
I almost shit my pants.

I hadn't been expecting her, but there she was—smack-dab in the middle of my soul.

Grief I thought long gone was back, like it'd never been gone.

We'd thought we were going to have a daughter. I'd been planning on proposing, but then Heather woke up one morning and...

It was like the day my mom died.

I'd been prepared for losing my mother, or as prepared as a kid could get, but we weren't prepared to lose our little girl.

We'd been full of hopes and future plans, and I'd even seen the white picket fence coming my way. There'd probably be a few Harleys parked behind it, but I'd been ready to go the ball-n-chain route—on Heather's ankle, not mine.

She was too good for me.

I heard the bell ring at my old high school and looked up.

Heather had slept over last night. Bren hadn't, and when I heard her this morning, I hadn't been able to keep the “cool

older brother/dad” persona in check. We’d had words, Bren had slipped out, and here I was—stalking my own kid sister like the loser dad-wannabe I was, fucking up on a daily basis. I’d seen her go in earlier, and the world hadn’t seemed too messed up. She looked good. The other kids gave her a wide berth, but one that was respectful.

Pride filled my chest as I watched her.

She was going to be okay. Right? She looked okay. She looked kickass—a little more on the terrifying side of kickass than Heather used to be when we were in school, but still, a badass.

My phone buzzed.

And just like that, seeing that it was Moose calling, my crew life was back. Bren, Heather, her—they had to be pushed aside.

The phone buzzed in my hand, but I had to take a second.

That worry/love/grief wasn’t going. It sat on my chest like a fucking elephant.

I growled. Sitting in my truck, looking like a creep, I gritted my teeth and shoved those feelings down. I stomped on them, and yeah, a part of me went with them.

Nostrils flaring, I answered the phone. “Yeah?” I barked.

“Hey.” Moose wasn’t fazed. “There’s a guy at the warehouse. Creepy lawyer dude. I’m looking at him through the vids. He’s even got the slimy, slicked-back hair.” Moose laughed. “He looks like a fucking pompous Peter.”

A Peter.

A part of me was happy. It was time I had someone to fuck with.

“Okay.” I checked the time, rasping out, “You working later?”

“I open at eleven.” He paused.

I knew he’d heard how I sounded.

He only asked, “You want backup?”

“Yeah.” You never know who might bring a gun to a cold call drop-in. “Leaving the school now.”

“School? What? You want to fail anot—”

I didn’t want to hear the ribbing, so I hung up. My phone buzzed a moment later, once I was on the road.

Moose: High school dropout fuck.

I chuckled. It helped. Not a lot, but a little.

When I got to the warehouse, I saw Moose was right. The guy standing outside the gate *was* a Peter.

Fucking hell.

I smirked at him as he turned toward my truck, and I rolled down my window. “Whoever you are, it is not your day.”

The guy turned away from the gate as I parked.

I got out, but I was in no hurry to escalate this interaction. The need to get some shit out of me, to make this target bleed was too great.

I kept back, leaning against my truck.

I didn’t trust myself, not yet.

Adjusting his tie, he started for me, his hand out for a shake. “I’m Eric McDougall. Brett Marsch is my client. He’s ___”

“I’d stop right there,” I snarled.

The guy had a bird-like head, and it popped up high. He ran a hand down his tie.

“I—excuse me?”

I was already past his question, studying him. “I wasn’t expecting the guy to lawyer up. I thought he had a crew here, thought I’d have to deal with the blowback that way.” I frowned. “This mean he doesn’t have a local crew?”

“What?” He frowned. “No. What are you talking about? I’m here on behalf of Brett Marsch, *Senior*.”

“You say that like I should give a shit.”

Another tie adjustment and this time, he pulled the sides of his jacket closer together. He fixed the top button. He really looked the Peter now.

“I’m here to offer you and your business associates a job proposal.”

“A proposal? I’m intrigued.” I said it flatly. I wasn’t.

I swear his chest puffed up.

“Like I said, I represent Brett Marsch, Senior, from Marsch Industries. He’s learned you may have come across his son recently. He’d like to know the basis of that interaction.”

“The basis?” I drawled.

My hand twitched.

“Yes. What was the reason behind your interaction with his son?”

Moose needed to hurry the fuck up.

I tilted my head to the side. “How much does he want to know?”

My meaning was clear.

The guy narrowed his eyes.

He stepped back. “Well, he’d like to know if it was a business interaction or a social outing interaction. Any information you could give my client, he’d be grateful for.”

I laughed, crossing one ankle over the other. “I’d like to know how grateful he’d be.”

The lawyer stared at me.

I stared back.

He frowned. “Are you attempting to extort my client of money?”

I smirked. “Those are big words for this high school fuck-up.” I dropped the smirk, letting him know I was serious. I cooled my tone. “Daddy wants to know where his errant son is. Right? I got that right?”

He swallowed, his Adam’s apple jumping up and down. “Yes. You did.”

“You don’t know where the fuck you are. We ain’t the friendly small-town folk here. You want something, you pay for it. You want information on your client’s adult son, you pay for it. We clear?”

He coughed. “Pay for it?”

I heard a truck approaching. Moose had the best timing.

His truck whipped down the road and slowed before pulling up to where I stood.

He rolled down his window. “Hey, high school dropout fucker.”

I grunted. “Shows you’re the idiot. I graduated.”

“What?” His smirk vanished. “Really?”

“You’re the one who didn’t graduate.” I gestured ahead. “This fine Peter is offering money to find out what business we had with *Mr. Brett Marsch*.”

The lawyer bristled. “My name is Eric McDougall. And I wasn’t offering. We were discussing the option of—”

“What? Really?” Moose was deadly serious.

The lawyer swallowed. “Yes.” He frowned. “That’s my name.”

“Not your name. You’re offering money?”

“Oh. Uh...” He coughed, then his shoulders slumped. “I guess I am.” Peter adjusted his hold on his briefcase, moving it in front of him as if it were a shield. “Mr. Marsch is willing to pay, but before any payment can be discussed, I need to know what type of interaction you had with his son.” He paused, waiting.

I had no doubt this had worked on others.

They would be awed by his slick suit, his combed-back hair, the briefcase that was probably some fucktastically expensive brand, and after waving the promise of money in front of them, their drool would be up to their ankles.

He stared at us.

Moose and I stared right back.

We said nothing. We didn’t blink.

We were content to wait this Peter out. Hell. This was entertainment for us, just seeing him fidget.

One minute. Two. He coughed again, smoothing a hand down his tie, and then again—a third smoothing. He couldn’t

make it any flatter. The tie was dead. He'd smothered it.

"Well..." He straightened his cufflinks.

No. Really. He did.

Still no reaction from Moose and me.

"Okay then." His chest rose and fell. "Can you tell me the reason you interacted with Mr. Marsch, Jr.?"

Moose and I cracked grins.

"What?" The lawyer seemed bewildered now.

Moose gestured to him. "Here's how we roll. You pay us. *Then* we tell you."

The lawyer looked at me.

I leaned against my truck and nodded toward Moose. "He's the muscle. I'd listen to him."

Moose flicked his eyes upward, but that was the closest he'd get to an eye roll. His dead-serious face was still on. "Your first mistake was coming here. Your second was mentioning you knew Brett Marsch. Your third was coming dressed like that, and your fourth was letting us know you *really* want to know what we talked to Marsch about."

The lawyer's eyebrows pulled together.

Moose amended, "Marsch, Jr."

The lawyer swung toward me. I shook my head. "You pay. We talk."

He scowled and cursed, reaching for his wallet. He pulled out a few bills and flung them to the ground.

Twenty bucks.

Moose and I started laughing.

Two of them blew away.

No one made a move to catch them, and I warned, “You might not want to piss us off.”

Moose didn’t react, but I felt his surprise.

I was close to snapping. I needed to pull back, but she was there. Right under the surface. She was with Heather. Bren too. Three females in my life, and one was already gone.

Shit. I had to let this guy know.

“You insult me one more time, throw money at my feet like I’m a fucking beggar, and your blood will be coating it.” I raised an eyebrow. “We clear?”

He didn’t move. Not for a full ten seconds. His eyes locked on mine, and without a word, he pulled out a hundred from his wallet.

When I still didn’t move for it, he walked it over to Moose.

As soon as Moose took it, I said, “He was here.”

I stopped.

He waited.

I just smiled at him, knowing the threat of violence was in the air and knowing he could feel it.

He muttered under his breath, “Are you kidding me?” But he thrust over another hundred-dollar bill.

The next round of this game started, followed by a few more after that. He learned that we’d talked to him and that he had been inside our warehouse.

I held out until we’d gotten a cool five hundred from him. Then I’d had enough.

“Look, give us another five hundred and we’ll tell you everything. Anything short of that, piss off.”

He drew himself to his fullest height, as if offended. But after glancing between Moose and me again, he gave up.

“Fine,” he muttered, taking his wallet out and emptying it.

Moose took the money, counted it, and nodded to me.

“Marsch was running a scam on the nursing home here,” I told the Peter. “We ran him out of town.”

He looked deflated. “That’s it?”

We’d beaten the shit out of him, but I wasn’t sharing that with a lawyer.

“Why are you looking for him?” I asked. “Father dearest just missing his heir?”

He held his briefcase higher, moving it to rest in front of his stomach. “That’s none of your business.”

Moose and I shared a look. I stepped forward, folding my arms over my chest.

Peter edged back a step, his eyes flicking from me to Moose and back again. His mouth thinned.

“We’re good at finding people,” I told him. “It would be worth your time to pay us to deliver him to you.”

“Deliver?” he echoed.

“Yeah. We find him, bring him to you.”

His head cocked to the side. “What’s the catch?”

See? He was smart.

“For a price, we’ll deliver him to you.”

He sighed, his shoulders drooped, and he shook his head. “Of course. For a price.” He grumbled, pulling out a checkbook. “Why do I have a feeling you’re about to rip me off?”

“Ten gran—”

“Ten thousand?!” he sputtered.

I ignored him. “Lawyers ain’t cheap. You’re driving around, chasing tail on this guy, so either he’s blackmailing you or you’re charging by the hour. Either way, he’s got enough to want to have his son brought back to him. So, yes. Ten fucking thousand, *Peter*.”

He growled. “That is not my name.”

“If he’s in the area, we’ll have him to you in forty-eight hours. If he’s not, it’ll take longer for travel time.” I shrugged. “Take it or leave it. Or we can wait, see if he comes back to finish his con, and we can give him the same option.”

Moose leaned forward. “Except he’ll pay us to not fuck him up, but fuck *you* up.”

“Your choice,” I finished.

The guy was screwed, and he knew it.

A vein popped out from the side of his neck. Moose and I did what we’d done before: nothing. We stared back, and we didn’t move an inch.

“Fine.” He expelled a frustrated sigh, cursing under his breath. “I have a feeling you’ll have no problem figuring where I’ll be staying in the meantime.” He wrote out the check, signing so forcefully his pen ripped a small hole in it. Tearing it out, he flung it toward Moose, then started for his car.

He was halfway there, past our trucks, when he rotated on his heels. He jabbed a finger at me. “He better be alive *and* unharmed.”

We didn’t answer.

He started for his car, but paused again. “Do I want to ask what a Peter is?” He was already grimacing.

Moose glanced to me. I dipped my head forward, giving him the go-ahead, and with a wicked smile, he started.

“You heard of a place called Tuesday Tits?”

The lawyer’s eyebrows pinched together. “That the bar in town?”

Moose nodded. “But it ain’t a strip club.”

“What’s that have to do with a Peter?”

Moose was getting there. He wasn’t going to be rushed. He spoke slowly. “A Peter is the type of guy who first showed up when Tuesday Tits was renamed. He came in thinking the place was a strip club. He goes in, he looks around. There’s a few girls, but no one showing their tits. So he’s confused, but he doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t leave. He doesn’t ask if the place is a strip club or not. He goes to a dark corner, where he’s ready to stroke it, and he starts drinking. He sits there all afternoon, hoping someone will start dancing, and hell, by the time night rolls around, he’s hoping just any girl starts dancing. He drinks all night long, getting so wasted that he’s a pile of nothing when he’s escorted out. He takes a cab home. Sleeps it off, and comes back the next day. A Peter is that guy who comes every day, drinks every day, just on the hope to see a pair of tits. But he’s so ashamed of himself, he never just asks if it’s a strip club or not. He’s the type of guy that gets Pathetic Every Day At Tuesday Tits, and when he’s called a

PEDATT at the end of the night, he turns around and slurs back, 'I ain't no Peter.'"

Moose was smiling wide now, but with a cruel glint. "That's a Peter."

The Peter looked at us. He didn't blink. He didn't react. He was still until his hands jerked up and tightened over the steering wheel. "Unharmd," he said again.

He peeled out of there, spewing up dirt, some of it raining over us.

As soon as he was gone, Moose looked at me. "He's not unharmd."

I lifted a shoulder. "What's he going to do? Sue us?" Then I gave a brisk order. "Spread the word. Get him before Richter finds out about this lawyer being here. We don't need to have one problem merge with our other problem."

Moose nodded, a dark look on his face. "Got it."

All the shit in my life, that was one problem I could cross off.

But I still had a need to pummel my fists somewhere.

HEATHER

I broke the rules.
I talked about her.

There'd been an uneasy truce in the two days since then between Channing and me. We hadn't talked about her anymore, but we both felt her. I knew we did. Channing was on edge more than normal, but so was I. It was probably the reason we'd gone at it like animals last night.

Sex was easier than feelings. Always. Forever.

I was leaving his place when Bren came in, already skipping on her first day of school. She had a bag of food in her hand.

I lost my footing, like I did almost every time she was around.

It wasn't her fault.

She hadn't asked for their dad to go to prison and for Channing to be her guardian. Despite the nonchalance and cold exterior, I had a feeling she loved her brother. But I remembered being in high school. I remembered losing my own mother, and I remembered not wanting to get close to anyone. I'd barely let Sam in, though she never knew that.

Bren and I talked a bit, and there was an awkwardness, like always.

She was a caged female wolf that grew up being abused. There was such beauty there, but she was wild and dangerous. She needed love, so much love, and I was the dick, taking some of that love away because Channing hadn't figured out how to juggle everyone on his plate.

I ached for Bren. I truly did. I wanted to take her in my arms, hug her, and hold her—even though I knew she'd struggle to get away. She needed the love, but she didn't want to need it.

I didn't have the words. I rarely did.

So she was here. I was here. And neither of us knew what to say.

I was surprised we lasted as long as we did. Eventually she took off, saying she was going back to school, but I wasn't born yesterday. The girl was ditching. It wasn't my place to step in. Fuck. I didn't even know what I would've done, so I left too.

I had to get back to Manny's.

But once in my car, I realized the gas was nearing empty, so I pulled into the one of two gas stations in Roussou. Channing was sitting on the front of my truck when I came out, an energy drink in hand.

His feet dangled off the hood, and he flashed a cocky grin at the sight of me.

I faltered for a step, glad to see the cockiness, not the turmoil I had unleashed two nights ago.

I tightened my hold on my drink before going over. "Hey."

“Hey.” He was mocking me, giving me the same tight-lipped response.

I fought against rolling my eyes. “What are you doing here?”

He didn’t answer that. “You just coming from the house?”

“Yeah, I slept in.”

We fell silent, but we both knew what was happening next.

He was cocky. He was smirking. That meant we were going surface. We weren’t going deep.

But Channing would wait for me to make the first move—if I wanted to touch him, or if I didn’t. I would set the tone. He usually let me unless his hunger was too much. Then he’d prowl for me, and I could either say yes or no. But not like this, when his hunger was sated, when we were in broad daylight and there were people watching us like I knew there were. Everyone watched us, especially Channing.

He was revered here. They loved him, and they watched me because they knew he loved me.

The decision was mine right now. I didn’t know what I wanted myself, so I played it safe.

I forced out a fake laugh. It made me cringe. “I was heading back to Manny’s.”

He nodded, still watching me, still not saying anything. His gaze took on a knowing look, like he was reading inside of me.

“Okay,” he said.

I shot him a look. “What?”

His grin spread, slowly. “What?”

“‘Okay’,” I mocked him. “What’s that mean? ‘Okay’?”

“I’m not saying it in any way. I’m just agreeing with you.”

“Come on.”

“Come on?” His eyes danced, and he lowered his head.
“Come on what?”

He was flirting.

I couldn’t hold my grin back. “Okay.” I said it exactly the way he had.

He let out a laugh, reaching for me and pulling me in front of him. He slid his hands through my hair, bringing some of it to cover my face until I couldn’t see anything. “This is how you should wear your hair. It’s very Cousin Itt. You can start a trend, call it Heather’s Itt.”

“Really?” I was eating my own hair, but I couldn’t dim my smile. He had that effect on me.

“Oh yeah.” His voice fell soft, growing intimate, and he leaned down, his hand trailing over my back. “And then I can do this all I want.”

His hand was on my ass. He grabbed a good chunk, but it wasn’t an offensive grab. It was a possessive claim, and I felt his breath on my neck. His lips grazed my skin. He held me close, almost draped over me. I moved into him, my arms sliding up his legs and around his waist. It was an intimate touch. It probably looked uncomfortable as hell from the outside, but they were on the outside. They weren’t standing where I was, and they weren’t feeling how I was feeling with Channing at that moment.

I didn’t want to move back.

He sheltered me, and I felt like everything would work out. All the bad shit would be fixed, and I wouldn't have to face any of it. But that wasn't the truth, and I groaned as I stepped away.

His hand left my ass, though he didn't let me go far. His legs tightened around me, holding me in place, and he closed his arms around my shoulders. He was hugging me, in an almost chaste way. His head rested against mine.

I felt his tension then, and I knew this hug was for him.

He needed me, and momentarily surprised, I stayed there.

I sank back into him.

“Aren't you two sweet?”

Dex Richter!

The question wasn't even fully asked before Channing whipped up and jumped down beside me. His body went rigid, and I turned. I knew whose voice that was, and I knew what Channing would want me to do.

He went forward to deal with Richter as I slipped into my vehicle. I was reversing out of there as I counted how many Demons there were with their leader.

Richter motioned to me, but I ignored him, spinning my tires to speed a block away before pulling over.

I called Moose.

“Heather?”

“Channing's at a gas station in Roussou with Richter.”

There was no hesitation. “Which one?”

“Miller's.”

“On it. Go to Manny’s.”

“He had four others with him,” I added.

I caught the slight swear before Moose hung up, and though everything in me wanted to go back and stand with my man, I went to Manny’s. That was my home. Dealing with Richter, that’s where Channing ruled.

I went to work and tried not to think about what I’d driven away from.

CHANNING

My jaw could cut steel.

I was goddamn pissed.

Here was Richter, four of his crew behind him. Their Harleys were in *my* town, and I wanted to pummel his face into the ground. Instead, I asked a question—with a definite chill to my tone.

“You think you can roll up on me and *my* girl?” I took a step closer. “When I’m *with* my girl?”

His guys were already standing at attention. That was my first clue Richter was here to mess with me. But at my snap-back, they got into a fighting stance.

The rage stormed in me, thundering loud, and I was tempted to wade in—caution be damned. Heather and my time with Heather were off-limits. That’s a lesson I thought he’d learned long ago. It seemed a reminder session was due.

“Whoa, Monroe.”

I caught the flash of wariness in his eyes before he masked it. I scared him, and that was all I needed to know. That meant he didn’t really have the fortress of men behind him that he acted like he did.

He rolled his shoulders back, trying to grin. His hand went up. “Chill, man. I didn’t know you and Jax were back together.”

The fu...? I was done.

I should’ve waited.

I knew Heather had called.

I should’ve given them time to mobilize, but a switch turned off in my head. I stopped thinking. And all the shit from the past few days rolled up and pooled in my fist.

I swung—consequences be damned—because this fucker had this coming. I clipped him in the face.

There was a second of silence right after. It was always this way in a fight.

Someone made the first move, expected or not, then silence. For one blissful second.

I loved that moment. I relished it. I breathed it in, because I knew it was all I had before time would slam back into place and the consequences would rush me.

But in that moment right now, as his body fell, I stood over him, and it wasn’t his blood on my hand. It was mine. It was Bren’s. It was my dad’s. It was Heather’s.

It was my daughter’s.

Then time rushed back to me, and the moment was gone.

It was time to fight.

His second rushed me, arm in the air.

Wrapping my arms around Richter, I slammed him to the ground, but they were on me.

Four pairs of hands grabbed me, ripping me away before I could really pummel him.

I heard squealing brakes, and before they could start hitting me, two large figures were on them.

Moose took one, threw him to the ground, and started railing.

Congo was next, wrestling their big fucker.

The last two holding me were yanked away, and Richter returned to my line of sight.

He froze, seeing me coming, and started to run.

“Don’t!” I tucked my head and went at him like he was about to score a touchdown, end of the fourth, and he was between me and winning the championship game. That guy was going down, and he knew it.

He stepped back. His hands came up as I grabbed him.

I body-slammed him down and began to pound.

The first hit dazed him, and any fight he might have had was gone. But I was still going. Left, right, left right—I hit him in rapid succession at first, but the longer he stayed still, the more distance I got for my punches. I was rearing all the way up, bringing my fist down from past my shoulder when I heard the first shout.

I couldn’t stop.

He’d threatened Heather before. Bren too. Now he came over and... I wasn’t fighting him for the push I knew he was working on to get into Roussou. I was telling him, in my way, that he needed to stay the fuck away from the ones I loved.

Bren.

Punch.

Heather.

Punch.

My daughter.

Punch.

“Chan!” Moose yelled in my face, pulling at my shoulder.

I swung, pushing him away.

I was free. For a second.

Richter’s face was a bloody mess. I wasn’t even sure where I was hitting. I couldn’t see his eyes or anything. It was one giant mass of oozing blood, and it was getting all over me.

I still couldn’t stop.

“CHAN!”

Three guys were on me, yanking, hauling me backward, pushing me away. They dragged me a few feet before I heard the cop cars coming.

“Fucking run, man!” My cousin screamed in my face, and I caught a glimpse of Lincoln coming out of the station, the security tapes in his hands.

We had to go. We had to go *now*.

“I got it.” I shoved them off me. “I got it!”

I didn’t want to spend the night in jail when the rest of the Demons would be on the prowl. They wouldn’t narc on me, wanting to get their own revenge, and no one in Roussou would talk. The security footage had been taken care of, so as long as we got out of here, we were safe.

For now.

I started for my truck, but glanced back.

Five of them were on the ground, and only one had started to sit up. There was a hospital in Frisco. They'd go there, not Fallen Crest.

As I jumped into my truck, Scratch was at the door.

“Get over.” He shoved me, not waiting, and got in where I'd been. “You're not driving. Not after that.” He tore out of there, spitting up loose gravel. “You lunatic.”

The windows were down, and he was going more than sixty through town, but all I could do was grin at him. He was bleeding from the face, shoulders, arms, and hands, and I just laughed.

“I bet you're as bad as me.”

He didn't say anything, just drove down the back roads to the bar we ran together. It wasn't until we pulled up to the back alley that his hands started shaking.

He parked and just sat there.

His head hung down. “You could've killed him, Chan,” he said before looking at me. “Where'd we all be then?”

A chill went down my spine.

He was right.

An image of myself, throwing fist after fist down on Richter, flashed in my head. I'd felt his cartilage break. I'd felt his teeth shatter. I knew I'd broken a cheekbone.

And I hadn't been stopping.

Scratch was right. I could've killed him.

“I'm sorry.”

He didn't reply.

A truck pulled up behind us. It was Lincoln. He and Congo were getting out, coming toward us.

They came for orders.

My cousin wasn't in our crew, but he might as well have been. He waded into shit like this for me.

Congo opened my door and stepped back. "Moose called ahead. Scouts are setting up."

I nodded. They'd be positioned outside the hospital, the town of Frisco, and outside Roussou too.

"I want two sent to Manny's."

Congo pulled his phone out, leaving to put that order through.

"Bren?" Lincoln asked.

I hesitated before shaking my head. "Her crew will protect her. She'll be fine. We'll give them a heads-up."

Scratch rounded my truck, tossing my keys to Lincoln. "If we had any Demons here, they either trashed the place or took off. They'll be back." He shot me a dark look.

I shut the door, wincing at how tight my hands already felt. "I had to," I called after him. "He threatened Heather and Bren. That was the second time."

Scratch held his hands up, going to the bar. He understood, but he was annoyed.

We needed to be ready, though a quick rebuttal probably wasn't in the works. Demons were slow, too slow at times.

I wasn't planning on sitting back and waiting to see what Richter's counter would be. I wanted to know before even he

knew.

“Come on.” I nodded to Congo. “You and Lincoln are working tonight. Clean up and start your shift.”

Lincoln started inside.

Congo waited. “You sure?”

I nodded again. “I need to clean up, and then I have to do some work.”

“What about that con man? Moose said you wanted to find him.”

“You know where he is?”

He gestured over his shoulder. “He left the hospital yesterday. He’s in Fallen Crest, at one of the hotels there.”

“Which one?”

“The Starroad.”

Moose came out of the bar’s back door.

“You parked on the street?” I asked.

His jaw was tight, just like mine had been. “I did. There’s six Demons inside, just chillin’ like nothing happened.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Who are they?”

“Traverse and Connelly are two of them.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Their phones not working?”

“They were on them, some of the guys. But not those two.”

That wasn’t right.

My crew heard I was in trouble and came for me. Those guys should’ve done the same for Richter, unless one of two

things was happening—they'd been ordered to sit and wait, retaliate if they got a chance.

Or...

I was going with the hunch I'd had as soon as I saw fear in Richter's eyes. I headed inside.

Moose and Congo hurried to catch up. "What are you doing, Channing?"

I heard the trace of worry in Congo's voice, and it almost changed my mind, but my gut was telling me something. I needed to see if it would work.

I didn't know much about the Demon MC, but I did know that Traverse and Connelly were often the ones in my bar. Richter was their leader, but he mostly stayed away. And when Traverse and Connelly were here, they always had the same members with them, plus a few others here and there.

I stepped inside.

Moose and Congo were right behind me, and at my presence, Scratch and Lincoln stopped what they were doing. The regulars scattered, and the few customers that had randomly stopped in from Fallen Crest or Frisco weren't far behind them.

Traverse and Connelly stayed put, not getting up as I approached their table.

I studied them, weighing the chances of one of them pulling a gun. As if reading my mind, Traverse flattened his hands on top of the table. Connelly did the same, and so did the others. None of them spoke. They were just waiting, sitting in their usual leather cuts, jeans, chains, and boots. They weren't dressed any differently than the ones we'd left on the ground outside the gas station.

I locked eyes with Traverse.

“You’re speaking for the others here?”

He nodded, slowly.

His hair was long and scraggly, always pulled back in a ponytail. He had tattoos running from his ears down his neck, with a dragon tat sweeping all the way around. The head started underneath his left ear and curled to just underneath his right, with its tail in an S shape. His forehead was low and flat. His eyes sunk in, and he had a hard nose ending just over his mouth. I didn’t even want to look there. He had a few missing teeth, but all that ugliness, Traverse was cunning.

I saw it in his eyes.

“You heard?” If he had, he’d know what I was talking about.

A second slow nod. He seemed to be working hard not to alarm me. “I did.”

I studied him.

I rethought everything in a flash.

I’d let Richter get away with threatening me once. This second time, I couldn’t. I had to fight, or Richter would’ve gotten worse. A line needed to be drawn.

Traverse scratched his cheek. “Richter underestimated you today. He won’t again.”

“And you?” I waited.

“I didn’t agree with him.”

“Way I figure it, you’re either here for a planned second attack, or…” I watched him. He didn’t bat an eyelash. “Or you’re here because you’re ready for a change in leadership.”

Now he blinked.

That was it.

“You want to be the new leader for the Demons?”

“Yes.” No hesitation, once again. He never looked away from me. “And today was the day that started.” He motioned outside. “Maybe we can talk out there?”

I ran a hand over my face, feeling the blood drying. “Give me a minute. I should wash up.”

I went over to Moose and Congo. “Go find that con man. Deliver him to that Peter at his hotel. And call Chad. I want him back in town.”

Both nodded and turned to leave.

I went to clean Richter’s blood from my face.

HEATHER

SIXTH GRADE

I wanted to bash Tate Sullivan's head in with the bat my brother had gotten for his last birthday.

She was flirting with Channing, pushing the new boobies she'd just grown into his face and tugging her shorts down, helping him see her pink lacy underwear. I watched all this from the porch at our house. Dad was adding on to Manny's, so a lot of my friends came over to hang out.

Free food and soda—it was quite the draw for sixth graders. Or actually, I was the only sixth grader here. Tate had always been a year older, and now Channing was a grade above me too.

Traitors.

Tate had talked last night about working at Manny's one day.

One day, my ass.

I daydreamed about my attack—how her blood would splatter and I'd wipe it off with my shirt. I'd drop the bat. Channing would be dumbfounded, and I'd walk away without saying a word.

The wood behind me groaned from someone's weight, and I straightened, the malice wiped clean from my face. I was the

image of innocence and purity when I looked up to smile.

“Hey, Dad.”

His eyes narrowed on me, his mouth twitching. He rubbed a hand over his jaw, but only grunted. “Mmm-hmmm.” He stepped out and took the seat next to me. Looking toward the alley in front of us, he nodded. “I see.”

I groaned inwardly. He knew. I knew he knew, but I still played dumb. This was embarrassing.

“What?” I tried to flutter my eyelashes, but fuck—forget it. I couldn’t go the whole nine yards. Faking wasn’t in my repertoire. (And go me—I aced our last vocabulary quiz.)

“You know what?” He brought out some peanuts and started taking off their shells. He indicated Channing and Tate. “Ain’t that your boy and bestie?”

There he went, showing off that he knew the term *bestie*.

He tossed the shell and stuck the peanut into his mouth. “Hmm?”

I already knew where this was going.

I rolled my eyes. “He’s not my ‘boy,’ and she’s a friend. She’s not my best friend.”

“Weren’t you calling her your best friend last night?”

Oh. Right. We’d had a sleepover. And we’d sung “You’re My Best Friend” by Queen at the top of our lungs. That didn’t mean anything, except, well...maybe I’d thought she was. At the time.

I grumbled, scooting lower on my chair. “We were singing a song, Dad. Jeez.”

He laughed. “Ah. Yes. Still...” He chucked another shell and tapped my shoulder. “I’m going to just say, you got your mom’s looks—not her penchant for leaving, but you look as stunning as she did, and I know you’ll keep getting more beautiful. So if you decide you want that boy, I know you can get him.” He gestured to Channing before grabbing for another peanut. “And if you decide you want a different boy, I’ve no doubt you’ll get him instead. It ain’t even about your looks, Heather. It’s about what’s in here.” He pointed to his heart. “And here.” He moved to his head. “You’ve got both of those. Boys will be attracted to you because of what’s on the outside, but they’ll stick around and fall in love because of what’s inside. And that boy.” He nodded toward Channing again, popping the peanut into his mouth. “I can tell you that boy had been coming around here long before she got those.”

“Ew, Dad!”

Even *he* noticed Tate’s new boobs.

I groaned. “Do you have to point ’em out?”

He chuckled. “I’m trying to tell you that you don’t need those. Monroe can be a punk sometimes, but if you’re worried about how he feels about you, you don’t need to be.” His mouth pressed in a disapproving line after that, as if he tasted something foul. A second later, he huffed, “And if you ever want to move to a school in Fallen Crest, you say the word. I’ll have you transferred in half a day.”

I’d been going to Roussou all my life. Brandon had switched over a year ago, and he was loving Fallen Crest, but not me. My friends were in Roussou.

And with that last thought, my stomach dropped to my feet.

The jig was up. I had to admit I liked the guy—like, in the official crush way, and I hated it.

God.

Boys suck.

“Channing!” Tate squealed, grabbing his bike and pushing off on it, speeding away.

The girl wanted to be chased.

I glowered, just knowing he’d grab her bike and head after her, but he didn’t. He watched her go, chuckled, and turned to me.

“She’s gone. Finally,” he hollered. “Now we can hang out!”

Okay. Maybe not all boys sucked...not a hundred percent of the time.

I stood up to go, but my dad said, “Heather.”

I went still. He’d been slightly amused before, but this was a different dad. His gaze was solemn; his eyes had bags under them. His mouth turned down at the corners. He seemed to shrink in his seat.

Oh no.

“I came out to tell you something.”

I didn’t want to hear it. I turned away, locking eyes with Channing. He stepped toward me, seeing my distress. “Heather?”

I heard my dad sigh, and it sounded so sad, so tired, so beaten down.

“Your mother’s coming back home,” he said.

I didn't look at him. I didn't want to hear it. She left once. Who was she to come back? Without responding, I went down the porch steps. I couldn't feel my legs. I couldn't see Channing as I walked to him, but I must've. He touched my arm and lowered his voice, "What's wrong?"

Nothing.

Nothing was happening.

"Let's play," I grated out.

HEATHER

PRESENT DAY

He was coming tonight.

I hadn't seen Channing for the last few days—minus a brief moment when he'd come over to Manny's to help contain a crew brawl Bren had started. Well, some guy's hand on her shoulder had started it. She took offense, and we were kicking everyone out a few minutes later. The cops had come, the crews split, and over the last week, I'd had to deal with repairing the damage they did to my restaurant.

I was shocked I hadn't started smoking again.

I was not a happy camper, but Channing's guys helped speed up the repair process, and now it was Saturday again. We were re-opening, but I was on edge.

Channing texted me to say he was fine after I left him at the gas station, but he'd said he would be scarce for a while. He hadn't lied.

Besides my temper, I was nursing a hard-on for him. I wondered how many different types of strangulation there were, because he was coming tonight, and that's what I wanted to do to him. I felt it. It'd been too long for us.

Fight or have sex. That's what he said we did, so when he showed up, I was going to fuck him, start a fight, and then end it all by killing him.

I had it all planned out.

"You're on edge."

I whirled around to find Brandon. "I'm not on edge."

I was, and it seemed like everyone was aware of it. Even the customers looked over. We had a party of forty and fifty year olds drinking in the back. They'd been laughing and loud most of the night, but they quieted now.

I swear I saw understanding pass through their group, and a second later, one waved, her underarm fat jiggling as she did. "You go, girl. Ain't no man worth the stress."

I winced.

Her friend guffawed. "Except if his name is Channing Monroe. That guy is *fiiiine*."

Their whole table broke out in laughter. The first tried to silence it, but another said something else and her margarita snorted out her nose.

They were gone. Off to the land of the buzzed.

I sighed, ignoring my brother's sympathy, and whacked him in the arm.

"Ouch." He rubbed his biceps.

I motioned toward the ladies. "Call Roy. I don't want any of them driving."

"On it."

Roy was our local Uber driver. Chances were high he'd end up parked in our lot anyway. He was smart. He was also

seventeen, skinny, and had a face still working its way through puberty, complete with acne and shaggy eyebrows. He had a penchant for blushing anytime a girl smiled at him.

The ladies would love him.

As if proving my point, one of them called out, “Come over here, Brandon. We’ve got a warm bosom to comfort you with. We’re feeling frisky.”

More hooting and lewd suggestions followed. My brother actually seemed a little terrified.

I nudged him with my elbow. “Could be worse. Rebecca could still be lurking around.”

He shuddered.

His stalker had stuck around for a week—until she’d gotten a punch to the face during the crew brawl. When she’d mentioned a lawsuit, I reminded her she’d broken in, trespassed, and threatened someone in my home not long ago.

She went away after that, and Brandon was beyond ecstatic.

For some reason, he hadn’t thought he would be able to shake her.

“Heather.” Our night manager came up behind me. “I called in more staff for the next shift. We’ve got a few coming to help cover till then too.”

Manny’s was beyond full, even the outside was at capacity, and there was a line snaking into the parking lot.

“Good.”

Ava walked past us, her shoulders sagging. She looked exhausted.

“Did Ava open today?”

“She came in at eleven.”

It was three in the afternoon. She shouldn't have been as tired as she looked.

“I'm going to send her home. She's sick.”

Cruz glanced at me, his eyebrows raised. “Two girls called in already. You sure?”

I nodded. “I'll take her place. She's going to fall over.” I gave him a hard look. “Figure out what's going on with her.”

He nodded. He didn't salute me or clip his heels together, but that was the effect of his response. I gave an order, and he'd fulfill it.

Ava was stubborn and proud. If she could walk, she came in, but she'd been struggling lately. She'd lost some weight. I didn't want to make any assumptions, but I wanted to know what was going on with her—if it was her health, if she was trying to lose weight for school, if she was up late at night with a guy... Who knew, but I couldn't have a waitress fainting on her shift.

Cruz would get to the root of the problem, and until then, I watched as he went over to tell her to go home.

She'd been waiting at the counter for an order, and she straightened up as he spoke. Her eyebrows pulled tight and angry eyes looked at me. She shook her head, starting to protest.

I went over, touched her arm. “You can keep the tips, but you have to go.”

“No, Heather. I—”

Her arm was so tiny. I could wrap my entire hand around it, and I hadn't been able to do that six months ago. "Go and rest. I've got it. We'll need you tomorrow."

Some of the fight had left her when I reassured her about the tips, but now she started crying. "You shouldn't have to do this."

Ava was special. So many waitresses would just take off, taking advantage of their boss's kindness, but Ava wouldn't, and that's why I'd offered it for her.

"Go, Ava. I've got this. Your shift was only till six anyway."

"I know, but..." She sighed, taking off her waitressing apron. She handed it over. "Table One needs their drinks refilled. I'm waiting for Two's food right now. Three is picky, so always have something extra to refill every time you pass them..." She filled me in on the rest until I shooed her out the door, Table Two's food in my arms.

"Go. I mean it."

She nodded, her head bent. "Thank you, Heather."

I nudged her arm. "Rest tonight. No going out."

"I know." She looked back up, determined, and for some reason, I felt she would be better tomorrow.

A few hours later, Cruz filled me in, whispering in my ear as I refilled a table's soft drinks. "I just got off the phone with her mother. Ava's got a new boyfriend, and apparently, he's not the nicest to her."

Asshole. I didn't know who he was, but if he was the reason for her dwindling weight, I already didn't like him.

"Got it. Thank you."

“We can run interference if he shows up, but Candy just got here to take over for you.” He looked behind me. His voice lowered, “And just in time, it looks like.”

I didn't need to turn. My body was in tune with Channing, and I felt him. He'd just walked in, opening the door for a group of teen girls. They paused to thank him and erupted in giggles and blushes as they scurried away.

A cocky smirk came over his face, but it faded quickly as he looked for me. He wore a simple shirt over his jeans. It molded over him like his clothes always did, highlighting his broad shoulders and showing the beginning of his chest muscles before falling loosely over his firm stomach.

My damned mouth started watering, which pissed me off, because was I always going to need him like this? It never lessened. It had only gotten worse each year.

“Have a smoke break,” I told Candy as she approached. “I'll cover you.”

She frowned. “I already did. Cruz said to take over for you.”

My hands tightened around the glasses. I hadn't felt the soda as it overflowed. I turned my back to Channing, feeling the exact moment his gaze found me. I felt zapped by him as I filled Candy in on the tables I still had open. My tips were in my apron, and I stuffed them in an envelope. Still ignoring Channing, I put the envelope in Ava's slot and went to find Cruz.

I had to step around Channing, who was about to reach out for me.

“Don't.” I held up a finger.

I was suddenly pissed at him, but I wasn't pissed at *just* him.

I was mad that I'd had to leave him at a gas station to stand off against an MC leader. I was mad that he hadn't told me what happened after that. I was mad that I didn't want to ask because I didn't want to know. I was mad that he was in the crew life, and that sometimes it was beyond dangerous. I was mad because he'd formed the crew life to help my friends, and I was mad that I benefited from that life too.

Mostly I was mad because I wanted him out of that life, and I knew he wouldn't leave it. He *couldn't* leave it.

He kept Roussou safe, but I wasn't fully whole unless he was with me.

And being him, he knew what was rolling through me. "I was protecting you too," he said softly.

That was the worst of it—he'd fought that guy, or whatever he'd done, because he'd interrupted our moment. My presence always added to his response, and I suddenly found it difficult to breathe.

Fuck it.

I grabbed the box of cigarettes Brandon had stashed behind the bar and thumbed the lighter along with it.

I couldn't breathe, so I was going to smoke. Totally made sense.

I burst through the door, already lighting a cigarette, and as soon as it hit my lips, I inhaled so fucking deep that the toxic shit went to my pussy. I needed relaxing, and I needed it now.

"Heather."

Of course he'd come out behind me.

“Don’t,” I rasped, turning away when I felt him step close to me. “I mean it, Chan.”

He ignored me, reaching around and plucking the cigarette from my fingers.

“What?!”

He dropped it, grinding it out with his foot, and he had the pack and lighter in his hands before I could blink. “No.” He turned his back to me, blocking me out, and then the entire pack of cigarettes was on fire.

“What are you doing?!”

He dropped it in the bonfire pit, where it’d be safe to burn, and took my shoulders in his hands.

Propelling me backward, toward my house, he said sternly, “You stopped smoking for *her*. You stayed not smoking for her, and I’m not going to be the cause of you going back.”

My lungs were on fire, but not from the cigarette.

My eyes burned.

He hadn’t said her name, but he’d mentioned her, and it was the first time since the night we’d lost her that he’d been the one to do that.

I felt the porch steps behind me and turned swiftly, leading the way to my house.

We went through the door, and Channing leaned back against it, crossing his arms. He wasn’t crowding me, because he knew that’s not what I wanted. Now I was the caged animal. He’d unearthed a shitstorm inside of me.

I shook my head. “You asshole.”

He sighed. “I know.”

I started pacing, back and forth. We could hear the people outside. Some had parked behind the house and were cutting through the back to Manny's, but they were blind to me. I heard their voices, their laughter, and I hated them.

I hated everything.

I hated him.

“You fucking asshole.”

“Let it out. We don't talk about he—”

I flung a hand at him. “You don't talk about her! Ever!” I flicked him my middle finger, continuing to pace.

I was about to explode.

More pacing.

The need to do something violent stirred in me. I wanted to hit him. I wanted to yell, curse, fucking smoke! I needed something, because I was feeling, and I didn't want to feel.

Goddamn.

I didn't want to feel, because all I could feel was her again.

How she'd felt in my arms, how tiny she was, how I'd wanted so bad for her little eyes to open.

Tears rolled down my face. I felt them on my arms, but I couldn't stop.

I couldn't do anything except keep moving.

If I stopped, I didn't know what I would do.

I would crumble.

I would collapse.

I would fall apart.

Heather motherfucking Jax did not fall apart.

It wasn't in my DNA, and I wasn't about to start now.

But it was the silence in my head that killed me. It felt so loud, so pronounced, and it was there because she was supposed to have been crying. Screaming. I would've taken anything. Not wanting to hear nothing another second, I pounded my ears and let loose my own scream.

“AGHHHHHHH!!!”

He crushed me. Channing's chest silenced me, and I was caught up in his arms.

I sagged. The fight was gone. I needed to replace it with something else, and he was the only other thing that made me burn.

“Channing!”

He was already carrying me up to my room, pulling off my clothes. He wasn't even kissing me. This was going to be rough—but then he pulled me into his arms again.

He kissed the right side of my mouth, then my left.

I curled my hands into his hair and gasped, “Don't! I need it rough tonight.”

“No.” Another soft kiss to my lips, and I felt him sigh against me. His body shuddered. His hands swept back my hair, and he pressed a kiss to my forehead, then held me tight. “I don't want to fight. I'm tired of fighting, so tired of it.”

He pulled back, and I saw his eyes shining.

“I loved her too,” he said, every word painful. “I wanted what you wanted. I wanted her. I wanted the stupid fucking

white picket fence. I wanted the marriage. I wanted everything too.”

A tender hand moved down the side of my face, tucking some of my hair behind my ear.

I cried more tears. I could taste them. They were hot and salty, and I didn’t want them. I wanted to forget them.

I didn’t want to be taken back to that time, but as I struggled, as Channing’s arms tightened, apparently he was going to torture me with it.

He ducked his head to rest his forehead in the crook of my shoulder, and he held me. His mouth moved against my skin. “This is usually the time we fight. You yell at me because I’m not putting you first. I feel like a piece of shit because I know that’s what you deserve, but I’m too selfish to walk, and we go round and round.” He molded me against him, his hand falling down my back, pressing my thigh. “But I don’t have it in me, not tonight. You’re right.”

He lifted his head, and the rawness in him was almost too painful to see. He wasn’t hiding anything.

“I protect my town. I protect my crew. I try to protect my sister, and I am putting all of them above you, and I am a complete asshole because of that.”

But...

But he couldn’t change it.

But he would continue to pick his town, his crew, his sister over me.

I knew it. He knew it. And we were back to the start of our problems.

I tapped his shoulder lightly, to let him know I was a little more sane, and pushed him back a step. I needed some space, and I crossed to my bed. I lay down, not wanting to see him. That would've made this worse, because then I would only want him inside of me, and this conversation wouldn't happen.

"I understand about Bren," I started, whispering brokenly. I cringed though I knew we needed to say these words. That didn't make it any better.

"Heather."

"No. Let me talk." I waited a beat. He was silent, so I started. "I have watched you love those guys. I've watched you become their friend, their leader, and I've watched you protect them. I know how many rely on you. I do."

I looked back at him now, but he wasn't watching me. He sat next to me on the bed, his elbows resting on his knees and his head in his hands.

"You pushed me away when your mom died. You pushed me away when your half-brother died. Then your dad went to prison. My dad took off. Our little girl died, and we were together for that night. It was just the two of us. No one else mattered."

His shoulders stiffened.

"She was more than just our daughter. She was the promise you were giving me for our future, and without her..." My voice wavered, starting to shake. "Without her we're back to how we were before."

The crew.

The sister.

The town.

Then maybe me.

And I was an ungrateful bitch for not being okay with all of that.

I sat up, resting my soaked cheek against his back. “You and I don’t talk about feelings and shit, but maybe we should.”

He turned around, grabbed my shoulders, and lifted me to his lap. He was so strong. I parted my legs, sinking down on top of him, and he stared right at me.

I saw his pain, his regrets, his indecision. They were usually masked by cockiness, jokes, innuendos, and anything flashy and charming, but not tonight. And despite myself, I felt my love for him blooming inside of me again.

I raised a hand to rest against the side of his face. He closed his eyes, leaning into my palm.

His hand rounded over my hip, tugging me closer. “We’ve got shitstorms upon shitstorms of feelings inside of us. You sure you want to start dealing with them?” His eyes opened. He was watching me.

No.

My answer was immediate. That wasn’t us, but I was a mess without him.

Hot and cold. Fire and ice. Oil and vinegar. We were all of that, but we were also the second half to the other.

I answered honestly. “I don’t want to, but I think we have to.”

He nodded, his eyes heavy and lidded. “Okay.”

I nodded too. “Okay.”

His hand slid over my thigh and dipped between my legs.
“Do you realize how hot you are when you’re all pissed?”

I smiled, not answering.

He smiled back at me. “Can we start sharing our emotions tomorrow and share something else tonight?”

Honestly.

This guy. I started to shake my head, not because he was incorrigible (which he was), not because this was the worst time ever (which *it* was), but because I was going to give in (which I totally was), and I knew I would have no regrets.

Like always, I kissed him.

Who cared about the stupid reopening?

Nothing else mattered, and not for a long time after.

HEATHER

““ **A**re we together again?” I asked. “And I mean *together* together, you know? Not just together like we always are, but *together* together. That kind of together.”

Channing smiled next to my breast, and I nudged him hard.

“Ow.” He sat up, rubbing his head with that annoying grin.

“You’re not funny.”

His hand dropped to the bed, like I’d offended him. “I beg to differ. I’m hilarious.”

“You’re not Logan Kade funny.”

He snorted. “Logan’s got nothing on me. People who don’t even know me know Logan’s got nothing on me. That’s how much Logan’s got nothing on me.” He was deadpan, but then a smirk popped out.

Channing could huff and puff all he wanted, but he was the one in this bed who loved Logan. Their bromance had reached new levels. He’d always had one with Mason, but on a recent trip, Logan and Channing had bonded over their love of burritos. Once I heard that, I didn’t want to hear anything else about it.

“Speaking of the Kades...” Channing lay back down, but this time he pulled me to his chest, his arm curving around me. “Have you talked to your friend lately?”

I thought back to the quick video chat from my office the other day.

“She’s happy and pregnant. Have you talked to Mason?”

“He sent a text the other day. Sounds like things are good with them. He’s busy with football and getting ready for the baby.”

The baby.

Rolling to my feet, I sat on the edge of the bed, naked, with the sheet around my waist. I was about to stand up when Channing touched my arm. “Hey.”

I glanced back over my shoulder.

The cocky humor was gone. “We should talk about her.”

I stiffened. “About Sam?”

He frowned. “You know who I’m talking about.”

We’d named her, but I couldn’t bring myself to say it.

“Not now.” *Good God, not now.* Not when my throat was burning, when my chest felt like it was going to cave in and squeeze my heart until it shattered. Not when it was all I could do to keep from turning my house upside down, looking for a pack to smoke.

The sex had helped distract me. We’d kept at it hard most the night, but it was six in the morning now, and I was ready to run a marathon. Talk about understanding Sam on a whole new level—I could’ve strapped on some sneakers and taken off, just like her.

Slipping into the bathroom, I showered and dressed. Manny's was already open, but I still wanted to go over and check in. Channing got the coffee pot going. He was at the stove when I padded downstairs. I could smell the fresh coffee and whatever he was making.

It smelled good, but damn, not as good as he looked—barefoot, no shirt, his hair still messed from the last time I ran my hands through it. His jeans had fallen low on his hips, and his entire back was like a sculpted statue. He'd added more tattoos, so they ran up and over his shoulder, then down his back. One went under his arm and wrapped to his backside. As he stirred something on the stove, I saw the skull and bones tattoo he'd put under his bicep. Even though he claimed to hate his father, Channing also had a sense of obligation to the man. He loved him too, and I know it tortured him at times. After one of his last visits to the prison, he'd gone off with Moose, and they'd both come back with the same tattoo. I hadn't asked, but I'd always figured it had something to do with his dad.

Going up behind Channing, I ran my finger over one of the bone tattoos and realized there was a word over it.

I paused, and he tensed.

It wasn't a word. It was a name. "You put her name here?"

He hadn't told me.

My mind spun. I felt those tears again. For fuck's sake.

A ball lodged smack in the middle of my throat, and I couldn't talk for a second.

Naly.

I traced the N. Channing stood stock-still, not even breathing.

A.

My hand skimmed down his back, falling to my side. “I didn’t know you did that.”

He turned, putting his hands on the counter behind him, but his eyes remained locked on me.

“You didn’t want to talk about her, and I didn’t want to forget her,” he said.

“When?”

He lifted a shoulder, his gaze falling away. “A few months ago. After my last fight.”

“For the underground ring?”

He nodded, his eyes flicking back up. “It was the same night I decided I was retiring. I won the championship, and I was drunk. Linc does tattoos, and we were celebrating, so...” Another shrug. “I did it.”

I burned with jealousy again, but not for Sam. “Do the guys know her name?” We hadn’t told anyone.

He shook his head. “I told them it was code for retiring from the ring.” He laughed under his breath. “They still think that.”

God. I wanted her back. I wanted to be holding her again. I didn’t want her name just on him.

“I want it too. Today.”

“Today?” He didn’t look surprised, but he raised an eyebrow.

I moved in front of him, tracing the LY I could see on his arm. “Yes. You can go check on Bren before school. I’ll make sure Manny’s is okay, and then after that.”

“Okay.”

His chest lifted as he took a breath and skimmed a hand down my arm, curving to my back. He tugged me close and bent down, grazing a kiss to my shoulder. “Can we skip whatever else we have to fight about and just be together? I’ve really, really missed you.”

I moved my forehead to his chest and closed my eyes. I breathed in his scent, the smell of his lingering cologne mixed with his permanently sun-kissed skin, and slid my arms around his sides. I hugged him back.

If we were official again, we needed to do something different. This time needed to stick.

I needed him too much, and so I kissed his chest and looked up.

“Yes.”

We were together again, but really, when had we ever been apart?



LINCOLN WAS WAITING for us when we arrived at Channing’s warehouse.

I hadn’t been out here for a long time. Being broken up with Channing meant my trips were generally just to his house (aka his bedroom) or him to mine. There were usually a few random visits to his bar, but I hadn’t been there during this last break. He’d come to Manny’s, but now that we were *together* together, I’d start visiting these spots again. I knew I’d be hanging out at Tuesday Tits later in the week, so a trip to the warehouse seemed fitting.

It also felt awkward, as if I shouldn't have been away as long as I was.

I tried to shake off the feeling when we parked and headed inside, but it seemed settled in my shoulders. It wasn't going to be leaving.

A few guys were lingering outside the door. They stepped back to talk to Channing as I went in.

Lincoln rolled back on his stool when he saw me. "Heard you wanted a tattoo?" He motioned to a chair. "Have a seat. You ready for some pain?"

I wasn't sure if he was joking, but I sat. I'd gotten a tattoo before. And I was plenty familiar with pain of all kinds.

I laid my arm on the table and turned it over.

He glanced over. "That's where you want it?"

I touched from under my wrist to my elbow. "Small letters spaced out."

"You have a pattern in mind?"

I showed him the font I wanted and where I wanted the letters inked.

He nodded, measuring me. "Same as Chan's?"

I didn't know Lincoln well. He'd joined the crew a year ago, but even if he'd been around for years, I didn't think I'd know him any better. He was quiet. There was a roughness to him, and he had an almost feral look in his eyes at times. It faded when he was around the others, but I saw it more clearly now that we were alone.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, but I had to trust myself. Under those hairs was nothing. The door was

open. We could hear the other guys in the warehouse, and no matter what, I knew Channing wouldn't allow me to be alone in a room with someone he thought might hurt me. If this guy tried anything, one, I'd beat his ass, and two, Channing would give him a second beating.

As I studied him, I caught a flicker in his gaze.

“You guys know?” I asked.

He'd started cleaning my arm, and now reached for a razor to shave it. He didn't respond at first.

“It's a guess,” he eventually said. “He told us he'd picked her up from the hospital. And he'd won so many fights, I didn't think it had much to do with that.”

A knot infused in my throat.

Everyone assumed it'd been a miscarriage because I'd been so small when she died. We hadn't told them how far along I'd been. I didn't know the guys knew she'd been stillborn.

“Yeah.” I couldn't say anything more.

I'd wanted to pick her up, but couldn't bring myself to do it. Brandon just told me he'd asked Channing, and it was done. He'd asked to bury her next to his mother, and I was okay with that. We had a small memorial for her, just a few of us.

It was one of the hardest things I'd ever done.

Lincoln finished shaving the area and drying my arm. “A few of us thought about doing something in her name for you guys—just haven't figured out what it would be yet.”

He'd kept his head down, focused on his work, but he looked up at me now. Just a small pause, but enough that I

could see he meant every word he'd said. His sympathy was genuine.

He looked back down.

He grabbed the stencils with the lettering, and added, "You don't really know me, but I was in a bad spot for a while." He laid the Y down. "When Channing brought me into the crew, he saved my life."

This wasn't what I'd expected from Lincoln.

As he worked, I studied a scar that ran down the length of his face, almost from his forehead to his jaw. It hadn't healed properly, and it seemed to stretch the skin. That scar, mixed with the air of violence around him, contrasted strikingly against the meticulous care he was taking with my tattoo, and how soft his voice was as he spoke.

It also struck me how much reverence I heard in his voice for Channing, and if he was crew, then Channing felt the same for him. It was moments like these when I understood why Channing lived the way he did.

Warmth spread through me.

I was proud to know Channing. I was proud to know these guys. They weren't criminals, but I knew they'd committed criminal acts, and because of that, they might be looked down upon by outsiders. Rich folk in Fallen Crest feared us, and they should, but they should never think they were above us.

In that instant, I felt foolish. Ridiculously foolish.

These guys were home to Channing. Channing was home to me.

I'd been away far too long.

“He has a habit of doing that, doesn’t he?” My throat swelled up. “Saving lives, I mean.”

We didn’t talk the rest of the time. Linc did my tattoo and bandaged everything up for me. When he was done, I waited until he’d put away all his equipment and cleaned the area, then I walked out of the room with him.

It felt fitting, for some reason.

HEATHER

One month

One week

One day

One hour

One minu—you get the drift—since my last smoke

“YOU CAN’T ban smoking from Manny’s.”

Brandon stood behind me as I put up the no-smoking sign. I’d slipped the night I got Naly’s tattoo on my arm. That whole day had been too much in general. Almost all of Channing’s crew had come to the warehouse. They’d put up seven speakers around the yard and inside. There’d been three bonfires. A DJ. A taco truck had pulled in. Someone ordered pizza as well, and the entire night passed in a drunken blur.

Too much booze, and so many people had been smoking, I’d succumbed.

I only got one puff in before Channing took the cigarette from me and led me away, but damn it—that puff seemed to have lingered in my lungs since then.

Every time I walked from the house to Manny's (a whole twenty steps) I had to walk past the smokers. It was beyond torture, and I swear her tattoo throbbed too.

I'd gone past irrational. I was in survival mode.

I. Would. Not. Smoke. Again. Whether it killed me or not. Though currently, I was almost ready to do the killing myself.

I finished whacking the last nail and stepped back. The sign stayed put.

"I can, and I will." My hands found my hips, and I turned to my brother. "You're supposed to be supporting me."

He opened his mouth. He grabbed a fistful of his hair, and then he closed his mouth. He swallowed. "Are you kidding me? This is our place of business."

I pointed the hammer toward the front parking lot. "I had that punk's crew clean out the front section. There's a whole area over there where they can smoke."

"No one's going to go over there. It's in the woods."

I didn't care. It was out of my walkway to work. "Brandon, you need to help me with this."

He stared at me. I stared back, and then he rolled his eyes. "Fine. God. Good thing I love you." He grabbed my shoulder and pulled me in for a quick hug.

"Good thing I make us a lot of money with this place." I patted his chest, moving away.

"There's that too." He stopped to study the sign. "I think you should put one more nail in it. It might fall."

I counted the nails. "You think?"

“Yes,” he deadpanned. “Twelve nails is not enough to keep this eleven-by-fourteen sign in place.”

I patted his chest again, but it was a hard thwack this time. “Don’t be an ass.”

“Only you, dear sister. You’re the only one who can have that title.”

I started inside, but flipped him off over my shoulder. I followed that with a laugh and heard him join in as he trailed behind me.

It’d been a month since that night, and a month since Channing and I were officially back together. Most didn’t pay attention anymore. This was our routine, but this time felt different. Everything felt different for some reason, and the last month had been good. Really good. Maybe it’s because I’d changed my attitude toward the crew, or maybe it was because Channing and I had started talking about Naly. Whatever it was, it was working.

“Is Channing coming over tonight?” my brother asked.

“No.” I shook my head as he slipped behind the bar. I stood back, scanning the inside of Manny’s. “I’m heading over to his place later.” I was about to say more, but Ava came to a screeching halt in front of me.

She was out of breath and swatting at loose hairs that had fallen over her forehead. “Suki’s going ham on Roy—the Uber guy,” she announced.

“Why?”

She held her hands up. “I have no clue. He got his food, asked for salt, and she went nuts.”

I could only groan as I headed to the front section. I heard yelling the closer I got, but it was just one voice. Suki's. Her arms were in the air. She was shaking a fist at Roy, then the plate, then back to Roy, and I had to admit, I wasn't sure if she was speaking a different language.

Roy had leaned back, his eyes wide, his face slightly pale.

I liked to give him a discount since he was so quick to pick up our patrons.

Now, as he held his baseball cap in front of him like a shield, I wondered if Suki hadn't permanently killed that situation.

Another server was trying to soothe her. It wasn't working.

Suki shook her off and only upped her volume. "Suki's fish doesn't need salt. Salt!" She pretended to spit on the floor. "That's what Suki thinks about salt, ketchup, butter." She sliced her hand through the air. "None of that is needed for Suki's food."

"Suki!" I stepped through the crowd.

Half the dining room was captivated. The other half were still eating.

I sighed. "Okay. That's enough." I pointed toward the back. "Suki, my office."

She scrunched up her face, another burst coming, and I shook my head.

"Office. Now."

She stormed off. Ava and the other server scattered. As they did, I took Roy's plate and handed it to Lily, another server passing by. "Give Roy anything he wants," I said to her,

before turning back to him. “On the house. All weekend. Okay?”

Hearing me, three regulars shot their arms in the air. “We’d like more salt too! Suki!”

“Har, har, guys.”

They laughed, lowered their arms, and went back to eating.

Roy was jittery, looking from them to me. He kept that baseball cap in front of him, tightening his hold. “That’s not necessary, Miss Jax.”

Oh, fuck. Miss Jax. I didn’t need to hear that.

“I mean it. No ifs, ands, or buts. On the house. I know you help us out too. Got it?”

His eyes jumped to where Suki had gone, then he swallowed and gave a quick nod. “Yes, ma’am, Miss Jax. I’ll just have a burger.”

Lily nodded. “Got it.” She turned to me. “I’ll take care of him.”

“Right.”

Ava and the other server had already cleaned up the salt, along with whatever else my manager-who-kept-forgetting-she-was-a-manager-and-not-a-chef had thrown, so Suki was the only one left to manage. I started for my office. I wanted to say this was an oddity, but it wasn’t. Suki was sitting in Brandon’s chair, her arms and ankles crossed. Her face was set in defiance.

“You’re cooking again?” I asked as I closed the office door.

She watched me as I sat in my chair. “Marie didn’t come, so Suki took over. Cruz came in early to cover the rest.”

My fingers twitched for a cigarette as I sat down. I rubbed them against each other. Maybe I could rub that urge out of me? Or candy. I had candy.

I started digging through my drawers. Where’d that bag go?

“I know you called Marie and told her not to come in.”

First drawer was a mess. I winced, but no candy.

Second drawer.

“What?”

Aha! Third drawer. There was taffy in there. Thank the candy fairies.

I plopped it on the desk and dug in. “She texted me last night, asked if I was sure we didn’t need her. I let it go because I knew you’d be covering.” Popping a yellow one into my mouth, I gestured toward the hall. “I know you love making food, but you can’t do that. You know that.”

Suki had been shirking her manager responsibilities a lot lately. I’d let it go for too long.

“Katrina’s still on the payroll?” A pink taffy was on deck.

“Yeah.” Her eyes narrowed. “Why?”

I tossed the pink one in my mouth and stared at her. Hard. “Because you’re suspended.”

“Suki opens this whole weekend.”

“Not anymore, Suki doesn’t.”

Yes. Third person. I'd joined her narrative. Oh fuck. What the hell. I started unwrapping a green taffy.

“Are you kidding Suki?”

Yes. That was her speaking. Not me. But I answered the same way. “Heather doesn't kid. Not when Heather needs a damn cigarette.” My nostrils flared.

Suki blinked, and her head inched backward. She was starting to get it.

Heather wasn't playing around.

Fuck. Damn. Shit! I was doing the third-person speaking in my head now too.

I cleared my head, grabbing that green taffy and clutching it as if it was life itself. “*You* haven't been doing inventory. You haven't been doing the ordering. What you have been doing is putting everything off on Cruz lately, which is why I've been cutting him loose most nights and closing for him.”

I was feeling a little more settled. Suki had shut her mouth.

“We have to face facts here.” I gentled my tone. “Food is your first love, but that's not your job anymore. Roy is like a daddy longlegs. He's around. You might get mad at him, but he helps us. He kills other spiders and insects for us.”

“He does?”

“What?” Crap. My metaphor. “No, he doesn't. The daddy longlegs does. They're good spiders, but that's what I'm saying about Roy. He's here a lot, and he might ask for salt, but it's not an insult to you. We want him here. He helps us. He keeps people safe when they might drive home drunk. We want him here.”

I'd lost her. I could tell by the glazed expression in her eyes. She was probably daydreaming about lamb chops.

"Okay." I motioned for the door. "Get your temper in check. Decide you want to be a manager again, and come back in a week. We'll talk again."

Her lips pressed together. She seemed to want to argue, but instead she pushed herself up with a small growl and stormed from the room.

Brandon appeared in the opened door. "You suspended her?"

I raked a hand over my face. "I swear. Even my lungs are exhausted." I frowned, sighing. "You know I had to."

He nodded. "You want me to call Katrina?"

"I'll call her. And if Cruz asks, he still gets the weekend off. He's been covering for Suki. He's part of the problem."

"I know." Brandon rested a hand against the doorframe. "He was trying to be helpful."

I knew that too, but while Katrina might be able to help us in a pinch, that didn't mean we wouldn't need a new manager in the near future.

"You can always ask Moose to help," Brandon added. "He's done it before."

"No."

Moose was one of Channing's managers at his bar, but I didn't want to go there. We'd really been trying to keep our relationship just our relationship. Him and me.

I was okay with the high school crews returning, as long as there was no violence and they kept spending money. But if

Moose helped out, members of their crew would start hanging out, and that would change things.

Adult crews were in a different league, a dangerous league.

“We’ll try Katrina first and figure something else out before we have to bring Moose in.”

I reached for the phone.

“Okay.” Brandon nodded. “Just let me know if you need anything.”

He closed the door.

And holy shit, I *really* wanted a smoke now.

CHANNING

My phone buzzed on my desk.
Heather: Have to close tonight. Suspended Suki.

Well, shit.

Me: I'll come there when I'm done.

It was a quick response.

Heather: TY

Friday night at my bar was busy. Our regulars usually came during the day and on weekday evenings, but the weekends were a different matter. Or they had been lately. A lot of younger customers were starting to travel over from nearby colleges.

We'd moved the karaoke night to Fridays, which meant it was nuts out there.

Scratch was in heaven, but I didn't understand his and Heather's addiction to chaos.

I liked disappearing to the warehouse with my crew, my girl in my arms, my sister and her crew with us, and a good whiskey next to me. That's what made me content.

Though all the customers out there meant money. That was always a *damn* good thing.

Since it was close to midnight, I could head out. Grabbing my stuff, I locked the office behind me and started through the crowd. There were a few skinny chicks in the hallway. Their eyes got big when they saw me. One leaned toward me while her friends started talking to each other, their heads ducked down, but still watching.

I gave them a small wave, but kept going.

A few guys called out greetings as I headed to the bar.

People stepped back, parting for me as I went. Once or twice, someone drunk stumbled into me. Their friends hissed, but I just steered 'em back. It was a bar. People were going to be drunk. That was the purpose.

All my guys were busy behind the bar, and so was Scratch as he filled orders for the servers. We didn't always use the girls, but it had become more of a regular thing on the weekends. I stepped to the side as one filled her tray with beer bottles.

Scratch saw me and raised a hand. "You heading out?" he shouted.

They couldn't hear, not with the music blaring, but every one of my guys glanced over. I nodded to each to confirm that they were doing what I wanted: working at Tuesday Tits. I didn't need them for anything else.

I raised my voice to my cousin, "You need me to stay?"

He shook his head, scanning the bar. "We're staffed tonight. We should be fine. You off to see Heather?"

I nodded. "I can stay, for real."

“Nah. I’m good.” He motioned for the door. “Go be with your woman. We got it.”

“Call if you need anything.”

I turned for the door as Moose called my name. He ducked out from behind the bar, but stopped and said something to Scratch. My cousin nodded and Moose motioned he’d follow me out. We weaved around the waitresses.

The two bouncers outside the door dipped their heads to me.

“Night, boss.”

“Have a good one, boss.”

“Night, guys.”

Moose went with me as I started up the block.

I frowned. “What’s going on?”

He looked up and down the street, which was empty, before taking out his phone. He handed it over.

“I meant to let you know before, but we got slammed at the bar. Traverse texted.”

I looked at the screen.

Traverse: Soon.

“Demons haven’t been in town since you tangled with Richter,” he added. “I know we struck a deal with Traverse—we help him take control of the Demons, and they steer clear of Fallen Crest—but I don’t feel good about this.”

It’d been a little over a month since the fight went down, but I hadn’t been concerned. Traverse checked in once a week with me, just sending a quick text. He was supposed to let us know when he needed us.

I gave Moose the phone back. “You think he’s planning something else?”

“I don’t know.” He frowned, rubbing a hand over his bald head. “Chad said his aunt had a vision about us.”

“I thought it was his mom in the nursing home?”

“It is. This is his aunt, through his daddy’s side. The gypsy one. Ginger.”

Of course. “What’d she see?”

“That we were double-crossed.”

“She said it in those terms?”

Moose looked up. “No. She said she saw a horse being ridden backwards with red paint dripping down its back, a knife in its rear haunch. But according to Chad, that means we’re going to be up shit creek. What if something happened to Traverse? What if while we’re waiting for them to call for help, we’re actually giving them all this time to get more backup here. That could happen. Richter’s a snake.” He shifted, his hand scratching at his chest. “And, I mean, you know.” He looked away, but I still heard him. “Chad’s aunt’s been right before.”

Right.

“When she said a feather was flying away, we don’t actually know that meant my dad was going to prison,” I reminded him. “That particular asshole’s never been called a feather before.”

“I know, but she said it had ‘father’ vibes to it.” He dropped his fingers for the quotation marks and cleared his throat. “You get my drift.”

I stared at him. Then I stared at him again. Hard. Because he was an idiot.

Moose avoided my gaze. “She predicted Chad would go to prom with Melanie Fina.”

“Everyone predicted that. They were dating.”

“Ginger Gypsy dreamed about a fire burning around Chad.”

I shook my head. “Melanie Fina gave him gonorrhea. His aunt predicted his burning STD.”

“Whatever. There’s enough of a history. I think we should take her seriously.” Moose’s neck was getting red. The side door had opened, and another pair of eyes was watching us.

“You...or Congo?” I asked.

At the mention of his name, Congo jerked back inside. The side door slammed shut.

Moose sighed, glancing over his shoulder. “Look, we’re all kinda on the same page with this one. It’s been too long. Traverse should’ve called by now. You’ve been all happy in the land of Heather’s pussy—”

“Watch it.”

“—which we understand, because you two are adorable right now, and I can’t believe I just said that, but you get my drift. You’ve been happy, and we didn’t want to push you out of the zone.” He faltered.

I narrowed my eyes. “But it’s time to get pushed out of the happy zone?”

“It is.”

My very large, very trustworthy best friend finally regarded me fully. He'd been voted the spokesman for the crew, and maybe they were right. Maybe it was time to drive to Frisco and get a look for ourselves at what was going on.

Moose wasn't the type to believe in gypsy aunts, but Chad did. Congo did. Lincoln wouldn't join the conversation, but he wouldn't have argued against it.

I was so glad we'd called Chad back—and yes, that was sarcasm there.

Well. Damn.

The big ginger loathed fighting. It was like nails on a chalkboard for him, so if he was pushing it, and if Moose was going along with it and being the voice—I had to listen to them.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” His eyebrows raised in surprise.

“Yeah.”

They were right. It was time.

“They have a place outside of Frisco. Let's go there first. It's where I'd hide out if I was in their MC.”

“We're scouting tomorrow?” Moose's eyes narrowed. A mean glint replaced the surprise, mixing with anticipation. He was comfortable with this—sneaking up on anyone who threatened us and rolling heads, so to speak.

I began walking backward to my bike. The truck had stayed home this evening.

“I'm getting laid tonight.” I picked up my helmet, fitted the keys in the engine, and swung my leg over. “Tomorrow we

scout.”

“Good.”

HEATHER

I was having déjà vu, except... I wasn't.

I wasn't in my house. I wasn't hungover. I didn't have to rush downstairs to Brandon's aid. Instead, my brother's stalker was in Manny's. That's correct. Code red. Stalker red. Rebecca, the frizzy-lioness-hair stalker had braved my wrath. She was here, folks.

Katrina sidled up next to me. "Too bad you had Suki go home."

I grunted. She was right. Those two would've had an epic showdown. One yelling in the third person, and the other lecturing her on being classy as she was anything *except* classy.

I grumbled, "Where's some salt when we need it?"

Katrina barked out a laugh. "You need me to do something?"

I shook my head. "No. I'll handle it. She's half Brandon's problem anyway." I gestured to the rest of the diner. "Just manage everything else."

Ava went by, her arms straining around a tray of drinks.

"Why is Ava still working?"

My fill-in manager frowned at me. “She said you were understaffed. I should send her home?”

“Long ago.”

Ava paused next to Roy’s perch, and it clicked into place.

What happened to the boyfriend?

“Wait.”

Katrina had started to move away. She paused, and I added, “Just tell her she’s on an hour break. My orders. Then tell the girls she’s done for the night.”

“And when that hour is done?”

I gave her a look. We’d be closed by then.

She gave me a sheepish grin. “Got it, boss.”

Ava would feel guilty, thinking she needed to leave if she wasn’t working. She’d stay with Roy this way. Roy was good. That A-hole boyfriend wasn’t.

“If she doesn’t listen, tell her she’ll have to battle me,” I added.

And on cue, I heard a different battle start up again.

“Rebecca, you need to leave.” My brother’s voice was ripe with irritation, and I saw the white around his lips. He was biting down, hard.

Rebecca wore a red halter top, her breasts almost falling out of it, with bright lipstick to match. She had on daisy dukes that didn’t quite fit her, and a navel ring.

It was inflamed, so I was guessing it was new.

With hooker heels, a not-so-seductive swaying back and forth, and a pink drink in one hand that she kept spilling, my

brother officially had a problem.

The stalker was prime entertainment. Our other customers had congregated around her, all except Gus. He was our regular, and though he was sitting two barstools away from her, he was the only one oblivious to her. Hunched over a beer in front of him, he kept his eyes on the television mounted above the bar. ESPN.

“Gus.” I came up behind him and patted his back.

He jerked upright. “A—what? What?!” He turned around, drool sliding down his chin. The front of his shirt was soaked. “Huh?”

Brandon laughed, sounding strained. “Maybe it’s time to go, buddy.”

Gus squinted at him. “You closed?”

Brandon smiled. “Yes.”

The crowd around us said otherwise.

Gus never noticed. “Oh.” His shoulders dropped. He started to slide off his stool, then saw Rebecca and stopped. He pointed at her. “Heeey. Why’s she here then?”

“Because I’ve not finished my drink. It’s not polite to force out a paying customer when her drink isn’t finished.” Rebecca’s face twisted into a scowl, and she began to fold her arms over her chest. Or she would’ve. Her glass got in the way, and the drink sloshed—half on her and half to the floor. It coated the back of one of the stools.

She didn’t seem to notice. Gus either.

“She’s going too.” I moved forward, my voice firm, and locked eyes with her. I plucked the glass from her hand,

dumped the remaining contents into the sink behind the bar, and showed it to her. “Your drink is gone. You’re done.”

The side door opened.

Channing stepped inside. He saw us, and whatever he’d been saying to someone outside faded. He took in Brandon’s rigid stance, the way I was standing in front of Rebecca and barked out a laugh.

“Bees,” he called out.

She swung around. Her hair almost hit me. “Wha—oh.” Her tone went from angry to a warmth that could melt butter. “Channing! Hi, *helllooo*. How are you?”

He came toward us. “Gus, my man. This is where you’ve been hiding?”

Gus was in his late sixties by now. The more sober he was, the less he could hear. Since he was too drunk to see the gawking audience, of course his hearing was like a hawk’s.

He harrumphed, narrowing his eyes, “I know you?”

Channing pretended to be hurt and held his arms out wide. “Gus. Come on. My bar’s your second home.”

At the same time, Rebecca decided to scoot around Channing.

Her heels went left. She went right.

She crumbled to the floor.

“Ow,” she moaned. “That’s not very ladylike.”

She shot Brandon a look, her cheeks reddening, and bit her lip. She grabbed Gus’s stool and started to pull herself up. One of her boobs popped out, and her daisy dukes came up to her waist. She was simultaneously flashing us tits and crotch.

“Can...can...oomph. Can someone help, please?” She shot her hand up, sounding contrite.

And *that* Rebecca was back.

Gus moved to assist her.

He saw her boob, and zeroed in on it. “You, uh. You. Um.” He pointed at it. “Your lady part is out.”

“What?”

He grabbed her shirt and moved it around, covering her up. Then he reached for her arm. Both of them were unsteady. I didn’t want to worry about Gus breaking a hip, not yet. The guy had been the janitor at school for so many years. No matter how much booze he put in him, I hoped his bones would be sturdy till he was ninety.

“Okay. Here we go.” He was sweating now, wheezing. He moved her hands higher on his arm and grabbed under her biceps.

She let him.

“Okay, up you go. Whoopsie daisy.”

He lifted, and she tried to stand. After a bunch more *oomphs*, both were up.

Gus’s face was bright red.

Rebecca was sweating too, and she blinked several times. “We did it.” She patted him on the arm. “Good job, Dirk.”

“Oh, yeah!” He thought she was asking for a high five. “Hey there.” He grabbed her arm again, holding it suspended so he could slap it, and down she went.

Her heel went out.

So did he.

Channing must've had enough because he motioned for Brandon. As one, they each grabbed one of them under the armpits. Gus/Dirk and Rebecca/Daisy returned to their feet, and Brandon and Channing kept a steady hand on both of them. When Rebecca paused to stare at the hand on her arm, Brandon cursed. Without a word spoken, he and Channing switched places.

Gus narrowed his eyes at Channing. "What were you saying your name was?"

Channing patted his chest. "Channing Monroe. Remember now?"

"Heeeeeey." Gus's finger rose, along with a bright, wide smile. "Yeah. I remember. Your momma used to sit on my lap when she worked at Kitty Titties."

"No." Channing shook his head, fighting back a grin. "Close, but no. My mother never worked at Kitty Titties. Wrong titties. We're Tuesday Tits."

"You guys have the Thursday Night Titinis. Five-dollar martinis." Gus was back in the game. "I remember now. You run that place?"

"I do. Yes."

"Well, it's a pleasure to meet you. I love the Friday Night Titquila Shots too." Gus stepped away from the bar. He waited, making sure he wouldn't fall back before straightening his shoulders. He thrust a hand out.

He started to fall.

Daisy/Rebecca grabbed him.

"Thank you, Daisy."

She nodded, patting his hand. "No problem, Dirk."

He turned back to Channing, leaning forward with a serious look on his face. “I want to shake the hand of the man who brought us Thursday Night Titinis. It’s the best idea for social adventurist capital if I ever saw one. And the martinis are top-notch too. Naming the place Tuesday Tits? Genius. Genius.”

Channing shook Gus’s hand, clapping him on the shoulder. “How about we go outside? We’ve got a whole new group of customers coming in lately, and we need to *capitalize* on them.”

Gus started to go with him, but faltered, looking at Rebecca. “I’d like to be so bold-like and ask for your phone number, if that’s okay with you?”

“Of course.”

That took another five minutes. They fumbled with their phones. Both forgot their code to get in, so they passed a napkin back and forth. Rebecca wrote her number on the front and pushed it over to him. “There you go. Now you.”

He flipped it over, wrote his number on the back, and slid it back to her. “There you go.”

“Excellent.” She beamed at him.

Neither picked up the napkin.

Gus nodded, stepped away from the bar and her steady hand, and cleared his throat. “Milady, it was a pleasure to meet you.”

“You too, Dirk.”

He managed a few jerking steps toward the door before Channing clasped him on the shoulder, holding him upright the rest of the way.

Gus looked up at him. “You’re thinking of another theme night?”

“Something like that.”

They were out the door, but we could hear one last Gus comment. “I’ve always thought End of Monogamy Mondays would be a good one.”

They disappeared, but a second later, Channing came back. He slid his eyes toward Brandon before saying, “Beccs, guess who mentioned you the other night?”

Her eyes grew hooded, if that was possible. She chewed her lip. “You’re trying to toy with me, get me out of your girlfriend’s hair. I’m not falling for it, Channing. And I know you don’t want my input on your theme nights...”

“Congo asked about you.”

She stopped everything. Her eyes widened. “You’re lying.”

There was a hopeful twinge in her voice.

Channing shook his head. His eyes never left hers. “He said he missed you.” Then he dipped back out, disappearing from the doorway.

Air exploded out of her, and her mouth dropped open. “Are you kidding me? Don’t kid with me.” A tear formed in her eye. Her voice grew husky, trembling. “Matthew Shephardson’s been the love of my life, all of my life. I knew it. I just knew it. He was lying when he threatened that second order of protection.” Her head went higher. “It was a test. He was making sure I was fully committed.”

She stopped talking, gathering her purse to her chest. “I think it’s time I take myself to bed.”

I wasn't sure who she was talking to, but I nodded anyway.
“Good night, Rebecca.”

She threw a distracted smile at me and moved away from the bar in much the same way as Gus/Dirk had—just a few steps at first. When her legs didn't give out, she started for the door.

“Okay, then. Goodbye, everyone. I'm off to find my love.”

I glanced out the window and saw a crowd forming.
“Roy?”

He was stuffing a fry into his mouth at the counter. “Huh?”

I waved to where Rebecca was trying to open the screen door. “Can you give her a ride home?”

Rebecca pushed the screen door open. Next she struggled with the step down. She forgot it was there.

Roy hurried past me. “Of course.” He went to her, touching her arm gently. “Can I help you, ma'am?”

“Oh, of course.” Her smile was blinding.

He dipped his head toward me, assisting her the rest of the way out. “Thank you, Miss Jax.”

I wasn't done.

I turned back around. “Ava?”

“Hmmm?” Her head popped up.

I motioned toward Roy and Rebecca. They'd only gone one step. Rebecca kept thinking there was another step. There wasn't.

“Roy, will you give Ava a ride home after your first patron?”

Ava smoothed her hands down her jeans, coming to my side. “Are you sure?”

I eyed her. “What happened to your boyfriend?”

“Oh.” Her eyes dropped. “He—uh...we broke up.”

I pressed my lips together, but she was better off. “You were supposed to be off work a long time ago.”

She lifted her head, her cheeks flushing. “The tips are good, and...” Her eyes darted to Roy.

“Go.” I patted her on the back. “You’re off shift. Ride all night with him, if you want, but you’re no longer working.”

She squealed and hurried to take Rebecca’s other arm as Channing was coming back in.

He grinned at me. “Gus is making a list of theme-night ideas while he waits for Roy. Looks like he’ll be waiting for him a long time.” He stared at the trio that just left, stopping in front of me. His hands came to my shoulders, and he began to rub them.

“Hey, man.” Brandon waved to him, going back behind the bar. “Thanks for the assist there.”

Channing said something back. I wasn’t listening. His hands were still rubbing.

“Holy shit. That feels good.”

“Your office?” His head dipped down, grazing my ear. “Please?”

Hell to the yes.

Once we were in, I started to turn, but he stopped me.

I heard the door lock behind us at the same time he pulled me back against him. Pressing up behind me, I felt what else

was ready for me.

I glanced up at him. “Be honest. Gus did that for you, didn’t he? He got you all excited talking about social adventurist capital theme nights.”

“You know it.” He pressed into me again. “Oh. What happened with Suki?”

I told him.

He frowned, studying me. “Use her.”

I frowned back at him. “What do you mean?”

He smoothed the back of my hair, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “I mean, use her for what she has to offer. She’s entertaining. She’s obsessed with cooking, so let her go as a manager, but have her do gourmet dinners. It can be a whole event where people sign up to watch her cook. And if you want to really add to the entertainment, have Brandon be her assistant or something. The two bicker like a married couple.”

Maybe. I liked the idea.

He asked, “You open in the morning?”

“Yeah.” I stepped back, though I didn’t want to. “Katrina’s going to close this weekend for me, and next week.”

He nodded, taking Brandon’s seat and then pulling me onto his lap. “I gotta take off in the morning.”

I stiffened in his arms. “What time?”

“Early.”

So neither of us would be getting a lot of sleep tonight.

Normal people would go home, bump uglies in a nice and comfortable manner, then settle in for as much sleep as possible. Not us, and most certainly not Channing. If he had to

get up early, and it was already nearing one in the morning, he was going to draw out the fucking.

I eyed him. “Do I want to ask why you’re getting up so early?”

Tuesday Tits opened at eleven.

“No.” He trailed a finger down my arm. I was half entranced by it. “It’s crew stuff.”

Oh.

I was in his arms, and I knew what would happen next.

He would pull me closer to him. He would kiss my neck, my throat, my lips. His hands would go to my hips. One would slide to my stomach, and he would start making me pant. The other would dip into my pants.

He’d make me hot and bothered, slipping a finger inside me.

It didn’t matter where we were.

I’d melt in his arms until he lifted me and placed me where he wanted. On the desk, on the bed, the counter, the couch, against the shower wall, against a door. It didn’t matter. I’d fall under his spell and forget that he was going to leave my bed for his crew, right up until he had to go.

That’s what normally happened.

There was a but coming.

His hand started for me, and I caught his wrist.

“What?”

Things were different now.

“I want to know what’s going on with the crew. I want you to tell me.”

He pulled back and regarded me.

He hadn’t hit the lights, but some illumination filtered under the door from the hallway. It was enough, just barely, to cast him in shadow. I felt him put a wall up.

“You don’t like my crew stuff.”

I pressed my lips together and swallowed. The knee-jerk reaction was there. Years of fighting about his crew had set me off. I tamped it down.

“I have loved you almost all my life,” I told him. “And I don’t see myself loving anyone else.”

God.

I stripped away all the layers we’d erected over the years. I was so scared of losing him, I pushed him away most of the time. Or I let him pull away.

But we’re different now, I told myself.

We had to be different. I had to be different.

“Heather?”

I shook my head. “This is it, Channing. We either make this time work or...” Oh, fuck. Was I actually going to say this? My throat was burning. “Or we need to walk away, and I mean it.”

He leaned forward, his face coming back into that little bit of light.

I could see his eyes again.

And I felt a little stronger inside. I felt surer, more certain.

This was the right direction to go. It had to be. I didn't know if I could survive another Naly, another promise of so much more, only to lose it all.

“Shit or get off the pot, you mean?”

I nodded. “Shit or go somewhere else to shit.”

His mouth curved up. “If that doesn't put me in the mood, then I don't know what will.”

I mirrored his smile. It clicked, whatever it was, and fell into place.

Channing was never going to leave his crew, so it was up to me. I had to be okay with it. If not, then I'd have my answer.

“I want to know what you're doing tomorrow,” I said again.

He was so close. He sat up straighter. His arms tightened around me, pulling me to straddle him. His hand cupped the side of my face.

I didn't know he'd touch me there, but I loved it. I closed my eyes, savoring him. His other hand went to my waist. He pressed against me. Holding me. It meant something.

He held me like I was the most fragile piece of glass.

“Do you really want to know?” he asked.

I shuddered, my hands resting against his stomach, feeling the ridges of his muscles there. “Yes.”

I had to know.

I had to try.

“Okay.”

HEATHER

SEVENTH GRADE

““**H**ey.”
Channing dropped down next to me. We were up on a large boulder, sitting higher than most everyone else.

Most were either swimming in the springs or drinking under some of the tents they’d put up for shade. I loved the springs, and I loved that it seemed only a Roussou place to go, even though Frisco wasn’t too far from here either. Today, as I watched everyone, I was kinda hoping they’d all just go away.

“Hey.” Even I winced at my tone. Dull and lame.

Channing paused, then nudged my arm. “What’s wrong? Not in the partying mood?”

I moved my arm out of the way, pulling my shirt down a bit more.

“My brother’s here.” Stupid Brandon. Sucking face with some girl. Football, drinking, and sucking face—those were his three favorite pastimes.

Channing laughed. “He is. Is that Melanie Fina?”

Melanie Fina was a grade younger than my brother, *and* she had an STD reputation.

I growled. “Great. Look, now I have to go over and interrupt that before he gets something he’s stuck with for the rest of his life, and he’s going to get mad at me. I’m not the older one, he is. But is he acting like it?”

Channing just smiled. “What are you really mad about? You and I both know it’s not your brother. You like going to the same parties with him.”

“You’re annoying.”

He poked my arm. “Tell me.”

“Stop it.” I flicked him away, gritting my teeth against the sudden pain that shot up to my shoulder.

He just laughed and scooted closer, wrapping his arms around me.

Pain. Pain.

I ignored it, stiffening until he said, “Come on, Heather. Tell me what’s wrong. You know you want to.”

I tried to keep my stern face, but when he did stupid things like this, I melted. My damn hormones. They always thought he was adorable, and looking up at his face, I had to admit he was. The sun had highlighted his hair with golden streaks, and he’d gotten a few tattoos. He wasn’t wearing a shirt today, and I studied the new tattoo on the inside of his bicep. He joked that when he got built, the paw would get larger. It was just over the size of my hand right now.

He had more building to do.

“You never told me why you got this tat.”

He let out a sigh and wiggled his fingers against my cheek.

I knocked his hand away, feeling a burn as one of my cuts grazed against his arm. Shit.

“Hey. What—” His hands darted to my arm, yanking it out in front of him.

Yeah.

I looked at it too.

It wasn't supposed to be there. I wasn't supposed to be that girl.

But I was.

He ran his thumb lightly over a cut. “I thought you stopped.”

I didn't respond. The words burned in my throat.

Channing cocked his head to the side. His eyes darted to where Brandon was sucking face with Melanie, then to me.

He sighed. “Yesterday?”

I didn't answer. I didn't want to, and I didn't think I could even if I had.

My mom had come back, then she'd left. Again.

Yesterday was the one-year anniversary of her leaving. The second time.

“Heather.” His tone was soft, luring me.

I moved so our eyes could meet. Our lips were an inch apart. One movement, one twitch, one lick, and we'd be kissing.

We hadn't kissed.

We'd started holding hands. We hugged. We cuddled. Channing crawled into my room at night and wrapped his

arms around me in bed. There'd been slight over-the-clothes grinding sessions a few times, but no kissing. Not yet.

I knew it was coming. He knew it was coming, and his eyes were dark now. They always turned that way when we touched, but he held back. I held back.

I think we were both scared of the next step. Once we crossed that threshold, it'd be different for us. We wouldn't be the best friends we were now. We'd be more. We'd be official, though we'd been *unofficial* for a long time. Everyone knew: Channing and I were together.

“Channing,” I whispered back, feeling a tear fall.

I didn't want to talk.

He cursed, then reached out and lifted me up until I was straddling him.

I moved my arms over his shoulders, sliding my fingers through his hair.

He searched my eyes, dipping to glance at my lips before looking back up. “What do you want to do here?”

I didn't want to think, that's what I wanted, and I was too goddamn young to be thinking like that. I said instead, “Forget.”

“Okay.”

He cupped the side of my face. “So let's forget together.”

I swallowed.

I saw his intent on his face.

He moved forward, and I closed my eyes.

His lips touched mine.

They were cool, but soft, and a zing went through my blood.

It shouldn't have been perfect.

But the reason we kissed wasn't.

Maybe it was for that reason, maybe it was because I felt like I'd been waiting since third grade for this kiss, but whatever it was, I let my mother go.

I kissed him back.

CHANNING

PRESENT DAY

“**W***e either make this time work... Or we need to walk away...*”

I might've joked about shitting when Heather said those words last night, but I swear, I almost did. Right then and there.

Heather Jax had balls of steel. If she said it, she meant it, and I'd been sweating the last six-pack I downed at her place ever since.

“There's the guys.” Heather leaned forward and pointed at a group of cars lined up on the side of the road.

I slowed, stopping alongside Moose's truck. He got out and came over as Heather rolled her window down.

If he was surprised to see her, he didn't let it show. He raised his coffee in greeting. “Morning.”

If it was good or not was yet to be seen. I dipped my head. Heather had slept a little, maybe an hour, but not me. I'd been busy pissing myself since she'd uttered those words. But crew was crew. We had to work, so game face on.

“Morning,” I grunted back.

I could see Scratch with him back in the truck, holding a wrapped breakfast sandwich.

“You guys stop and get food?”

“Yeah. You eat?”

Heather shook her head, holding up her own coffee. “I made this right before we left; that was it.”

A car door shut behind us, and Congo appeared next to Moose. He waved a pack of chew in the air. “You want some?”

Heather shot her hand out. “God, no. Get that away from me.”

“She’s trying to quit smoking, dumbass.”

He cocked his head. “When did you start chewing, Heather?”

She groaned, sliding down in her seat.

I barked over her, “It’s a goddamn trigger—smoke, chew, booze, fucking, all of it. Put that shit away.”

The fact that Heather boozed it up, worked where there was smoking and drinking, and had sex on the reg wasn’t something either of them brought up. At this moment, Heather could react to seeing a piece of grass blow in the wind, and I’d clobber anyone who cooed that it was pretty. I’d rip the whole damn lawn up if I had to.

“Oh...” Congo was still frowning, but he put it away, shrugging. “Sorry, Heather.”

A light tap on my window, and I rolled it down.

“Hey.” Chad’s red hair whipped around so he looked like a Chia pet, and he tucked his hands up under his pits.

“You cold?”

“Nah. I’ve got the shakes. I drank too much when I was visiting family.” His grin was crooked. “You know us Catholics. We like our wine.”

“And everything else,” Congo piped up from the other side.

“Am I supposed to come over there too?” Scratch yelled, still inside Moose’s truck. “What’s the deal?”

Heather snorted.

I leaned forward. “Why are you here? This is crew shit.”

Scratch shrugged, holding up his sandwich. “Moose promised me food, and besides, anyway you split it, if it affects the bar, it’s my business too.”

He had a point.

“Besides, I’m your goddamn family.” He pointed with the sandwich. “And Heather’s here. She ain’t crew.”

All the guys straightened. Someone said under his breath, “Oh, damn.”

I opened my mouth to respond, and Moose opened his mouth. But before either of us could say anything, Heather leaned out of the window.

“When you’ve been fucking one of the members for years, you can have a say,” she hollered. “They might not listen, but I can have a say. Until then, keep eating your damn sandwich. Thank you.”

It was a big deal that Heather was here. The guys knew it, but Scratch—he hadn’t always been around. He’d only come

back into the fold one or two years before we took over the bar.

Some days it felt like he was crew, but mornings like this reminded me that he'd grown up somewhere else.

Not Heather. She was Roussou born and bred. She'd never changed. And everything she'd said held up. I'd go to the ends of the fucking Earth for her, and these guys would have my back.

Scratch would stay and take care of the bar.

“Sorry, Heather.” He took another bite, wiping his mouth with the back of his arm. “Sometimes my mouth moves before my brain does.”

“It happens.” She sat back, looking over to me. “Are we doing something or just going to hold hands?”

Chad burst out laughing. “I’ve missed having little Jax on our missions.”

“Yeah, when was the last time?” Moose asked.

“I remember.” Chad snapped his fingers. “That old barn-dance place. The owner said he’d rather burn it down than let some homosexuals party there. Ginger Gypsy was there with my other aunt and some of their friends, back when they could still shake it.”

Chad a large family. Really large.

Congo raised his voice, “Yeah! She was there with her girlfriend, and they got so mad, they went to Manny’s. Heather heard, came and found us, and then—”

Heather was watching me.

I finished the story, so goddamn proud of my girl. “Heather was the first to go and light the match.”

Her cheeks flushed. “I really liked Cora. That made me mad.”

Chad’s laugh softened. He rested his arm on my door. “That meant a lot to my aunts. Cora asked about you until the day she died. She kept proclaiming you’d be blessed for what you did.”

“For burning down a barn-dance hall?” But Heather was smiling.

I’d forgotten how much she’d loved Chad’s aunts, but it wasn’t just them. It was the girlfriend. Heather had doted on them...

“They were friends with your dad,” I said, remembering.

She nodded again. “Cora Lovell used to babysit Brandon when he was little. He had a crush on her. I was the one who told him she didn’t swing that way. I think it made him love on her even more.”

“Yeah, she said you visited them in the nursing home a lot.”

“How is Ginger Gypsy?” Heather asked Chad.

He glanced to me, asking for permission. I nodded, just barely.

“She’s good. Still fighting, raising a ruckus like always.”

“And your mom?”

He lifted up a tight shoulder. “My mom not so much. She got conned by someone recently.”

“Oh, no. I’m sorry, Chad. I really am.”

“Yeah.” His head lowered a little. “She wasn’t hurt too bad. And we were able to get most of the money back.”

There was a pregnant pause after that.

Someone had hurt someone a crew member loved. Heather knew the policy after that: we got even. I waited to hear her response.

“And whoever conned your mom?”

I looked over. I was surprised to hear a hardness in her tone. It reflected in her eyes. There was the old Heather, the one who’d burned down a barn-dance hall without a moment’s hesitation.

I swore I saw the same flames flickering in her eyes as she asked me, “Did you get the guy?”

I nodded. “You know it.” *Whatever god brought her into my life, thank you.*

She clipped out, “Good.”

After her response, the guys all seemed to breathe easier, stepping back from the truck. Congo popped the last of his chew in his cheek, then brought out a lighter and started to touch the flame to the empty case.

“Hey, hey, hey!” Moose grabbed for the lighter. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“What?” Congo frowned. “There’s no trash around, and I don’t want to litter.”

Chad started laughing behind me.

Moose shook the chew packet in front of Congo’s face. “Burning this shit could be worse for the environment than littering.”

“How? I’m just burning it up.”

“You gotta make sure.” Moose patted the top of Congo’s head with the chew case. “Just in case, man. There could be chemicals in this. You got it?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Congo grumbled, grabbing for the case and going back to his vehicle. He called over his shoulder, “Figure out the plan and let me know, would you?”

Moose turned back to the truck. He stepped in closer; so did Chad.

“You heard him, boss. What’s the plan?” Moose asked.

This was a scouting mission. So, it was time to do some scouting.

HEATHER

F *art!*
Somehow I'd ended up running behind Channing's cousin, and smelling the farts he kept denying.

Another one. I hit Scratch in the back. "Stop farting! They stink!"

"I'm sorry. I can't help it. I shouldn't have had that sandwich in the truck."

"No shit, Sherlock."

He rolled his eyes. "You're kinda mean sometimes, Heather. Do you know that about yourself?"

My hand spasmed. I wanted to hit him again, across the face. I deadpanned, "Really? I had no idea."

"Not nice. Not nice."

Then a voice spoke from behind me. "Would you two stop bickering? You're like two little kids fighting over a toy."

Scratch didn't respond, but I screamed my displeasure—or I would've. I jumped straight in the air, and just as I started to yell, a hand clamped over my mouth.

"Ssshhhh! It's me. Lincoln."

I nodded, and he eased his hand away. I looked at him over my shoulder, still a little shaken. “Where the hell did you come from? And make some noise, why don’t you?” I punched his arm.

Girls aren’t supposed to hit. Guys can’t hit girls, so it should go both ways, but my God, he scared three years off my life. And the need to smoke hit me full blast now. I could smell the nicotine. My nose started twitching, trying to lead me toward it.

“He’s been trailing us the whole time. Right?” Congo said, laughter in his voice.

Lincoln nodded, but barely. The guy was committed to his statue impersonation. “Chan sent me after you guys. Neither of you were answering your phones.” He nodded to our left. “We’re supposed to cross there and meet them on the other side of the hill.”

So far in our scouting mission, we’d done a whole bunch of running around fields and over hills. We’d crossed a river (that was not fun) and gone over more hills. Channing said we were checking some of the Red Demon territories, but so far, I was just seeing land. Everywhere.

“Were you in the trucks before?” It was still bugging me, not seeing Lincoln till now.

Congo spoke for him as Lincoln went ahead, taking the lead. “He’s been our rear, staying back and making sure no one sneaks up on us.”

Well. That made perfect sense.

Channing moved like a ghost. So did Moose, and now Lincoln too. But Congo didn’t, and neither did Chad. Chad smelled like spice cologne, and Congo wore these chains from

his pants that rattled every time he moved. Although now I noticed those chains had stopped making any sound.

Chill, Heather. It's not like they haven't done this before.

This was a regular Tuesday to them. I kept telling myself that as I jogged after Lincoln and Congo and saw the rest were already ahead. They lay flat at the top of the next hill, some with binoculars out.

Channing turned his head, checking on us as Lincoln dropped and began army-crawling to lie next to him. Congo did the same, but he went to the end, next to Chad. Channing gestured to his right, and I crawled there, Moose on my other side.

“You okay?” Channing asked under his breath, leaning closer to me.

I nodded, but I wasn't. Or I wasn't sure.

In the early hours of the morning, when I'd normally be finishing closing Manny's and going to bed, they were out crawling around in the hills. That shouldn't have put a dagger of fear in my heart, but it did. I used to not want to know. Now I did, and I was even more terrified.

This life was going to get Channing killed. We weren't sneaking up on friends or family. We were sneaking up on a motorcycle club—one that did illegal shit.

There'd be guns, drugs, whatever nightmare crap I could think up—it'd be there, and Channing was heading toward it. Not away.

He was insane. They were all insane. I was insane.

“Hey.” He touched my arm, scooting closer. We were lined up from shoulder to ankle, and he could've kissed me, but he

only whispered, “You okay?”

“No,” I hissed back.

One of the guys started chuckling.

“What’s going on?”

I glared at him, or I tried. There wasn’t much distance between our faces, and as I was glaring, he started smirking. His lips were going to touch mine. He would distract me then, push out all the cold and rational fear in me—because it was rational. The fact that he wasn’t scared was irrational.

He was the insane one—and I was repeating myself. My fear had put me on a loop.

“Don’t you fucking touch me. This is messed up, Channing.”

One of the guys whispered from our left, “Channing’s in trouble tonight.”

Another said, “I’m thinking Channing’s going to get a spanking.”

A third laughed. “Are you kidding me? He’s going to eat that shit up. Spank away. You can spank me too, Heather.”

“Shut it!” Channing lifted up, glaring at both ends of the line.

I had recognized that last voice. “I’m going to make you eat shit, Congo. Just wait and see.”

Moose started laughing. “Congo, you dumbass. She burned down a barn-dance hall because she got pissed. What do you think she’s going to do to you?”

“Jax isn’t one I’d want to piss off.” That was Chad.

I liked Chad, even if he was a little more nuts than the rest.
“Thank you, Chad.”

“Got you covered, Heather. And I was not one of the ones being disrespectful just now. Just making sure you know that.”

“Oh, I do.” I raised my voice, just a little. “I’m fully aware which assholes are going to get laxatives in their food when they come to Manny’s one day.”

One of the guys groaned. “I forgot Jax isn’t like other girls. She’s vengeful *and* she follows through.”

The second voice that had piped in earlier added, “We missed you, Jax. Why’ve you been away so long?”

It’d been high school since I’d tagged along with the crew. As the guys were talking, memories of old times came back to me—when this was just our group of friends doing stupid shit together, when it wasn’t an official crew activity, just a prank or a time we were getting back at Fallen Crest people, or following the Broudou brothers and hoping to make their lives hell.

I met Channing’s gaze, and it was as if he was there with me, remembering too, because his eyes softened. He reached over and brushed a strand of hair from my face.

His forehead rested against mine and he whispered, quietly for only me to hear, “It’s good to have you back.”

His lips touched mine, but only briefly, and he pressed a second kiss to my forehead.

I squeezed his hand before he rolled away.

It *was* good to be back. It was also terrifying, and I’m pretty sure I’d be jonesing for a cig every time I was with the

crew, but it was good. It felt like a piece of me had fit back into place.

“Hey,” Moose spoke up. “They’re moving.”

I hadn’t even looked at what we were scoping out. It was a warehouse, similar to Channing’s, but with another building next to it. A trailer sat at one end, along with a small house. A metal fence ran around the entire place, and a light had turned on, illuminating the front yard area.

One of the large warehouse doors rolled up, and a train of motorcycles pulled out, with no headlights on.

They didn’t rev their engines—just a soft purr as they rolled out, one after another. The front man raised his arm, and the perimeter fence began rolling backward. They had it all set up on an electrical feed, and he started through. They went past us, probably twenty feet to the left.

I panicked for a second, wondering if they’d find our trucks, but then I remembered we’d pulled up to a tree line and left them within the woods. They were hidden.

After the last rider left, the fence closed, and the front yard light went off. At least one person was still in there.

Moose said over my head, “That was Richter.”

“I didn’t see Traverse, or Connelly,” Lincoln added.

Channing was still studying the compound, his jaw clenched. “I didn’t see any of the guys loyal to them.”

An unsettled air lingered over everyone. Channing had filled me in earlier so I knew that wasn’t a good sign. The guys who were supposed to help them weren’t anywhere.

Moose finally asked, “You think they’re dead?”

No one wanted to answer that question, but after a slight pause, Channing shook his head.

“I don’t know.” He pushed himself up. “But I’m going to make sure they’re not in there.”

The rest started to stand. He motioned for them to stop. “No. Stay. I’ll go in alone.”

I sat up. “Like hell you will.”

Lincoln stood too. “I’ll go with him.”

I knew Channing could fight. I’d never seen Lincoln in a fight.

He nodded to me. “I won’t let anything happen to him. Promise.”

Channing came over, bending so his forehead touched mine again. His hands found my face and he whispered, “I’ll be fine, but I have to look. I have to.”

This was what I hated about the crew life, but I nodded. He was going anyway. I’d rather him go with a clear head than one clouded, knowing I was upset.

As he started to pull away, I grabbed him and crushed my lips to his. “You fucking come back to me. You hear?”

“I hear.” He wore a proud grin, and he kissed me again, softer this time. “I promise.”

The two left, blending in with what shadows we could see as they approached the compound.

Chad moved over, taking the spot Channing left behind. Congo followed him.

“If anyone can handle themselves in there, it’s those two.” Chad tried to reassure me. “They’ll be fine.”

Moose growled, “And if not, there’ll be hell to pay.”

I grunted. From the both of us.

We quieted and waited until we saw them appear in front of the fence. One of them threw a stick at it. There was no spark. It wasn’t electrified. Both clambered up and over with an ease that surprised me. They darted across the yard, going to a side door, and were inside.

“Why didn’t they lock the doors?” Congo asked.

“Because their compound is in the middle of nowhere,” Moose answered. “Probably don’t think anyone would have the balls to go in.”

The next moments took years from me.

I didn’t know what Channing was doing. I didn’t know who else was in there.

I didn’t know if they had guns. I didn’t know if someone would attack with a knife.

No lights were on, so they were moving in the dark.

All I knew was that Channing could fight. He was the champion of Roussou’s underground, but I also knew I was ready to tear into them, with my bare hands if necessary. Every second I waited was a lifetime.

The asshole.

He went in there with only one friend.

He left us all out here.

He was selfish.

He was reprehensible.

He was—*BANG!*

He was the love of my life.

I was up and running before anyone could stop me.

“Heather!”

“Heather! Stop!”

I didn’t care.

Bang! Bang!

Two more shots, and my heart pounded in my chest.

I went down that hill as if my life depended on it, because it did. The guys were in pursuit with me, and I was keeping up. Adrenaline gave me an edge over my normal speed, and I hit the fence hard, using my momentum to climb up and over. This was an old hat I used to wear.

When we were kids, we’d climbed over fences, up trees, through houses. Through creeks and rivers or in the ocean—I would go anywhere with Channing, and today that meant I was storming into an MC warehouse.

After those three shots, there’d been no other sound. The lights were still off, but I was beyond caring.

I ran to the side door and shoved it open.

After that, I stopped. I could smell the gunpowder.

I heard the guys climbing over the fence outside, a few grunts. Someone landed hard on the ground, then nothing. They were as silent as Channing and Lincoln had been.

“Heather.” Moose was behind me, looming over me.

My heart was trying to pound its way out of me, but I held back. I waited for my eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Suddenly, someone cursed. “Fuck this.” The room was flooded in light.

I blinked a couple times, seeing stars. When my eyes could focus, my heart stopped in a whole other way.

Seven guys sat in chairs, their mouths stuffed with rags, their hands tied behind them. Their legs had been zip-tied to the chairs. Lincoln had a gun pointed at someone on the floor, and a pool of blood seeped from beneath him.

And Channing—God, where was Channing?

I heard a footstep from the back hallway, then another.

He appeared, rubbing his hands with a towel, blood splattered over his front and his jeans. There was a smear of blood on his face, but it looked like he’d used something to wipe it off.

“Well.” He looked up, saw me, and surveyed the room. There was no surprise, just a grimness as his jaw clenched again. “If we weren’t at war before, we are now.”

CHANNING

“It’s not your fault, Channing.”

I heard the words. I’d been there myself. I knew what had happened. The cops knew what had happened. Detective Miller said ballistics would back me up too, along with the eight other witnesses in the room.

It still didn’t ease the dread in my gut.

Traverse leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. “The idiot drew his gun on you, tripped, and shot himself in the head. He literally shot himself. You have nothing to be feel bad about.”

I grunted. “You’re right. Except that one of Richter’s guys is dead because of me. He won’t give a damn if it was indirect or not. I scared him. He pulled a gun, and he’s dead. That’s all Richter will care about, and you know it.”

That shut him up.

We were sitting in the back section of Manny’s. Heather had left us earlier to go open, so I’d sent Moose and Chad with her. The rest had stayed with me as we released Traverse’s guys and the cops showed up. Apparently, when Heather kicked open the door, it had triggered an alert. In a way, I was thankful the police knew I hadn’t killed the guy. I didn’t want

that hanging over my head. After giving our statements, and once everyone was cleared to leave, we'd come here.

I wanted to be close to Heather, and she was fine with closing off the back room at Manny's for us.

"Let us worry about Richter," Traverse finally countered. "This is our war, not yours."

It wouldn't matter. "He'll blame me."

"He'll blame *me*, not you. If the cops hadn't shown up, there wouldn't be any record of you guys being there." One of Traverse's guys held up a hand, starting to say something, but he was shut down. "We would've destroyed the security footage," Traverse continued.

The guy lowered his hand.

I'd seen that footage myself. It only started an hour before we broke in. Feeling Moose's gaze on me, I didn't react. He'd watched it with me. The other guys didn't know.

They were watching me. They were waiting for orders. This wasn't the scariest shit we'd been in, but they knew the protocol. We had a lot of members in our crew, but not everyone lived here. I hated making the call, but...

"We need to circle the wagons."

One by one, they nodded at me and stood to leave.

They didn't go together. Each went alone, except Lincoln. He lingered by the door, and I knew what he was waiting for. Digging into my pocket, I chucked him my keys, and he held them up in a last salute before he left.

"What are they all doing?" Traverse asked.

They were going to visit every one of our members. Those who couldn't come back to help would be on alert. They'd know so they could protect their families. The ones who could come back would, and every member's home and business would have round-the-clock surveillance. The ones who didn't have to go to their jobs wouldn't. Tuesday Tits would be protected. Our warehouse would become the base of operations for everything. Heather would be protected—at Manny's and her home. Brandon wouldn't know it, but someone would be on him too.

Some members had local families, so as many as possible would set up camp at the warehouse.

We'd even ask Ginger Gypsy if she had any new visions for us.

But all I said to Traverse was, "You and I are married. You know that, right?"

A grimace crossed his face. "Come on. This is our fight."

I made sure my face didn't move, but this guy was fighting me on this? Why? He wanted a mutiny. I promised I'd help, and he got one. Now nothing.

Traverse told me Richter had found out what he was doing and tied them up. According to Traverse, they'd been there for weeks.

They didn't smell like they'd been tied up for a month.

They didn't look starving, or thirsty. No one was gaunt in the face or had trouble standing on their feet. They looked... like they'd been tied up just before we broke into the compound. That's what they looked like, smelled like, acted like.

That damn tape. There was only an hour of footage on it.

It all added up to us being set up.

If that was the case... I played along for now. I had to. I didn't have enough to make a move. I didn't know enough to make a move.

I needed more information.

"I don't care what you say," I told Traverse. "Richter's been after Roussou since he took over the Red Demons. He might hate you, but he hates me too. And you and I, we're in this together." I paused. "Aren't we?"

I wanted him to put his cards on the goddamn fucking table. I wanted to know what men he had, what men he could call for, where they'd come from, when they'd show up, and if he had already called for them. I wanted to know the blueprints for his playbook.

I wasn't going to get that, so what did I know?

I had to stop and recalculate.

He had seven men with him.

There was no way he'd take on Richter with seven men, and I wasn't including myself in this situation.

He would need more help if he was going to backtrack on us.

I was still waiting for his answer.

His eyes got hard. He tilted his head back. His nostrils flared, and all the while I stared right back at him.

I could take out my gun. I could shoot him in the head. Then I'd pray. That was a last-ditch option if hell broke loose just now.

I didn't move a goddamn inch.

Traverse's eyes narrowed. An emotion flickered before vanishing, and he cleared his throat. He held his hand out. "You know we are." But his tone was curt.

He waited, and I shook his hand. We stood at the same time. The rest of his guys did too, and I saw one slip into the bathroom.

"Maybe we should take a breather? Meet up later tonight?" I suggested.

He jerked his head in a nod. "Yeah. That sounds great."

Too fast. He smiled too fast, and he took that bait too fast.

Fuck.

I couldn't have timed how fast they left. They were gone before I even thought about it. There was a trample down the hall, leaving just me standing in the back section.

Until I heard a toilet flush.

That bathroom was just outside the door.

The door swung open. His last member stepped out.

I raised a hand. "Hey, man."

He scanned the room, and his eyes widened a fraction. Rubbing a hand over his jaw, he tugged on his cut with his other hand, coming toward me. "Everyone take off?"

I cocked my head, making sure I talked as smoothly as the bottom of a snake's bottom. "Traverse wanted you to stay back, give me the rundown on your group's operation and everything."

"Really?"

I narrowed my eyes. "That all right?"

“Oh, yeah. Sure.” He nodded and came back into the back room, shutting the door behind him. “He wanted me to tell you everything?”

“Just go over the basic operations. We’re going to meet later and come up with a plan of attack for your guys and mine.”

He was low man on the totem pole. If he wasn’t, he wouldn’t have picked that time to go to the bathroom, so I knew he didn’t know anything.

Still, he should’ve hesitated.

My guys wouldn’t have said a goddamn thing.

This guy told me everything—where their extra men were coming from, where they were going to hunker down for the fight, where they knew Richter might be staying since he wouldn’t be at their compound anymore. He told me how many of the men they thought they could pull to their side. He gave me names. He gave me names of the guys coming to help.

The only thing he didn’t give me was the shirt off his back, and I watched his phone. He had it clipped to his side. It started blinking as he was talking, and it kept blinking the whole time. He talked right through it, not noticing it once.

No matter what Traverse was really planning, we were still going to war.

I just wasn’t sure against who.



HEATHER FOUND me still sitting there, long after that last guy left. The sounds from Manny’s filled the room as she opened

the door, quieting as she shut it.

“Hey.” She crossed to me. “You okay?”

Like so many other times, probably in the thousands by now, I lifted my arm. She curled up on my lap, and I encircled her. She was secure, right where she belonged, in my arms.

I let out a long, tense sigh. “Yeah. I think so.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know if they were telling the truth.”

She tensed, then let out a short laugh. “You say that like you’re disappointed.”

Because I was. Because I wasn’t sure.

I looked up at her, meeting her eyes. “A push to get into Roussou is different than a mutiny war.”

One was a helluva lot bloodier than the other. Heather didn’t ask which was which. She already knew.

She leaned back, resting her head against my chest, and found my hand with hers. “We’ll make it through. We always do.”

She moved my arm aside and lifted my shirt. I already knew where she was going. A moment later, as I felt her tracing Naly’s name again, I closed my eyes and imagined I was holding both of them.

Until she said, “What are you going to do about Bren?”

Oh, fuck.

HEATHER

““**Y**ou want me to what?” Bren asked, her hands on her hips.

Channing was telling Bren and her crew about the situation, and once again, things were a little tense. They seemed fine with watching out for the Red Demons MC—all of them except Bren. Of course.

Channing leaned against his kitchen counter. It was late at night, late for these teenagers. Normal kids should’ve been in bed, their homework done, their only worries about the next day’s classes. Again, not these kids. Midnight might as well have been their lunch hour, and every one of them was bright-eyed, but not bushy-tailed.

“You think they’ll target Bren?” Cross asked.

Bren had been protesting, but she went quiet once Cross started talking. She stood slightly behind him, her arms over her chest. Her chest rose and fell, and she glanced at me. I saw the struggle in her. The sister in her wanted to tell her older brother to fuck off, but Channing wasn’t speaking in that capacity now—or not *only* in that capacity. He was crew, like them, and he was the godfather in Roussou.

She closed her eyes a second before moving alongside Cross to face her brother more fully.

Channing paused a beat before nodding. “They might. Everyone’s protected in our crew, except Bren. She’ll be the lone wolf, and they might use that.”

The tallest one pushed off from the wall and came to stand next to Bren. “She ain’t alone.”

“The Ryerson crew will help us,” Cross added.

“You sure about that?”

I was thinking it, but Channing spoke it.

Cross dipped his head in a brief nod. “They’ve had a leadership change. Drake Ryerson.”

“That fuck?” Channing studied his sister for a moment. “You okay?”

She met his gaze and started to nod, but paused. “I’m more worried about you, actually.”

A wide smile flashed over the tallest one’s face, and he threw his arm around Bren’s shoulder. “We got your sister. No one’s going to hurt her, MC or crew.”

Without blinking or showing any emotion, Bren slammed her elbow into his ribcage.

“Ow!” He glared at her.

She didn’t even spare him a look. “You know better than to do that with me.” Turning, she walked out of the room.

Rubbing his side, he started after her, but Cross cut him off. “Don’t.”

The taller one stopped in his tracks, silent as Cross went to follow Bren.

The fourth member of their group went to the front door. “Jordan, you coming?” he asked.

“Shit.” Jordan’s tall shoulders dropped, and he trudged after their last member. He looked in the direction of Bren’s room before going out.

The front door shut behind them.

And a second later, Bren’s door clicked shut.

“She’s in there. With him. Alone.” Channing raked a hand over his face. “What the fuck am I supposed to do here?”

Again. Not normal kids.

I crossed the room to stand in front of him. I rested my hands on his stomach. “It wouldn’t have made a difference to us when we were that age.”

“I know.” His hands found my hips, tugging me closer. “I would’ve just left and snuck back in through your window.”

Channing’s relationship with his sister had improved, but they had a long way to go.

“I’m not a mom...” That word came out a little raspy, and I swallowed over a lump. “But I think the best thing is to cement your relationship with her first.”

“I’m trying.” He pulled me in, wrapping his arms around me and bending his head to the crook of my shoulder. “I’m trying.”

He *was* trying. I was trying. I even think Bren was trying too.

“Come on.” I stepped out of his arms and took his hand. “Take me to the bedroom, old man.”

“Old man?” He smirked down at me, his eyes darkening. “I’ll show you old—old ways cavemen used to have sex with their women. How about that?”

A tingle shot through me, and I couldn’t have wanted anything else. “Promise?”

He groaned, his lips finding mine. “God, I promise.”

Picking me up, he carried me to his bedroom and locked his door.

At that moment, everything felt right...

HEATHER

FRESHMAN YEAR

My. Fucking. Bag. Wouldn't. Budge.

These damn lockers needed to be bigger. Honestly. I mean, come on. How can we keep all of our crap in these small things for an entire year? Some of us had real items to stuff in here—like books, and bags, and food, and the occasional liquor bottle (don't judge me), and hello? What if I wanted to put an overnight bag in here? Or someone else's overnight bag, such as Channing's, because who knew where he slept most nights.

Actually, it was his bag I was trying to pull out of my locker. Why he hadn't used his own locker, I wasn't sure. There was always a reason with him, but he'd gotten more and more vague with his explanations. I hadn't wanted to start a fight (another one), so I'd just grabbed his bag and thrown my whole body at it, cramming it inside my locker.

Now I had to move it because my stupid freaking history book had fallen behind it, and I couldn't get it out.

I tried from the floor now, my feet braced on either side of my locker as I yanked. I'd need a shower after this. My hair was sweeping the dust up from the hallway, though our janitors really did do a good job.

Gus needed more credit for the crap he had to clean up.

“Looking good, Jax.”

Oh, shit.

I looked up, still almost horizontal with the floor, and got a good junk shot from Budd Broudou.

I'd be scarred for life.

“Get the fuck away from me.” My teeth ground together.

Budd's brother Brett wasn't that bad, but this guy was an A-hole of epic proportions, and their sister was just as bad—spoiled, sheltered, and narcissistic to the extreme. They had another brother too, but he didn't go here. Anyway, the ones I knew seemed to get worse every year, and lately Budd had begun strutting around our school like he owned it. I might've been a lowly freshman this year, but I was a Jax. I wouldn't take shit, and that certainly included the Broudous too.

“Oh, come on.” He moved his hips in a circle, knowing what I could see as I looked up.

Thank God for jeans, or I'd be seeing some peen and beans.

I gave up. Climbing to my feet, my hands found my hips. I focused on his junk for a moment, then smirked.

“You pad that shit, don't you.”

Before he could retort, I gave him a little tap with the back of my hand.

I was right. There was a sock in that thing.

He howled, cupping himself. “You bitch!”

I rolled my eyes. “Please. You didn't feel it, if you know what I mean.”

“You...”

I could see his body temperature rising. The red at the bottom of the thermostat was rolling up, up, up, and all the way to the top. Even his forehead was red. His hands curled as if he might go for my throat. “You bitch—”

Smack!

Channing had appeared out of nowhere. His punch sent Budd into the locker beside me.

“Get away from her!” Channing yelled, and then he was on him.

Punch after punch, I almost felt sorry for Budd. He didn’t have time to recover or fight back. Then a shout came out from farther down the hallway, and a mass of students pushed toward us.

Budd’s brother Brett was coming, along with the rest of their friends. I’d noticed a divide among the students—half followed the Broudou brothers around like puppies trailing their mother’s tit, and a fourth remained neutral. The last fourth were loyal to Channing. They were a smaller group, but they were fierce.

Channing had started fighting more and more, which made his friends wade in too, and somehow, they’d become a fighting force. They were tough enough to make the Broudou followers wary, which is why only Brett and one other tried to get Budd away from Channing—or more accurately, Channing’s fists.

Moose, Congo, and Chad pushed through the crowd and started in on Brett and Jared Caldron, Budd’s best friend.

I was pissed—beyond pissed.

One, I'd been handling this. Like the day would come that I couldn't handle a fucking Broudou? Please.

Two, I'd been trying to get that damn bag out of my locker, and now what was I doing? Waiting. Waiting for these shitheads to figure out whose dick was bigger.

Three, as I watched, Channing slammed Budd against my locker. The force was enough to drive his bag back *in*.

And finally, my mouth dropped as I watched all of my books and papers fly out of the locker. Not one or two, all! How was that even possible?

"Fuckers!" I yelled.

Forget it. I waded in. If they hurt me, so be it. I was getting my damn history book one way or another.

"Heather!" Channing yelled.

"Jax!"

I didn't know who that was. I didn't care. Shoving Broudou away, I pushed Channing's hands off of me too. "Get away."

He cursed, shoving Budd farther away from me. Fine. Whatever. They could do their stupid fighting over there. I dropped to the ground, my ass on that floor again, and I wedged my hand under Channing's bag until I could wrap my fingers around my history book.

Of course. Because it was cosmic karma—my books were all spread out around the hallway except the one I wanted.

The guys still wrestled around me. Moose slammed Brett into my neighbor's locker. Both guys saw me, and their eyes bulged out.

“Jax, what the fuck are you doing?”

But then Brett wound back a fist and sent it right into Moose’s jawline. He punched Moose back toward where Channing had taken Budd—see? That brother wasn’t as bad as the other.

I heard a crow squawk, “Get off of my brothers!”

There was only one girl stupid enough (besides me) to wade into this mess, and if she started fighting, so would I. I’d have to go at her, though I didn’t want to. I had priorities here. I was still hoping to get this damn book and go to class. Not all of us had to get detention. That was my thinking until Shannon Broudou screamed at the top of her lungs.

“Teachers! Get the teachers! Channing Monroe started the whole thing.”

I had a good hold. I was able to wrap my entire hand around the book. I tensed up, and pulled with all of my weight.

Ooomph!

Success.

The book popped out of the locker, and since Shannon was passing me at that moment, I used the momentum to let it fly.

It soared over my head and smacked her right in the shoulder.

“What?” She whirled to me, but I was on my feet by then.

Before the book hit the ground, I snatched it up off its bounce and backhanded her. With the book. Across the face. It wasn’t enough to knock her off her feet, but she fell into the crowd beside her. A look of wonder came over her. Her hand raised to touch where I’d hit her before pure fury formed.

It was at that point I rethought what I'd just done.

Shannon Broudou was not a small girl.

She was nearing the line between solid and pudgy, but she embraced her weight. She loved her curves. I had no problem with that, but it was a problem when those same curves were now poised to take me on. She had a lot more meat than I did.

“Aw, shit.”

I had enough time to consider running, but my Jax pride wouldn't let me, so with those guys still fighting in the background, I braced for her rebuttal.

She dropped her head and charged.



CHANNING NURSED a black eye in detention—right next to me.

“Why are you mad at me?” he asked. “I was defending you.”

I glared at him. “Because I was handling him just fine, and it's not that.” I quieted. I didn't want to fight, but screw it. “You're fighting all the time lately.”

He pulled the ice bag away and straightened. “So what?”

God. I hated how his eyes got so cold, especially when he was staring right at me.

“Your mom died, but—”

“But what?” he snarled. “I'm not handling her death the right way?” He leaned close, his breath hot on me. “Tell me, Heather. How am I supposed to mourn my mom, huh? Can't be like you, not giving a shit that my mom took off when I was in first grade.”

I winced.

I waited for the second dig, where she came back and decided we *still* weren't good enough for her. But it didn't come.

"Shut up," I shot back. "You don't know what you're talking about—"

"I know what it's like to lose a mom. I just don't know what it's like to live without one." He shoved back his chair, standing up.

"If you walk out of this classroom, Mr. Monroe, you're suspended," the teacher warned him.

It didn't matter.

Channing walked out, raising his middle finger over his shoulder.

The thing is, I wasn't sure if that was meant for the teacher or me.

HEATHER

PRESENT DAY

Two weeks went by, and it had become crew haven at Manny's.

Channing's, Bren's, and another one—they were all in and out every day.

Crews always held a “danger” appeal to the Fallen Crest crowd—from high schoolers through the middle-aged lonely housewives—and since they were here, business was booming.

I was still ready for the crews to go back to their normal, less frequent visits. Things weren't so tense when they weren't around.

In the grand scheme of things, though, I wanted to make sure we were safe, so we endured. That's all you could do in a storm: hunker down, wait for it to end.

Everyone felt it—the staff and the customers—whether they knew what was going on or not. They walked a bit more freely when they were leaving. The only one who didn't seem affected was Suki. We'd pitched the idea of her hosting a private dinner night, and she loved it—so much that she'd settled back into being a regular manager. So now, when I

wasn't needed at Manny's, I was at Tuesday Tits with Channing, or I was at the warehouse with everyone else.

It was one of those warehouse afternoons again. I'd started to stay away from Manny's as much as possible, just because I didn't want to feel the weight of putting everyone there in danger, but I was bored. And restless, and I'd started carrying a pack of cigarettes on me again.

I didn't smoke them. Not yet, but I was taking them out. I'd hold one in my hand.

I was doing that more than I should've.

I sat on a picnic table in the back. Everyone else was inside, or the kids were on the makeshift playground that had been set up in the middle of everything.

I hadn't liked seeing the kids here, but when I'd said as much to Channing, he'd asked what else they could do. Some of their members had kids. They probably wouldn't be touched. He didn't think the Red Demons would hurt kids, but why risk them?

I couldn't quite make out all the conversation inside, but I could hear it. I could hear them laughing.

I wasn't laughing.

There was nothing to goddamn laugh about in this situation.

I needed my own chaos, not theirs. I needed my Manny's dysfunction.

"I didn't know it was getting that bad," Channing said, coming out from the warehouse. He moved to sit on top of the table beside me. Reaching over, he took the pack out of my

hands and slid the cigarette from my fingers, caressing my hand in the process.

I didn't fight him. I couldn't. Because he was right. It was getting bad.

"It's this place."

I didn't look at him, but I knew he wouldn't buy that excuse. He put the cigarette back in the pack and took out a lighter. He lit the whole thing on fire and tossed it into one of the bonfire pits.

"It's not this place," he said. "It's the situation."

Well. That too.

I grunted. "I was trying to be nice."

"I know."

We fell silent—comfortably.

Maybe it was because Channing was with me no matter what, or maybe it was because I'd given in. But I wasn't fighting him about being in a crew anymore. I wasn't hoping to pull him away. I was in, fully in. Whatever the reason, he said something he never had before.

"I'm sorry."

It wasn't that.

I glanced over. "Huh?"

"You're in this because of me, because of the crew."

It was that.

I couldn't talk. I was too surprised.

He rested his elbows on his knees. "I'm crew, and that'll never change. And you're in danger because you're the

woman I love. I'm sorry. I am." He looked over now. "But that'll never change either. I'll never love someone like I love you. Don't ask me to try."

Channing had hurt me. He'd loved me. He'd made me laugh. He'd made me swoon. He'd been cocky, smirking, careless, reckless, and stupid. Beyond stupid. He was good and bad, and I'd had a front-row seat for the whole show. I'd also been an integral part of so many of those times—when he pushed me away, when I turned him away, all of it.

"You formed the crew system to stand up against the Broudous," I reminded him. "You did it for me."

He shook his head. "I did it because Brett and Budd were too strong. They were bullying everyone except my group. I did it for me too. Your friend was just the catalyst. That's all."

"Still." I leaned forward, mirroring his posture. "That's ancient history. You didn't know the life the crew system would take on. Thick and thin, right?" I wasn't really talking to him. "Being in a crew is like marriage."

Channing laughed. "Being in a crew is like those marriages that last through everything and don't fall apart."

"Not the flimsy ones who get divorced after one scandal." I wrinkled my nose, but I was smiling.

His grin matched mine. "Exactly."

"We don't have problems because you're in a crew," I admitted. "I mean..." I imagined a jail cell slamming shut, the sound of an ambulance, that gunshot from inside the warehouse. That could've been Channing on the ground.

I would've rained hell on whoever was responsible.

I don't know what took my mom away. She left. It didn't matter, but a retired RV caravan took my pop to Florida. My oldest brother was married, working a nine-to-five job with two little ones and probably a normal marriage that had its struggles. But Brandon was still with me, and my other family was sitting right next to me.

I had friends. I had good friends, one I even called my best friend, but they weren't Roussou. There was no one like Roussou except those who came from Roussou.

"I love you," I told him.

I said it because he was my best friend, my lover, my soulmate, and even sitting on a picnic table, I wouldn't have been anywhere but by his side.

"I love you too." There was a gruffness to his voice.

I turned to stare out over the hills surrounding his warehouse, but I knew he was blinking back tears. Hell. I felt them too, but I also felt *her*.

"You think she'd be standing by now?" I asked.

"Oh, fuck yeah." A soft laugh from him. "She'd be starting to walk, maybe even be running."

"You think?"

"Yes. She's a Monroe and a Jax together. She'd be tearing ass through this warehouse, streaking, showing her naked booty to everyone."

I laughed, and once I started, I could see her. Chubby legs, chubby arms, chubby cheeks. Peals of laughter. So blond she'd probably have white hair, maybe curly. She'd be running toward her daddy, no doubt.

"She'd already be kicking ass."

I couldn't stop laughing, and crying. Goddamn.

I blinked, trying to stop the tears, but he was right. Naly would've kicked ass, and I knew a couple more things just then.

It didn't hurt to talk about her anymore. And I wanted another baby. Fiercely.

Channing was waiting. He likely already knew what was going on inside me, and I only had to catch his eye before he stood and grabbed me—an arm under my legs and another around my back—and threw me over his shoulder.

“Oomph!”

He smacked my ass, softly. “Quiet, woman. You and I need some alone time.” His hand began rubbing in circles, becoming a caress, and I closed my eyes.

I savored that touch.

He ducked around some people in the garage and deposited me in his truck. I sat up as he shut the door and watched him dart around.

“We're *leaving* leaving for this?”

He flashed me a grin, starting the engine. “I want complete privacy where *no one* can find us.”

Channing paused at the gate. “Going out for a bit. I'll keep my phone on me.”

Moose was standing watch. He frowned, but looked me over and sighed. “Fine.” He hit the switch, and the gate rolled open.

Channing held up two fingers in a small salute and drove through.

HEATHER

Channing was taking me to the springs.

I recognized where we were going about halfway there, and I couldn't explain what went through me. It was our spot. When we pulled onto the small road that led to our section of the river, I could only stare at him.

He had the window down, and the wind was moving through his hair. He had one hand on the steering wheel and the other between us, palm up and his thumb turned toward me.

I felt an upsurge of love that was different than the others. It was love from knowing the person all your life, yet still feeling that "newness," that giddy emotion, that excitement pooling in the bottom of my stomach. It was all of those loves, and it was fierce, and protective, and there was a twinge of regret.

I regretted letting him walk away before. I regretted pushing him away. I regretted not talking about Naly, not wanting to hear him talk about Naly. But mostly, I regretted every word I'd said to hurt him, because that was my fault. It wasn't his. He had his faults—don't get me wrong. He'd cheated on me, and that was a big deal. It took a year before

that wall had come back down, and that was another of the times we never talked about.

But his mistake didn't outshine Naly. I wouldn't let it take away the love I felt for him now.

Hope.

Something new was happening. Something new was coming.

I'd made the first move by accepting the crew, but he'd met me every step of the way.

I placed my hand in his and closed my eyes, memorizing the feel of his fingers over mine. It was one tight grip, and when I opened my eyes again, he was watching me. The truck had stalled. He'd stopped it in the middle of the gravel road.

"What's this?" he asked, his eyebrows dipping down.

I shook my head. I didn't want him to feel that way. Not now.

Moving over, I straddled him, and he adjusted. He made room for me.

Our lips met and grazed over each other, teasing, tasting, loving.

He groaned in my ear, and I felt it all the way to my pussy. His arms went around me, but he put the truck in gear and drove a little bit farther, then turned off. We were at the springs. I knew every bump in the road, every tree in the ditch, every rock that we passed, and I was turning back into that seventh grader I'd been when we first kissed.

He turned the engine off, his mouth finding mine.

He growled, lifting his hips to grind against me.

He was already hard, but he was usually hard for me.

“Please.” I panted, throwing my head back.

His lips moved down my throat, down my chest. He nuzzled my shirt over and found my nipple. His tongue swirled, teasing it. His teeth grazed it, and I gasped, arching my back. He clamped down again, sucking, his tongue still caressing me.

He growled again and shoved the door open.

Sliding out, he held me firmly to him. As soon as we were clear of the door, my legs wrapped around his waist. He locked the truck, shoving his keys into his pocket, and carried me down the steep embankment to the water.

Resting me on my feet, he slid to his knees, unbuckling my jean shorts.

I gasped, my eyes closed and my head back. I raked my fingers through his hair, and I felt his mouth on my stomach, then lower.

He knew where to taste me, to lick, to kiss, to savor me.

“Channing,” I groaned.

He knew every caress like the back of his hand.

His mouth lingered over my clit, his mouth sucking on me, and I almost came. His hands found my legs, nudging them apart to give him room, and then his tongue slid inside.

I grasped his head, and I held on.

My knees were buckling.

His tongue kept thrusting inside, again and again and again, and I was almost blind. I didn't know how much more I could handle.

As if knowing my feelings, he sat back on his haunches and looked up at me, his eyes dark with desire and lust. He gave me the widest grin before he said, “Undress, woman.”

I laughed, feeling half drunk, and did just that.

I pulled my top off and my breasts perked up, feeling the air against them. His hand slid up my stomach to grab one of them. I panted as I adjusted, readying myself with a hand to his shoulder, and kicked the rest of my clothes free—sandals, shorts, panties. I was buck naked in front of him now, and he stood, his hands falling to his jeans.

I yanked his shirt off, needing the feel of his shoulders, chest, arms, stomach. I had to touch them, glide my hands over him, caress him in return. As I was lost doing that, he kicked off his shoes and jeans, and then I felt his cock. It was hard, resting flat against his stomach, and my hand found it like it was my anchor.

He sucked in his breath, leaning over me, his hands going down my back and curving around my ass.

“Goddamn, Heather.” He rasped out my name, his mouth closing over my shoulder. Once he hoisted me up, his lips found my nipple. He closed in on my breast at the same time I sank down on his cock.

He slid inside, but he didn’t start moving.

He carried me into the spring, and laying me back against the rock, he gripped my thigh. Then he started moving, bent over me, kissing my breast, my throat, my neck, and going back to my breast as he kept moving inside.

I clenched his shoulders, rolling my hips with him. I wanted to ride him, and when I pushed at his shoulder to move that way, he only laughed and found my lips.

“Not a chance. I get to fuck you hard. I get to fuck you strong. And hot damn, woman, I get to fuck you because you’re my woman.” His hand flexed on my hip. “Now let me do my job.”

I laughed, my head resting on the rock. His lips moved down my throat, and he kept going. My legs twined around him. We were both moving in perfect accord, and then he cried out. He fell on top of me, his body plastered over me, and he gripped my ass, pounding me harder.

We moved together.

We rode each other.

I never wanted to stop. I never wanted the real world to come back to us, but as he pushed me over the edge, my body started trembling, and he thrust one last time for himself. We both exploded.

I ran a hand down his back, feeling him shudder from my touch.

“I want to do better,” I murmured.

He tensed, propping up on an elbow beside me. “What do you mean?” His hand fell to my breast, holding me there, warming me.

“I can’t walk away from you.” I shook my head, rolling it back and forth against the rock. “It’s just not possible right now. If I had to...” God. I didn’t even want to think about that. “I don’t know if I’d survive anymore. We’ve had too many breakups. Too many fuck-ups.”

He nodded, his mouth curving down. “I know.”

I caught his face in my hands. He had started to gaze down at my breasts, but I made him look at me.

“Let’s grow the fuck up,” I told him. “Let’s be adults.”

“Okay.” He nodded, grinning at me.

I groaned, seeing his eyes darkening. I began to unwind my legs from around his waist.

“Oh whoa, whoa, whoa.” He grabbed my hips, holding me still. “What are you doing? Let’s not be hasty here.”

I laughed again, locking my ankles around his back. He slipped out of me, but he was still down there. This was what we did while we waited for the next round. We talked. We kissed. We rubbed. We laughed. We teased each other. He’d pinch me. I’d swat at his shoulder, and in as little as twenty minutes, he’d harden again.

When that happened, we’d stare at each other. All the laughs, jokes, and whatever we’d been talking about would fall away, and we’d grow serious as he took my hip in one hand, moved back, and then moved into me.

Today was no different, except he lay on top of me a little longer than usual. We talked a little longer. We laughed a little harder, and when he paused to slide inside, I swear there was more oomph than usual.

We were cementing this change for us.

Today was the first day of a new us, and my God, as Channing moved inside of me, I vowed it’d be the last change. When I felt the need, I shoved him over and settled back down on top.

It was my turn now.

HEATHER

““O h! Oh! Ooooooooh!”

After our initial encounter, Channing had taken me farther into the springs. We'd originally been just off the road. His truck had blocked us, but if someone had walked over and looked down from the cliff, there we would've been. Farther in meant more privacy.

We were walking back to the truck when we paused, hearing a breathy woman cry out.

“Ooooooh. Yeah! OMG, Matthew!”

A roar came next, and I jumped back from the shock of it.

Channing caught me and started laughing.

“It's not funny.” I glared up at him as my tank strap fell down one shoulder. He caught it and put it back before taking my elbow and guiding me ahead.

“I'm not sure how to react to hearing her actually spell out OMG and not just say the phrase,” I told him.

“OOOOH HELL YES, my lover!”

Channing kept laughing, his head down almost to my shoulder.

I glared at him. “What’s going on with you? Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

I started forward, but he kept me in place, still laughing. He pulled me closer and whispered into my ear, “That’s Congo.”

Congo...

I was a dumbass.

“Oh my God.”

He snorted. “OMG, you mean.”

“OMG.”

One of the only people to refer to Congo by the name his momma gave him—Matthew Shephardson—was his stalker, or my brother’s stalker, or whoever’s stalker she was now. It was get-off-his-dick, drunk-with-Gus-at-Manny’s Rebecca.

“Come on.” Channing’s voice dropped low and he moved ahead, grabbing my hand. We weaved around some more springs, coming closer to their voices.

“Yes. Yes. Yes.” She was almost chanting now.

There was a large boulder ahead with trees to both sides, but I could see the water leading out from behind the rock, and we could hear them just ahead.

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to sneak up on them.

I mean, this was Congo and Rebecca. She dressed... Well, who was I to judge? I liked tight clothes too, but she spoke like she was an etiquette snob. Who said “classless vixen” or “courted”? Rebecca was an odd mix. I’d just go with that, but Congo too?

The guy could have a gun nearby, and he could grab it in reflex.

Who was scarier? Him or Stalker?

Fuck.

Didn't matter. Channing had knelt down, and he started to crawl between the rock and one of the trees. He was checking to make sure there were no snakes or other animals, and then he motioned for me to join him.

Yeah. I didn't think so.

I wasn't stupid.

I crawled on top of him. I wasn't going to risk squashing a scorpion.

So there we were, Channing peeking around the base of the rock and me on top of him with my boobs pressing down on the back of his head. We could see Congo and Rebecca on the other side.

I thought he'd be on top of her, and both of them in the water so we couldn't really see anything.

Not the picture we got. Not at all.

She was on all fours, her legs spread and turned toward us. Her breasts were almost grazing the ground and her head was back, eyes closed and mouth open as he held a good handful of her hair in one hand. Fully mounted behind her, Congo had one knee on the ground and the other up and almost over her hip. His other hand clenched her ass, and his head was up and back too. Veins were popping out of his neck.

Whatever we'd heard before had only been the beginning. They were still fucking.

Seeing that, I felt bad. This was wrong. It was an invasion of privacy.

Channing didn't feel the same. As I began to slither back off of him, he dug into his pockets and pulled out his phone. He took a photo as he was stepping backward, and then all hell broke loose.

I heard the warning rattle and felt a sudden lurch. I saw the snake from the corner of my eye as Channing yelled and tackled me to the ground. He rolled me away and was up almost as quickly as we'd fallen. There was a commotion, and I jumped to my feet as Congo and Rebecca ran from around the other side of the boulder, still naked except for a gun in Congo's hand.

Channing grabbed the end of the tail and threw the snake away from us, but it wasn't far enough. The rattler was pissed and coming back.

"Shoot the fucker!" he yelled at Congo.

"I'm trying!" Congo had the gun raised, but it was pointed at Channing, who was in the way. Cursing, he lowered it and stepped aside. "The thing keeps moving."

Channing wasn't wasting time. He snatched the gun out of Congo's hand, aimed, and shot. He got it in the head. The snake went limp.

"Oh." Rebecca made a pitying sound. "Why'd you have to shoot it?"

Everyone twisted around to her. Channing's eyebrows shot up. "Because it was trying to attack us, and I didn't bring a gun."

Her mouth curved down as she folded her arms over her breasts. "This was probably its home, and you broke into it.

I'd attack too." She paused, cocking her head to the side. "Why are you guys here?"

"Yeah." Congo was panting, his hands on his hips.

Both were naked, and neither seemed disturbed by that.

I was trying not to notice. I really was, but his dick still had a half-chub, and Rebecca's boobs were peeking out from under her crossed arms. She was suffocating them. I wanted to have her put her arms under them or something. It looked painful, and I don't even have big boobs.

I glanced down. They were small. I felt sorry for them for a second.

The stalker girl was pitying snakes, and I was pitying my own tits.

Somehow, that seemed the most normal thing about this situation too.

Channing flashed a grin and pulled his phone out of his pocket. "What'd you think I was doing here?"

Congo's head inclined, trying to get a better view of the phone. When he did, his eyes rounded, and he scowled. "No way!" He started for the phone.

Channing laughed like a little girl. He didn't put it back into his pocket, but he didn't hand it over. Congo was still coming for it, and Channing was jogging around, typing away.

The snake was completely forgotten, except by Rebecca. I caught her looking at it, almost crying. I would've gone to comfort her, but hello? She was naked, and it didn't seem like that would be corrected anytime soon.

"Come on, Chan! That's mean."

“It’s payback for the shit you pulled with Marsch.”

Congo started to run after Channing, and he continued to evade him, dodging, running in tight circles, coming right back and then using Rebecca and me as shields.

We were in fifth grade all over again. I was annoyed.

“I did that for Chad, man.”

“But I paid the piper for you.” If Channing was mad, he didn’t sound it. Suddenly, he stopped. “There. Done.” He tossed the phone to Congo. “It’s gone.”

Congo caught it, studied it. “You fuckhead! You sent it to Moose!”

Channing never stopped smirking. “I sent it to *all* the guys.”

Blood drained from Congo’s face. “I’m never going to live this down. She’s naked in that image. Her tits are out.”

“What?” Rebecca was coming out of her snake-sympathy coma. She blinked a few times. “Huh?”

Channing kept laughing, but it softened. He nodded to the phone again. “Look at the picture, dumbass.”

He did, and his frown cleared. “Oh.” Congo laughed, showing Rebecca the picture. “It’s the snake.”

My eyebrows shot up.

Channing saw my look. He gestured to the dead rattler. “That one.”

It was a bad joke, but I still felt reassured. No one needed to see Congo and Rebecca. I didn’t need to continue seeing Congo and Rebecca.

“Good.”

Channing reached for his phone. “I deleted that one of you guys right away. I’m not a complete asshole.” He went back to the snake and kicked it over, sliding his phone into his pocket. “Wonder how long this guy is?”

Congo went with him. “He looks around four foot, I bet.”

Now that everything was done, I looked back and forth from Channing and Congo to Rebecca. I was okay with nudity. Hell, I enjoyed showing too much skin myself, but this—this was a different level of comfortable.

“Do you want to get dressed?” I asked.

“What?” Rebecca had gone back to her sad stupor.

“Your clothes.”

“Oh.” She looked down at herself, then shook her head. “Yes, normally it’d be rude to remain unclothed, but we walked out here like this.”

“Yeah.” Congo joined our conversation. “We didn’t want some fucker sneaking up and stealing our clothes.” He smacked Channing in the chest. “They’re locked up in the truck back there.”

“Your truck’s by my truck?”

Congo nodded, running a hand over his head and making parts of himself bounce from the motion.

“Oh God.” I turned away. I now knew for certain that I only needed to see Channing’s cock. Maybe my kid’s, if I had a boy, but that was it. I wasn’t aware that I’d been questioning this need to see other dicks or not, but I knew now. For certain.

I did not need to see another vagina either. My pussy. Channing’s cock. Our children. That was it. Well, maybe I shouldn’t get ahead of myself. There was always porn.

A vision of Congo mounting Rebecca flashed in my head. Nope. I wouldn't be watching porn for a while.

"You okay, Heather?" Congo asked.

"Yeah..." I was going to have visions of those two in my head forever, but I'd be fine. Nudity wasn't the end of the world. "I'm good."

Congo sighed, looking down at himself. "Looks like he's gone soft. Moose sent me after you. He was worried, wanted to make sure you had backup." He motioned toward Rebecca, who came to his side so he could put his arm around her. "Becca followed me out here—"

Because she's a stalker. Hello? We've all forgotten here?

"—and I'm not an intrusive asshole. I wanted to give you privacy, but she showed up, and one thing led to another."

Channing smirked. "Yeah, right. You couldn't find us, and you know it." He glanced to me, and I knew we were both remembering the first time. Our situations would've been easily reversed if he'd come sooner.

"That too." Congo shook his head.

We all began to walk toward the trucks. They really had walked naked to the springs. They didn't go back for sandals or anything.

That wasn't normal.

We had to go up a ridge, and everyone fell in a single line. Congo started to go first, but Channing made a sound and Congo fell back. Channing went first. I was second. Rebecca was behind me, and then Congo.

Think about the visual if it'd been any other line-up.

Channing and I went to his truck.

Congo and Rebecca went to his and put clothes on. Her car was parked behind his, and Channing and I shared a look at that, but I wasn't sure what to say, so I didn't say anything.

Why Congo decided to have sex with her wasn't in my wheel of answers, but she was a bomb waiting to go off. She was another whole situation they'd have to deal with, just not today apparently.

"Moose sent you to watch over me?" Channing called, standing inside his door. He grabbed some water from the back, handing one to me and tossing another to Congo as he came around to us.

"Yeah, he wanted me to tell you he got a call earlier."

"A call?" Channing went through his phone. "I'm not seeing anything."

"He didn't tell me what it was, just said to have you call him." He looked over his shoulder. Rebecca had taken up position in his truck, sitting in the passenger seat the way I was in Channing's. Her face was impassive, no emotion.

It was odd.

Channing's mouth flitted down a second before focusing on Congo again. "Okay." He punched in the number and raised the phone to his ear, but kept looking back at Rebecca. After a second, he moved away from the truck so he couldn't be heard.

We all fell silent, waiting for him.

Until Rebecca announced, "Richter burned down two of his warehouses."

Congo whipped back to her.

I shot out of Channing's truck. "What did you say?"

She wasn't even blinking. "That's why I came to find you, Matthew. To tell you about Richter's plans."

"Channing!" I yelled for him, waving.

I heard him saying something to Moose before hanging up. He came back over. "What?"

I flicked her the shocker hand sign. "The stalker just told us about Richter."

"Heather."

"No, Congo!" I snapped.

I'd dealt with her too much. This was a last straw.

"She knew something. She should've said it right away."

The more I thought about it, the madder I got.

Channing's safety.

Congo's.

The guys.

The families.

The children.

My family.

"You know something, you spit it out! You don't wait until after a fuck session with your latest obsession and after we've been standing around, taking our goddamn time!"

Channing's hand curled around my arm. He wasn't restraining me, but he wasn't letting me walk up on her, and I really wanted to.

I paused, but she didn't make a peep.

“Talk!” I yelled.

Channing kept me right in front of him. His hand curled around my other arm too.

Now she blinked. Finally. She registered I was pissed.

“Richter’s burned two of his warehouses down, and he’s going to blame you for it.” She looked right at Channing.

There was no change or inflection in her voice, but she blinked. Again.

“His plan is to set you up, and while you’re arrested, he’s going to move in and take over Roussou. By the time you get out, or prove you didn’t burn his warehouses down, he’ll have thirty of his men in Roussou, and it’ll be impossible for you to get them out.” She turned to me now. “He’s willing to hurt Heather too, if worse comes to worst.”

Congo was watching her like she was the rattlesnake Channing had killed. He eased away from her a foot.

Channing’s hands fell away from my arms. “*How* do you know this?” he asked.

“I overheard it.”

We waited.

Nothing. She didn’t elaborate.

Enough.

I was full-on raging now.

Smother the fucking fire, Heather. Keep it contained. Don’t get out of control.

Yeah. No. It wasn’t happening.

I went right up to her, my nose in her face, and I didn't care if she bit. I'd bite right back, and harder.

"You come clean with everything. You hear me?"

Yes. My nose touched hers. I was blasting her with my breath, but to her credit, she didn't flinch. Neither did I.

"I am not scared of you. You get that? You chose, Rebecca. You chose our side. If you don't tell us everything you know, I will make it my sole mission that no guy in Roussou will touch you again."

She blinked back at me. "You live in Fallen Crest."

"*Anywhere* you goddamn live. Got it?"

She blinked. A third time. "Got it, but call me Becca, please. I feel like we're going to be friends now."

She was psychotic.

I glared at Congo. "She's your problem. Get *all* the information out of her."

I sailed past him, not caring how he reacted to my order. I went past Channing, got back into the truck, and I sat there. I had to calm down.

Be calm. Be controlled. But fuck it. I wasn't calm at all.

I was already planning someone's murder.

CHANNING

Moose was waiting for us when we drove back into the warehouse.

All the women and children were inside or somewhere else. I couldn't see or hear anyone.

He stood up from the bench to greet us. "We moved everyone to one of Chad's aunt's houses."

As safe houses went, that was ingenious. He had about sixteen aunts. Even I had no clue who they all were.

I got out and started inside, Moose with me. Hearing my truck start up again, I turned back.

Heather had the window rolled down. She was behind the wheel.

I started for her. "What are you doing?"

Her face was set in stone. Her hand tight on the wheel. "I have to go. I have to try to protect my place." She spoke over what I was about to say. "And you need all of your men back here."

Which meant she had a plan. I frowned. I didn't like this. "Stay, Heather."

"No."

“Fuck—Heather!” I growled. This was not the time for a fight. Not now. Not here. Not today. “Get out of the fucking truck.”

“No.” Her eyes narrowed. “Let me go.”

Never.

“Heather.” I started for her.

She kicked the truck in reverse, spraying me with dirt from the tires. Then she lingered. “I have to go, Chan.” Her eyes were suddenly sad, staring at me through the dashboard window. She gave me that sad smile too, the one she didn’t know she wore when she thought about Naly. “You know I do. You need your men here. I need to be there.” She gave me a look.

“What are you planning?” I asked.

“I’ll need extra protection, I get it. So I’ll call in some reinforcements.”

I had a feeling about where she was going with this, and I didn’t like it. Not one bit. “Heather,” I said again, a warning in my tone.

“What better protection than the media? Maybe it’s time I ask Sam, Mason, and Logan to come visit.”

“Are you kidding me? You call them and you’ll make it worse. Sam’s pregnant. Mason’s in the middle of the football season, and Logan’s in law school. They can’t come.”

But...

“You go there,” I offered instead.

“What?”

Shit. I knew she wouldn't, but I had to try. "You go visit them."

"Fuck, no."

If she could kill me with a look, I'd be dead three times by now.

Tightening her hold on the steering wheel, her eyebrows locked down. "I'll call and see if they can come. If they can, I won't tell them what's going on, just that I want them to stay at the house with me. Even if it's for a weekend, it'll be worth it. Richter won't touch me if I'm surrounded by them, and you know it. They're outsiders. He won't risk the exposure."

I shook my head. "I don't like it. You're bringing them into this war. If something happened to Sam or the baby, Mason would kill me."

My insides twisted around a cold-edged knife. Heather assumed they were an added layer of protection, but she was wrong. Richter wouldn't care. Not in a war. It just meant she would be vulnerable, and nothing could happen to Heather. *Nothing.*

"I'm going to call them." She began edging backward again.

I started for her. "If you call them, I'll tell Mason what's really going on."

She wasn't stopping. If I ran outright, she'd gun the engine and go. She'd crash through the barricade even, but this was my ace.

If I called, it'd be pointless. Mason would never allow it.

She jerked back in her seat, hitting the brakes. Her mouth fell open. "Are you kidding me?" Her eyes narrowed, and she

closed her mouth, thinking.

I didn't like that look, not at all. She was still planning something.

A second later, she said, "They'll still come."

"No, they won't."

Heather's mouth flattened in a determined line. "Let's see, shall we?"

I'd created a monster.

She hit the pedal and the truck shot backward.

I stood in the middle of the road and watched as she continued backing up. She wasn't even looking.

I knew the second she was going to whip the truck around. Her eyes held mine, and she mouthed "I love you" just before her hands tightened on the wheel. She hit the brakes and jerked it around.

The truck lurched, rocking on its tires, and then Heather accelerated again.

Moose stepped up next to me. He didn't speak; I just gave my order.

"I want five men on her. One of them has to be Lincoln."

He nodded. "On it." He radioed ahead for the guys at the gate to let her through, and for two to follow right away. He moved back, pulling out his phone to call the rest. They'd be at Manny's when she showed up.

Becca sidled up next to us. "Let me protect her. I'd like to take on that responsibility. I feel somewhat protective of Heather, like she's going to become a younger sister to me."

I'd forgotten she and Congo were still here. They were waiting just behind us.

“She just threatened you at the springs.”

She raised her head. “I want to prove her wrong. I know you all think I have certain issues, and I'll admit to most of them, but I'm someone worth having around. Let me prove it to you.” She skimmed over Congo, and I was thinking he was more the *you* than myself.

I sighed. “Congo?”

He lifted a shoulder. “She *was* the one who brought Richter's plan to us, but I'll take her on. She'll be my responsibility.”

I didn't trust her. I jerked a hand at Congo. “You go with her.”

A smile began to spread over her face. I stepped into her personal space, just like Heather had at the springs, but I was a lot taller, stronger, and way more lethal.

“If anything—and I mean it, *anything*—happens to her or Congo, I *am* holding you responsible. That means whatever happens to them will happen to you threefold.”

She flinched.

Good.

“Got it?” I almost spat on her.

She nodded quickly. “Got it.”

“Then get *the fuck* out of my face.”

She didn't need any other encouragement. She was speeding away in seconds, and I growled at Congo.

“If she’s the one to hurt Heather, or allow Heather to be hurt—”

“I got it.” His mouth was a flat line. “You’ll hold me personally responsible.”

“You’ll do it.”

He stopped, frowning. “What?”

I spelled it out. “You. If she does anything to Heather, I’m going to make you enact the revenge on her, and you’re going to have to do it over and over again.”

I wasn’t beyond killing, but I liked to dish out my revenge in slow and torturous ways. Congo knew this because he’d been right beside me, sometimes watching, sometimes protecting me, and sometimes being the one to hold someone down.

He clipped his head in a nod. “I got it, boss.”

“Good.” I motioned for his truck where Becca had gone. “Get out of here then.”

He left just as Moose was coming back.

I started on him. “And why the fuck did you not call about the warehouses?”

He hesitated just briefly before lowering his head. “I didn’t know what he was planning, just that two of his warehouses were on fire.”

“Anything that happens to our enemies, I get told *immediately*. I want to know before it happens? Got it?”

“Got it, boss.”

“Where are the rest of the guys?”

“As soon as you called, I sent them out. They’re all watching Richter’s places.”

That was good, but there was one person we should’ve heard from before anyone else.

Where the hell was Traverse?

HEATHER

W *hat the hell am I doing?*

Channing was in real danger, and I was going nuts. I was considering calling the Kades, and for what? For a civilian border between Channing and the Red Demons? As if the MC would even care about that—they probably wouldn't. And it would put Sam in danger, her baby too. Channing was right. I'd been stupid to consider calling them.

But I wasn't leaving either. The crew members who had wives and kids had all been sent away for safety. That wasn't me. I wanted to tear the bastards apart with my bare hands, but I also wanted to make sure everything, everyone I loved was safe. Manny's. My brother. My workers. They were all mine.

My responsibilities. My family.

As I drove through Roussou and out to Fallen Crest, some rational thinking began to edge in, and I was back to the root of the problems Channing and I had always had.

Channing's crew life was dangerous. That extended to me. Which extended to my brother. Because I loved Channing, my brother was at risk, our business was at risk. So what should I do? I couldn't leave Channing. I'd tried over and over again.

Did I leave Manny's? I had a feeling no matter how much time passed, Channing's enemies wouldn't care. They'd know I loved my brother and the bar I'd nursed to life since high school. If they wanted to hurt me, I was an easy target, but my God... If anything happened to that place, to Brandon, I'd be the one in danger of going to prison.

The lengths I'd go should've scared me. They didn't.

So maybe, when I looked up and saw a line of motorcycles blocking the road, I didn't turn around. I should've turned Channing's truck around. I should've gunned the engine.

I didn't do any of that.

If I had, what happened next wouldn't have happened.

If they wanted someone to hurt, fine. They could try. Maybe they would hurt me, but I was going to take every last motherfucker with me.

I stopped the truck. Right in the middle of the goddamn road. I knew the stakes. We didn't live by police. We didn't expect them to protect us, and we didn't use them to enact our vengeance.

So it was me and those Red Demons.

I had a strong feeling if I gave chase, they'd enjoy the ride.

As I was thinking that, another line of motorcyclists pulled up behind me. I looked in the rearview mirror.

They'd been waiting on a side road.

I was blocked in.

Fuckers.

The guy in the lead got off his bike and held his hands out, signifying he had no weapons. That was a lie. We both knew

he had one or two guns on him.

My thoughts raced as he walked toward me.

A pit of ice sank in my gut, coating my insides.

Channing kept a gun in here. It was attached under the seat. I could grab it, but then what? They'd find it. I had no doubt. My jeans were skin tight. My shirt too. There was not enough cleavage between my boobs to hide an entire handgun.

I was going to leave it. I had to. But I *did* pocket the extra key Channing kept in the console. If they took me, if they brought the truck too, I could maybe get free and sneak back out? That was a lot of ifs and maybes, but I had no other choice.

I could get the gun then?

Palming the key, I knew I'd need to get it into my hair so they wouldn't see. That fucker could hide in my hair. I'd just thrown my hair up in a messy bun when we left the springs. It was a perfect bird's nest up there.

The guy was almost to the door when he took his helmet off. It was Richter. He made a rolling motion for me to open the window.

I did, but kept the door locked. I wasn't going to make it easy for them.

"Hey, Heather." He stepped closer to the door, a red bandana over his forehead. It almost covered his eyes, but I could still see them. He was studying me, cautious.

I didn't respond, just extended a middle finger instead.

He chuckled, ducking his head a little. He leaned against the door. "I can see that fighting spirit. It's nice to know Channing hasn't taken that out of you."

Why the fuck would he? Asshole.

I kept my mouth shut, though my throat burned. Rage licked my insides, warming me up.

“No answer?” He bobbed his head. “Okay. We can do it this way.” He motioned behind me and in front. “You know what’s coming next, right? You’re surrounded, Heather. And we have a job to do. We *have* to take you. I get it. I do. Your man doesn’t want me in Roussou, but the problem is I *need* to come into Roussou. I’ve got businessmen who have made it very clear they want to go through that town. Cops don’t patrol there so much, and we have to use that to our advantage. It’s business, Heather. No one has to get hurt.”

Richter wanted to drive drugs through Roussou.

Channing wouldn’t let that happen.

Channing was supposed to work with Traverse to replace Richter as the head.

Where the fuck was Traverse?

“And your guy that died? The one that shot himself?” I couldn’t keep the bite out of my voice. “We’re supposed to believe you won’t want payback for that?”

His eyes flashed. They were hard for a second before he masked them again. The smooth and slimy criminal moved back to the forefront.

“No, no. Sully shot himself. We saw the video. I won’t hold that against Channing.”

He smiled, and shivers wracked through my body. Even my toes curled.

“At least not yet,” he continued. “We’ll see if I hold it against him depending on how amendable he is when he finds

out where you really are.”

Time slowed at that moment.

I had to decide. Fight or surrender? My choice would change my life forever. There was dread in my gut, a sick feeling that if I went with him, I wouldn't live. But if I fought, it was the same result.

This was that last moment where I was still Heather Jax. My life was the way it should be—determined by my decisions, my choices. This, what he was forcing me to do, wasn't my choice. Fighting and dying or being taken captive was not my choice.

It's a weird feeling, realizing an actual fork in my life was occurring in front of me. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and I knew I would remember everything about this day. It was going to be seared in my memory.

It was hot. Humid.

Sweat filled the air, along with dust, smoke, and wild grass. I didn't know wild grass had a smell until that moment, but it did. It was almost sweet, but pungent too. The heat in the air pushed down on me, making my lungs feel stifled—or maybe that was Richter.

As I stared at him in that small window of time, I noticed some things he didn't, and I almost started crying in relief.

I heard the trucks approaching.

I heard one of Richter's men yell at him.

And I saw what he didn't.

The grass on both sides of us was moving—and not just a little. How Richter or his men didn't notice was beyond me. Maybe they were focused on me, focused on their leader,

making sure I didn't pull a knife on him, or maybe they were distracted by the trucks coming up behind us. They were moving fast too.

Whatever the reason, everything slammed back into place. The fork disappeared, and I gasped out loud, knowing I could continue my life the way I was supposed to. My choices. My decisions. I wasn't going to be taken captive or die today.

Those three trucks were Channing's guys—one was Moose's and another Chad's.

I didn't recognize the third.

A strange calm came over me.

I knew what I was going to do now.

I was going to fight. I was going to hurt them. I would not let them hurt me, hurt us.

“What the fuck?” Richter was distracted. He was still standing at the door to the truck, his hand now clenched in a fist, and he pounded it against the side. “Goddammit! I thought we had the back covered.”

A guy came up, winded. “We did. They pulled out from some other way. We don't know where.”

Now. Now, Heather!

I bent slowly. They were both staring at the trucks, trying to figure how many were coming.

More of his men were approaching. They were between me and whoever was in the ditch. They still hadn't noticed them. They were all watching the trucks.

I felt the gun under the seat, and I felt the Velcro strap holding it in place.

Channing, I hope you keep bullets in this weapon.

“What’s the plan?” one of Richter’s men asked, waiting on his bike.

Richter was still staring.

I had to move. Now. Richter was going to walk ahead, or—no.

He growled and reached for the door handle.

I grabbed the gun. My hand came up from under the seat as he reached in to unlock the door.

He saw what I was doing, and his eyes widened. “Holy shi—”

He was backing away as I brought it up, and then there were *pop, pop, pops* everywhere.

“AGH!” Glass exploded, but instead of Richter running, he lunged for me. He dove right through the window, catching my arm before I had the gun at his face. I couldn’t shoot him, but one of his guys was running back to his bike. I could shoot him—and I did.

The front window shattered. Some pieces rained on my face, and I closed my eyes, but I opened them in time to see the guy go down.

Richter was on top of me, clambering for the gun. The steering wheel blocked him so he couldn’t get a firm grip on it.

“NO!” I screamed, trying to wrestle away from him.

I have to hold that gun. I have to hold that gun. That was on repeat in my head.

Richter was too strong. He hadn’t punched me yet, but I was waiting for it. I couldn’t fight him. I couldn’t overpower

him, but I *could* hurt him. I could twist away from him, and raising my leg as he was still trying to paw at the gun in my hand, I brought my foot down as hard on his knee as possible.

“OOOOOOW!”

He slammed backward, right into the door.

The fucking door.

Shit. I was trapped with him. I wanted him off of me.

I tried lifting him off of me with my feet, but I felt the gun slipping from my hand.

I had some space. That wheel kept him just above me so he couldn't keep me completely paralyzed under him. Using that space, I twisted my hip up, gripped the gun, and yanked it backward with both of my hands.

“Goddammit!”

I brought my elbow back into his face and pistol-whipped him.

Then I scrambled out the passenger side of the truck.

“No fucking way, you bitch!” he growled, grabbing my ankle to yank me back. One hold on my ankle, one swoop, and I was right back where I started. He tossed my body like I was a sack of nothing.

His face twisted up in a snarl, and I saw the fist forming.

The punch was coming. I threw my arms up to block just as I heard: “GET OFF HER!”

And then he was gone.

As easily as he'd hauled me back in place, his entire body was pulled from the truck.

Channing slammed Richter to the ground, and then he was punching him. Blood sprayed everywhere, and my stomach churned.

Adrenaline buzzed in my ears. But underneath the violence, the blood, the fear for my life, there was a sadness too.

I sat up in Channing's truck, his gun still in my hand, and I surveyed everything.

Some of Richter's men had stayed to fight, and some hadn't—they were simply gone. It wasn't just Channing's crew that had come. I recognized some of the adults from the Ryerson crew. I saw two of Bren's crew, and my stomach dropped.

They were babies. Jordan and Zellman. They weren't supposed to be a part of this world, even though I knew they were. They had their own fights, but this was ours. My fight. Channing's fight. Not theirs.

I wanted to cry. I should've cried. I should've been scared, furious, whatever was normal in these situations. Maybe I should've been in shock, but I was none of that.

I just was.

I looked back down at the gun, but it wasn't the weapon that caught my attention. It was my hand—there was no shake or tremor. I was steady. In fact, I raised the gun and studied my hand.

I was rock fucking solid.

And that scared me.



CHANNING

MOOSE HAULED me away from trying to kick Richter's head off of his body, and as he did, I glimpsed Heather.

The sight stopped me in my tracks. I could smell the blood and dirt and sweat in the air. There was a storm going on around us, but in the middle of it, she sat still.

There was blood all over her—in her hair, on her face. Her arms were bleeding. Blood gushed from a cut on her chest. But her eyes weren't wild, though they should've been. They were calm. She clutched my gun in one hand and her shirt in the other, and her eyes—I'd never get that image out of my head.

They were wide and unblinking, but resigned.

Everything left me. The need to hurt, defend, protect, maim—all of that was gone, and instead, my stomach plummeted to my feet.

I shivered, but it wasn't cold. It was a goddamn blistering day. I shook off Moose and went to her. Richter had been pulled away, and I knew his men—the ones still able to move—were taking their injured with them so I could step clear to the opened door.

“Heather.” My voice cracked. It was shaking. *Fuck*. My hand too.

I formed a fist, then smoothed it out. It was still trembling.

I'd done this to her.

No matter what anyone would say—I did this to her.

I'd brought her this violence and darkness. I had put it in her, and I couldn't take it back. The damage was done.

I'd damaged her.

“Heather,” I whispered and held my hand out.

Reaching for her felt like it signified something more. Forgiveness? No. Not that. I didn’t deserve it, so maybe something else. Acceptance? Fuck. Did I even want that?

You can walk away. There’s time. You can still save her.

Shit. I almost pulled my hand away.

That’s what I’d done so many times; it’s why I kept walking away. It was to save her—from myself.

We’d won this round of the war, but there’d be another. I was waiting for Richter to win a battle, and when he did, who knew how catastrophic it would be. No matter what, the war would continue, and Heather was smack in the middle—literally, at this moment.

I couldn’t walk away from her, not yet.

You will.

Yes. Whoever that voice was in my head—my conscience?—I knew he was right. Heather kept thinking it was her choice to accept me and be with me, or not. But it wasn’t that simple. We were intertwined. There was no me without her. No her without me, so to do what I needed to do, I was going to rip us both apart.

So help me.

“Heather.” I unfolded my palm, stretching my hand toward her, and without a second’s hesitation, she grabbed it. It was a strong hold. Sturdy. It ripped me down the middle, but I pulled, lifting her out of the truck.

Her legs came around me. My arms enveloped her, and as she nestled up against my chest, I carried her.

I would've carried her the rest of my life.

HEATHER

FRESHMAN YEAR

Channing was sitting on the top of my truck when I left school, his feet dangling over the front. He might have been lounging there, looking all cool and shit, but I was still pissed. I couldn't deny how damn good he looked, though, so I schooled myself. I couldn't let him get away with the crap he'd pulled. No way. Or the way he'd talked to me.

I had a lecture already prepped in my head. I'd had the rest of detention to perfect it, but when I got to him, he dropped to his feet.

"I'm sorry," he announced.

Seriously. Those two words.

I had my hand up, my pointer finger ready to go, but his apology thwarted my plans. I shook a fist at him instead. "Not cool, Chan. Not cool at all."

He sighed, hanging his head. "I know. I know." He slid his hands through his hair, making the ends stick out, and even that looked good on him. He'd changed from the T-shirt he'd had on earlier to a shirt with the sleeves ripped off. Bodybuilders sometimes wore them in the gym, but on Channing's lean frame, it showed more of his recent tattoos.

I saw claws wrapping around his torso, disappearing under his shirt. “When’d you get those?”

“Huh?”

“Those.” I touched them, moving the shirt over to show the rest of it. Half the claw mark tattoos were on his chest.

“Oh.” He shifted under my touch—gently, but still moving my hand away from him. “Just a while ago, with Moose.”

I tried not to feel slapped by that move, but I failed. That hurt.

Channing didn’t talk about how his mom had died. He’d been quiet for the few months they knew beforehand, and he’d kept quiet for six months after. He’d crawl in my room at night and just lie with me, holding my hand. But not talking.

I was never sure what to say, if I should press him or not. I was starting to think maybe I should’ve.

All the fighting lately, it was connected.

“How’s Bren doing?”

He never talked about his sister either.

He shrugged, a stark look in his eyes. “She’s little. She’ll bounce back.”

I fought against rolling my eyes. Couples were supposed to talk, right? Well, we were failing at that.

“And your dad? Is he still being an asshole?”

A grin tugged at his mouth, and he snorted. “Maybe that’s where I get it, right?”

“So he is? Still being an asshole?”

“The fucker could die for all I care.”

I wasn't even going to ask about his half-brother. I knew the guy's mom hated everything Monroe.

"Channing," I sighed, but a truck wheeled in behind us. Two upperclassmen waved, hollering, "Monroe! We're about to go fuck some shit up over in Fallen Crest. You in?"

"Hell yes."

I tried not to see how relieved he looked as he started for the truck.

Catching my eye, he stopped and kissed my neck quickly, whispering, "I love you. I'm sorry."

Then he was gone, vaulting into the back of the truck.

The two guys grinned at me, one giving me a peace sign before they roared away.

I stood in the exhaust trail behind them and shook my head. It was then that I realized how much I loved Channing Monroe, because while he was being all tortured and twisted, and growing into a dick, I still thought he was the hottest thing to walk this Earth.

I was messed up.

HEATHER

PRESENT DAY

I sat on the porch, a bottle of bourbon next to me and a pack of cigarettes in my hand.

I hadn't opened them yet, but I wanted to. Holy shit, I wanted to. Across from me, the back of Manny's was full, but not with the high school crews. There was a ten-year Fallen Crest Academy reunion in town, and their after-party had moved to Manny's.

Most times I didn't care whether the rich and hoity-toity were here. I never preferred them over customers from Roussou, but right now, I was beyond thankful they had filled Manny's tonight. Chances were good no massive brawl was going to break out, and Suki was in heaven. A few had come specially to request her fish meal, so she'd asked Katrina to take over for her, and she was putting on a show in the back.

She had a prep table set up, and white tablecloths over all the back picnic tables. There were flowers, candles, mason jars—the whole nine yards. She'd had Cruz hook up the grill before he went off shift. He was still there, but just as a drinking customer. It was his high school reunion.

“I didn't know Cruz went to FCA.”

I heard the footsteps coming from inside, but I didn't look back. The main door was propped open with the screen door in place, keeping the bugs from going inside. Channing had dropped me off earlier, then left to check on everyone else. He'd wanted to take me back to the warehouse, but considering my not-giving-a-shit, I'd opted for my place.

"I didn't either. He must've been two years older than Sam." I didn't ask how Channing got in, because he hadn't walked past me. He must've parked in the back and climbed through my bedroom window.

I could feel his gaze. He hadn't opened the screen door, content to talk to me from inside. A part of me wondered if he didn't want to be seen, if there was still blood all over him, but I knew that wasn't likely. Who knew, though. It'd be like Channing to want to wait and shower with me, but I hadn't waited. As soon as he'd dropped me off, I'd grabbed the bourbon on the way to the shower and started guzzling before the water was warm. Since then, I'd only dressed and made my way down here. The bottle hadn't left my side, and I'd grabbed a thin blanket for my lap despite the sweltering heat outside. I had no bra on, and I knew there was a definite, hundred-percent chance my tits were nipping out.

It was ironic. I didn't care if the rich folk could see my tits, but I still held that blanket over me like I needed to cover up, like the shoot-out had exposed something dark and dirty inside, and I didn't fit in with the crowd a few yards away.

The rebellious side of me mixed with the half-shameful side.

And thinking of that, I shoved off the blanket. Screw them. This was my place. They were on my territory, not the other way around.

“You need anything before I come out?” Channing called.

I shook my head before he padded to the fridge and opened it. He came out, a beer in hand, and stepped over my legs since I’d stretched out my feet on the porch railing. Swiping the pack of cigarettes from my hand, he tossed them into the alley in front of us. They landed on the gravel.

“Hey!” I glared at him.

He shrugged, settling beside me and resting his legs on the porch railing too.

A group of three guys walked from the picnic area back to Manny’s through the side door. All three were holding drinks and dressed in polo shirts with baseball caps turned backward on their heads and trendy sandals under jeans. They stopped, saw the smokes, and glanced to us.

“Those yours?”

I didn’t even try. I knew what Channing would say.

“Take ‘em. Smoke ‘em,” he called.

They laughed.

One said, “Really?”

“Yeah. Take ‘em.”

“All right.” He shrugged and swooped down. He fished out a cigarette and handed the pack to the others. Someone produced a lighter.

I groaned. I was going to have to smell my own smokes. Shooting Channing another death look, I said to the guys, “Smoking’s on the other side of the building.”

“Oh yeah.” The first guy waved his cigarette toward us. “Sorry.”

They went around the front and disappeared.

“You’re an asshole.”

Channing laughed. “An asshole who loves you.” He lowered his voice. “You stopped for her, and you didn’t start back up for her. I don’t want to be the reason you start smoking again. You know I’m right.”

Yeah. Yeah. Didn’t help me, though.

“Whatever,” I grumbled, slinking farther down in my chair. I eyed the bourbon. If I couldn’t smoke... I grabbed it and took a long drink. There was no burn, which wasn’t a good sign.

I was beyond caring about that.

He’d brought Naly up.

She hadn’t been on my mind, not for a few days.

Now the burn was starting, just not from the booze.

“You want to talk?” he asked.

I moved my head from side to side.

Channing had filled me in earlier. Stalker and Congo had been tailing me. Traverse had finally called Channing and tipped him off what Richter was planning. Stalker called minutes after Traverse. And one thing more.

I’d shot a guy, but he wasn’t dead.

I hadn’t killed someone.

That was the real kicker of the whole shit day.

Thank God I wasn’t a murderer.

There was a whole host of other stuff I knew too. A whole bunch of guys had been shot, but only one guy was killed. I

didn't ask who it was, or who shot him, and Channing didn't tell me. There'd been a tense exchange, but Channing had allowed Richter's second-in-command to send their uninjured men back to pick up their wounded.

When they left, Traverse had been their leader. Somehow, behind the scenes, a whole other mutiny had occurred.

Richter was out of commission, completely.

I also knew I didn't want to be told what that meant when Channing relayed the information. I didn't want to know if that meant Richter was going to die, or if I'd see him walking back into Manny's. The only thing I did want to know is what Channing told me: the war was done.

I didn't want to know the politics, or how under the agreement with Channing, the Red Demons were only allowed to drink at Channing's bar in Roussou— that was it. They weren't even allowed to stop at Roussou's gas station. If they ran out of gas, they were supposed to call one of the crews, who'd get the gas and bring it to them.

I'm sure they had other bars to frequent in Frisco, but they'd continue to come to Tuesday Tits to show good faith in the renewed relationship too.

Channing had offered that for Scratch, he said. His cousin always said when the Red Demons drank, they drank hard.

"You really think they're going to continue to drink at your place?" I looked at Channing, who was staring down at his beer, his eyebrows pinched together.

He looked up. "I don't know. They're banned from Fallen Crest, and the only place they can go to in Roussou is my bar, so who knows. They're Frisco's problem now." He shrugged, taking a swig of his beer. "They've been drinking there since

my dad ran it. There's sentiment attached to the place, but we've been getting a lot of college students lately, so they might stop. They don't care for the outsiders. I think we're getting your old customers." He nodded to the Fallen Crest Academy reunion people. "Your base is becoming more high-end."

"Those aren't normal."

"Yeah, they are." He met my gaze. "You renovated the back end of Manny's, then added on to the front porch and did that whole other section just for smokers. He gestured to the picnic table area. "Plus you have lights all over the trees now. Suki moved back there. She's not going to be returning to the front." He patted my leg with his free hand. "The only place that's not looking like a five-star pub is your house."

Dammit. He was right.

I hated to admit it, but I'd started to become a little self-conscious of my own truck in the parking lot. It wasn't mixing with the BMWs, Mercedes-Benzes, or even the Jettas. There were a whole bunch of a lot shinier and pricier vehicles too.

"The crews come in," I countered.

"Not for long. Bren's friends asked if I could buy the place next to the bar and turn it into a spot they could hang at, like your back room."

"They can be here because Manny's is still a diner too. You don't have that."

"I know. That's why I said no, but they're looking. That's what I'm saying. They're looking for a new spot."

Well, cripes. I wasn't sure if that was good or bad. I felt a heaviness cloud my mind, so I took another drink of the

bourbon. Some of those richy people were looking at us, but I was so far beyond giving a shit.

I didn't care that I'd shot someone.

I didn't care that I'd been in the middle of a shoot-out.

I didn't care that I was losing my old clientele.

I didn't care that I'd stopped smoking.

I didn't care... There were too many goddamn things I kept trying to deny I cared about, because if I didn't, I didn't know what I'd do. Until I could face the list of problems in my life, I'd resorted to my white-trash trailer-park ways.

A few of those real-housewives women turned their noses up at me, and I was *real* tempted to itch my nose. With my middle finger.

"They're looking at me, Heather."

I swore under my breath. "They're not, and you know it."

"No, they are." He leaned forward, finishing his beer and putting the empty bottle on the railing. He looked back at me, and that's when I saw he still had blood all over him. "I haven't cleaned up yet."

He *had* waited for me to shower.

I melted inside, despite a whole layer of pissed-off feelings that I knew were for him.

"I feel like I'm stuck between two worlds," I admitted, the bourbon loosening my tongue.

That burned too. I didn't admit things. I didn't share stuff. And if I did, it was a big deal.

He reached over and took my hand, lacing our fingers in my lap. "I know."

Except to Channing. He was the one I let in.

“Because you are,” he added. His hand tightened, momentarily, and he leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. He brought my hand with his, and I had to sit up as he pressed a kiss to my knuckle. “Maybe you shouldn’t have to be.”

“What?”

But he didn’t answer.

Without looking at me, he reached back, scooped me up and pulled me onto his lap. Settling back, he cradled me in his arms, burying his head in my hair. “God, I love you.” It came out in a whisper, and I closed my eyes, folding my other hand over his in my lap now.

I could’ve sat there forever.

A smattering of laughter pulled me out of my brief reverie. The same ladies were whispering together. They were holding up hands to cover their mouths, even.

Fuck them.

I stood, my bourbon in hand, and strode over.

I didn’t stomp. I didn’t storm. I didn’t even walk. I strolled—slow, sensual, and I knew full well my tits were on display. Those women had their husbands at another table, and as soon as I started forward, a hush fell over their group.

This wasn’t Business 101, but it was Humanity 101.

My head held high, I stopped right in front of their table. My jean shorts slipped low on my hips. There was a good amount of toned flesh showing. I knew because I felt the breeze. Maybe the bourbon hadn’t completely taken me over, but raising the bottle to my lips, I smiled at them.

Their class was two years older than me.

Their bank accounts probably surpassed mine, but in no way were they classier.

“Hi, ladies.” I took a long drink, tipping the bottle up and letting my throat stretch back. Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I kept that cool smile on my face as I leaned forward. I put the bottle on their table, resting my hands so they could see down my shirt—just enough to make them uncomfortable, make their husbands excited. As their gazes went there, they straightened, and their mouths tightened.

“How’s the evening for you?” I drawled. “Having fun? Having a few drinks?” I nodded to their wine glasses. “Enjoying Suki’s gourmet show?”

The gravel crunched behind me, but I didn’t look to see who it was. I already knew Channing was there. Their eyes moved past me, and they couldn’t hide the desire that sparked. One coughed, glanced at her husband, and looked at her lap. Ooh, look. She needed to readjust her napkin. It wasn’t in the right spot. A second’s cheeks burned red. She stared a second too long, then did the same, glancing over to her husband. But the other two, they couldn’t tear their gazes away from him.

I knew how they felt.

Feeling my own lust ignited, I gave the women a knowing look. “I bet between the sticks up your asses and the long hours your men keep with their jobs or mistresses, you guys are actually envying me right now.” I straightened, ignoring the gasps from two of them, and the clenched jaws from the other two. “I can totally see that.”

“Heather,” Channing murmured behind me. He stepped up close, and I felt his hand on my hip.

I ignored him too. My gaze lingered on the last lady, the one who'd seemed perpetually pissed off at me. "It's not me you're actually mad at. You're mad at yourself. You hate your life, and seeing me, wanting what I have, you can't keep lying to yourself. The truth is bubbling up inside, just like mine is right now. Yeah, I'm coming over like a bitch, but you're the one looking down your hoity-toity noses at me. You don't even know me." My hand flexed on the table. "You don't know what I did today. You don't know where I came from, where I'm going. You don't know anything about me, but you think you do." My eyes narrowed. "You think you're so high up that I can't yank you down. You're dead fucking wrong. I can."

"Okay." Channing's arm came around my waist.

"Get her *out of here*." Brandon's voice twisted on a snarl from behind us.

"Already on it," Channing grunted, carrying me back to my house.

My take-down monologue was done, but I was all about embracing my roots.

As Channing carried me past my house to his truck, I had the last laugh.

I held up my hands, both middle fingers extended, and my last view was my brother, his hand rubbing his forehead.

I didn't care.

That was the theme for the day.

As Channing deposited me in his truck and rounded to the driver's seat, I slumped down. "Where's my bourbon?"

“Hopefully coming out of you in a few minutes.” He kicked it in gear and backed out.

Yes. Maybe. My stomach began rolling around, mixing in rhythm with the truck as we pulled out onto the main highway that went to Rousou. I clasped a hand there and frowned.

Nope. I wasn't going to be sick, because that wasn't how a Jax rolled. We had stomachs of steel, and we stood up for ourselves, whether it hurt the bank account or not.

“If you're worried about what you just did, don't be.”

“I know.” I had friends in high places. I would recover, whatever the damage might be. An uptight socialite was the least of my worries.

I rolled my head over and watched him, appreciating how the wind whipped through his hair. And because I wasn't fully in control of myself, I said, “Never leave me. Promise.”

He reached over and took my hand, patting my leg.

But he didn't promise.

CHANNING

It was three in the morning when I left the bed.

I hadn't slept at all, and I finally admitted defeat.

Heather was curled in a ball, sleeping with the sheet pulled over her leg. I skimmed a hand down her back and side, then tugged it up. She was naked, the way she normally slept.

As I shut the door behind me, she didn't move an inch.

I made a quick stop in the bathroom, where I avoided the mirror.

I didn't want to see what would look back. Heather and I had showered, so I was clean, but I knew there were scrapes and bruises all over me. I had some cuts. There was a burn from where a bullet had grazed me, and that shit shouldn't have been normal. But it was. And that's what I didn't want to see.

I was grabbing a beer from the fridge in the kitchen when I heard a footstep behind me.

"Is everything done on the Richter front?"

Some of my tension eased as I turned to see my sister leaning against the kitchen doorway, her arms crossed over her

chest. I nodded, looking her over. “You just getting in?” She had on her normal jeans, but she wore a black shirt.

Fuck’s sake, she looked tough.

Was it from this life? Bren had grown up in the crew system. Had that life given her that hardness or was it other circumstances? Me? Being in Roussou?

“If we moved, would you go with us?” My question came out rushed, but damn, I was feeling a desperation I normally didn’t.

Her eyes widened a fraction, but her response was immediate. “No.” She raised her head, lifting her chin. “My crew is here. Cross is here.”

Yeah. Heather would say something similar.

I didn’t respond, but Bren did, reading my mind. “You can’t untangle her from your life, if that’s what you’re thinking. You two are entwined. You try to shove her away, you’ll destroy you both.”

“What do you mean?”

She snorted, going to the fridge. “You know what I mean.” Grabbing a water, she went to the patio door. “Wanna go outside?”

I eyed her water. “Thank you for grabbing that.” She had been reaching for the beer, but changed her mind at the last second.

She grinned, opening the door. “I know we’re not the conventional brother and sister, but I can show respect every now and then.”

I barked a laugh, grabbing two beers and following her. Handing one to her, I took the seat beside her.

She paused, so I shrugged. “Take it. Two of your crew members helped us today. One beer is not going to tip the balance of me being a crappy guardian one way or the other.”

She laughed, opening the beer. “Give yourself a break. We’re better than we were before. That’s all we can take right now.”

Fuck. “When did you get so wise?”

She smiled around the beer. “I’ve always been. You just didn’t know.”

She was right.

“I’m sorry, Bren.” My throat felt thick, damn thick.

I felt her surprise as she stared at me. She recovered just as fast, turning back and taking a drink of her beer.

“I wasn’t thinking about you, or how my little sis might need me,” I told her. “I was just—fuck, I was selfish.”

“You were losing your mom too.”

Her voice was soft, and I studied her profile. She wasn’t looking at me, but I knew it probably burned her to say that.

“Doesn’t matter.” My voice was a bit rough, hoarse.

She looked over, meeting my gaze.

I didn’t turn and look away, wanting her to see that I meant what I said. “I wasn’t there for you until he went away. I’m sorry.”

She looked ahead again, holding her beer like a life raft, and she jerked a shoulder back. “I mean, whatever, Channing.” Her voice was tight, raspy. “You weren’t there. I dealt with it. Whatever.”

Yeah. She’d said that already.

“Still.”

She shook her head, sighing. “Besides, Dad wasn’t that bad, not at the end.”

I almost growled. “Didn’t goddamn matter.” I didn’t know who I was more angry at: him or myself. He was an abusive asshole, but he hadn’t been to her. I knew that much. While he’d yelled, thrown things, hit, shoved, taunted, and ridiculed me, he’d left her alone.

He’d left our mom alone, and he’d left Bren alone. In that very small way, I was grateful, but only for that.

“Look.” She expelled that word in a sudden whoosh of breath. “He wasn’t perfect. You weren’t perfect. I’m not perfect. At least we’re together.”

I couldn’t move for a second.

Bren said we were *together*. I never thought...

If it’d been in a different context, I would’ve teased her about being sick and felt her forehead. Instead I felt punched in the stomach and so damned humble to have her as my sister.

“I love you.”

She glanced at me, hesitant, studying me as if I were a feral animal asking for a hug. Then she relaxed. I saw her swallow before she dipped her head in a nod.

“I love you too.”

So we sat there. We didn’t hug. We didn’t go into specifics. We didn’t even utter another word for five more minutes, but I’d never felt so close to my sister.

I looked out at our backyard and the stars above, and I brushed a hand at the corner of my eye.

Nope.

I wasn't crying.

Not a bit.

HEATHER

Channing was going to leave me.
I could tell.

We'd been here before. He wasn't meeting my gaze all the time. He was being super nice, like he was already trying to say he was sorry. He was treating me as if I was the most fragile creature in his life.

Like I said, we'd been here before, and fuck him.

Honestly.

Fuck. Him.

It'd been three days since the attack. Everyone had gone back to their lives as if nothing happened. The only thing that changed was that Richter no longer drove through Fallen Crest or Roussou. In fact, Richter no longer drove. I hadn't seen any of the bikers. I knew they were around—I'd overheard someone talking to Brandon about Traverse, so the MC was around. Just not the old leader.

Then again, should I have been shocked by that?

“Hey, boss.” Cruz lifted his head in a nod, making his way toward me where I sat at a picnic table in the back of Manny's.

Remembering the high school reunion, I realized there was a lot I didn't know about Cruz. He was a pretty Latin lover—his words, not mine—and he'd been working for us for two years now. I knew he'd moved to Fallen Crest when he was little, originally from Tijuana, and he had luscious black hair and dark eyes. He was handsome enough to get quite a few of his groupies to come to Manny's. But I didn't know anything else.

No, that wasn't true.

I knew he was quiet, hard-working, lean, smart, and never a problem. He showed up for his job, and on days he didn't need to be here as an employee, he came as a customer. He enjoyed Brandon. Those two talked and laughed a lot together at the bar. Cruz came in to be there on nights when Brandon closed, and he was there most of the “not so busy” nights. I now realized that had all been purposeful.

He paused, sitting across from me, and frowned. “I stink or something?” He smelled his armpits.

“What?”

He gestured to my face. “You look in pain. I know it's not my outside—I'm pretty beyond measure there—so I thought I must smell.” He sniffed his shirt. His grin turned sly. “I don't. I smell like fresh lilacs, and I know that because Ava just got a whole bouquet of them.” He paused a beat. “From Roy.”

“Roy? Uber driver Roy?”

He nodded, resting his elbows on the table and getting more comfortable. “Apparently he asked her to some dance, and she's all giggling and blushing right now.”

I laughed softly. “That's awesome. Good for her. Him too.”

He nodded again. “Mmm-hmmm, and that brings me to why I’m out here.”

Here it was. I prepared myself.

“I’d like to become your main manager, and I’d like to hire Katrina to be the manager under me, along with one of my cousins. He’s a really good worker. Lots of experience. He doesn’t live far. He’s here a lot already.”

I knew who he was referring to. It was the guy he came with a lot of those nights when they closed with Brandon.

I already knew I was going to do it, but I still groaned, rubbing at my temples. “You’re giving me a headache. You know that, right?”

“I do.”

There was a person we hadn’t named yet, a person who would be directly affected by this.

He leaned forward, the easygoing smile going away. “She doesn’t want to be a manager. You know it. I know it. She knows it. She says otherwise, but I’m already doing her work for her. Hell, you’re doing her work for her, and you’re the boss. You’re supposed to hire us, not fill in for us. It’s not right, and it’s time to make the change.”

He was right, and why did I feel this could be a metaphor for other parts of my life too?

“Right.” I said it dully, because that’s how I was feeling. Like a dull, dumbass piece of shit. I’d let things with Suki go longer than I should’ve. She was excelling at the private gourmet dinners, but she’d gone back to not even being half a manager.

It wasn’t meant to be.

I sighed. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Yeah?” He straightened up, his eyebrows rising. That grin started to spread again. “On everything? My cousin too? I have his resume with me, but he—”

I waved him off. I trusted Cruz. I trusted Brandon, and he liked Cruz’s cousin. “No. It’s good. Tell him to come in next weekend to fill out paperwork, and we can figure out the orientation schedule. Katrina’s okay with this too?”

His head moved up and down, his eyes dancing. “Oh yes. It was her idea, said she was tired of being ordered around by Suki. It’s the right call. It’s time, boss.”

The way he was talking, I knew he expected me to let Suki go. He had another thing coming.

As he started to get up and leave, I noted, “I’m not firing her, Cruz.”

He rounded back to me. His eyes got big. “What?”

I understood his fear. Suki was... Well, Suki was nuts, but Suki was family. Once you were in, I didn’t let you go.

“She’s not going to be a manager, but she’s going to be around.”

“Oh my God.” He dropped back to the bench and caught his head in his hands. “Oh my God. You have no idea. She’s a nightmare to work with.”

I knew. I really did, but she was an asset. I pointed behind him. “Go in. Send Suki out, and you can call Katrina, let her know the good news.”

“Oh no.” He stood, but it wasn’t quick. He kept shaking his head, and I heard that phrase on repeat over and over until he rounded the corner of the building.

I didn't want to do this. I knew what the rest of the day would be like.

Suki would come out. I would fire her as manager. She'd be upset, get all blustery and start expressing how Suki was going to bring her wrath and damnation on this place. I would interrupt her, tell her I wanted her to stay on as the gourmet chef, doing her shows more often, and she'd be happy—or I hoped so—but it didn't matter. She'd take the job change, and she'd do it without an attitude because I was not in the mood.

This whole day had become about taking care of the shit I'd been letting go.

Once we got through it and Suki went back inside, the normal grumbling out of her system because she wasn't really sure if she should be happy about being demoted, even to the job she really wanted, she'd have a little extra bounce to her step.

And she did.

Then Ava came outside. She was grinning and blushing, and she gushed about the flowers. She was beyond excited.

I smiled. I congratulated her. I expressed how happy I was, and then I teased her.

I went through the motions, but inside I knew that after all of this, there was another part of my life I'd need to deal with too.

Once Ava went inside, that same extra bounce to her step that Suki had, I knew the next person around that corner would be my brother.

He appeared, laughing to himself and shaking his head. "You've had an eventful day."

I grunted as he dropped into the seat Cruz had vacated, then Suki, then Ava.

“It’s hilarious inside. Cruz is beaming, but he’s wary of Suki. Suki is happy, but acting like she’s supposed to be angry, so it seems like she’s faking. Katrina came in, and she’s having a drink with Chester, the guy you just hired as a manager.”

Chester? That was his name?

Brandon rolled his head around and massaged his neck, “And Ava is acting like a giddy schoolgirl, which is annoying the fuck out of Suki. She’s so damn happy about her own thing that she wants to swat Ava down, but she isn’t because it’s all confusing the fuck out of her.”

Confusing her? Welcome to the club.

I groaned. “My headache is getting worse. I don’t think I want to know what Roy is doing.”

“Roy took off. He pushed those lilacs in Ava’s hands, read a poem, and dropped to his knee. It looked like he was proposing, and then one of his buddies ran in with a poster and threw it at them. It hit Ava across the face, but Roy caught it and read it out loud, asking her to that dance. I swear she’s going to have a fat lip from that sign, but she’s not feeling a thing. I don’t ever remember being that happy about going to a dance in high school.”

“Because you’re a manwhore. You don’t have the simple, pure outlook on life that they do.”

He grunted now too. “You think?”

Shit. Ava was a senior at Roussou Public School. That same year I’d been running Manny’s, having sex with Channing, and hanging out with Samantha and the Kades. The

only thing that had changed from then till now was that the Kades had moved across the country.

“Oh yeah. I can’t imagine Channing even thinking about asking me to a dance with a sign, much less me blushing because of it. If I was blushing, it was because his head was between my leg—”

“Oh God, no!” He held up a hand. “Stop. Please. Do not make me throw up.”

I laughed. “You think I enjoyed hearing your last stalker demand that you pull your dick out of the girl underneath you?”

He groaned again. “Shit. I’m never going to live that down. But one, she wasn’t underneath me. I was the one und—”

“Like I need to know that!”

He kept on as if I hadn’t said a word, grinning. “And Becca is no longer my stalker.” He wiggled his eyebrows up and down. “In some way, *you’ve* acquired her as a stalker. I know she ain’t in Manny’s right now, sitting in a corner booth for *my* ass. She’s all about Congo being her man. Roy asked if she might need a ride home tonight, and she yelled at him to leave her alone, her man could rip his spine out of his back if he wanted to.”

“And you think Roy left because he was embarrassed about Ava?” I drawled.

“Yeah. I do. Becca’s threats are commonplace. I’m surprised she and Suki haven’t become best friends.”

My eyes almost shot out of me at that thought. I shuddered. “I don’t even want to think about that...the shit they would do.”

“Becca would set fire to some unsuspecting girl, and then Suki would go in and insist she show her the difference between using butternut squash or zucchini for fettuccine noodles.”

I burst out laughing, and the more I laughed, the more I was grateful to Brandon.

“Thank you.” I quieted, feeling a little release in my chest and shoulders. Things didn’t feel so tight between my shoulder blades either. “I needed that.”

“Yeah.”

I heard how knowing he sounded. “What?”

“After your white-trash moment a few days ago, you’ve been working nonstop. And I know Channing hasn’t been crawling through your window. You want to talk about whatever’s going on?”

I shot him a look. “Do you not know me?”

He grinned. “I know. I’m the one who talks about feelings, but I’m kinda serious.” The grin faded. “What’s going on? And don’t lie and say nothing because I know my sister.” He pointed over his shoulder. “You’re always in there, no matter what paperwork you gotta concentrate on. You’re never out here, hiding. Why are you hiding?”

“Brandon.” A low warning from me. “Don’t push this. I mean it.”

“I don’t give a shit. My little sis is hurting, and I want to know why. What’s going on?”

Fuck’s sake. I was just starting to admit it to myself. Now he wants me to spill my guts? That made me want to vomit. That’s a whole ton of feeling and expressing, and I was

starting to miss being in a gunfight. Things were more straightforward there.

“I’m just doing paperwork. That’s all.”

His face scrunched up. He was going to argue.

“Dad called.” I was lying, but I had to throw something up. I needed to distract him somehow.

“What?” He leaned away from me. “Why? Is something wrong?”

“Nothing. I mean...” *Think, Heather. Stall. Be a big pain in the ass and evade him.* “We bought Manny’s from him, but he called about opening up another Manny’s in Florida.”

“What?!”

I cringed.

“He’s in his sixties. And he lives in a fucking retirement RV park. What the hell is he thinking?” Steam could’ve been coming out of Brandon’s ears. He gripped the table and jerked forward. “What’s Brad think of this? He’s down there with him. He’s supposed to be watching over Pops and taking care of him. If Dad’s serious, he should be reining him in.”

I was going to hell. “I think he wants Brad to run it, actually.”

“Are you serious?” Brandon yelled, pushing half out of his seat. “So typical of Brad. Manny’s has been your puppy. Yeah, Dad took care of the books, but you took over everything else. He can’t do this. Dad can’t do this. If he wants to be a part of Manny’s, he needs to buy it from us fair and square. Brad can’t ride your coattails. No fucking way.”

I began to pray, fervently and hard, that this wouldn’t erupt in to a full family battle, but until then... I nodded. “I know.

What a dick.”

“Yes! He’s always been a dick. I don’t care if he’s the oldest. He’s the biggest fuck-up of all of us.”

Oh boy. “Well, I don’t know about that.”

“I do.” Brandon stood and began to pace back and forth in front of me. “Thought he was going pro, then he blows out his knee in college. It’s not our fault his baby mama made him marry her. It’s not our fault he’s got five kids. That’s on him. Or that he hates his job. He can’t exploit Dad, and if he thinks he’s going to get a franchise from us for free, he’s in for a rude fucking awakening.”

Well, fuck. Brandon was going to do damage if I didn’t stop this. I had no choice.

I shot to my feet. “Okay, stop!” I thrust my hands in the air. “Just stop. Okay?”

“What?” But his jaw was still clenched.

I hadn’t expected any of that.

“I made it up. All of it.” I lowered my hands, resting my knuckles on the table. “I made it up.”

“What?! *Why?*”

“Because I don’t want to talk about why I’m out here!” I yelled. “Okay? I don’t want to fucking talk about it.”

“Oh.” But he was frowning, his eyebrows still pulled together. “You didn’t have to lie about that, and that’s a really shitty lie, Heather.”

“I know.” My God. “I know.” I gentled my tone, falling back to sit again. I pulled my hands through my hair, cradling my head. If I could hide from my hiding spot, I would’ve. “I

just really don't want to talk right now, and I'm sorry. Dad didn't call. Brad's not exploiting him."

I heard Brandon sit across from me again with a soft thud. "Now I feel like a dumbass for getting so mad." He laughed, the sound half strangled. "I almost feel like I should call Brad and apologize."

I didn't care—not about that.

I missed Naly.

It hit me in the chest. She hit me there. It was abrupt, and it came out of nowhere, but it was there and I couldn't push her down.

I missed her in my belly. I missed not having the chance to hold her, to hear her cry, to soothe her, to feed her, to see her eyes looking back at me when I told her I loved her.

I missed not getting the chance for any of that, and I missed Channing, because during that time, it'd been him and me against the world.

I hadn't been second fiddle to his crew once she was born. But when her little heart stopped, so did that other life I was going to have.

"Heather?"

My brother was staring at me. "You okay? I won't actually call Brad."

I couldn't deny it. I felt it coming. I even knew the catalyst because I'd seen how Channing stared at me when I was in that truck. He'd finished beating his enemy, and his head had lifted, the adrenaline from the fight draining.

"Channing's going to leave me." I met my brother's gaze.

This wasn't new. He'd had a front seat to our relationship.

He swallowed. "You sure?"

I nodded, feeling the pit in my stomach open up and all of my insides fall out. "Yeah."

I'd never told him about the other times. If Channing and I broke up, Brandon always realized it weeks later. There was no point in sharing, because he always came back. I always went to him. The revolving door was just that, revolving.

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah."

I got up, accepting it, feeling emotions press down on my shoulders that I usually liked to ignore. I felt Brandon following me inside. Even when I went to the office, so did he. I put the paperwork away, shut down my computer, collected my keys, and turned to him.

He was in the doorway, waiting for me.

He knew where I was going.

His chest lifted. His mouth started to open. He was going to say something, but then an emotion flickered over him, and he shut his mouth.

I left. I was going to do what I'd threatened Channing with when we got together this last time.

It was time to shit or get off the fucking pot.

HEATHER

JUNIOR YEAR

It was a normal day, or as normal as they'd become.

I'd had two years of Channing acting like a dick—fighting, cursing, being a jerk. He'd apologize, and I'd forgive him because I was spineless, or just an idiot girl in love. There'd be cuddling, making out, and I'd be happy for a few days.

Then he would start again.

As Channing grew more and more into a dick, I worked more and more at Manny's. I was a full-time staff member by the time I was fourteen. Don't tell the government. Manny's was home to me. It had become my sanctuary away from Channing's craziness. He and his friends were out of control. Some nights he crawled into my bed and I didn't recognize him. He sounded like a stranger. He reeked of alcohol. Most nights there was blood on him—either his or someone else's.

I stopped asking.

He stopped telling me.

Today was my first day of junior year at Roussou. I'd barely talked to Channing over the summer, which I wasn't thinking about. He still slipped in at night, but that'd been it for us. Not a lot of conversation happened then, and coming to

school, I didn't know if the nightmare would start up again or there'd be a break in *something*. Anything.

It happened when I was walking down the hallway, books in hand. I was going to my fifth period class when I saw her.

A girl slipped out of Gus' janitor's closet.

Nothing about her should've caught my attention. Closet hook-ups happened all the time.

But, for whatever reason, I saw her.

Her lipstick was smeared. It was obvious what she'd been doing.

I started to move past, looking for my classroom, when the door swung open again.

I saw his shoes first. The same black sneakers that'd been by my bed this morning. The same shoes he'd kicked off as he climbed through the window and jumped into my bed. The same shoes he shoved his feet in when he needed a quick getaway.

My heart sank.

I jerked to a stop, nearly falling over.

I couldn't... My head was swimming. I couldn't think that.

Right?

He wouldn't do that.

Right?

But he came out.

The same jeans.

The same hands.

The same tattoos on his arms.

The same shirt I'd watched him pull on this morning.

The same face.

The same lips—no, not the same.

There was lipstick smeared over his lips, and he rubbed at the side of his face as he stepped fully out.

I was on the opposite side of the hallway. He first looked at the students moving past, and then his eyes darted around until he saw me. He straightened up, his hand falling away, and I saw more lipstick there.

Jesus.

I sucked in my breath. My hands tightened on my books. It was like she'd branded him.

He'd cheated on me. I'd caught him red-handed.

An apology flashed in his eyes, but no. No way.

He stepped forward, toward me, but I slammed back into the lockers behind me. I heard the sound, but I never felt it. I just shook my head.

He mouthed my name, but I shook my head again.

No fucking way.

My hands were shaking.

No FUCKING way!

My books fall to the floor. I never heard the thud.

NO FUCKING WAY!

My legs were trembling. My knees knocked against each other.

I was done.

I felt light-headed. Spots appeared in my vision, but fuck him.

Done.

Fuck her.

DONE!

Fuck everything.

I was already gone.

Turning away, I walked past my classroom. I walked past the office. I walked all the way out to the parking lot, got the extra set of keys Channing kept under his truck, and I drove to Fallen Crest Public High School.

I broke up with him, transferred schools, and took his vehicle—all without saying a word to anyone.

I was done with Roussou.

HEATHER

PRESENT DAY

Tuesday Tits had a line out the door. Channing was right. He was starting to get our old clientele. I recognized a bunch of college students that were regulars at Manny's. He'd said his karaoke nights were doing well, but tonight was the martini night.

A few people recognized me as I passed.

A guy called out, "Hey, Heather!"

"Hey, guys. You here to enjoy Thursday Night Titinis?"

The name was ridiculous, but it got the buzz going. I had to give Channing credit where it was due, and yeah, there might've been some business envy attached to it. I was human.

One of the girls laughed, flipping her hair over her shoulder. "Five bucks a martini? We'd be nuts not to grab that deal."

Note to self: steal his idea.

The sale only lasted an hour, but it was enough to get people lit and keep them around.

Another girl linked her elbow with the first. "Besides, there are hotties to look at."

There was that too.

I grunted. “Maybe I’ll see you in there.”

They waved as I headed for the door. A few grumbled that I was cutting, but they were hushed.

Congo and Chad were manning the door, and both grinned in greeting.

“How’s my woman?” Congo asked.

“Still nuts. I don’t know who she thinks she’s protecting me from, but she’s still at Manny’s, and I’m here.”

Chad burst out laughing before pointing over my shoulder. “You sure about that?”

A glaze of pride and lust showed in Congo’s eyes as he looked too.

Stalker strolled up around me, almost sauntering. She ran a hand down Congo’s arm, leaning in for a kiss. “Hello, lover.”

I didn’t need to see that.

No one did.

When tongue got involved, I held my hands up. “Okay. Stop. Even your future children are scarred.”

Shit. The words slipped out before I knew what I was saying, but I was the only one who froze.

Chad and Congo laughed.

Rebecca (I couldn’t bring myself to call her Becca like the others were, and it felt a little mean to keep referring to her as Stalker) huffed, turning to face me. “Respect the Becs. I’m here to protect you, whether you like me or not.”

Congo wrapped his arm around her. “She promised Channing she’d watch out for you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You promised Channing?”

Congo’s arm slipped to drape over her front. She held onto it at her waist. “I did. I fulfill my promises.”

She was still a stalker. I wasn’t going to thank her. Instead, I twisted to Chad. “Is he here?”

“He’s in the next building.” He pointed past the line. “Door’s around the corner.”

“Thanks.”

I’d started off when Becca called after me, “Do you need backup?”

I flicked some of my hair over my shoulder. Yes. I’d become that girl in this situation. I still didn’t trust her, and I didn’t know if I ever would. Why Channing put her on me was something I’d have to take up with him. “I’m going around the corner. Pretty sure I’ll be fine.”

Chad had gone back to checking out the girls in line.

Rebecca detached herself from Congo and came over, digging into her large white leather purse. “Here.” She shoved a brooch into my hand. “Put it on your purse.”

“I don’t use purses.”

She looked down my body, her nose wrinkling. “Where do you keep all your stuff? Your keys, phone? Your password receptor. Your clothes are a second skin all the time.”

I fought against rolling my eyes, chiding softly, “I don’t think that’s proper etiquette.”

I left the password receptor comment alone. Stalker. Her. There you have it.

She flushed. “No, you’re right, but pin this to your jeans or something. If you need me, just press it. It sends an alert to my phone, and I’ll know exactly where you are.”

Oh my God. This took stalking to another level.

“No. No.” I gave her back the brooch. “If I need help, I’ll text Channing.”

“Come on. Don’t be like that,” she cooed as she took the brooch and started to look for a place to pin it. She reached for my jean jacket, but I evaded her, stepping back. “Come now, Heather. We all need help. You too.” She went for my jeans pocket, bending down to my waist.

“Stop!”

I took two steps back. She followed me.

“Seriously. Stop.”

“Just hold still.” She was going for my shirt now, where it was peeking out from my jacket. “Oh, right there would be perfect.”

I began backing away, through the line and around the corner. Becca trailed after me, still trying to pin the brooch on.

“Stop.” I plucked the brooch out of her hand and turned to throw it.

“Wait—”

“Ms. Heather Jax?” A guy approached, stepping out of a black SUV. He smoothed a hand over his tie and inclined his head forward. “You’re Heather Jax, correct?”

I squared off against him. “Yeah?”

We had stepped fully around the corner, and this side of the street had minimal lighting. Cars were parked up and down

the road, but the line had snaked the other way. We could hear the people around the other side, but that was it. We were almost isolated.

Becca popped out from behind me. “Who are you?” She grabbed the brooch from my hand, palming it.

He was a tall son of a bitch, maybe over six foot and four inches, but the slicked-back hair and shifty eyes gave him a sleazy vibe—that and the whole approaching us on a dark street thing. The one light that worked on this road was halfway down the block. It cast a long shadow, and this guy stepped into it, coming toward us.

He held a hand out. “I’m Eric McDougall. I represent an associate of your significant other.”

This guy had to do with Channing. I folded my arms over my chest. “What do you want with me?”

“Us,” Rebecca clarified, also folding her arms.

I rolled my eyes.

“Uh...” He looked between us. He started to pull his hand back, but Rebecca moved forward and grabbed it.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. McDougall.” She smiled up at him, and when he frowned at her, then transferred his attention to me, her hand darted out. She dropped the brooch into his pocket, bumping into him slightly. “Oh, sorry! I had some wine earlier. It must’ve gone straight to my head.” She fluffed her frizzy blond hair, shaking it out before moving back to stand next to me. She caught my gaze, and I arched an eyebrow. She moved her head back and forth, a discreet shake before clearing her throat and smiling at the guy.

He coughed, his hand out to me again. “As I was saying, Brett Marsch is one of my clients. I recently had an interaction

with Mr. Monroe and was wondering if you knew where I could find him?”

Nope. I didn't know this guy. I didn't care to know him. I didn't trust him.

“I have no clue.”

He blinked a few times. “What?”

“No clue. You want to know where Channing is? I have no clue.”

He narrowed his eyes, sweeping over us. “Ma'am?”

“Oh.” Her head went from left to right. “Nope. I don't know either.”

“I was told that if anyone would know, it would be his ‘woman.’” His gaze rested on me.

He fell silent after that.

So did I.

So did Rebecca.

A full twenty seconds of silence passed.

It was obvious this guy expected us to help him, and for the love of me, I had no clue why.

“Miss Jax.” He was all authoritative, coming to stand on the sidewalk with us. “I would like your help with this matter. It's very important for me to find Mr. Monroe.”

“Oh!” My arms dropped from over my chest, and I turned to Rebecca. “When he says it like that? You know? It *must* be important.”

She didn't get the sarcasm, her eyes darting right back to him and narrowing.

“I mean, it must be something vital for you to find me and ask me. Right?” I didn’t wait for his response, rushing on. “You need help locating Channing. *That’s* what you need?”

“Yes.” His eyes gleamed.

“Well, then...” I stalled. “I probably should tell you...”

He leaned closer. “Yes?”

“...that...”

“Yeah?” He began grinning.

Game was up. I didn’t have the patience. “You need to decipher sarcasm better.”

He snapped back, and the grin dropped abruptly.

Stalker started laughing. Her elbow nudged my arm. “That was good, Heather.”

I ignored her, jerking my head toward the corner. “If you don’t have balls enough to try to get into his bar, why the fuck do you think I would help you?” I snorted, starting around him. “Get out of here, jackoff.”

“Miss Jax, I—”

The door opened farther down, a bell jingling, and we heard, “It’s the Peter.”

Channing left the store with his sister and her crew members, as well as another guy, behind him.

“What are you doing talking to my woman?” He passed me, going up to the guy and standing close enough to violate his personal boundary bubble.

His tone was cold. His smile was uninviting.

The guy tugged at his collar, straightening his shirt before moving back a step. “It’s Eric McDougall, Mr. Monroe.” He softened his voice too. “But you’re quite aware of my name, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. Just like you know going up to Heather would be the first way to piss me off.” Channing chuckled under his breath. “So, good job there. Did your boss send you my way? Does he want to get rid of you and I’m supposed to do it for him?”

The guy didn’t respond, instead scanning the group. He paused on me, then Rebecca. His gaze moved behind us to Bren and her crew. I didn’t need to look to know that no one was breaking. Not one of us was shocked at Channing’s threats.

This guy was the outsider. Outsiders weren’t welcome.

“I see. And no, Mr. Monroe, my employer did not send me. I actually came as an act of good faith. We’d previously discussed doing business together.”

The second he stopped talking, Channing began.

“Yeah. No. Not anymore. You need to learn the rules, and finding her first broke them all.”

“I wasn’t aware. I am now.”

“You are now.”

Channing wasn’t backing off, a hard glint to his tone.

“Well, then.” The Peter coughed. “Maybe I could speak with you in private?”

He directed his question to Channing, but Channing nodded to Rebecca. She darted around the corner as Channing glanced back to us. “Bren? Why don’t you guys...”

“We’ll head out.” Bren’s best friend moved ahead. “Unless you need us?”

“Nah. I’m good.”

They moved past, one by one, going around the corner until it was only me, Channing, and the Peter.

“Heather?”

“Not a chance.” I wasn’t leaving. I’d come for a talk. I was going to have that talk, but I did lean back against the building. “I can wait.” I smiled at him, ignoring the small grin that appeared on the Peter’s face.

It didn’t matter anyway.

Moose, Chad, and Lincoln came around the corner. I waited, but no Rebecca.

As if reading my mind, Chad said, “She’s the other doorman now.”

I grunted. That sounded about right.

He handed something to me. “She told me to give you this.”

It was her phone, and I was surprised to find it unlocked with a red blinking light on the screen. I zeroed in and saw it was a map—of us. She was showing me the tracking on that brooch, and it was activated all the time.

She’d lied to me.

Bitch.

I stifled a growl, saw everyone watching me, and put her phone into my pocket. “I’m good. Carry on.”

Channing looked at the others, then indicated the store he’d left. “We can talk in there.”

The Peter and all Channing's men filed in, but Channing stayed back. Once it was the two of us, he touched my hand. "Hold back?"

I did. Moose shut the door and moved to stand in front of it. He was giving us a bit of privacy.

Channing headed farther up the street so they couldn't see us through the windows and stepped into the alley between this building and the next. We were completely isolated this time.

"What's up?" He leaned back against one of the buildings.

I nodded to the one that now housed the guys. "Did you buy this place?"

He rubbed a hand over his forehead. "Yeah. I got it for the crews, or something else."

Oh. He hadn't been joking before when he said they were looking for a new place. "Are you going to create something for them?"

"I don't know. Maybe. That's not what it was about."

"Okay."

"What's going on, though? You don't normally come over here."

I let out a soft sigh, leaning against the other side of the alley, feeling the brick behind me. "I came about us, but maybe now's not the right time."

"Us?"

I hated this. He was acting fine, polite even, but that wasn't Channing. It wasn't the guy who slid inside of me every other night or who had gotten in that guy's face. That

was my guy, not this one. He was talking to me like we were buds.

It set my teeth on edge.

“Channing, stop it.”

“Stop what?”

He goddamn well knew.

“I mean it.”

He didn’t reply, closing his eyes a moment.

“You know why I’m here.”

“Yeah.” He gripped the back of his neck, expelling a ragged breath. “I know.”

There it was. The nagging feeling in my stomach blossomed up, taking over my body, and I felt sick. “Is it because of Richter? Because I was there?”

He opened his mouth. “I—”

BOOM!

The wall behind me shook.

I jerked forward. Channing swept me behind him, a cement arm around my waist, and we felt more than heard a fast stomping coming toward us.

The side door shoved open and Moose yelled, “Get in here! Chad flipped his lid.”

Channing stifled a curse. I was about to follow him, but his arm tightened. “Not you.”

“What?”

We could hear shouting from inside.

“But—”

“I mean it.” He was firm. “Go home, Heather. I’ve already damaged you enough. *Go.*”

“Channing!”

He wasn’t waiting. He headed inside, slamming the door behind him, and I heard the deadbolt flip a second later.

If that wasn’t a perfect metaphor for our relationship, I don’t know what was.

I was beyond pissed. The timing wasn’t right, but I didn’t care. If I could hang through a gunfight, I could deal with whatever was happening in there, and I started to the front of the emptied store to tell Channing exactly that.

When I got there, it was empty. They’d moved to the back, the only light shining from underneath a door farther in. I reached for the front door.

It was locked.

If there was ever a need for Stalker, it was now. She’d have some way to get in. I was heading to the bar to get her when there was a rush of movement behind me. I rounded, hearing someone running up.

There was a blur before it went dark.

A bag or something was shoved over my head, and someone picked me up.

“Wha—No!” I started fighting, kicking, trying to punch, but it all happened so fast. I dropped Rebecca’s phone. It fell with a clatter to the ground.

“Fuck,” a guy grunted, arms tightening around me.

They tossed me into a vehicle.

“What was that?”

“It was her phone. It’s gone. Let’s go!”

Someone else jumped into the vehicle. The door slammed shut and a deep voice yelled, “GO, GO, GO!”

We sped away, tires squealing.

HEATHER

No one was talking as we drove, but I could tell there were three of them. Two in the front and one next to me. Every time I began to inch toward the door, the dude on my left hauled me back.

The damn bag was still over my head. But this showed their intelligence levels: I could see out of it. I couldn't make out details, but I saw the shapes of the guys. And I could see the shapes of the buildings as we drove past.

They turned a bunch of times so I lost track of what direction we were going. So instead of tracking where we were going, I focused on them.

The driver was large. The guy in the passenger seat was just as big. The guy on my left was smaller, more my size.

Okay. Take a deep breath. Think, Heather. Think, because you're not going to be raped or held for hostage.

My damn pride couldn't take it.

I was going to get out. Then I *was* going to kick their asses.

I had to think of a plan.

They hadn't tied my hands together, just the bag.

I still had my keys, ID, some cash, and my phone. Becca was right. There weren't a lot of places I could stuff them, but they fit in the pockets on my ass, and I'd silenced my phone.

They thought they'd already gotten rid of my phone when Rebecca's fell out.

Praise fuck for that small break!

Now to wait. Think. Keep the fuck calm.

That was really my whole plan—wait for an opening, jump out of the vehicle, and haul ass into the woods. I grew up a tomboy. Okay, I grew up a slightly slutty tomboy, but the slutty was just in appearance. No guy was going to hold me hostage, or whatever the hell they were planning. If anything, my sheer determination would keep me going, but I was ready to fight and fight hard.

Weapon.

I would need a weapon, so I started looking around.

The guy next to me had a gun—not good—but he had a knife too. It was strapped to his right hip, only a button keeping it in place. I could grab that, grab the gun. I'd have to elbow him first, throw it into his throat and push as hard as possible. Lay my body over his arm so he couldn't block me or throw me off, or even shoot me. I'd have to almost sit on his hand where the gun was, then after ramming an elbow into his throat, I'd get the knife, and the gun, and haul ass.

Wait. Chill out. Take a second.

If they didn't stop, there'd only be one guy to deal with. He was in the front. He'd be twisting around, grabbing at me. I'd have to bring the gun up. Did I shoot? Did I shoot a second guy? This one might be fatal.

I swallowed over a knot.

The last time had been different. It was self-defense. This would be calculated. *But it'd be self-defense too*, I thought... I went through the steps in my head, planning to shoot a guy.

Did I dare?

I had to. These guys weren't talking, so I didn't know what they had planned. I was sure they were following orders, but who knew the end game? Who they were taking me to and what were their intentions? I wasn't going to wait to find out.

So the revised plan: attack the guy next to me and shoot the guy in the front passenger seat. But where?

Shoot down. Shoot his arm? Shoot his shoulder? Would I even be able to aim?

Shit. Maybe I should just run for it? Then worry about them shooting me in the back... That was a distinct possibility.

Fuck it. I'd do whatever I had to do when the opportunity came along—but we were leaving the woods. If I was going to go, I needed to go now. There was a field up ahead. There'd be no cover unless I was crawling, and that meant going slow.

Fuck!

GO, HEATHER, FUCKING GO!

I went for the door. I could see through the bag enough, but shit—it was locked.

“Hey!” he guy next to me barked.

I twisted back and was on him like a rabid cat. I launched my entire body at him, and I scratched. There went the whole cool, calm, and collected plan.

The bag came off, and I was fighting for my life. Scratching, biting, and hair pulling wouldn't help for long. The guy *oomphed* under me, and I felt him gathering his weight. He was about to throw me off.

Knee, down.

I followed my own commands, ramming my knee down on his junk, and as he buckled in a howl under me, I looked behind me. The front passenger guy was going for his gun. I gave him the elbow, lunging forward to hit his throat as hard as possible. He grunted, falling back, and then I was scrambling.

Gun, gun, gun.

Knife.

I grabbed both, punching the guy's junk again and using my feet to kick out the window.

The driver was slowing down.

The front passenger yelled, "No, don't! Richter wants her unharmed. Go fast."

Richter—that fuckhead. So he wasn't dead.

I used all of my weight to kick at the door, leaning fully back on the guy behind me. He still seemed busy clutching his dick, and then finally, the window shattered. *Hell yes.*

Rational thought left me at this point, and I dove out of the window. I knew I was cut. I felt the searing pain, and then more as I landed hard on the side of the gravel road. Something hit my head, and a numbing ache started there, but I couldn't stop and assess the damage.

I had to run. I had to go fast and hard, and I couldn't stop. If I stopped, I didn't want to find out what would happen.

I wasn't going to be a goddamn victim. I knew that much. As the SUV screeched to a halt, I staggered to my feet and began running. We'd gone past the trees, so I crashed into the ditch. Long grass scraped against my legs, but I kept going. I didn't know what I was running into—animals, whatever. All I knew was I had to go. I had to fucking go. *Get out of here!* So almost blindly, I kept going until the first line of trees was closer.

I heard the guys yelling, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. The blood pumped so loud in my ears, my heartbeat was like the bass in a techno song—really freaking fast and hypnotic in a way.

“There!” one guy yelled.

I veered toward the trees, or more threw myself in their direction, and glanced over my shoulder. All of my movements were wild and half-crazed, but I could make the guy pointing right at me.

An animalistic sound ripped from my throat. It scared even me, and I heard other animals running away. The trees were thick, I realized. The branches were going to hurt. I crashed through them, and yes, they stung like a bitch.

Better than a gunshot.

Better than being a victim.

Fight, Heather.

I was. I was fighting. I was running. I had kicked their asses, and this wasn't going to be the end of me. I would run till I couldn't run anymore. Then I'd walk, and if I couldn't do that, I'd crawl. I'd fucking crawl until the skin was ripped off of me and all my blood was gone. Then I'd crawl some more.

“Where'd she go?”

They couldn't hear me? I was crashing into more and more branches.

That meant I could slow down.

I'd have to hide.

They'd have to leave, and if they called for backup, so could I. Or I'd try. No. I couldn't do that. Even as I thought it, I forgot it. I didn't know where I was, and I couldn't risk my phone flashing or buzzing or anything.

I felt myself weakening. Blood trickled down my arm. I was going to lose consciousness, and soon. I felt sort of woozy. It was that rock, or whatever had hit my head. That's what was doing this, not even the cuts or road rash.

Wait. What was I doing?

I stopped, lurching forward, and fell against a tree.

I steadied myself, but my heart felt like it wanted to beat out of me, drilling up through my throat. I looked down to see it, but I couldn't make anything out. I couldn't even see myself. I was in complete darkness.

"Where'd that bitch go?" a guy grunted, swearing. "Fucking whore."

Whore? I wasn't a whore.

I felt more and more dizzy. A wave of nausea crashed over me. I wanted to puke. My stomach was pushing up too. Everything was pushing up. It wasn't a good feeling.

I was going to be sick.

No...

I was running from those guys.

I needed to retch.

I grabbed hold of the tree and bent over, but I had to keep going.

What was I doing again?

And then—oh shit—I heard them closing in. They had a light too. They were shining it everywhere.

I ran from them.

I had to hide—I couldn't keep going. But where?

Oh God.

A really bad idea came to me. Feeling my stomach, feeling everything in me sink to my feet, I looked up.

I had to hide. Oh, fuck. Okay. I had nowhere to go. They'd find me down here, but maybe not up there.

I started to climb.

This was going to be a long fucking night.

HEATHER

““**H**eather!”

They hadn't stopped searching for me. I felt like I'd been sitting here for hours, but it could've been thirty minutes. I had no idea; I'd been woozy when I hoisted myself up into this tree. I was higher than their line of sight now so they'd have to shine a good-sized flashlight right on me to see me. The tree had two large branches coming out of the trunk, and I'd maneuvered myself into that little notch where the tree separated and used my jacket to hold me in place. It wasn't the best way to secure myself, but it was what I had because the trunk was big enough that I couldn't wrap my arms around it. I laid myself against the branch so my own weight kept me anchored in place.

I pulled out my phone to call for help, but when I did, they saw the screen flash.

“Hey! There!” one shouted, and they came crashing through the woods toward me.

I clicked it off.

It was still on silent so it wouldn't even buzz. I hated, hated, hated doing it, but I turned it over so if any light flashed

it would be toward my leg, and I shoved it into my pocket. I was plunged back into darkness.

They stopped about ten feet from where I was, but I could hear them.

Too close. Way too close.

I must've dozed off because when they walked right underneath me, it woke me up.

I jerked in place, then thanked the gods that my anchor had stayed in place. Some bark scraped free, and it fell to the ground. It sounded deafening to me, but I couldn't hear it when it landed. The ground was soft, no rocks down there.

I still held my breath, praying for a solid five minutes that they hadn't heard.

When they didn't backtrack, I felt tears of relief on my face.

How was I in this situation once again?

Channing.

This was why we should break up.

This was why we should go our separate ways.

I had a life. I had loved ones to worry about and keep safe. But a whole new slew of curse words flashed in my head, because no matter how many times I told myself to go, I knew I wouldn't. I physically wouldn't be able to walk away from him.

I had a magnetic attraction to him; it always led me back to him, and while I knew I should be fucking furious, I wasn't.

Face it, Heather.

I was talking to myself. I'd resorted to that, but I sank even lower because I answered.

Yes, yes. I know. It's not Channing. It's me. I'm attracted to the crazy dysfunctional. That's my family, my friends, and my other half. It's me.

I was the problem.

And I didn't think I could change. I didn't think I even wanted to change.

I tried to imagine it.

Normal would've meant moving to a house away from Manny's. I'd need more quiet. Living so close just meant I basically lived at Manny's. The chaos from it, the adrenaline, the excitement was intoxicating. It always bled over to the house, so I'd have to move. Even at that thought, I winced.

I would need a plain home, in a plain neighborhood where people cared about the length of their grass. Where they cared if a fence was chain-link or painted brown versus white, if it was decorative or for privacy, if it was six feet high or four feet high. The neighbors would want to meet me. They'd care about the HOA fees. There'd be an enforced quiet rule in the neighborhood. No revving motorcycle engines after midnight, or even ten. Certainly no gunshots—what losers.

I shuddered. Was it from the cold or the head wound? Who knew? Me. It was the thought of living a normal, plain life.

I couldn't do it.

There'd been no guy I wanted as much as I wanted Channing. I thirsted for him. I didn't want to wake up next to anyone else every morning. No guy could live up to Channing.

I was in. I was all in.

I mean, I already knew I was. I'd had the realization earlier, but being in a gunfight and then being kidnapped called for some second thoughts. So I'd just run back over it all, while tied up in a tree and bleeding from the head.

That was it. I was in an altered state. I didn't know what I was thinking because I *should* not be okay with this.

“Heather?”

I almost growled. That was Richter. They'd called in reinforcements. He wasn't far off, maybe thirty yards or so. I heard a dog barking too.

For the love of God. They'd gotten dogs.

“Heather! Listen to me. I know you're still here.”

No, he doesn't. He has no idea where I am.

“Listen.” Crunch. He was walking toward me. “My men didn't hurt you. They tried to restrain you, but they didn't hurt you. I know that because that was my order. You weren't to be harmed, and I still want to follow that. I don't want you hurt, but Heather...” His voice rose. “If you stay out here, I can't guarantee that won't happen. It's a long way from here to town.”

He was almost to my tree. It looked like the early morning light was starting to stretch over the horizon. There were a few breaks from the trees, enough to let some light in eventually, but it was still dark.

How much time had passed?

My head spun.

I wasn't sure.

I could make him out, the shape of his head.

He was almost beneath me.

He cupped a hand by his mouth and yelled, “My men showed me the bloody rock. You hit your head, Heather. There was a lot of blood. Wherever you are, I know you’re hurting.”

Goddamn, shut up, you fucking Peter.

I was talking to him in my head, and I knew I was probably forming the words with my mouth. I should’ve stopped myself, in case I accidentally let the words slip out, but I couldn’t. I was barely holding on.

I eyed the tree underneath me and added, *Literally.*

He was right beneath me now. He paused at the base of the trunk and scanned the area.

They thought I was still on the ground.

Fuck.

The head wound. That’s why.

They didn’t think I was stupid enough to climb a tree.

I almost snorted. Little did they know.

I started laughing, silently, jostling myself.

Shit. Maybe they were right.

I began sliding to the right, but the tied jacket kept me in place. I didn’t dare move, not an inch. Bark would fall down and land on his head.

Why does the bad guy always have to be right on top of the heroine? Why? Or in this case, right below?

Ooooh! OH! Oh fuck.

I started to slip farther to the right.

If I fell, I was done—cracked neck and everything.

Richter needed to move, and on a seismic level.

Move, dumbass!

I began inching again. More. More. Another inch.

Holy shit.

I was too close to the edge. If I kept going, I'd fall.

I was nearing a precipice, pardon the pun. Either fall and die or move and risk being found?

I had to move.

If I waited any longer, I wouldn't be able to make a choice.

I did it. I jerked back to the left, made sure my body was resting heavily on the branch, and held my breath.

Bark fell, scraping down, and I froze. I could see a little bit better, and as I watched, the bark moved right toward his head. This is the time in the movies where the bad guy moves and the bark falls within inches of his head.

This wasn't the movies.

The bark landed smack on his head, and he looked up, a hand raised to brush whatever had fallen off him. As he did, his eyes moved up...and up...and up—until they landed right on me.

They almost bulged out of his head.

“Get down from there!” he yelled, the veins on his neck sticking out. “Holy shit.”

I was pretty sure the blood drained from his face, but I wasn't completely certain. He jerked back a few steps to get a better view.

“How did you get up there? You have a death wish?!”

When he put it like that...

The game was up. I could officially move again, so I grabbed my phone from my pocket.

“SHE’S OVER HERE!”

He was yelling as I checked for a cell signal, and bam! I had one. I clicked through to my GPS and hit Find My Location.

The guys were yelling, scrambling toward us. A dog barked wildly. As they got to the base of my tree, I saw it was an Italian greyhound.

“Way to bring out the bloodhounds, huh?” I kept talking as I screen-shot my location and sent it to Channing. I waited a second, rethought, and sent it to Rebecca too. Who knew when having a personal stalker would come in handy?

The dog pulled at his leash, going every way except my tree. The guy kept cursing and yanking him back, until Richter waved his hand and the guy stepped away. I swore I heard a “Thank God” come from him.

“Heather.”

Richter was back at it. I wanted to say something snappy, but I wasn’t feeling it. I was saving my strength. I needed to muster enough sass for my last line, and just thinking about it made me smile. Here came some of that strength again, like a small trickle.

“Come down from there.”

“Wait.” One of his guys jerked forward. “What if she falls?”

Richter paused, then shrugged. “We catch her?”

Another guy asked, “What if we don’t catch her?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?!” Richter barked, glaring.

The two lowered their heads, and the others fell in line.

“Heather! Get down from there before you slip and fall. If you die, well, that will suck for everyone at hand. Just...” He softened. “Come down. Please.”

Oooh. *Please*. He was really trying to turn it on.

I tried to speak, but only a rasping sound came out. Coughing, I cleared my throat enough to hoarsely call back, “Only if you get on your knees, Richter.”

“Heather.” A warning growl.

My phone beeped, and I saw the texts coming through, one after another.

Channing: We’re coming.

Channing: Hold on.

Channing: Woman, I love you. Don’t do anything stupid.

Too late.

Rebecca: The cavalry is assembled. We’re riding your way.

I groaned.

Channing: Are you hurt? Do you need an ambulance?

Whoa. He really was worried. An ambulance usually meant cops, and we didn’t do cops here.

Me: No. Just come.

I pushed send, then rethought it and sent another one.

Me: Maybe a lift? I'm in a tree.

I was about to be rescued, and that thought had my ovaries on hyperdrive.

Richter was still trying to get me down. I must've tuned him out, but I could hear him rambling on about something, sounding more and more mad.

“Heather!”

I heard that from him a few more times before I figured it was time to say my piece.

“Richter,” I called down.

He quieted and stepped closer to the tree, his head at a ninety-degree angle with his body. “What?”

I smiled. “I just called in backup.”

His eyes went flat. “What?” His nostrils flared. “You don't have a phone.”

One of the guys swore. “She dropped it. I swear.”

I shook my head, laughing like a maniac. “That wasn't my phone. I was returning it to someone when they snatched me. I've had my phone this whole time.” I paused, savoring this. “The cavalry is coming. They're on their way now.”

“I don't believe you. There's no cell signal out here.”

I took my phone out and waved it, just a tiny bit. “You're right, unless you're up here.” I pointed toward an opening in the tree line. “And you know there's a tower not far.”

He stared at me.

I stared back, felt myself leaning backward, and jerked forward again.

He smiled. “I don’t believe you. I’m calling your bluff.”

At that moment, two guys rushed in with large bags over their shoulders. He waved at them. “Do you know what that is?” The guys unzipped the bags and pulled out climbing ropes.

My heart sank.

“That’s the end of this stupidity. They’re coming up to get you.”

“It’s too late,” I yelled. “I really do have a signal.” To prove it, I clicked on the sound and dialed. It took a second. I held the phone in the air. Richter smirked at me, and those two guys were really moving fast. They had grips and everything.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

They’d get to me before Channing.

And then, my phone started ringing.

That smirk moved from his face to mine. “Better go, because I told them to bring an ambulance.”

He paused, then came to a decision. “Move faster, guys!”

My heart was officially in my feet now.

Channing wouldn’t get here in time.

I had to move, and looking up, I decided I’d have to go higher.

“Heather, don’t you dare. Don’t!”

My decision was made. He wasn’t the only moron here.

“Suck my dick,” I growled as I prepared to move.

I was going to die.

CHANNING

Heather walking down the side of the gravel road, covered in blood from head to toe, was not a sight I expected to see. I almost hit the brakes, thinking she was an apparition, then hit the gas pedal.

Richter was going to die.

I didn't care the consequences. He was going to hurt, over and over again, before he fell six feet under.

"Holy shit!" Brandon exclaimed before a hush came over the vehicle.

We were one of eight trucks, all full, all ready to battle. And yes, I'd brought her brother to a crew fight.

As we got closer, Heather came into focus. She was covered in so much—I saw fresh blood, dried blood. Dirt. Mud. She looked like something coming out of the swamp.

I slammed to a stop a few yards away from her. I didn't want more dirt to spew at her, and I didn't trust myself to go slowly, so I parked and was out the door the next instant.

I felt Brandon hot on my heels, and I was ready to tear him up if he grabbed her too roughly.

She limped toward us, her clothes torn and her jean jacket hanging from her hand, dragging on the ground behind her.

As we got to her, we both reined ourselves in, but she kept limping forward. One hop, a half drag, a second hop, the other foot behind her, the jacket last. There was a glaze in her eyes, but I saw fire underneath, and I could've pissed myself in relief.

She was fine.

I knew it.

She was furious. She was hurting, but she had the same fire she'd had before. If anything, it was rooted even deeper, and as she met my gaze, her top lip curved up.

She stopped, her eyes boring into mine, and she said, "I am going to take a hammer to Richter's knees. Both of them. One at a time. I'm going to knock them out. Then I'm going to take the hammer to his dick. After that, I'll start knocking out pieces of his limbs. His elbows. His throat. His fingers. His toes. I'll rip off his balls last and make him eat them. He'll throw them up, and I'll make him swallow them all over again."

Her fire wasn't stamped down. It was a full blaze, and it was simmering over.

She dropped her jean jacket to the ground. "I am going to kill him. Slowly. With as much torture as possible, and I'm going to enjoy every goddamn second I hear his screams."

Brandon moved back a step. He coughed out. "Well, then..."

Oh yeah. Heather was just fine.

I began nodding, slowly, and edged closer to her. “Other than that, are you okay?”

She didn’t answer, just stared at me.

She was an animal right now. Feral. Dangerous.

I wasn’t the only one sensing it. Brandon grew quiet, letting me take over. The others got out of their vehicles. The doors slammed shut, but as they got to us, an eerie hush came over them. They stopped short, and soon, we could hear a bird calling from a mile away.

No one said a word. We were waiting for Heather.

“Heather?” Concern crept up in me. I wanted to touch her, but not if it was going to hurt her. Still, I couldn’t help myself. I reached up and touched her elbow, just gently.

At my touch, she seemed to dissolve.

Her head fell down. She choked out, “Channing.”

She crumbled.

I caught her. “Whoa. Whoa.”

That’s when she began to sob.

It sounded like it was coming from her gut. She balled my shirt into her fist, pressing her forehead to my chest. “Channing.” It was a whisper this time.

I smoothed a hand over her hair and carried her away from the group.

Heather had cried six times in her life—three of them over Naly. This was her seventh. She wouldn’t want the others to see her like this, beaten and exposed.

Once we were away from everyone, where they couldn’t hear, I found a spot on the road and sat. I cradled her in my

lap. I rocked her like a baby.

She cried. Her sobs wracked her entire body until they finally grew quiet, but even then her tears were a steady trickle.

I banked down the murderous rage in me. It would come out again, but not until Heather was okay. She was my job now. I had to make sure she was okay, and as she quieted, I began checking her over for wounds.

She'd been hit on the head. Bad. The lump was the size of my hand.

I could see the scrapes over her body. Scratches. Thin cuts. Glancing at where she'd come from, I realized they might've been from the branches.

I winced inside, knowing how fast she must've been going to get cut this deep.

Shit.

She'd said she was in a tree. We'd been bringing stuff to help her get out, and I couldn't stop looking over her. Had she fallen out? Where was Richter?

Why did this happen? Check that. I knew why.

How could I make sure this never happened again?

Leave? Fuck. I stopped myself. I wasn't going to think that far ahead. Take care of Heather. That was first.

So I just held her. I would hold her forever.

Maybe it was a few minutes later, maybe twenty, maybe an hour. I wasn't paying attention, but it felt like a good amount of time before I heard someone walking toward us. There was a soft crunch of gravel, and Heather stiffened. She had fallen

silent in my arms, but she didn't move an inch. I wasn't going to make her move either, but we both looked.

Heather sat up, but I didn't let her go too far. I put my knees up, my feet on the ground, and I tugged her so her back rested against me. Her head moved to my chest. The person paused behind us, but I didn't want Heather twisting around, so I motioned.

“Come in front.”

Brandon came around, kneeling and approaching delicately.

There was a rapt and stark emotion burning bright in his eyes. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was trying not to cry.

His voice broke under the strain. “Heather.”

Heather stiffened further. Her arm shook until I rested mine on top, still cautious of her cuts. She expelled a breath, some of her tension leaving.

Brandon stopped, swallowed, and looked down. When he lifted his head, he was more controlled. He pressed his lips together, swallowing again. “Heather, are you okay?”

Heather held her hand out.

Brandon took it, and her fingers linked around his.

“I want to kill someone,” she rasped. “Is that answer enough?”

Relief flooded him. He closed his eyes, sitting back on his heels. “Hell yes. That answers me.” He tried to smile, but he was still pale. “We should get you to a hospital.”

“I know.”

But Heather didn't move. If anything, she sank farther into me.

Brandon got back to his feet. "Maybe you could just carry her, Channing?"

I nodded. "Yeah." My own throat was full. I hadn't expected that. "Can you give us a minute?"

"Oh. Sure." He smiled at Heather tenderly. "Love you, sis."

Heather didn't respond. She just returned the smile as Brandon moved behind us.

Once it was the two of us again, a sniffle left her.

I didn't know what was going on behind us.

It didn't matter.

I had the woman I loved in my arms. She was safe. She was hurting. And I could never let that happen again. That's all. My arms tightened around her. I never wanted to let her go.

I took another minute—we both did. Then I asked, "Are you ready?"

"No." She sighed, her finger tracing up and down under mine.

She said no, but I felt the acceptance in her body. She loosened, and I knew what she needed. Moving her in my arms to cradle her once again, I stood, careful not to hurt her with any sudden motion. As I straightened up, she closed her eyes, her head resting against my chest.

Something shifted deep inside me.

I couldn't leave her. Ever.

The realization blared hard and loud, and our lives together flashed in front of my eyes.

As I proposed to her.

As I married her.

As we had our first kid.

Our second kid.

Our ninth kid, if she wanted.

We'd move into a bigger house.

Bren would get married, and Heather would be at my side.

All the holidays together, birthdays together. The future fights we'd have.

All the love making.

As we got old.

As we joined her dad's retirement RV caravan or made our own. As we moved to Florida and made all our friends come with us—the ones still alive.

As one of us moved into a nursing home.

And as one of us left this world, but even then, I would watch over her as she got older and started hooking up with some other old dude.

Always and forever. The words were in wedding vows for a reason.

All of that flashed before my eyes, and as I began carrying her back to the vehicle, I knew two things.

I was going to marry her.

And I was going to be the first of us to die, but not for a long time—a really long time.

HEATHER

I needed a new phone.

I started to explain that after they finished checking me out at the hospital. Everything had been documented. Every inch of my body had been photographed for evidence—or it felt like every inch. I was exposed.

I didn't know what they would do with the photographs, if they'd be turned over to the police? I wasn't even sure if the cops had been called. Channing brought me in under the guise of having had an accident climbing. The nurses didn't blink, but the doctor had paused when he saw the seatbelt imprints on my body. When that had happened, I had no idea. He paused too when I told him most of the cuts were from tree branches. From falling. When he looked at me, I knew *he* knew the angle of those cuts came from running at a dead sprint, not falling.

But I didn't waver from my story, and after a second, he'd continued assessing me.

I didn't think the cops would be involved, but a part of me wondered if that was bad or good. The concussion they'd informed me I had was making my head a little dizzy. They told me I'd have clear thoughts in a week or two. Until then, it was supposed to be dark and boring rest.

Channing never left my side, even though I knew he was probably itching to go find Richter. I told him once he could, and he'd only grunted, "Payback can wait."

I was relieved. I didn't want him to leave. It hurt to admit, but I barely handled it when he stepped outside of the room, for whatever reason—if a nurse had to check on something, or if he had to talk to one of the crew. All those times, he moved so I could see him through a window or I could hear his voice, and then he'd return to his spot beside me.

Brandon had promised to check on me at Channing's tonight, then left to take care of Manny's.

Now we were in Channing's truck, heading to his house. He was behind the wheel with Rebecca beside me in the back, and Congo in the front seat.

The guys remained silent on the drive back, until Rebecca spoke up. "If only I'd put the brooch on you after all, and not that other guy." She cradled her head in her hand. "I thought the guys would want to keep tabs on him, and I gave you my phone to show you since I was helping Congo. When I pinged my phone and found it on the street, I knew something was wrong. Horribly, horribly wrong."

"Becca," I grunted, giving her preferred name a try for once. "Nothing's your fault. I only got away because of you."

She flicked a hand over her face, wiping away tears. She sniffled. "Really?"

I nodded, or tried to. The painkillers were kicking in. I was starting to feel like I was strapped in to a roller coaster.

"When I was out there, and Richter's guys were climbing up to get me, I thought I'd have to go higher than them. And I couldn't do it. I started to slip, and I thought I was going to

die, but then I thought to myself, *What would Becca do?*” I grinned. “WWBD, man.”

She smiled back. “You’re messing with me.”

“I’m not. I’m really not.” It hurt to laugh. Well, that and it felt like the roller coaster had just tipped upside down. “I realized you wouldn’t climb. You’d think of some other way to get out of the situation, so I broke it down. I wanted them to leave, and I thought about what would make them leave. You guys weren’t going to get there in time, so I needed something else. And I thought: the police. Cops would make them run ASAP.”

“Yeah?”

“So I pulled my phone out, put on that police siren alarm, and hit a timer so it’d go off in a minute and get louder. Then I chucked my phone.”

I remembered worrying that the phone might break, that it wouldn’t work.

I worried the alarm wouldn’t work.

That minute was the longest—well, not in my life, but it took forever.

I felt myself grinning again. “When that alarm went off, I almost started crying. I slipped on the tree and fell a little bit, but they didn’t even notice.”

The alarm had been soft at first.

“They didn’t hear it at first. Then it got louder and they started hearing it.”

“Wait! What was that?”

“Oh fuck.”

“Cops!”

“That alarm got louder and louder, and they bolted out of there.”

“Hey!” One of the climbers had begun swearing. *“Wait for us!”*

“They left the two guys who were climbing for me.”

“You’re not far up. Just cut the rope and bolt,” the first had said as he did just that.

Both dropped almost at the same time.

“They took off after the rest. I’ve never heard more guys squealing.”

“What about Richter?” Congo asked, turning around to look at me.

I shook my head, still smiling. “He was the first to go.”

CHANNING

I smelled the cigarette before even nearing the front door.

Heather was on the porch, the screen door open, and it was three in the morning. She had wanted to come back to her house, so after dealing with some business at the warehouse, we'd headed here.

Richter was back.

The Peter was back.

It seemed like nothing had changed.

Manny's parking lot was bare, for once, and all the lights were off. They usually kept one light on for the lot, in case anybody had to return for a car, but all of it was dark now. I knew that was Heather's doing.

I stopped just inside the screen door before going outside.

I didn't make a sound. I never did, but it didn't matter. She knew I was there. She remained quiet, just like me. There was no specific reason except maybe to take a breath, to prepare myself.

They'd taken her. And the *they* was interchangeable—could've been Richter, could've been the Peter, could've been

the con man. *They* could've been any other enemies we had or would have.

But she was here.

She was safe.

She was pissed, wounded, and exhausted, but she was here.

Moment done.

I felt ready to do this, and pushing open the door, I looked to the side.

Heather sat in her rocking chair, one foot propped up on the bench beside her, a blanket wrapped around her so one shoulder was exposed. Her tiny tank top strap was hanging off her shoulder, her clavicle a bit more pronounced than normal, giving me a nice shot to the goods. If it was possible, she looked tinier to me. Smaller. More vulnerable. But I knew most of that was a mirage. If Heather went up against a cliff, it wouldn't land her on her ass. She'd figure a way to scale the bitch and then proclaim it was hers at the top.

Her hair was pulled up in a loose ponytail, some free strands framing her face, and she had a cigarette between two of her fingers.

“Don't judge. I was kidnapped. That warrants a smoke.”

Her voice was hoarse, but it wasn't the smoking.

I went over, scooped her up, and deposited her back down on my lap. She didn't even tense. She just held her cigarette up and out the way, then waited until I was comfortable before rearranging the blanket around herself, one end laying over my leg, and relaxing against my chest. Her head rested on my shoulder, and I put a hand over her forehead, stroking her hair.

She loved that. Always had.

“I loved you when you were eight years old,” I murmured.

Her chest and shoulders moved from her laugh. “That’s not possible.” She brought the cigarette to her lips, inhaling the last bit of it.

She held it out to the side, and I took it from her, grinding it out before flicking the bud into the metal can she had on the floor. My arm went back around her, sliding under her blanket and settling on her stomach. She had her pajama shorts on, and a few of my fingers slipped underneath the waistband, resting there.

“It is.” I nipped her exposed shoulder, just a small pinch from my lips.

Heather’s throaty laugh had my dick sticking right up now.

She’d just been through a nightmare, and I was having to refrain from sliding my hand down between her legs, dipping my fingers into her, and taking it from there. But no. The doc said she needed to rest, and the sex I wanted right now wasn’t soft, gentle, or anything close to making love. I just wanted her, and I wrestled to stamp down the need to own her, claim her, and make sure nothing bad ever happened to her again.

It was primal.

I had to ball my hand into a fist, resting it tight on my leg.

“What’s wrong?” Heather was no longer relaxed. She was tense—she was responding to me.

Get yourself under fucking control, asshole.

I expelled a deep breath and forced myself to relax. Letting the fist go, I slid my arm around her from the other side,

hugging her for a moment before brushing my fingers against her inner thigh.

“Nothing. I’m good.”

“You’re not good. You’re telling me you were in love with me when I was eight.”

I laughed, catching her ear with my lips now. I felt her shiver as I said, “I was. It was the best kind, when we were kids. I just wanted to pick on you all the time. I didn’t care about other girls.”

She snorted a laugh. “That right? What happened junior year?”

Junior year.

How could I explain that to her?

I had to. It was time, and I could only hope she didn’t hate me.

“Nothing, actually.”

She froze, then pushed out of my lap. “What do you mean? You didn’t...”

There was a half moon behind her, and how could I describe what I saw? She was beautiful. Fierce. Strong. Protective. Sassy. Smart. Witty. Ambitious. Loyal. I could see the third grader I *did* fall in love with. It might not have been the adult love I had for her now, but it was the beginning of this whole journey we’d been on. I could see the woman she was, the wife I hoped she’d be in the future, the mother I wanted by my side. But at this very moment, she was the girl whose heart I’d broken that year.

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees and raked my hands through my hair. “I’m sorry.”

She didn't let me say anything more. She grabbed my hair and yanked my head up. Eyes were blazing. "What the fuck are you talking about? You *didn't* cheat on me?"

The truth. That was the only thing I could tell her to make this better.

So I started, "You never saw me leaving that janitor's closet after I cheated on you."

Her eyebrows pulled together. Her mouth turned down and she pulled back, faltering. "I... I did. You had lipstick on your face."

"You saw me leaving after I pushed that girl away. Gus asked me to grab him a wrench—gave me his keys and everything. I went in, and that girl slipped in after me. She grabbed me, not the other way around."

"But..." Her eyes were darting back and forth, remembering.

It was an easy enough story to check. Gus was a regular at Manny's. He might not remember, but there was a chance he would. I had a feeling he would.

"My mom died, Heather."

God. This was our pattern, around and around. One long fucking circle.

Something bad happened. I walked. She walked. One of us walked, and the other let 'em. We'd go our separate ways, start missing each other, and get back together. It was a goddamn cycle that had to stop. Somehow.

"Do you remember?"

Heather moved to sit beside me, her blanket still draped around her. She wasn't looking at me, but staring off in the

distance, and a tear fell down her cheek. She flicked it away, a savage and quick motion before she spoke, her voice hoarse, “Of course I remember when your mother died. I loved her.”

I nodded. “She loved you back.”

“That’s why? That’s why you did that?”

I felt an ache digging in the middle of my chest, burrowing out a hollow hole. “I was fucked up. I was hurting. I was hurting you. I was hurting myself. Bren. I was hurting anyone close to me. You were pissed at me all the time, and I couldn’t blame you, but I didn’t want to pull you down with me.”

“Channing.” She started to reach for me.

This was the other part of the cycle.

I would hurt, or she would hurt, and the other would come. I was a selfish asshole. If I was hurting, sometimes I didn’t have the strength to keep her away. I did that time. She thought I’d cheated, and I let her.

That was the first time I let her go.

I shook my head and sat forward. “No. You have to hear all of it.” I couldn’t look at her. Call me weak, but I didn’t want to see the woman I loved in tears. I didn’t want to know I’d put them there, but it was more than goddamn time the whole truth was out.

I pressed a hand down on the porch railing and used it as an anchor. I needed it to hold me steady. “I was spiraling. Cutting classes. Vandalism. Drinking. I was already starting all of it, and I was going to make you do it with me.” I tipped my head back, closing my eyes. Jesus. This hurt. “I snuck out of your room one night, and your dad met me with a hunting rifle.”

“What?” I felt her move behind me.

“He cocked it and pointed it at me. Because, you see, he knew what was happening to me. He told me all the things I just told you—I was going down a bad path. I was taking you with me, and fuck, Heather...” I gestured around us, though there was only darkness. “It’s true, even now. You were in a gunfight. You were kidnapped. You got hurt today, and it’s *my* fault.”

“Shut up. Just shut up.”

I couldn’t. “He told me to leave you, and the next day when you saw me, I knew what you thought.”

It burned me. Still. I was back there in the hallway. The bitch was slipping out behind me, rubbing at her mouth. Heather was rooted in place, her eyes widening, going from my face to the girl, and back at me. I rubbed at my mouth and saw the lipstick then.

“I let you think it.”

“I switched schools because of that. Because of you. And Tate? You slept with her. The girls told me at that school.”

I shook my head. “Tate texted me, said what they told you. I asked her to let you think it.”

“Are you fucking with me?” Her forehead was wrinkling again.

I answered before she spoke again. “Tate didn’t say anything that day because she didn’t think you’d believe her. Sam started at Fallen Crest Public, and you were besties with her. Tate knew it was a losing battle. She came to me later to convince me to back her up.”

“You said no? Again?”

“We were back and forth already by then, but you were in a better school. You weren’t traveling back to Roussou anymore. You had new friends, *better* friends.”

“Shut up.” A small whisper.

“I spent the first part of my life trying to catch you. I’ve spent the last part trying to walk away.” My voice dropped to match hers.

I watched as her head curved down. She was trying to curl into a ball, the blanket in fistfuls on her lap.

“I was trying to let you have that better life.”

And now...

Now, I saw her walking toward me on the gravel road again. Blood all over her. Blood coming from her head. I saw myself running to her, expecting her to collapse, but she didn’t. Her eyes flashed. The fight was there. The defiance. She said her piece. She held strong until she didn’t have to any more, and I was there.

I caught her.

The second chapter of my life was over in that moment. Whether she wanted me or not, she could have me. I no longer had the strength to walk away.

That fight was gone.

I had nothing in me. I couldn’t walk, not anymore.

“You push me away every time something bad happens in your life,” she said.

My half-brother Max died. My dad went to prison. My mom died.

She was right. Every time.

“Naly,” I murmured.

She looked back up. The blood drained from her face. I saw the sheen of tears, and her eyes were so wide and wondering. “What?”

“Naly,” I said again. “When she died, you pushed me away.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

I knelt in front of her, gentling my tone. “Yes, Heather. I did it to you all those times, so I know what the signals are. I knew you were pushing me away, and I obliged that time. *That* time.”

Her eyes darkened. “What are you talking about?”

I reached for her hands. She started to pull them under the blanket, but I nabbed one and intertwined our fingers. “I’m done walking.”

She held my gaze, studying me, trying to decide whether to believe me or not. She swallowed. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

I was done with the distance. I’d said my piece. She was still here. That was a good enough sign for me, so I moved forward, scooping her up. I pulled her back onto my lap and said, almost roughly, “When I carried you back to the car this morning, our life flashed in front of my eyes. I’m no psychic, but all the same, it did. I can’t explain it.” My hands tightened around her. “There’s no goddamn way I’m walking. Any bad shit that comes our way, we shoulder it together.”

She laughed, a small one. “Manny’s. Brandon. My home. All of that’s here. Suki. Cruz. Ava. Gus even. All my staff. They’re here.” Her fingers relaxed and began to rub against mine. Her thumb caressed the palm of my hand. “If you want me to have a better life, I’d have to leave, and that’s not me. I am Fallen Crest. I am Roussou. This place is who I am.” She looked up, our eyes meeting. “You are who I am.”

Nothing. No one. Not a natural disaster. Not a random crime. Not bad luck. Nothing was going to hurt her. That vow pounded in my chest, and I touched her lips, rubbing over the bottom one. “I love you so fucking much.”

A blinding smile came back at me, and she gave over, surrendering everything. I could’ve picked her up and cradled her like a child.

“I love you too, so fucking much.”

I stood up, holding her like she was nothing, and I carried her into her room.

HEATHER

I was out of commission for the next two weeks.

I was confined to my house at first, and I wanted to climb the walls, hearing the noise at Manny's, hearing the opening and slamming of car doors, hearing people laughing, knowing they were all going to my place of business. Then hearing the music, smelling the smoke—I was in hell.

I wanted to know what was going on. I wanted to be *in* the chaos.

This was torture.

Brandon walked in one time, saw me holding a pack of smokes, and promptly called Channing. I'd indulged the night after I was attacked, but that was it. I'd gone back to trying to stop, and I'd stayed at Channing's house after Brandon caught me.

It was quieter there, sometimes. Channing didn't want me at the warehouse. He said they'd handle everything. I wasn't supposed to stress myself out. Stress was bad for concussions. Yeah. Well. This insane boredom was worse. He came home every minute he could, and I knew Bren was in and out. She was mostly out—or sneaking in late at night.

Channing had tried to keep track of her, but it was a losing battle. Bren could move around the house like a cat, and her guy was the same. *If* they were having sex, they were damned quiet—and that was an *if* because I didn't fully know what was going on. I think Channing did, but he didn't want to talk about them.

We usually switched on our fan to cover our noises too. We were high-class, in a trailer-park kind of way.

We were high-class, in a Roussou kind of way.

Then, Channing came home early one afternoon.

I didn't see him. I just heard him, but it was enough. All the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I was in the kitchen when he came in. He went to the bathroom, opening and closing drawers. The closet door opened. Something was going on, but I waited. He'd come to me, and a few minutes later, he did.

A suitcase came with him too, along with my traveling bag.

He rested that on top of the table, laying an airplane ticket beside it.

He was sending me away.

“No.” I shook my head. Decision made. Conversation done. I wasn't going anywhere.

He raked a hand through his hair and sat across from me at the table. “It's not what you think. Mason called me.”

I sat up, leaning forward. “Is Sam okay?”

“He thinks Sam's going to have the kid soon. He wanted to fly you out as a surprise.”

Convenient timing. I narrowed my eyes at him. “Really?” But I was doing the math in my head, and it was close.

“Really.”

He schooled himself. He wasn’t shifting his eyes around. He wasn’t moving, scratching, itching, being restless. There was no finger tapping, no foot tapping. He was calm. This was the dead serious Channing, but without the dead part. There was no intensity from him, just a matter-of-fact expression.

“I don’t believe you.” I called his bluff.

His phone shot across the table to me. “Call Mase for yourself.”

I shoved it back. “Mason will lie to have your back seven days out of the week. Sam would do the same for me.”

God. A bubble of frustration rose in my throat. I couldn’t call Sam because it was getting close to her due date. That was true, but I couldn’t ask her if Mason wanted to fly me out as a surprise. That could be true too. I had to go with my gut. If Channing was going to make moves, he’d want me safe—and flying to Massachusetts was pretty safe for us.

I tried a different tactic.

“I’ll stay at one of their houses in town,” I offered. “Mason bought a house. I could go there. Or Nate’s parents’ house. They’re never here. Or hell, even Sam’s parents’ house. Malinda and David. They’d put me up.”

I would be close, but safe.

I waited, not looking away, but Channing didn’t break. He shook his head and sighed, his shoulders lowering. “I have other safe places I could ship you to if it were for safety reasons. Mason really is flying you out to surprise Sam. When

you come back, he's going to fly Malinda out. She's going to stay with them for a while, help Sam with the baby."

I gritted my teeth. It all sounded legit, and that made my toes curl. Channing was sending me off to get me out of the way, but dammit—he was doing such a good job. I began to feel obligated to go.

"You fucker."

He smirked, a cocky half-grin. His eyes flashed at me, darkening. "How's your head?"

This was another of our routines. Channing would come home. Sometimes it started right away, other times later in the evening or after we sat outside for an hour together, but that question always came around.

How was my head?

Any headaches?

What was eight multiplied by twenty?

He was a jerk with the last question. They were supposed to be questions I could've answered before the concussion—multiplication and asking me to recite the capitals of all fifty states weren't those questions. I still didn't know, and I was rounding out the end of my two-week concussion-healing timeframe. I was good. I was fine. I was ready to wade into the fight.

Fucking Richter had taken me, had made me scale a tree, and I wanted in on that revenge. I knew Channing was cooking it up. He'd started to stay away longer and longer, sometimes dropping into bed at three or four in the morning, only to get up and head out around six. Every time I asked, he recited the doctor's words: "Rest. Eat right. Dark rooms. No television. No internet. Nothing that would stimulate the

brain.” He followed that up with a recent study that said it could take up to a hundred days to fully recover from a concussion, if a person didn’t follow those guidelines.

Every time he said this, I told him to “stuff it.”

He would cite the source in response.

By the time that exchange was done, I always did have a headache, and then he’d kiss me softly and say, “I told you so.”

I wanted to punch him. One time I did, but Channing only caught my hand, started laughing, and tucked me under him. I wasn’t complaining. That was one activity I could do.

Fine. I swallowed my growl.

I’d go. I had to now.

But I was going to suck him dry of all the information I could before I left.

“What’s going on with Richter?”

Channing relaxed, leaning back in his seat. “He’s going down. That’s what’s going on.”

“Have you talked to Traverse?”

Channing’s eyes grew hooded, and a wall slid in place. He got up, like I knew he would. He hated when I turned interrogator, and he went into the kitchen and looked through the fridge.

He spoke with his back to me, half his words mumbled, but I heard, “...called, and said they’re watching Richter.”

“Channing.”

He straightened and turned back.

“I’m only going if I know.” I folded my arms over my chest. “Tell me every detail. This is my revenge too, not just yours.”

He studied me, gauging my words, and I looked right back. He could stare all he wanted. I wasn’t lying. I wasn’t bluffing.

My nostrils flared. “I’m not getting on that plane unless I know it. *All of it.*”

“Okay.” He grabbed a beer, but he didn’t come back to the table. He rested against the kitchen counter, his feet crossed at the ankles.

He started.

“Traverse said Richter brought in another Demons charter. They didn’t agree with what Traverse did, so there’s a war between them. That’s why Richter hasn’t made a move and why we haven’t either. We’re waiting for that to finish. No matter who the winner is, Traverse is going to give us Richter.” His eyes slid from mine, and his mouth clenched.

“Are you sending your crew to help Traverse?”

His eyes came back to mine, and I saw the hardened look in them. “Fuck. Yes. I’m sending all the help I can. I want Richter to burn for what he did to you.”

“So you’re in a waiting period with Richter. What about that other guy? The one that talked to you in your new storefront.”

Annoyance flashed over his face. “Yeah. That asshole. He was the guy wanting that con guy.”

“The con job on Chad’s mom?”

“Yes.”

“The con man was an heir to some rich crotchety old guy. His lawyer, a Peter—”

I grinned at that. He looked like one of those guys.

“—paid us to deliver the son to him. We did. They went away, and the lawyer showed back up to let us know he’d left his rich pop’s estate and was probably coming for payback. He said that, and Chad went nuts, Hulk-style.”

I sighed. I’d seen it once, and it’d been fireworks. A sick and twisted part of me wanted to see it again—maybe on Richter.

I inclined my head. “Is it possible that the Peter was working with Richter? He was the bait to pull you away, and that’s when they snatched me?”

“We thought that, but we grabbed his phone. There was no history of calls between the two. We ran down every number. They all checked out.”

I wasn’t going to ask how they got his phone, or the history. Knowing Channing, they just took it, whether the guy wanted to hand it over or not.

“So he was letting you know as what? A courtesy?”

“No.” Channing shook his head. “Money. If the son comes back, he wants us to deliver him back to the pop for the same money. I told him that wouldn’t fly. We’d just deal with him ourselves.”

I grinned. “What’d he do after that?”

Channing matched my grin. “He doubled the fee. It’s on a continuous basis.”

“Why would the con guy keep coming back?”

He shrugged, sipping his beer. “The Peter thinks he has a score here that he hasn’t gotten yet, and it’s good enough to keep bringing him back. We’ll find out. If he shows up, we’ll snatch him and beat him for information.”

“Is that what you did before?”

Channing scowled. His hand tightened on his beer, then he tossed it back in one swallow. “You’re right.” He swore under his breath. “We’ll have to try a different method.”

“Let Becca at him.”

He tilted his head.

“I have a feeling if anyone can figure out how to weasel info from the guy, it’ll be her.”

“Shit.” His eyebrows rose. “You’re right. I bet she would, and if she can’t...” A seductive smile pulled at his lips. “Maybe we’ll let you go at him.”

The thought of having a guy tied up in front of me at my complete disposal, where I could do whatever I wanted, say whatever I wanted—I couldn’t deny the zing that went down my spine. But then I really pictured the guy, whoever he was. I chose a sleazy, smarmy kind of guy. Greasy hair. Too much tanner. Blinding white teeth. Heavy chains around his neck and a fake Rolex on his wrist.

That zing dried up immediately, so I replaced him with Channing.

Channing tied up. Channing at my disposal, at my command, and I could do whatever I wanted with him.

That had appeal, a lot of appeal. A throbbing started between my legs, and watching me, Channing’s eyes darkened in response.

He set aside his beer. “What are you thinking?”

“I want to fuck you. I want to ride you so hard, so smooth that I’ll be able to just squeeze my legs at the right moment, with the right amount of pressure, and you’ll come so long and hard, you’ll be seeing the fucking galaxy.”

His eyes went wide, and I smiled. I was almost purring as he tossed his bottle into the sink and scooped me up.

“The things you say.”

My pants were soon unzipped, unbuttoned. He tugged them down, his hand on my bare ass.

He threw me over his shoulder, but damn, I wanted down. I wanted to touch him. He took me to his room and dropped me onto the bed, bending with me so his hand lingered on my ass. Groaning, he pulled away to shut the door. He flipped the lock and turned the fan on full blast.

High-class, people. High-class.

I rolled on my back and watched him come to me.

He started to take his shirt off but paused, his eyes locked on mine.

I licked my lips and murmured, huskily, “Take it off.”

His eyes were so dark, they were almost black. He nudged my legs apart and stepped between them. His head inclined just enough to let me know he meant business. “You take it off.”

An explosion of lust filled me. He wanted to play games? Hell to the fuck yes.

I scooted down to the edge of the bed, wrapping my legs around his, and I jerked him forward. Taking a good hold on

his jeans, I pulled him the rest of the way until he almost fell on me. He caught himself, steadying, and smirked at me.

His dick was hard, standing right up, and I skimmed my hand up the front of him, reveling in his small groan. He tipped his head back, letting me do whatever the hell I wanted.

And I wanted. I wanted.

I pushed his shirt up, my hand running over all of those muscles. He sucked in his stomach under that touch.

I could make him gasp. I could make him tremble. I could make him do anything I wanted, and that power was addictive. Climbing to my knees on the bed, I lifted the shirt over his head, and his eyes caught mine once more. I tossed it at the same time his hand came up to cup my neck. It was his turn now. He bent down, his lips hovering over mine.

“You have any idea how hot I am for you right now?”

My hand went down his chest, and I undid his jeans, slipping inside. Wrapping my fingers around his cock, I grinned back at him.

“I have a feeling.” My thumb grazed the top of him and a guttural groan left him, almost in an explosive way. He bent down, put his hands around my legs, and lifted me clean up in the air.

“Channing!” I clamped onto him, my legs and arms wrapped tight, but then I closed my eyes. I started not to care where he was taking me. I could feel him between my legs, and a small shift—there he was. He was pushing his way in. The only barrier between us was my panties.

“Goddamn, woman.”

I grinned, nipping his neck. “Get my underwear off. Now.”

He put me on his dresser and ripped them off in a flash. He was rock hard. Tensing, I didn't know what for, but he paused a second longer than I wanted. He reached for his drawer, but I wasn't waiting. Condom be damned. I wanted another Naly, and I took his dick in my hand like a stick shift. I put that fucker in gear. Scooting to the edge of the dresser, I moved him inside me at the same time.

Channing gasped, his hand grabbing the dresser.

“Holy fuck, Heather.”

I really wasn't waiting. He could adjust at his own pace. I began rolling my hips, riding him in a smooth motion, taking him deep, then bringing him back to the edge and repeating. I went slow at first, speeding up next.

Channing was frozen, rigid as I rode him until suddenly, another growl erupted and he grabbed me, spinning and dropping us both onto his bed. One hand clamped onto my hip, and the other grabbed the top of his headboard, and he began to ride me in return. He lifted himself, his hips matching my motions at an almost frenzied speed. I was blind with desire. The pleasure built and built, coating my insides, tensing me, stretching me.

I loved this man, but I might've loved what he did to me in bed the most.

Reaching up, I grabbed him, trying to bring him down. I wanted to feel his weight.

“Hell no,” he grunted and just thrust harder into me.

God.

He was like a man possessed, but this had been my time to dominate. Not his. He was tormenting me. I mean, he was

giving it to me, but I wanted more. I needed more, and snarling, I grabbed his arm and yanked him down.

“Wha—”

I broke his hold from the headboard. Before he caught himself, I flipped our positions, dragging him down on the bed and clambering on top. I threw one leg over him, and I sank down on him.

Oh, damn. That felt good.

I could feel him in spots I hadn't before, and bracing myself on his chest, I began going again. His hands went to my hips, and he matched me, our hips almost dancing together, grinding.

This. Yes. This way.

My head fell back, and I savored this.

After a bit, I felt him sit up, and his lips found my breasts.

Pleasure coursed through me. I grabbed the back of his head. My fingers sank in, holding him to me as he took my nipple in his teeth. I began to crave that, yearning for him to torture the other one too.

There were no pretty words between us. There weren't flowery promises. There was just us. Our love. Our bodies. The addiction we had for each other. We were linked, like invisible chains. They were there, whether we wanted them or not. The farther apart we went, they just went with us, growing taut until the other gave in and came back.

That was how we were, and as I rode my man to completion, felt him jerking under my body and shooting up into me, this was ecstasy. I squeezed him, savoring how he felt inside me. I didn't need the drug. I had him. I went over the

edge and felt my orgasm almost assaulting my body. It went all the way to my toes, to my fingers, to the base of my neck where one of his hands had crept, anchoring me as he came.

I gasped, panting.

My eyelids peeled open, and I stared down at him.

I saw the same contentment in his eyes, and one corner of his mouth curved up. “You are welcome to do that any time, anywhere, and anyway you want.”

“Maybe I’ll fly out tomorrow.”

His arms came around me, pulling me down. He rolled on top and fitted right between my legs.

“Yes. Maybe you’ll fly out tomorrow.” He wasn’t ready for another go, but he laid on me, and I savored this feeling of him. I traced my finger down his back as he ran a hand down my side and leg.

I raked my fingers through his hair.

We lay like that for an hour.

Channing had to make some calls, but when he came back, he climbed right into bed. We stayed there the rest of the day, and when it was getting dark out, he rolled me to my stomach and thrust in from behind.

It was his turn to make me see the stars.

HEATHER

I was on the plane the next day.

People were still getting to their seats, but I had my seatbelt on. I'd gone to the bathroom. My phone was in my hand, headphones on for music, and I was already bored. Flipping through the travel magazines in the seat pouch in front of me, I glanced between them and my phone. Then I thought, *fuck it*. I called Sam. We hadn't talked for a while—not since the day at Manny's when I needed some strength not to end up in bed with Channing.

It'd been a losing battle from the beginning.

“Hey!” She answered a second later, sounding out of breath.

“Hey. What were you doing?” I grinned. “Bumping uglies with your man?”

She laughed. “Yeah. Right. I wish. I was doing some of those mommy Pilates. Anything to help with the birthing, you know. I'm worried how stretched I'll be.”

“Are you trying to induce yourself?”

Another laugh. “Yeah. Right. I'll be like that closer to the date, but it's too early.”

Wait—what?

“When’s your due date again?” I should know.

I was a horrible friend. I couldn’t remember. Why couldn’t I remember?

“We have another month. Mason wants to do a C-section, but I told him...” She stopped. “Heather?”

I wasn’t being carted out for a surprise birthing present. “Mason didn’t ask for me to fly out, did he?”

“Wait. What?”

I knew. I didn’t need her to ask Mason. I knew.

That fuckhead. Channing lied to me.

“Hey. Um...” I motioned to the lady next to me, mouthing, “I’m sorry” as I undid my belt and got up.

That fuckhead.

Fuckhead

Fuckhead.

I was going to kill him.

No, I was going to find him, then kill him, then bring him back to life, and maybe I’d kill him again. He knew damn well what he was doing.

He was getting me out of the way.

“Are you okay? Heather?” Sam was still on the phone.

Shit. “Sorry, Sam.”

I grabbed my bag from the top and started for the front.

“Miss!” A flight attendant stepped in front of me. “Miss!”

“I have to go.” I was past her, going back up the ramp.

“Heather, are you okay? Where are you?”

I laughed, wincing at how bitter I sounded. “I’m leaving an airplane I was put on to come and visit you as a surprise.”

“What?! Really?”

Another grimace. She sounded so happy.

I tucked the phone in the crook of my neck, gentling my tone. “Yeah. Listen, I have to go.”

“The plane is taking off?”

“No. I’m off the plane.”

“What? I thought you just said—”

“I know.” I was past the flight attendants. Both saw me and shook their heads. “Listen, Sam. I’ll call you later. I’ll explain everything, but I’m not coming.”

“Oh. Oka—”

I hung up on her. I would text her to apologize, but I had a suitcase to try to stop first.

“There’s an emergency...”

I started there, and I got a denial from the first employee, then a denial with a smile, then a denial with a forced smile, then a long pause, and then two phone calls until I was exiting the airport with my luggage.

Channing had given me a ride to the airport, so I dumped my stuff in the closest taxi and gave the driver my address.

I was officially off the concussion-healing regimen.

I was going to kick Channing’s ass.

CHANNING

We were going over last-minute details when Moose nudged me. “Wrecking ball incoming.”

I glanced up and swore.

Heather was striding toward us, coming in fast and hard. Those eyes—they’d melted me this morning, but they were furious now. As for the rest of her, she’d done her research. She was dressed for the part: black pants, black shoes, a black long-sleeved shirt. Her hair was pulled up in a fancy braid, falling down her back. She had a flashlight in hand, though it wasn’t on, and I was eyeing the other weapon she held when Lincoln asked, “Is that a taser?”

“Shit.” I took off running.

One guess who she meant to use that on.

“Channing!” She took off right after me.

We were meeting with half of Traverse’s men about how to corner Richter’s group. Being chased by Heather, no matter how fun, wasn’t something in those plans.

Over the next hill, down half a mile, were the last of those loyal to Richter. They weren’t expecting us, and they didn’t know they’d been cut off from the rest of the Red Demon charters. Traverse had gotten permission to bring us in on the

fight, which had taken two weeks, but we were finally moving in on them.

Traverse was going to take care of Richter's men, while I got Richter. I wasn't planning an execution, but I wouldn't say no to some torture. It was what it was. This was what we did to protect our town.

"Channing!" Heather yelled after me.

I couldn't keep running. She'd alert the Red Demons, so I pivoted and ducked, wrapping my arms around her waist just as she careened into me. I picked her up in one motion, throwing her over my shoulder.

Before she could tase me, I warned, "Richter's just over the hill. Don't do something you'll regret."

I felt her pause, then her elbow slammed into my back.

"Oomph!" I rubbed my hand over her ass, enjoying that. "I see you missed your flight."

"You're such a dick."

We were far enough away from both camps now. If she hollered a little, the Demons wouldn't hear. My guys might, but they couldn't hear a normal conversation. I set her in front of me and nudged her back behind some trees with my hips.

"Hey." She stepped back, her hand on my chest. "Stop."

Not far enough. The guys could see us, or they could see our shapes. There was a full moon above. I wanted to make sure no shadows played out over the path.

We moved behind another tree before I was happy.

"You have GPS on me?"

She must've. She was prepared for what we were going to do.

“Becca told me.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Stalker’s not supposed to know.”

She rolled her eyes. “Congo could cut her off tomorrow and she’d still know your plans for the next ten years.”

True. And disturbing.

Running my hands down Heather’s arms, I pulled her close, just enough to feel her. I rested my forehead on hers. “So...” I smirked. “How was your trip?”

“You’re a dumbass, you know that?”

“I was being cautious.”

“You lied to me.” She punched me in the chest, harder this time. “You fucking lied to me.”

I fought myself to keep from groping her—not the right time and place, but my hand flexed on her hip. I could...yes. I moved in, guiding her back against a tree, and I stepped closer so we were in full alignment.

My dick was happy to see her too. I closed my eyes at the touch.

“Channing.” She sighed and rested her head against the tree. Her fingers grazed over me, and I bit back a groan. “This isn’t what I had in mind when I came out here.”

“That’s obvious.” I dipped my head down, nibbling her neck. She shuddered under my touch. That only made me want to do so much more. I was struggling here.

I wasn’t a Neanderthal. I was a professional, and crew business sometimes felt like it was a profession.

But I was hungering for another session like we'd had yesterday, except I wanted our entire goal to be total destruction.

Heather was worth more than a quick and silent round behind a tree.

“Hey.” She grabbed me lightly through my jeans—and squeezed.

I bit back a moan. “I was just talking myself out of a quickie.”

She laughed, some of the anger fading from her face. The lines around her mouth softened. “Like that'd fly with your guys here. You might think about it, want it, but you and I both know you'd never do it.”

“You give me too much credit.” My insides were honing in. I was becoming sharper, more alert, predatory even. Heather was my prey, but not really. She was my partner, my equal. She was my other half, and an explosion of blood soared to my junk.

I was ramrod hard.

“Holy shit, Chan.” Heather looked down, even though it was dark. “Scale back on whatever you're thinking.”

This was going to be painful. I grimaced. “We have about thirty seconds before one of the guys comes and gets us.”

I forced myself back. I felt like I was peeling off a second layer.

Heather grew somber. “I want in on whatever you're planning.”

I figured, needing to adjust myself. “I was planning on delivering Richter to you. It was going to be an ‘I'm sorry I

lied to you' present and bribe at the same time." I studied her.
"Would it have worked?"

"No."

I lifted a shoulder. "A guy had to try."

"I'm going in with you."

I nodded. "I know." I was resigned.

Her eyebrows went up. "You know?"

I loved this woman. I loved her because I knew her inside and out. "The second you showed up here, I knew there was no persuading you to go back. I'm not even going to try, but you have to give me credit for trying the ultimate way of keeping you safe."

Her heated look melted. "I know." She moved toward me, her hand slipping under my shirt and resting on my stomach.

I bent down to meet her lips.

Living this life and loving this woman, we were going to go round and round constantly. A part of me hoped we'd never stop. And still not hearing anyone coming to get us, when Heather started to pull back, I tugged her close, my mouth deepening over hers.

We made out until someone stepped on a twig, snapping it.

Lincoln emerged from the darkness. Coated in camouflage paint, his face was grim, but his teeth flashed white as he spoke. "It's time."

HEATHER

They were beautiful to watch.

Channing put me at one of the watch points with night-vision goggles. I looked on as they all moved at once. Channing's crew and Traverse's men, all descending from high up on the valley, circling the lone house below.

Richter's guys were up partying. They had music going, though it wasn't blaring, and a bonfire in the yard. I could almost smell the booze.

I counted eight on the outside, and at least three moving in the house.

My stomach should've churned at what was going to happen.

This was how they lived, the Red Demons. This was also the door where the Demons were on one side, the crews on the other. Nights like tonight, they had to go through that door, enter that world, and I hoped they would come right back out unscathed. That was my hope, but watching, my hand tightened around the goggles, I knew not everyone would.

I wouldn't.

Richter had hurt me. He'd intended to hurt Channing, and who knew where he would stop. Because of that, I was okay

with this.

Because of that, my stomach was rock hard.

Because of that, there was no uncertainty about what we were doing here.

If I had stayed on that plane, I would've been in a whole different world. I loved my friends, but they lived in a privileged world. They were normal. Happy. Healthy.

They were whole.

Being here, sitting on this hill with these goggles, watching an attack in progress—this wasn't the world my old friends were part of, not anymore.

This was Channing's.

And as the first group slipped over the chain-link fence, I stood.

This was mine.

It was time.



CHANNING

LINCOLN, Traverse, and I went together. We were the first round. We were all the same body type—lean and fucking fast. We were the best fighters, and moving as one, we came in from different directions.

Up and over the fence.

There were nine in the backyard: eight by the fire and another behind the shed. I approached it, so he was my guy to take down. We needed to move quietly, quickly, and as a unit as much as possible.

Lincoln saw my approach.

He flattened himself against the garage, then tossed a rock to land at the ninth guy's right. When he looked, I slipped up behind him and struck. Arms wrapped around his neck, I stuffed a shirt into his mouth and pulled. I held as tightly as possible, my body almost wrapped around him like a spider. We fell as he started to lose consciousness, and once I felt him slip into unconsciousness, I let him go, kicking his body off me.

It happened so quickly he'd barely struggled.

The first was down. The rest wouldn't be so easy.

I joined Lincoln. We moved to the other side of the garage.

He held up an arm. I took the signal, and we reversed positions as if reading each other's thoughts. He stepped out. I moved in behind him, and he stepped back. If someone had been watching, they might've seen only a small motion in the darkness, but these guys were all drinking. It'd been two weeks since they'd tried to take Heather. They'd let their guard down. We had to strike while it remained that way.

I was the farthest inside, leading the charge, and I peeked around the corner.

Traverse had been waiting. I saw him on the other side of the house, having run a circle around the back. He nodded at me.

There were eight between us, four of them on the other side of the fire. Even if we moved fast, they'd see us. They would alert the others, or they could.

If we tried to lure one away, or two, we still ran the risk of them alerting everyone.

We had to strike at once, go as fast as possible.

I tensed, knowing Traverse was waiting for me to go first, but I held back. I wasn't sure why. It was now or never, but then I heard a soft, "Hey."

Lincoln and I both jerked around.

Chad, Congo, Moose, and three others were lining up behind us, all trying to flatten as much as possible against the side of the garage.

"What are you doing here?" Lincoln whispered.

They weren't supposed to come until we had the front contained. Then we were going to all go in the house as one.

"Heather radioed. She said if we all took care of the eight out here, we could maintain the element of surprise."

Fuck.

"What?" Lincoln asked.

Moose just shrugged, grinning at me. "Take it up with your woman, but it made sense."

He was right. We had to move fast, faster now since there were so many that could be discovered.

"We each find one guy. Go fast and go hard. Take him out, and do it as quietly as possible."

They all nodded. They were ready to go.

I peeked around to see if Traverse was still there. He was, and he mouthed, "What?"

I went. There was no reason to wait now.

We ran.



HEATHER

THERE WAS NO SOUND.

I saw the whole thing—how fast each one moved, how efficient every step was. They darted around the sides of the buildings like ghosts, floating at a breakneck speed toward their target.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

They each took a person down, and I waited to hear a shout, a yell, but there was nothing.

Shivers went down my spine. Goosebumps rose over my skin.

They looked supernatural. They looked as if they had grown up training for this one moment, and they'd performed it perfectly. There were no mishaps.

I knew the music helped cover their attack, and I knew those men had dulled senses. The bonfire probably helped blind some of them, so they couldn't tell what was happening—not quickly enough to do anything about it at least—but it still looked orchestrated, like a masterpiece.

Channing had told me to stay up here.

I was to keep watch, that's what he'd said, but I knew it was to keep me out of the way and safe. He needed a sound

mind. If I'd been down there, whether I could handle myself or not, it'd weigh on him. He'd be distracted, so that was done.

Now the guys were hauling the men away, hiding the unconscious bodies on the other side of the garage. Once they'd finished, they advanced on the house.

There were three other scouts positioned around the territory, and I hadn't been put in one of the corners. Channing had picked a random spot, so I knew what I could see was covered by two of the others. I felt a restlessness inside of me.

He didn't want me to go down there.

Go.

The command was simple and quiet, but authoritative inside of my head. Maybe it was my subconscious, or hell, maybe it was just me rebelling. I didn't want to admit I was breaking ranks, but I did. I started down the hill.

I shouldn't go down.

He told me not to.

It'd be dangerous.

I was still going. In fact, the closer I got, the more right I felt about it.

I was supposed to be down there.

I was meant to be at Channing's side for this, whatever this last confrontation would be.

By the time I hit the fence, there was no stopping me.

Grasping the chain-link, I began to climb.

CHANNING

“Brent!”
Richter was yelling from far inside the house.

We moved in, all of the guys taking positions. Moose signaled to one of Traverse’s guys, and when I got the nod, I started forward. Traverse and I were supposed to go through the two side doors together, entering on both sides of the house. We’d done our surveillance. There were two others inside, one in the kitchen and another down in the basement. Three different men spotted.

Richter was yelling. We heard his footsteps. He was coming from the back.

“Channing,” Moose whispered.

I looked at him, looked where he signaled. Lincoln was there with a gun. His face was grim, his eyes blank as he handed me the 9mm.

I took it.

As soon as the gun shifted to my hands, Lincoln reached behind him and brought another one out. He took up right behind me, and we waited.

There'd be a final signal, the sound of an owl hooting, and we'd go in.

Moose raised his hand. Three fingers.

Two.

One.

Both men did the owl hoot, and I stepped inside.

Two steps in, Lincoln was next to me.

Traverse was on the other side of the living room.

The guy was at the sink, and he jerked, rounding. His hand grabbed for his gun on the counter.

Two bullets slammed into him. One in his shoulder, the other in his chest.

As I turned toward Traverse, Lincoln darted for the guy. He moved silently, catching him before he could yell and wrapped a towel around his neck. He pulled, keeping it tight until the guy fell to the ground, unconscious.

We waited, tense.

“Brent?” The call came from farther down the hallway.

Something moved. I felt footsteps next.

A door opened. “Brent?” Quieter. More hesitant.

Then, a curse under his breath. Richter started down the hallway. “Brent, I swear to God, answer me—”

He entered the dining room, freezing when he saw us. A choking, gurgling sound came out of him, and he turned to sprint back to where he came from.

I started after him.

Bang!

A bullet slammed into his back, pitching him forward.

Wha—!

Traverse had his gun aimed, and he walked forward, slowly.

Bang!

Methodically.

Bang!

Calculating.

Bang, bang!

A last gasping wheeze came from Richter, and then he was gone.

There was no time to dwell on what had just happened. We heard stampeding sounds from the basement. A head appeared, his gun already blazing.

I was in the line of fire.

I saw the flash of light as I dropped to one knee, my gun ready. I shot him.

Two slugs went into his chest.

This last one was different than the first one. I'd hit the kitchen guy's shoulder, intentionally not killing him. I would kill to defend myself, to defend loved ones, but I wouldn't do what Traverse did.

As soon as I thumbed off those two bullets, I whipped around.

Traverse was behind me, his gun already on me. The way he was looking at me. There was no surprise. No regret. He was cold inside, dead.

He had his gun raised to kill me.

He just hadn't been prepared for me to turn so quickly. I shot him first—one at his hand where he held the gun. The gun fell to the ground, and my second shot found his knee. As he began screaming, I kicked his gun to Congo.

“Lock that door!” I was heading for Traverse as I yelled at Lincoln, who was already coming over.

He saw me shoot Traverse. He didn't need to be told.

The rest were confused, coming in slower.

“Wha—

I pulled out a knife and slammed the handle down on the back of Traverse's head. He fell quiet, unconscious.

I looked up as Congo found my eyes. “He turned on us.”

That was all I needed to say. Congo was out the door, telling our men what happened. The next minute would determine life and death—whether we escaped unscathed, or entire futures would end.

My men would do what they needed to do. Trusting them, I ordered Lincoln, “Get in his office. Find security footage, anything. We have to grab it, grab everything.”

He nodded and headed back.

I hollered after him, “Wear gloves. No prints.”

We needed to secure the house. Some guys were outside, fighting Traverse's men, so I headed downstairs. I could hear scuffles and shouts. I heard a gunshot, then a second as I finished clearing the house. I had to trust there were enough outside to get the job done. When I got upstairs, they were pulling in one of Traverse's guys, his head hanging low. Chad

and Congo dropped the limp body on the floor. More of my men trailed in carrying one of our own, Hawk. His real name was Paul Mainley. He was a good man. He worked as a contractor an hour away—had a wife, two kids.

He'd been here to back us up because he'd stayed loyal to our crew since our senior year at Roussou High.

Now he was bleeding from a bullet hole in his gut.

I had thoughts of keeping the security footage as a backup, just in case, and torching everything, but Hawk's wound meant I couldn't do any of that. He couldn't handle an hour drive to get that wound fixed. He'd have to go to the hospital in Fallen Crest, and there'd be questions. The cops would figure it out, putting two and two together no matter how much evidence we destroyed.

I was cold, locked down myself. There was no room for regrets. Just calculating thoughts. Clear mind.

I shoved everything down. Whatever fury I felt, I stomped down forcibly. Ruthlessly.

We needed a different plan.

“Are all the guys detained outside?”

Moose came in, blood all over his face. He used the back of his sleeve to clear his eyes. “They're detained, all except the guys on point.”

The guys on point—I felt all of the blood leaving my body.
Heather!

“I'm here.”

She spoke as if she'd heard my thought. She materialized right behind Moose. A little shaken, pale too, but no blood, no

bullet wounds. Not even a cut. Her hands were red, and I lingered on them.

She cursed, shoving them behind her. “The chain-link. Rougher than I thought it’d be.”

I didn’t know why or how. I didn’t care. I crossed the room in three strides and had her in my arms.

Everything I’d just forced down hurtled right back up.

One of the guys on point outside belonged to Traverse. He could’ve—I shuddered, smoothing a hand down her back, and held her. She was safe. She was here. She was in my arms. A part of me felt off-balance, not wanting to deal with any of this mess, but holding her—she righted me. I felt better, more sure. Kissing her forehead, I turned to my men.

Moose’s phone buzzed. He read the text. “Traverse’s guy took off. They couldn’t find him.”

Which meant he’d alert the rest of the Red Demons.

We were officially in the middle of an MC war, and this time, we had no allies.

Lincoln came back, a bag over his shoulder. As one, all of my men quieted and looked at me.

Congo said, “What’s the plan, boss?”

That was the question in my head.

What *was* the plan?

HEATHER

I curled up in a ball in Channing's bed. The door was open a crack, but the lights were off, in the hallway too. I listened to the guys mull over their options. It lasted all night.

I wasn't sure if I'd heard a decision when the guys finally left around six in the morning. Then again, I knew it would fall to Channing's shoulders. Times like this, it always did. It was his burden to carry. I could almost see him sagging under the weight of it when he came to bed.

He came in silently, moving the door open and shutting it behind him.

His eyes were haunted.

He took his shirt off, muscles stretching, moving seamlessly under his skin. His tattoos shifted from the motion, and his hands went to his zipper as I sat up. I'd put on one of his shirts. It hung over me. I wanted to feel him even when he was in the living room. It slid down one of my shoulders as I moved his hands aside, going for the zipper myself.

I heard a soft sigh leave him, and one of his hands slid into my hair, cupping the back of my neck, but he didn't do

anything. He just held me as I slid his zipper down. As I pushed his jeans off, I looked up.

Our eyes met and held.

I saw the ache in him. I felt it too. His was pain for what he'd have to do, for what had already happened. Channing might act carefree at times, hyper and restless at others, but he cared. He cared deeply, and it was costing him right now. I ached to soothe that away. I wanted to nurture, protect, love. I wanted to make him forget, just for a moment.

As if reading my thoughts, he whispered, "I love you."

I didn't answer, but I moved to my knees, my hands traveling up his chest, around his neck. I drew him down to me.

Our lips met. It was almost playful, and I moved back a bit, my hand curling into his hair. My other hand ran back down his chest, relishing every dip between his muscles, lingering over his tattoos, then moving to rest over her name.

NALY.

Now it was my turn to sigh.

My forehead rested against his, and I whispered, "I want another one." I looked up, seeing the love darkening his gaze. "I want to try."

He nodded, offering a hoarse, "Okay." His hand went to the back of my neck and he tipped me up, his mouth falling onto mine.

We made love that morning.

It was slow. It was torturous, and as he slid inside of me, it felt like the most perfect thing in the world. An almost euphoric and addictive pleasure swept through me. I ran my

nails up his back, lightly, enjoying the way he shuddered under my touch. Whatever mess we were in, something good would come out of it.

I closed my eyes, turning my mind off.

I searched for Channing's lips.

His mouth opened, his tongue meeting mine, and he kept moving inside of me.

HEATHER

JUNIOR YEAR

There was a tap on my window, and I paused in changing my shirt.

I'd actually pulled the curtain down, for once. There hadn't been much need for it since my room didn't face Manny's. The few customers we had couldn't see in, and maybe it was my I-don't-give-a-fuck attitude that had me taking the small chance someone could see. Whatever. Nudity wasn't something to be scared about, though I knew my dad and two brothers would adamantly disagree.

I had to cross the room and lift the curtain.

Channing was kneeling on the small ledge outside my window. There was hardly room for one foot to rest there, much less an entire teenaged boy.

I stood back, folding my arms over my bra, and tapped my cheek.

He rolled his eyes. "Come on. Please?" His voice was muffled through the glass.

Giving in, I unlocked the window, but I didn't lift it. I backed up and waited. He could lift the damn window himself.

Which he did, pressing his hand flat against the glass and using that traction to raise it up. Once it moved an inch, he got

underneath and pushed it the rest of the way, hoisting himself into my room.

“Thanks for that.” He shot me a dark look as he toed off his shoes.

This was our usual routine—until a few months ago.

“Stop.” My throat was full. My voice came out hoarse.

I’d seen Channing since I transferred schools, but it wasn’t the same.

He’d apologized for being an “ass.” Those were his exact words. We hadn’t said much after that, and I hadn’t run back to him with my arms open wide. I’d transferred to Fallen Crest.

Things were different. I was different.

“What?” He stopped, keeping his shoes on. He sat on the bed, but didn’t reach for me. He just sat and waited, watching me.

I felt tears and twisted away, wiping them.

I hated tears. I hated weakness. I hated feelings.

I was a laid-back smart-ass chick with everyone else, but this guy... I turned back and stared at Channing. He was still hella hot, his hair ruffled, a new tattoo peeking around his arm, but I looked at his knuckles. They were bruised and cracked open.

Leaning back against the wall, I nodded at his hands. “You’re still fighting?”

He looked down, as if he’d forgotten about them. “Oh, yeah.” He ran a hand over one of his knuckles. It looked

infected, but he didn't wince at the contact. It was as if he didn't even feel it. Maybe he didn't.

I scooted down to the floor, draping my arms to hang over my knees. "Are you numbing your pain? Is that what you're doing?"

"We're doing this shit?" He stood, raking his hand through his hair. The motion lifted his shirt. I expected to see his normal washboard abs. I saw a big fucking bruise instead.

I was right.

My heart sank. Well, not really. It had stopped doing that long ago with Channing. It shifted to the right now.

I didn't know if it would ever stop shifting, somehow winding its way out of my body. But until then, it was still beating, and while it was inside me, I knew it still belonged to him.

"Why the hell not?" I rasped. "I keep hearing rumors about you fucking other girls."

His eyes flashed. I saw agony, but there was a heated emotion there I couldn't name. Regret? Remorse? Did I even want to know what that was about?

"Don't believe everything you hear."

I waited, but that was it. That was all he said.

I didn't care that he said it in a gruff whisper, like those words were choking him.

I didn't care. Nope.

But dammit. There it was. I felt it.

A hole formed in my chest, and every time I saw this guy, he could fill it or he could make it bigger. I hated him. I did. I

was nothing but vulnerable and bleeding. That's what he reduced me to.

He could heal me or ruin me. I couldn't take anymore 'ruining.'

I hung my head, whispering, "You have to let me go."

I heard him sigh, then saw movement and lifted my head. He lowered himself so he was on the floor too. He remained by the bed, mirroring me with his knees up and his arms resting on top of them.

I faced him and he faced the door.

If that didn't mean something, I didn't know what did.

His eyes moved away from me to stare at the ground. "I'm trying to do the right thing for you, Heather. I actually am."

I snorted. "You're fucking it up." I tensed, waiting for a retort.

It never came. Just a quiet, "I am toxic right now." He growled, deep in his throat. "I fuck everything and everyone up around me, and I am *trying* to stay away from you. I've been trying for years now, doing the right thing for you, and I'm failing." His head whipped up. He glared at me, branding me, but this time, I knew the hatred wasn't directed at me. He hated himself.

I was just his reflection.

He fisted some of his hair. His knuckles whitened. His hand shook.

"Every time I tell myself I'm leaving you alone, I end up back here. I don't even think about where I'm driving, and I come here. I..." He swore, low and savage, and jerked back against the bed. "This goddamn life. Why's it so hard?"

“You have to stop,” I said quietly. I didn’t even want to hear my own words. “We have to stop.” I looked at the bed. My meaning was clear.

He didn’t respond, but his eyes closed and his head fell forward again.

My heart was ripping open, for the four-hundredth time with him. I dug my nails into my knees, just holding on.

“Okay.”

He stood, then stared at me a moment. “I do love you, Heather.”

I met his gaze, unflinching, but knowing I was crying. “That’s not our problem.”

It never had been.

HEATHER

PRESENT DAY

I slipped in through the side door at Manny's the next day for the first time in two weeks, and Ava was the first to see me. She tucked the bill she'd been carrying under her arm, turned to face me squarely, and began a slow clap.

I flushed, but couldn't stop the stupid grin on my face. "Oh, stop."

Brandon joined in, smirking from behind the bar.

Then another. And another.

Suki and Katrina came out of the office, already clapping. And soon the entire bar and diner sections were standing, clapping, and some were hooting. A few wolf-whistled.

I waved a hand in the air. "You're going to make someone's baby cry."

On cue, a baby started screaming.

"We missed you around here." Katrina came forward to hug me.

Suki wound her arms around me, lifting me up. She jostled me a little and grunted, "Suki missed you too. It wasn't the same."

Ava was next. Even Roy gave a shy wave and skirted over for a quick hug. Then he scurried back to his seat at the front counter, where he had pie in front of him. Ava returned from dropping off her customer's check and went to refill Roy's glass. She saw me watching them and ducked her head, the back of her neck growing red.

So that was actually happening.

I was glad.

“Ava.”

It wasn't the guy who raised the alarms in me. It was his voice. It was how Ava tensed up, how the blood drained from her face. It was how whiny and clingy and desperate he sounded. It was all of those, mixed with anger just under his surface.

A kid stepped past me, going for Ava. If I'd seen him at another time, I would've thought he was a Fallen Crest teenager. Sun-streaked blond hair, golden tan, broad shoulders like an athlete's. He was wearing nice clothes, but his jaw was clenched.

Roy stepped ahead, blocking Ava. He tugged at the collar on his shirt and swallowed. “That's far enough.”

The guy took a menacing step anyway. “Fuck you, you little twerp. You goddamn nerd—”

He swung, not even finishing his own sentence.

Ava screamed.

Roy ducked.

The fist came close to Ava's face, but she didn't flinch. Her eyes were wide with terror.

I started for them, Brandon moving in next to me.

But Roy got him first. After he ducked, he punched the guy in the junk, and he went down with a high-pitched, strangled cry, like an animal being tortured. It was horrific. Then Brandon was there. He grabbed the guy's shoulders and jerked him up, ignoring his screams.

“Come on. We're at full capacity, dipshit.”

Brandon wasn't messing around.

He signaled to some guys at the bar, and they stepped forward. They took the kid from Brandon, and together, they dragged him out.

Brandon followed them, and I could hear him saying, “You will never be allowed back on these premises...” There was more, but I got the sentiment. The kid was permanently on the shit list.

I asked both Ava and Roy, “You guys okay?”

Roy looked shaken, staring at his hand, which was still in a fist. “Yeah...”

Ava's hands were cupped over her mouth, but she lowered them, studying Roy. “Roy?”

“Yeah?” His gaze swung up to hers. “Huh?”

She touched his arm. “Are you okay?”

He nodded. Gulping. “Oh yeah. As long as you are.”

“Yeah.” A timid smile lifted her face. She stepped in close to him. “Thank you.”

“That was the boyfriend?” I asked.

“Ex.” Her eyes were fixed on Roy. “Ex for a long while now, and ex forever.”

Roy's eyes took on a wet sheen and he turned to her, pulling her against him. They wrapped their arms around each other.

I didn't say anything else, didn't think it was my place right now. Ava would be okay. Roy would be okay. That was all I cared about.

Brandon found me a little while later in the office.

I gestured to the hallway behind him. "Those were your old high school friends?"

"Yeah." He slumped into the other chair. "That was Ava's ex?"

"She said her ex forever."

"Good. He's a fucking weasel. He was threatening to sue until I reminded him he charged first. He could be the one sued." He shook his head, disgusted. "He's got rich parents, from the looks of it. We might have to lawyer up, but I don't even care. He's a punk. We could let the crews loose on him, for all I care. And speaking of..." His eyes cleared. "Channing told me you were coming back today. I don't know what happened, but I called in some favors just in case we needed extra security. Those guys will be around the whole weekend."

I bit my tongue. I wanted to tell him it wasn't that bad. I couldn't. Because it was.

So I nodded.

It felt good. It felt right hearing the buzz of conversations, dishes clanking, chairs scraping outside, and it felt good to be in the middle of the chaos. I was home again.

There were worry lines around Brandon's mouth. Bags under his eyes. His hair was a little messed up.

My stomach tightened. “Are you hungover or...” Or he’d been worried out of his mind about me.

His eyes flicked down, and he lifted a shoulder. “No, you know.” He glanced to the door, though no one had knocked. No one opened it. “My friends are here. We might’ve had a few extra beers last night.” He paused. “Or tequila shots.”

He was lying through his teeth.

“I’m sorry.”

He looked back at me, his expression closed. I hated feeling pushed away from my brother. Brandon and I gave each other shit on a daily basis, but we were partners in crime. I was the one he’d called for help, naked, when there was a stalker in his room and a one-night stand hiding in the bathroom. That was us, not this dynamic where I kept him in the dark about the real threats to me, where he was concerned enough to call in personal favors and have his old high school buddies hanging out here for an entire weekend.

“It’s fine. I mean...” He stopped himself and looked at the floor.

The air in the room was stifling, pressing down on me.

Channing hadn’t asked me to keep things quiet with Brandon. I’d made that choice, just like I’d chosen to fight at his side.

I was back to the same place I always found myself with my relationship.

What happened to me, happened to my brother. It affected him too.

But I couldn’t leave Channing. I knew that, so there was only one thing I could do.

“I want you to buy me out.”

Brandon froze. His mouth dropped open. “What?”

My insides twisted. This place was my home—had been for longer than I could remember. I loved every staff member, all the customers, even stupid punk Alex Ryerson. I loved the memories I had here. I loved living in that house with Brandon. I loved being able to walk outside my home and be right where I lived.

I loved everything about this place...

...but I loved Channing more.

“You heard me.”

“No.”

“Brandon—”

“No.” He shoved up from his chair and yanked open the door.

“Brandon!” I followed him out into the restaurant.

He went past Cruz, telling him something as he shoved out the side door.

Cruz wore a look of bewilderment as he came over. “What was that about?” he asked me.

“What’d he say to you?”

“Just to take over till he got back.”

I had one guess where he was going.

CHANNING

“**S**he’s selling out for you.” Brandon burst through my office door.

I was finally *at* the office. It’d been too long since I was able to come in and take care of business at Tuesday Tits. Scratch was in the hallway. His eyes darted from me to Brandon, asking silently if I wanted help taking care of this.

I motioned to him. “I’ll be fine.”

He nodded, pulling the door shut.

Brandon turned and began to pace, his fists pulled tight at his sides. He shook his head.

“You goddamn piece of shit. You piece of shit!” he yelled.

He kept on pacing.

I didn’t ask what he meant. I knew. There was only one place Heather would sell to her brother, and as he ranted and raved in my office, I thought back to our recent interactions.

There’d been a look in her eye. It was different. Resolved. Resigned. I saw it when she’d asked me for another Naly. I saw it when I walked into the room and found her curled in bed, waiting for me.

It was there when she'd come into Richter's house. When she walked through the doorway and came to my side, that was when she'd decided.

I let Brandon curse me out. Twenty minutes passed before Moose tapped on the door. He waved his phone at me through the window.

I nodded, holding up a finger.

Moose jerked his head to the side, then disappeared.

I stood up. "Brandon."

He was still going. He didn't spare me a look. "No. You sit. You sit, dammit. I love you like a brother, Channing, but sometimes—sometimes I wish my sister had never met you." He stopped, so much loathing in his scowl. "She's giving up Manny's for you! Do you not fucking care?"

More than you could ever know.

I motioned behind him to the door. "There's a phone call I have to take."

"Of course." He snorted, rolling his eyes. "A goddamn phone call. My sister is preparing to cut off half of her life for you, and you have to take a call. Jesus Fucking Christ, Channing. Is that all you care about? A phone call? Wait. Let me guess." His eyes were wild. "It's crew business, isn't it?"

He went back to spewing, spit flying from his mouth. "Goddamn you. Goddamn you, Channing! It's always been your crew first. When are you going to put my sister first? She can't fucking leave you. She should. She should've years ago. She should've before you weaseled your way under her skin and claimed her. It's like you got in there and took hold of her, and you haven't let her go since."

He had started to pace again, but wheeled back and pounded his fist on my desk.

It happened so quickly, I didn't react. I only held his gaze as he panted, his fist half through my desk.

He probably broke his hand.

“Goddamn you, Channing.”

Some of the fight was leaving him.

Blood had pooled around his hand, but he didn't show his pain. He only glared at me. His fury had blanketed him, numbing him from the pain, but it was going to come—and hard.

“Brandon.”

He snarled, baring his teeth at me like a wild dog. “I hate you. You know that? If I could make you go away, I'd do it in a heartbeat. If I could...”

He didn't finish, letting the threat hang in the air between us. He straightened up and pulled his hand from my desk. Blood dripped all over, down his jeans to the floor by his feet.

He still didn't seem to notice.

Another soft tap on the door.

Moose was there again, his phone in hand. He waved it, but his eyes were on Brandon and Brandon's hand.

I had to go. I had to take that call. I had to fix everything.

“I have to go, Brandon.” I moved around the desk, slowly.

He was still half-crazed. There was a light in his eye, as if he were imagining my death. That was fine. I understood.

Collecting my keys, my wallet, my phone, I stepped around him and opened the office door.

He didn't move.

I looked back, and he was staring at where I'd been standing.

"I love your sister." I needed to take care of this business, but him, this situation, he was important too.

His head swung halfway to me so I could see his profile.

He knew I loved her, but he didn't know everything. He didn't know what I was about to do, or that it was for her. It was all for her.

But he had to know one thing: "I will go to the end of the goddamn Earth for your sister. I will fall before she does. I will gun down any fucker who tries to hurt her. I will rip apart any crew for her. There is nothing I won't do—"

"Except put her first."

He sounded broken.

Yeah. So was I.

"Wait," I told him. "Just wait, because you're going to eat your goddamn words."

"What?" He turned more fully to me. His eyebrows furrowed.

But that was all I could say, for now. So I stepped into the hallway.

Moose moved with me.

He lowered his voice. "What do you want done with him?"

I shook my head. "Nothing."

I moved past Moose, heading out to the main room. “Who called?”

“The charter king.”

Scratch moved to meet me at the counter, a washcloth in one hand and an empty glass in the other. “Is Jax going to be a problem back there?”

“You guys heard?”

I looked around the bar. There was a whole line of regulars watching us. Even the people at a back table watched us. The music had been cut at some point, so the whole place was silent.

They’d heard it all.

My cousin grimaced, rubbing a hand over his jaw. “Hard not to. Congo tried feeding the music to get a song going, but Becca yanked the cord.”

Becca stepped forward. “He shouldn’t talk to you like that. He doesn’t know what’s going on.”

Her mouth was tight, and as I looked around the bar, I saw similar expressions.

They were pissed, but they didn’t know everything.

Brandon didn’t.

Becca didn’t.

Even my crew didn’t fully know.

The only two who did were Heather and me.

I had to say something. This could go sideways real quick, and that’d be bad for everyone.

I held a hand up. “You all might be feeling a certain way, but do me a favor, keep an open mind.” I gestured to the hallway where Brandon now stood, cradling his hand to his chest as blood dripped over his shirt.

He still wore a dazed look. He was blinking rapidly, sweating.

I pointed at him. “He’s angry about his sister, and he has a right—”

Becca growled. “He doesn’t have a right to tear into you.”

I lowered my hand. “He has a right to his feelings, just like you guys do, but no one knows everything. No one does.”

“Don’t tell us to butt out, because I love that girl whether she wants me to or not.” Becca folded her arms over chest. She glared at Brandon before looking back at me. “I love my man, and you’re part of his family. Heather’s part of that family. He ain’t. He wants to judge and keep her away from us.” She sneered at him. “You don’t get to have that opinion, Brandon. You’re an outsider.”

“Fuck that. Fuck you!” He jerked forward. “I’m not an outsider. I’m Roussou too.”

“No.” She shook her head, growing calm, somber even. “You ain’t. Not anymore. You haven’t been for a long time.”

He scanned the room.

No one spoke up for him.

“Channing?” he questioned, the fight fading from him again.

Scratch came around the bar and stood in front of me. “You’re unbelievable. You come in here, ream him out, and now you want him to help you? We’re not saying this to hurt

your feelings. We're saying it because it's the truth. You're Fallen Crest, Brandon. You have been for a long time."

"So what?" Brandon moved forward again. "Why's that bad?"

"It's not."

This had gone from bad to wrong. I shook my head, turning as everyone else looked to see who'd just walked into the bar.

Heather.

I flinched, seeing the sadness in her gaze. It clung to her, making her appear smaller than she was. This wasn't the girl I've loved since we were in third grade. That girl was fierce. She was a fighter. She never gave a shit who she went against, and I hated that she was bleeding on the inside, having to choose a side—mine or her brother's.

But it wasn't like that. I wasn't going to let it be like that.

"Heat—" Brandon started to sigh.

I snapped, pointing at him. "Don't. Don't you say a goddamn word." I moved forward, past my cousin, my crew, Stalker. I couldn't be silent anymore. I wouldn't let Heather take this on.

"Heather." I went to her. "Don't—"

"No, Channing." She stepped around me, facing her brother. "He didn't know what I was going to do," she told him. "I never told him. It was my decision to make—"

"You shouldn't have to make that decision," he protested.

"I don't care what you say right now." She moved in front of me, her hand reaching behind her to find mine. "I'm with

Channing, and that'll never change. I can't keep doing it. I'm choosing, Brandon. It's my choice. I'm going back to Roussou. It's time."

This had gone too far.

I raised my hands. "Stop! Everyone shut the fuck up!" I pointed at Brandon. "Go back to your job." I motioned to Moose and the guys. "Let's go. Let's take that meeting." I pointed at Becca. "And no more giving our details out to people." I skewered her with a look, and she lowered her head.

Heather turned to me. "Chan?"

I drew her to me, hugging her. I bent to kiss her neck. "Don't do anything right now. Okay?" I skimmed a hand down her back, kissing her throat and then her mouth. Cupping her face, I drew back, resting my forehead to hers. "Don't make any decisions. Don't do anything. Go to Manny's, or wherever you want, but wait for me."

The guys moved past us.

I went to follow, but she grabbed my shirt and yanked me back, her eyes on my face. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing." I pressed my lips to hers. "I'll be back. I promise."

I started to leave.

"Becca?" Heather called.

"No." I turned right back. "Becca, keep your trap closed."

She walked past Heather, and I heard her say, "Sorry," as she followed Congo to his truck.

My shoulders relaxed a little. Becca had chosen just now. She'd chosen crew. Congo had been watching. He met my

gaze. I nodded.

The guys all went to their trucks. I got into Moose's, and he pulled out first, leading the charge.

I was going to fix everything. I just had one more meeting to take.

CHANNING

Thirty motorcycles formed a straight line on one side of the abandoned parking lot.

They were parked facing toward us, their men standing behind them, all in a line as well. We drove up, over the cracked pavement with weeds growing through it. The store had closed years ago, put out of business when James Kade moved back to Fallen Crest. His reach stretched past Fallen Crest, past Roussou, even past Frisco, all the way to Callyspo, a small town that used to not be so small. It was damn near extinct now, and the few stores they still had depended on their local Red Demon charter to help keep them afloat.

This leader wasn't like Richter.

Maxwell's charter was large.

I recognized some of the guys we'd let go after our debacle with Traverse. This charter had recently gotten larger. As we pulled into the parking lot, five men walked past their motorcycles toward us. They moved a few yards ahead, then paused.

Moose glanced at me. "Should we line up too?"

I surveyed their group. Each of their men had a gun, half were holding them, while the others had their rifles resting on their motorcycles, ready to be grabbed if needed.

Their whole display was just that, a display.

Maxwell wanted me to know they had numbers. He wanted me to know they were armed, and that those men weren't new or young. They were older. Some were grizzled with graying hair, some had large bellies, and others were lean. Some were built like some of mine, but I got the message.

They were experienced.

Not one of his men twitched from nervousness. They stood there, just waiting for whatever their leader would command them to do.

I hoped this meeting would have a good result, but I also knew I couldn't rely on that. So I said, "No." I motioned to the back end of the lot. "Park here." Before Moose started again, I hopped out of the truck.

He braked, and I leaned in through the window. "Move it around for a getaway if you need to go."

"But—"

I waved him on and stepped back before he could finish. Moose twisted to keep watching me, so I motioned again for him to go on. A scowl formed, but he pulled ahead. Congo's truck was next, and I relayed my plan to him. The rest filed through, all parking behind one another, pointed to the exit, until Lincoln brought up the rear. He pulled up next to me, but unlike the others, he didn't wait for my orders. He parked and hopped out, going to the back of his truck bed. As he opened it, I stood by.

He reached in, grabbed Traverse, and hauled him out.

Traverse fell to the ground, scraping his knee.

“Get up.”

Lincoln grabbed his shirt, pulling him to his feet.

I looked him over. Contrary to what I’d wanted, he hadn’t been tortured. I’d wanted to so damn badly, but I’d held back. The two bullets I’d put through his hand and knee had to be enough. He still struggled to stand upright, with good reason. We’d brought a crew friend out to look him over—a nurse Moose was banging—and she’d fixed him up as much as she could. The bullets went straight through, and she’d cauterized both sides to stop any infection. He’d need some more tending to, but they could handle it. He’d remained alive on my watch—all I cared about.

Lincoln shoved him to walk forward, but I waved him off.

“I got him.”

“What?”

“I’ll take him over,” I said. “I got it.”

“Channing—” He started to say more.

I jerked Traverse forward. “I got it. I mean it.” I nodded to the others. “Cover their backs if something happens.”

“What about covering your back?”

I wasn’t listening.

Traverse stumbled, almost pitching forward. I righted him, holding him steady as he grunted, his face pale. “What are you doing? This a suicide mission?”

My hand tightened under his elbow, digging into the bone. It wouldn’t affect him, not normally, but he was weak. When I

broke the skin, I lessened the pressure and said, “Shut the fuck up. Unlike you, I have a plan.”

“You’re going to die, Monroe. You’re walking to your own grave right now. You just don’t want to admit it.”

He giggled maniacally. The guy was half hysterical, and once we neared Maxwell, he started shouting, “He shot me. Twice. He tortured me, Maxwell. I’ve not had medical care.”

“Shut up.” I grabbed for his injured hand now and yanked back.

A scream ripped from his throat, and he fell to his knees.

I studied their faces. They were close enough to hear everything, and I was close enough to read their expressions. Nothing showed. They were walls of cement.

Maxwell, their leader, moved forward, stopping a few yards away. Tanned from years on his bike, he had a leathery sheen. From what I knew about him, he was in his fifties. He’d grown up as a Red Demon, taking over ten years ago after his uncle retired. He was known to be reasonable and fair, but if you crossed him, you were already dead.

I was banking on some of that honor for what I had planned. If not, Traverse was right. I was a dead man.

“You look like your father,” Maxwell said as a greeting. He ignored Traverse, inspecting me as I did the same with him.

Traverse’s scream faltered. “What?”

I motioned to him. “You can take him. I shot his weapon out, and I shot to injure him. We *did* have someone look at him, and he *was* fed, given water, and had a bed to sleep in until we could meet. He wasn’t tortured.”

Maxwell hesitated, then held up a hand.

Three of the guys who had moved forward came the rest of the way. They grabbed Traverse and half dragged-half walked him back to their motorcycles. As he passed the last man still standing back, Traverse jerked in their arms.

“What—Connelly?”

Connelly didn't respond.

“Wait a minute.” Traverse started to struggle, trying to get free of their hold. “Connelly, what are you doing? What's going on here?”

Maxwell nodded at Connelly, who turned to Traverse and said, “You weren't supposed to kill Dex. I know that's what you had planned when you went. It's why I didn't go. That wasn't what we agreed on. Double-crossing Monroe's crew wasn't part of the deal either.” He motioned to me. “He's connected. You forgot.”

“What? The crews? They're nothing. Half are high school kids.”

“No.” Maxwell's voice was loud, booming over the entire parking lot. But he wasn't yelling. He was just authoritative. He had charisma, and he didn't need to do anything other than speak.

Traverse quieted. Connelly too.

“He has roots you don't even know about,” Maxwell continued. “You were foolish, Traverse. You got ahead of yourself, thinking you could out-con us, expecting us not to do our homework.” He gestured to his men. “Take him away. We'll deal with him later.”

Connelly came forward, pausing at Maxwell's side. He inclined his head briefly to me. "I didn't agree with what Traverse was going to do, and I'm sorry for my part. We'll make it right."

Well. Shit. I hadn't been expecting any of this.

Connelly followed the rest, helping them put Traverse in the back of their one truck. Three guys jumped in with him, and Connelly got in on the passenger side. The truck pulled out, driving past my men.

Maxwell took out a toothpick and popped it into his mouth. He began to chew on it, moving it around over his teeth. When he put that toothpick in his mouth, I got a different glimpse of him. He wanted to look laid-back, almost carefree, but I saw his intelligence. His eyes were sharp.

If I hadn't known his reputation, I would've caught on anyway.

"Your father said you're one of the smartest guys he knows," Maxwell said. "Coming from him, that's high praise."

I laughed, wincing too. "You sound like you know him well."

"I do. He was my cellmate for a year. I never thought I'd hear from your pop again, not unless I got put back in. Imagine my surprise when he called me this morning."

"Yeah."

I hated to do it, but getting in touch with Maxwell Raith couldn't be done through the front door. He wasn't that type of guy. I'd needed a back way in.

"To be fair, I think I gave my dad a heart attack when I called him."

“Yep. Yep.” Maxwell nodded. “He told me about you. Said things aren’t too great between the two of you.”

I jerked up a shoulder. “Yeah, well. Maybe they’ll get better after this.”

“You have a sister too? Younger than you?”

I narrowed my eyes. What’d he know about Bren? “Yeah.” He didn’t need to know anything else.

He laughed. “Relax. That wasn’t a veiled threat. Your old man saved my life in prison. And just so we’re clear, I don’t consider that debt paid here.” He motioned to where the truck had gone. “Connelly already rode out, told us what Traverse was going to do. We’re not a charter that wants enemies in Roussou. The entire club has steered clear of your town for a reason. We know the system you have in place—have had in place for years now. Richter was moving in on his own. He was an ambitious piece of shit. Traverse was doing us a favor by moving in on him. But he didn’t know he wouldn’t have gotten permission for moving in on you.”

“So, if this isn’t a debt for my dad, why are you doing this?”

“Well, that’s for us to know. Not you. It’s club business.”

Fuck that. “Then how am I supposed to know another young punk won’t get in his head to ‘get ambitious’?”

He stared at me, weighing my words.

Here we were. Two leaders. Two armies behind us. In the grand scheme of things, his men would win. He knew it. I knew it. He had other charters to call on for backup. I had my men and maybe fifty crew members, half of which—Traverse was right. They were young. My job here was to protect them. No more blood needed to be shed, but Roussou was a prize. If

Richter and Traverse had wanted to control it, why not someone else? And if that was a battle down the road, what moves should we start making now to protect ourselves?

His eyes narrowed, studying me.

He bobbed his head a bit. “Okay.” He took out his toothpick and flicked it to the ground. A second one came out of his pocket, and he popped that in instead. “Your town’s too close to Fallen Crest. They got too many corporations there, businesses, empires. We don’t want attention brought on us, and where there’s rich folk, there’s cops. They like to enforce their own kind, and that ain’t us. Roussou’s too close. We like moving our product through Frisco, through Callyspo. We like staying to the back roads where we might take down a truck, but not enough to bring too much heat on us. That’s why we steer clear of Roussou. Your town is the boundary for us. We go around you guys.”

It made sense, in a way.

“Thank you for that.”

“There’s another thing.” He took out that second toothpick, but he only held it. “Your dad offered something else. We took him up on it, which is another reason I don’t consider this transaction as a debt paid off.” He began to scratch near his mouth, using the back of his thumbnail. “Your pops didn’t want me to say anything, but I figured maybe you should know. I’d want my own to know.”

I knew. I knew before he said the words. There was no rhyme or reason. There was nothing building up to it, but I knew because it only made sense.

“Your dad joined up. He’s an older member. We don’t usually take ’em that age, but he’s a good fighter. He can hold

his own. He's one of our point guys in prison." He tilted his head, measuring me, waiting to see my response. "How you feel about that?"

What'd I say here?

My dad would be protected, but he'd get out. He still had forty years to live when he got out, and what then? Well, now I knew. He'd leave. He'd be with the Red Demons.

He'd be out of Bren's life.

"It's a smart move, for you guys and him."

"That it?" He narrowed his eyes.

"Yeah. That's it. We're all good then?"

He pursed his lips, still gauging me, and then he sighed and held out his hand. "We're good."

"No more Red Demons in Roussou? Traverse won't be a problem?"

That got a shallow laugh from him. "You won't be hearing from Traverse again. Connelly will be my spokesman from now on, and he'll be based out of Frisco. If we have to do business again, you can go through him or your pops."

I wouldn't be going through my pops, and the way Maxwell was watching me, I caught the knowing look on his face. He also knew I wouldn't be going through my father.

"Deal."

We shook on it.

I was about to head back to my guys when he said, "I have to ask..."

He motioned to where my guys were perched, all standing on the backs of their trucks, watching the exchange.

“What was the idea for that? What were you going to do if this all went south?”

I shook my head. “Nothing. I was going to offer you something.”

They wouldn’t have been able to stop me by then. They wouldn’t have been close enough to fight or try to protect me. I would’ve made the offer, and I would’ve stood by it. I would’ve done it all for them.

“What were you going to offer me?” Maxwell asked.

I met his gaze with no hesitation.

“Me.”

CHANNING

“**W**hat the hell was that?” Lincoln demanded.

I had to give Moose credit, because he was the one I thought would be on my ass the second the rest of the crew left. It wasn’t him. It was Lincoln.

We’d all returned to the warehouse, and Congo had just shut the door on the last exiting member. The ones who’d held back were my core: Chad, Moose, Lincoln, and Congo. It had long been the five of us. I just needed Bren, Scratch, and Heather here, and this would be my family.

I was lucky.

It hit me.

I was goddamn lucky because I’d been able to spend most my life with these people. They hadn’t filtered in and out of my life, with a few exceptions. Lincoln had joined up a year ago. Bren—I’d been the fuck-up there and hadn’t been in her life as much as I should’ve been. But I’d had Heather, Moose, and Congo with me since elementary school. Chad had joined up at the end of sixth grade.

These were my guys.

I goddamn loved them, but what I'd said to Maxwell was the truth.

It was time I told these guys.

"If things went bad with the Red Demons, I was going to offer myself."

"Yourself for what?" Moose roared.

There was the menacing growl I'd expected from my best friend. Moose edged forward a step, his massive arms folding over his chest—literal tree-trunks, both of them. And how he got them to fold over each other was impressive.

"Yourself for what?" he asked again.

I raised my head, meeting each of their gazes, one by one. Then I looked back at Moose.

"I was going to offer to leave the crew."

Moose's nostrils flared.

Chad cursed, swinging his head from side to side.

Congo swore and kicked at a can near his feet. It slammed into the wall, bounced back, and he kicked it again. He sent it clear across the warehouse the second time.

No one cared. No one paid attention to him.

I waited, studying Lincoln.

He had no visible reaction. He was stoic, waiting for more.

Shit. He knew. There was more coming, and goddamn, he knew somehow. I glanced back to Moose and saw the same look there. He knew too.

"And?" Moose was the one who clipped that word out. "And now what? You're not going anywhere, right? It's all

good. We're good. The shit's over.”

He knew that wasn't what was going to happen.

So I braced myself, and filled them in.

HEATHER

JUNIOR YEAR

I'd left a few minutes before the basketball game was over. Sam was still inside, sitting with Logan and some others, but I'd wanted to get to Manny's before everyone filtered in.

I might be a high school student, but I had work to do.

I was weaving through the vehicles in the parking lot when I heard him.

“You becoming a full-fledged Fallen Crustie? Going to their games too?”

I drew up short, my insides tightening at his voice, and I looked over.

Channing lounged against his truck, one foot over the other, his arms across his chest, and his head down.

I readied myself, prepared for anything he was going to throw my way, but he didn't look angry. He almost seemed... I cocked my head to the side. That couldn't be true.

He almost seemed resigned.

No way. Channing Fucking Monroe wasn't a guy to let me become a “Fallen Crustie,” his derogatory term for them—not without a fight anyway.

“Maybe.” I stopped a few feet from him, sliding my hands into my back pockets. I tilted my head to the side, knowing it drove him nuts. He always wanted to step in, slide his hand around my neck, and pull me in for a kiss.

“I don’t go to school in Roussou anymore. I guess that makes me Fallen Crest now.”

His eyes darkened. “You’ll always be Roussou.”

We are Roussou.

The thought flared in me at his words, and I couldn’t deny that I wanted it too. The kiss. I touched the top of my mouth with my tongue. The thirst was there. The hunger. It’d been too long since I last tasted him.

He groaned. “Fuck, Heather. You’re playing with fire here.”

“Maybe.” I grinned at him. I couldn’t stop myself.

His eyes darted behind me. “You’re making new friends.”

Oh. That’s why he was here. All the flirting left me. “Yeah, but you knew that.”

“Friends come and go.” He pushed off his truck, walking toward me, a predator stalking his prey. He stopped right in front of me, now within inches. “These friends don’t seem to be going,” he breathed.

I didn’t want to look in his eyes anymore. There was too much history there.

I focused on his chest, murmuring, “Yes, they do.”

His arm shifted.

I felt him now, and I sucked in some air at his touch. His hand rested on my chest, then slid upward, curving around my

neck. He tilted my head to meet his gaze. It was heated, but not from anger, not from wanting to fight. His eyes were fiery because of me, because he was touching me.

“If they hurt you... If she hurts you...” He let his threat hang in the air.

My heart skipped a beat. My body temperature was rising fast, and I was just barely restraining myself from pressing against him.

I touched his chest, intending to push him back an inch. But I didn't. I only whispered instead. “I like Samantha. She's a good person.” She was a new friend. I thought she could be a good one too, but only time would tell.

He grunted, his thumb rubbing against the base of my neck. “She's connected, Heather.”

“I know.” He'd known that already. That wasn't why Channing was here. He was here to remind me I was connected too, that I had others who would protect me. I wasn't on my own, which I had to admit was sometimes how I felt going to school in Fallen Crest. I had friends, but they weren't like him.

No one was like him.

I spread my fingers out, moving my hand to feel his heartbeat.

We weren't a couple—when we actually were official—who did cheesy. We didn't have the pretty words, the nice promises. What we had was different. We had history. We'd bled for each other. We'd fought for each other. We fought against each other. But as I smoothed my hand over his heart, I closed my eyes.

No. Instead of the romantic stuff others might have, we had this.

I felt my heart align with his.

We had the same heartbeat.

Channing gave in too, his arms moving around to hold me. He bent his head. I felt his lips brush my forehead.

“I might not be the man for you now.” He cupped the side of my face and moved my head back so I could see him. His eyes were downright smoldering. “I will never be worthy of you, but one day, I hope to be better. One day, I will give you *everything*. I promise.”

HEATHER

PRESENT DAY

Jesus Christ.

The Fallen Crusties were out and in full force. I watched them from my front porch again. The cigarette in one hand, the lighter in the other, and a 40-ouncer between my legs. I was as white-trash as possible. Again.

Sunglasses over my eyes.

My top was low, my shorts tight and high, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I even had my hair all blowing in the wind, because I didn't give a shit.

That asshole.

Like I didn't know what he was doing.

He went off, saying he'd fix everything, and it had been three days of silence.

Three. Fucking. Days.

Not a goddamn word.

“Hey.”

And just like that, now he's here?

I looked up, saw him standing on the sidewalk, looking all hot and shit. He wore frayed jeans that slid down his hips and a white T-shirt. That shirt—I hated those shirts. They weren't supposed to look good. They're basic shirts. Basic. That should mean they'd look basic on everyone, but nope. Not this asshole who's graced with some of the best genes I've known.

Fucker.

All calm-like, I lit my cigarette.

“Heather.”

Staring him down, I flicked it at him.

He batted it away, hissing. When it fell on the ground, he ground it out. “Are you serious?”

I grunted, not answering, and pulled the ouncer from between my legs. It'd been there so long it was warm, but I didn't care. I'd had two others before grabbing this one. I took another healthy swig.

Three. Days.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. “Fuck you.”

He sighed, coming up the two steps to my porch. “You're pissed.”

“And you're smart.”

My throat burned. I needed to finish the ouncer.

“It's six in the evening.”

Which meant I needed to catch up. I was behind. I finished my ouncer and held it out.

Channing took it. “Can we talk now—”

I reached down and grabbed another one from beneath my chair.

“Oh God.”

I opened the can, giving him a bright, wide smile at the sound of it without looking at him. To be honest, I wasn't seeing much of anything. If I focused on one thing, it started swimming around and my head got all fuzzy.

Channing leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He caught his head in his hands, raking his fingers through his hair.

I ignored how his shirt tightened over his back.

I ignored how his back was tight and corded with muscles, and how it was making me ache in a few places, and—I needed to drink. Heavily.

“Everything's worked out with the Demons.”

I grunted. “Good for you.” I needed pizza. Swinging my legs down from the railing, I almost clipped Channing in the head.

Almost.

Too bad.

“Where are you going?”

He had no right to sound wary and defeated. That fucker let me hang for three days. Waiting. Worrying. I'd called. He didn't answer. I'd texted. He didn't respond.

Fucker.

FUCKER!

“Heather.” He grabbed for my hand.

I held it up. “No.” A step forward. The porch was tipping. Nope. I caught him on the head, righting myself. I could do this. I could go inside and make a pizza. My stomach was growling, and fuck it all, I was going to eat the greasiest pizza ever.

Or whatever was in the freezer.

Wobbling inside, I felt like I was walking on a slant, but I made it. The screen door slammed shut behind me. I needed to grab the counter. Using it as a base, I maneuvered myself around it and into the kitchen.

I had to use the counter all the way past the microwave, sink, coffeepot, stove, and then the fridge. Aha. At last. Touchdown.

I opened the freezer door with a burst of energy.

Fumbling through the cartons, I pulled out one of the pizzas. I didn’t care which one. I just grabbed the first round thing and dropped it on the stove.

“You’re going to make pizza? In your condition?”

The—I couldn’t...why wouldn’t it open? I stuck it in my mouth and tried to bite the wrapping. There. It tore open. I flung an arm backward, my middle finger in the air.

“You,” I barked, letting the pizza drop on the stove again. “You don’t start. I’m still deciding if I want to talk to you.”

He let out a sigh.

I fumbled around, grabbing a pan and putting the pizza on it. I was putting it in the oven, feeling pretty proud of myself, when Channing walked up behind me. He reached over and took the pizza out.

“Hey—” My voice died as he turned the oven on. “Oh.”

His hand went to my hip. He turned me around gently. “Go and sit down. I’ll make it for you.”

“I like it extra crispy.”

“I know.”

“I like it with just cheese.”

“I know.” He was picking something off it. I focused and saw I’d grabbed the sausage one. He was taking all of them off.

“I—”

“Go and sit.”

He abandoned the pizza, settling both his hands on my hips, and he walked me backward until I felt one of the chairs behind me. I sat, and he leaned down, his face close to mine.

He stared hard at me, his forehead almost touching mine. “I know what pizza you like, how you like it, how you want it cut. I know how you like to eat it on a paper towel, how you’ll want a beer with it, but I’m really only going to give you a soda, and then I know you’ll eat one piece, but will want a second, and I’ll sneak one on your plate and you’ll eat it, pretending it’s been there the whole time.” He pressed a kiss to my forehead. “I know you as if you’re me. Okay?”

I wiped something away from my eyes. I didn’t know what that was. And my throat was swelling over a lump.

I didn’t know why that was there either.

“Well.” I wiped again. “I’m just hungry, that’s all.”

“I know you are.” A second kiss, this one to my cheek, and a third to the corner of my mouth before he went back to the

oven. He finished picking off all the sausage, and after a few minutes, he started talking.

“In first grade, you gave me my first Trapper Keeper.”

He turned around, resting his hands on the oven door behind him.

I frowned. What was he talking about?

He looked down. “I didn’t have one. I didn’t have anything except a folder the school counselor gave me. That was it. Then second grade, you gave me a football. It wasn’t much to you. You probably don’t remember—”

I did. Barely. “It was one of Brad’s. I was mad at him, so I took it to piss him off.”

Channing still didn’t look at me. He tightened his hold on the oven door, cording his arm muscles. “He saw me with it. I was walking home and he pulled over, asked where I got it. His initials were written on it in red marker. He saw it from the street. When I told him my friend gave it to me, he didn’t take it away. He could’ve.” His voice was gruff. “He gave me a basketball that Christmas. I never told you.”

Oh man. My throat was really burning now. I whispered, “He never told me either.”

Channing finally looked up. His eyes were shining. “He gave me a baseball that spring and my first catching mitt. He gave me cleats. He made sure I had everything I needed for the next year with sports.”

I was speechless.

“Third grade, you told me you would care. It was the first time I’d heard that phrase in a long while. My mom...she cared, but she was too exhausted from life. The moments

when a mom makes her child feel loved, I didn't get those, not enough. So yeah, when you said it, it stuck out to me. I realized then you were my best friend."

A tear slipped down my cheek. I did remember that.

"Fourth grade, I kissed you on the cheek."

I gasped. "You did not."

"I tried. You gave me a black eye." He chuckled, but his voice was still soft, still rough. "Then in fifth grade, we held hands."

"Your friends," I said accusingly, "tried to steal my Halloween candy."

He smirked. "You're right. It was just your candy."

I snorted.

"In sixth grade, I realized you were jealous of other girls."

Another snort, but damn, it was true. I growled. "Fucking Tate. She was bad news from the start. I should've known."

"When you were in seventh grade, we kissed."

I remembered. I remembered what else had happened that year too.

"You never told anyone." He knew what I was talking about.

"Your mom left, again. But I would've." His eyes were fierce, steadfast on me. "If you had continued, I would've."

Aaand my throat was swelling once again.

His head dropped again. "My mom died that year, and you held my hand during the funeral."

My face was getting hot. We did more than hold hands that night.

“My dad was abusive to me, and she was gone, and that—that was the start of the end for me. I was out of control, but you were my constant. Everything else in my life was fucked up, and the only time some of the storm went away was with you. Sometimes I needed you desperately, and sometimes I hated you for it. I hated needing you. I hated loving you. I hated depending on you, and I knew all of that even in fucking eighth grade. Shit. I knew that earlier on. You were mine. It was just the way it was.”

More tears.

I hated those things.

“There was a blackness in me. It ate me up every day, more and more, and I pushed you away.” A dry laugh slipped from him. “I didn’t realize I would push you all the way to Fallen Crest. Fuck me. That’s what I thought when you went, but then I thought maybe it would be better for you. Better school. Better community. I wouldn’t be dragging you down.” He bit out the last sentence, shaking his head. “I didn’t let you go. I shoved you away. I had no one except my guys, but I swear, Heather. I swear. I didn’t want to pull you back. I didn’t want to—I just couldn’t stay away, but I tried. I tried so hard. You were better off without me. I knew it. Your dad knew it. You knew it. Everyone fucking knew it.”

“Channing,” I said, softly.

“No.” He shook his head. “That’s not what this is. I’m leading up to something.”

“Oh.”

He clipped out a laugh. “I told you that day I would be good enough for you one day. One day. It’s taken me almost ten years, but even though there’s no way I’ll be good enough for you, there’s no way I’m worthy of you, I’m hoping you’ll take me.”

Whaaaaaaaaaat?

The oven beeped. In that weird and awkward and confusing moment, he put the pizza in. He programmed the timer, then turned to stalk toward me.

My mind was spinning. Now I wasn’t sure if it was the booze or something else.

I saw two of him for an instant.

He knelt in front of me, taking my hands in his.

What the hell is going on?

“I have not texted you back or called you—not because I’m an inconsiderate asshole. This time, it’s the opposite. Because I’ve been trying to do everything possible to get ready for you. I did all of this for you.”

“What are you talking about?”

His hands squeezed mine. He looked up at me. “It took a few days, but everything is sorted with the Red Demons.”

He told me what happened, along with the part about his dad joining up.

“Oh, Channing.” I started to kneel with him. I wanted to comfort him, touch him.

He shook his head. “No, stay there.”

“But your dad—”

“He is not a part of this conversation anymore, not after this. It’s done. The whole battle with the Red Demons, that’s done too. They won’t push into Roussou anymore. And I think my sister is okay. My crew is okay. And...” He took a breath. “I was prepared to offer myself for the guys. I was going to offer to leave the crew. I was hoping that would be good enough for them, in case something happened, but it wasn’t just an offer to the Red Demons.” He stopped, closed his eyes, kissed my hand, and started again. “I left the crew.”

I couldn’t...

There were no words.

No thoughts.

I only stared at him.

“Huh?”

“You said you wanted to do things differently. You said you wanted this to be the final time. You said we had to shit or get off the pot. You said it all, and I’m here. I’m doing all of this because I want you. I want everything you said too. I’ve changed. I made the sacrifice. I know you’ve been trying. You were going to leave Manny’s because of me, my crew, but it’s not your turn. It’s mine. It’s my time, Heather.”

He smiled, and that smile was so tender, so loving, so gentle that I started a whole new burst of tears.

“The root of our problems is me. Never you. I was fucked up growing up, and then it became about the crew, about staying away from you, then Bren. I was the root of our problems. I knew as long as I was with the crew, you weren’t first, but that’s over. I’m out. I left the crew for us, for you. It’s time,” he said again.

I blinked.

What.

The.

Fuck?

My throat was closing up.

A look of wonder came over him. He pressed a hand over my stomach. “We made a life in here. She was coming, whether we were ready or not, and I wasn’t. Not then, but I wanted it. I wanted everything she signified. Our past, present, and future. She brought everything to the forefront. We needed to get ready. There was no other choice. It was you and her, and me. I knew it then, and then we lost her, and I hated it.”

We were together that night, but like other times, we’d pulled away.

I’d pushed him away. He went away. Neither of us fought for the other.

I was ashamed.

“Channing.”

“No.”

I tried to sit down with him again, but he held me in place. His hand was warm on my stomach.

“I want another one, and if I can’t have one, I don’t care. I want you. I want the forever.”

“What?”

I was crying.

The oven was going to beep. I could smell the pizza. My stomach growled under his hand, but then his hand was gone.

He was holding—he was holding a ring instead.

Oh... OH!

“I was going to do this in front of your staff, your brother, my guys. I had it all set up, but it didn’t feel right. Then I came here. You were drunk. You were pissed at me and feisty. You wanted your pizza, which you usually do if you’ve been drinking, and it felt right. So, I decided to do it now. I hope you’re okay with it, because with all that said...” He took a deep breath, biting down once before saying, “It’s my time to give you everything. To make *you* everything for me.” A slight pause. “Heather Jax, will you marry me?”

I couldn’t—I swear, there were two rings now.

“I’m drunk!” I blurted. “You’re proposing now?!”

He shrugged. “It seems appropriate somehow.”

“Oh God.” I groaned, but holy shit.

He leaned forward and pressed a loving kiss to my stomach. He whispered against my skin, “I’ll do it all over again in the morning.”

All over again? I didn’t know if I could handle the emotions. They were crashing through me, in a good way and holy shit!

I fell down, wrapping my arms around him, and I hugged him so tight.

I didn’t even know what I was saying, but all I could think was YES!

I pushed back, framing his face with my hands. I knew those tears were still on my face, but I didn’t care. “Yes. I’ll marry you.”

“Yeah? You sure? I can ask tomorrow again. You can tell me tomorrow.”

It wouldn't matter. I loved him. He was mine. I was his, but I still nodded, choked up and crying, and not giving a shit.

He kissed me, folding his arms around me, and he stood with me in his arms.

He turned off the oven.

We kept kissing.

He walked us upstairs.

So much kissing.

We showed each other how much we loved the other.

And he asked me in the morning, and my answer was the same.

A whole fucking resounding yes.

CHANNING

HEATHER TRAILED her finger down my arm. Manny's had closed long ago, and we spent the entire time in bed. We'd been at it the whole night, only pausing to finally eat that pizza. Heather had insisted.

"Tell me again."

I wrapped my arms around her, lifting her on top of me, and leaned back against her headboard. She trailed her hands down my chest.

Her hair fell down over her shoulders, framing her face and hiding just the tops of her breasts. She was so fierce, so loving, so mine.

I was such a sap.

I caught her waist. “Tell you what again?”

“Everything.”

I nodded, knowing what she wanted.

I told her how Lincoln had decked me when I announced I was leaving the crew.

I told her how Congo had started crying.

I told her how Chad had exploded, and once he started, he couldn't stop.

I told her how Moose had wiped a tear from his eye but was the first to hug me. He was the first to congratulate me too.

And I told her how they'd all lined up, all saying congratulations, and all hating it at the same time.

I told her how I'd talked to Brandon and told him what I'd done so he knew not to buy her part of Manny's, no matter what she said.

I told her how I'd called her dad and gotten his approval, though it was a reluctant approval.

I told her how I'd called and thanked her brother, Brad, and also gotten his approval.

I caught her hand in mine, lacing our fingers as I shared the last bit for the first time. “I asked for Bren's approval too.”

She stilled, her eyes holding mine. “Yeah?” she breathed.

“Bren's happy for us. She grunted, literally, and said, ‘about fucking time.’”

Heather started laughing. “Good. That's good.”

“This is it for us.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re going to grow old together and get boring.” I raised an eyebrow. “You ready for that?”

She let out another breath of air and melted into me. I raked my hand through her long hair. Her breath warmed my shoulder and she reached out to hug me.

Then I felt her lips move against my skin. “I’ve been ready for forever.”

I grinned, nuzzling her hair and tightening my arms around her.

She pinched me. “And I don’t think we’ll ever get boring. It’s not in our DNA.”

I squirmed away from her fingers. She smiled against me again, and I replied, “Yeah. Maybe not.”

Then I told her about the next business venture I wanted to take.

CHANNING

THREE MONTHS LATER

The doorbell chimed.

I was unloading a crate in the back storage room when I heard it. Walking up to the front section of the empty store—or what was now my new office—I saw Bren standing there. It wasn't seeing her that made me pause. It was that she was alone.

No best friend with her, no crew members.

For a moment, it wasn't her that I was seeing. It was Heather—a flashback to another time when Heather had walked into Manny's. The place had been empty. She was taking over officially, and her hand had gripped mine. She didn't know she'd been squeezing it almost to the point of breaking a bone, and I never said a word.

For a split second, Bren and my imagined Heather stood in the exact same position—in front of me, just stepping through the door. Turned sideways, head down, their hair slid over their shoulders.

They both stood as if the weight of the world was on them, but then Bren looked up, and the resemblance was gone.

The memory faded.

“Hey,” I murmured.

“Hey,” she murmured back. She scanned the office, taking in the large main room, the two smaller offices in the back. There was a short hallway that led to a bathroom and the back door. We’d just finished installing another door, which connected Tuesday Tits to this place.

“I thought you were getting this as a place for the crews to hang out.”

I grinned at her. “Yeah, right. Like you guys would chill at a place I own with the rest of the other crews.”

I caught the twitch of her lip. I was right, and she knew it.

Their crew would stick to their own, only mingling with the other crews at parties—parties her big brother wasn’t attending.

“This is the place, then? Where you’re starting that new business?”

This was my second business now. Tuesday Tits was still going full-force ahead. The expanded clientele was bringing new life to it, but we made sure to keep the regulars happy as well.

I nodded. “Yeah. This is it. New Kings Bounties.”

She snorted. “You’re naming it after your crew? Are you kidding yourself about the whole leaving thing?”

I frowned. “No. I did leave.”

At that moment, the door opened and in walked Moose, Congo, Lincoln, and Chad, each carrying a box. They greeted Bren with a nod, then began unpacking.

They didn’t ask where to put things. I gave them no directions.

Chad took his box to the front window and began unloading signs.

Congo and Moose took their boxes to one of the offices in the back.

Lincoln set his box down in the main room and began unloading what would eventually be his desk.

Bren watched all of it and shook her head. “Left the crew, my ass.”

None of the guys responded, but Lincoln was hiding a smile. Which said a lot from him.

She gestured around the place. “So this is what you’re doing? Opening a bounty agency?”

“Pretty much.”

“And let me guess, your co-workers are all your old crew members?”

Lincoln paused, looking up.

Chad looked over.

Congo and Moose came in from the back office. They paused in the doorway.

I nodded. “Yep. I mean, we all have to take the test and get registered, but I have a feeling we’ll pass just fine. We already have our first client.”

“And Heather’s okay with this?”

“Oh yeah.” All the guys were smirking. I was trying hard not to. “She was ecstatic.”

That was an exaggeration, but she *was* happy.

I was still with my guys, I just wasn't involved with the crew business.

Bren rolled her eyes, her hands sliding into her jeans pockets. "And the lie that you're perpetuating, the one where you left your crew—you're still spreading that?"

The guys started laughing.

My smirk went down a notch "That's actually true. I'm out. These guys know it. They accept it, but that doesn't mean I can't hang out with them." *Or work with them in another capacity.*

Bren nodded. Slowly. "Right." She started for the door. Before opening it, she looked back. "And if something happens and you have to return to the crew life?"

My smirk was gone.

I straightened to my fullest height. "If something happens where I have to step in and save my brothers, I will. But it'll be a quick trip in, and a quicker trip out. I left for Heather. After you, she's my first priority."

Bren's normal stony exterior softened. She blinked a few times. A small grin tugged at her lips before she coughed and the old mask slipped back in place.

"Good," she said, "because I love her. Not as much as you, but I still do. Don't fuck it up, brother."

The reversal of roles wasn't lost on me. It made me feel all warm and cuddly, not feelings I was used to experiencing with my sister.

I touched two fingers to my forehead, giving her a small salute. "Will do, sister."

She flicked her eyes up to the ceiling and stalked out, like the momentary showing of emotion was a bad memory for her. Which it might've been.

That's just how Bren was.



LATER THAT NIGHT, sitting on Heather's porch, I told her about Bren's visit.

"Wait. You didn't tell me you had a client already," she said. "Who is it?"

I slid my hand down her arm, moving to her waist, and I picked her up. Manny's was full, with a line extending out into the parking lot. They'd had to get a pager system to alert people when they could get a table inside. Half the parking lot had people sitting in their vehicles waiting. The other half had a drink from the bar, hanging outside. All the tables in the back section were full.

But as always, Heather enjoyed the chaos. So instead of hanging out at my house, we were at hers, even with all the moving boxes cluttering up the kitchen and living room. She was moving into my place, after selling her half of the house to Brandon. That was the only thing she was allowed to sell, though. No more talk about selling Manny's. I was biding my time, but it was in the back of my mind to wait and see how the bounty hunting business would do, then approach Heather about franchising Manny's and setting up another one somewhere else.

We'd see, though. That was all future adventures, future projects. Right now, I was damned content with where we were.

“Hey.”

“What?”

Heather smacked my shoulder. “Who’s your client? Tell me.”

“Oh. You remember that Peter from a while back?”

She paused, frowning. Her eyebrows pinched together. “That slimeball lawyer? His employer’s son was that con guy, right? He take off again?”

I grinned now, because there was nothing not to smile about—finally. “No. The con man is in prison now, but turns out Peter has a few other clients that have people they want found too.”

“I thought you were a bounty-hunting business.”

“Bounty hunting.” I shrugged, tugging her to rest against me. As she did, I lifted my chin over the top of her head. It fit perfectly. “Or just searching for people. I’ll get paid either way. My only requirement is that the person we’re looking for deserves to be found.”

“And if someone tries to use you guys in a bad way?” Heather asked. “What if someone needs to stay lost for whatever reason?”

I smoothed her hair back, kissing her forehead. “Then we turn around and help them instead. No one is getting hurt on my watch.”

That meant her.

That meant Bren.

That meant my guys.

My hand dipped down to her stomach.

That meant the little one inside her.

Ginger Gypsy called Chad and had him share with me that she'd had a dream. She said our little girl who had passed was watching over us, and it struck me now what else she'd said.

She told Chad she'd dreamed of us on our porch. Everything was in place, and Heather was on my lap, my hand resting on her stomach. There was chaos surrounding us, but not where we were. We were peaceful.

I felt goosebumps rise on my arm as Heather fulfilled the last portion of Ginger Gypsy's dream:

Her hand fell on top of mine, just as Ginger Gypsy had said it would.

And Naly was watching over us.

If I hadn't known it then, I did now.

Heather, me, our family—we were going to be just fine.

EPILOGUE

HEATHER

““M OOOOOM!”
A breath.
“MOOOOOM!”

I stepped out of my office at the end of the hall. “What? I’m here.”

I could hear him just inside the doorway. “Moooom!”

“Max!” I picked up my pace. This hallway was freaking long. “What’s wrong?”

He waddled two steps forward, just until he could turn to see me.

I stopped. My hand rose to my face, hiding my smile. I was already biting down on my lip.

My little boy.

He looked... Well, he looked like he was about to wade into zombie territory. He’d attached pillows to the top and bottom of his arms with duct tape—one pillow covered his wrist to his shoulder. He had the same on his legs, front and back. The pillows came to just past his knees, so he’d used some of the decorative pillows from the couch to cover the rest. They half covered his feet too. Two more decorative

pillows covered his chest and back, and a round throw pillow covered his butt.

He also wore a full-face motorcycle helmet, with some of his blond curls sticking out.

I couldn't.

I lost it.

“What are you doing?” I stopped laughing enough to ask.

“HUH?” he yelled.

“Max. Lift up the helmet.”

He tried. He really did. He reached up, but the pillows were in the way. Snorting, I crossed to help.

“No, no!” He waved his arms around, so I just lifted the shield over his eyes.

There, staring back at me, was my six-year-old Max Monroe. The same dark eyes as his father, but instead of Channing's cockiness, Max's eyes held pure innocence.

“Mom, this is very important.”

His little hands rested on my arms, as much as the pillows let them. They kept slipping off.

“Yes.” I wiped the smile from my face. He was being serious. I had to be serious too. He was sensitive sometimes.

I knelt down and rested my forehead to his. I whispered, “What's going on?”

He whispered back, leaning into me, “I need you to check my junk area.”

Nope. Not a smattering of laughter could slip. He was dead serious.

“Why?”

“Because Maddy’s coming over to throw a baseball at me, and I can’t get hurt there. Uncle Logan always says junk shots are not cool. I can’t let her hurt me there. I’ll never be able to have children.”

He was six. Going on twenty.

I glanced down. There was no pillow in that crucial area, and he was right. Maddy Kade would throw at the one spot not covered. She had a wicked streak in her. She took after her Uncle Logan.

“What should we do about it?” I asked.

“Hold on.” He patted my arms and waddled into the living room, side to side like an adorable, helmet-wearing penguin. He swayed all the way to the couch and picked up the last round throw pillow we had, the one with the list of UFOs on the front.

It’d been a gift from his Uncle Nate. Because there was more than one type of UFO out there. Max had seen four of them himself. He swore it.

The pillow was his prized pillow—he just loaned it to the couch.

He held it up now, as well as he could. He got it up to his chest and yelled through the helmet, “THIS ONE, MOM!”

A mom’s gotta do what a mom’s gotta do.

Maddy Kade—no matter how adorable with her jet-black hair, green eyes, and facial features already promising to be as striking as her mother’s—couldn’t be allowed to harm my little boy. Maddy was a year older, but it didn’t matter. Since they’d been crawling then running, the two of them had been

inseparable. There were other cousins, but those two had a special bond.

The duct tape beckoned me from the shelf in the front entryway, and I sighed, reaching for it.

“Okay, little buckaroo.” I held it up. “I’m ready. Let’s do this.”

He waddled back to me, smiling wide through his helmet the whole way.



CHILDREN’S SCREAMS and squeals drifted in from outside, and Channing paused at the window overlooking the side yard. He had lifted a beer to his mouth, but held it there, frowning. He rotated swiftly to me and narrowed his eyes.

“Why is Maddy Kade whipping a baseball at my son as if she wants to kill him?”

“Because apparently, Maddy Kade is proving she can throw as good as any boy. Her words, not mine.”

Channing’s eyes widened, even more alarmed. “She does have an arm as good as a boy’s, better than most. Why is my son allowing himself to be a moving target—and better question, why are you letting that happen?”

Almost the same look as I’d seen before.

He was just as serious as his son, with the same dark eyes looking back at me.

I had a sinking feeling Max was going to take after Channing, because his reason had been the same one Channing once gave me when we were kids.

“When I asked him, he puffed up his chest and said, ‘Mom, she’s not as tough as me, but I have to let her think she is.’ Then he winked at me and said, ‘Plus, I’m way faster than her. It wouldn’t be fair if I threw the balls at her, now would it?’ And then he went outside to wait for Maddy.”

Channing lowered his beer now. “What. The. Fuck?”

“Relax.” I gave in, relieving his concern. “I switched out all the balls. She’s not throwing a baseball at him. She’s throwing a foam Wiffle ball.”

His eyes rounded and he whipped back to the window. “Damn. She can throw, if that’s what those are.”

He kept watching, just like I had at first. I’d waited long enough to see the first Wiffle ball hit Max’s pillow with barely a smack. Max wasn’t even fazed. With his helmet in place and every inch of him covered in pillows, he would be just fine.

And anyway, it was as he’d said. He was fast enough to whip back and forth, dodging the majority of her throws.

“They’ve been sticking to the south yard?”

I went over and he moved, accommodating me at the window. He set his beer aside and molded to my back. His hands went to my hips, his chin went to my shoulder, and right on time, I felt him hardening as his thumbs snuck under my shirt.

A nice, warm tingle spread through me.

My blood buzzed as if I’d been the one with the beer.

“Yeah,” I murmured. “I told them they had to stay in behind the play gate.”

Three dogs ran around them, along with our pygmy goat, which Max had become obsessed with at a fair a little while

back. It was a fawn-colored goat that seemed convinced it was part German Shepherd and part English Bulldog—until she tried ramming her head into someone. She was all goat then.

But for now, Channing and I had the house to ourselves. It was blessedly silent.

He nuzzled under my chin, and his hand slipped up over my stomach, rubbing there. “Did you tell Sam our news?”

I leaned more heavily against him, an ache beginning to throb between my legs. I wanted his hand to move south. I panted slightly. “No. Malinda dropped Maddy off today. Sam’s in Baltimore with that new trainer.”

During Mason’s off-season, he and Samantha kept a second home in Fallen Crest, though Sam was already training hard for her next Olympics. I didn’t keep up with her training schedule, but we all helped take care of the kids as much as possible. If they asked, we helped. It was the same on their side too.

“Who’s picking Maddy up?”

“We have her for the night,” I said, struggling to keep my voice even.

Shit. That flame was live and sparking. Reaching for the walkie on the counter, I turned it on and moved into Channing’s arms. The sounds we could hear outside became crystal clear as those voices now sounded as if they were in the same room. We could observe without watching now, and I reached up to twine my arms around his neck.

Channing groaned, picking me up.

My legs went around his waist as he sat me on the counter, his hands going to my ass and pulling me tight against him.

“God, I love you.” He moaned, holding still. His lips hovered over my neck. He slid his hand up to cover my breast. “We did good, didn’t we?”

I knew what he meant, and yes, we did.

Manny’s had been franchised to three other locations. Channing’s Tuesday Tits had a sister Monday Mooners closer to the city. He wasn’t involved with crew business, but his crew brothers were still in our lives every day. They had dinner over here three to four times a week.

But this night was one just for us since we were babysitting Maddy.

The warehouse Channing bought had been renovated recently for our new house. We had a pool in the south end and a walk-around porch that covered every side of the house except for the garage.

Brad had another child. Brandon had two of his own—a set of twins that had come from one of his one-night stands, but it turned out that he and the mother got along so well they’d married last summer.

My dad was loving all his grandpa status. He even took another RV caravan back for a few months of the year.

Suki was still doing her gourmet dinner events—almost every night because we gutted the old house and turned it into Suki’s kitchen place.

I didn’t know the latest on Ava, but I knew she and Roy had dated for a few years while she went to college. She used to check in with us when she was in town, but the last I heard, she was headed to graduate school somewhere. Her parents were beyond proud of her, and that said it all.

Congo had married Becca.

I put up with her presence for a long time. But acceptance had reluctantly and gradually come until now she was one of my most trusted friends.

Moose had ended up marrying a nurse from Fallen Crest. I asked once how they met, and Moose grumbled something about a Peter. I stopped asking after that.

Lincoln had a bedmate; that's all we knew about her.

Chad married someone who came from Ginger Gypsy's group of friends, and therefore, Channing received reports from a lot more visions than he wanted, but that was how they worked—or at least, that's how Chad's wife worked.

But on the whole, yes, we had done quite well.

I was panting twenty minutes later, stretched out on the counter with my pants unbuckled and three of Channing's fingers inside of me. I was riding his hand when I faintly remembered the time.

A car door banged shut.

A second one.

I froze. "Oh shit!"

Channing grunted, his eyes glazed over with lust. "Huh?"

"OH SHIT!"

And then we heard a piercing scream from my little girl, "MOMMA!"

That'd be our little four-year-old. Natessia was my exact replica. The door opened, and we heard Bren call, "Take your goddamn fingers out of your wife. You have three dogs running around tearing up your pillows. You have another kid

covered in duct tape, which Maddy is trying to tear off, and your stupid goat just head-butted my ass.”

Channing gazed down at me, his eyes so loving, and we took another second—just one second. The world stripped away for us, and he mouthed “I love you” before twitching his fingers in a sudden movement, which pushed me over the edge.

I was still trembling as he washed his hands and went to handle everything outside.

Yes. We had done quite well.

And we had a third on the way.

For more Roussou, Crew 2 is coming late spring 2019 with
Bren’s crew!

Go to www.tijansbooks.com for more information.

A NOTE

To the readers,

I know I didn't get the Fallen Crest peeps in Heather and Channing's book that much, so to make up for it, here you go!

I hope you enjoy.

FALLEN CREST BONUS SCENE

TIMELINE IS DURING THE BOY I GREW UP WITH, THE DAY
HEATHER CALLED SAMANTHA ON THE PLANE.

SAMANTHA KADE

I was on the couch when I heard the garage door opening.

Lifting the remote, I turned the television off at the same time I heard two car doors slam.

Nope—there was a third, followed by three male voices. I didn't even need to hear them to know who it was.

Mason, Logan, and Nate. They were together for a few days before Logan had to go back to law school, and Nate took any second he could to be here with us.

The back door opened and Logan's voice got a whole lot louder.

"I'm telling you..." he said, "if we all go in together, we'd make a killing."

"No, Logan."

I grinned faintly, resting my head against the pillow behind me. Mason sounded tired of his brother already. They would've driven from the city, so whatever Logan was talking about, he'd probably been on it the entire drive.

"I don't know, Logan."

Even Nate sounded wary.

Great.

They entered where I was in the media room. Mason passed first, then reversed.

God. He took my breath away.

He was a wide receiver for the New England Pats these days, so he had a trim waist and broad shoulders—he had thinned down from his earlier football position in high school. He had molded his body for speed now, and I was one of luckiest women in the world. I woke up every day to be thrilled by him.

Shirtless, his body was like Van Gogh's *Starry Night* with all the beautiful dips and swirls of his muscles. I could stare at him and never get enough, and right now, with his hair slightly wet and his fleece jacket with a dusting of water over the top, he looked fan-fucking-tastic.

Feeling a slight kick in my stomach, I grinned at him. “Did you stop to get ice cream for me?”

He had a brown bag in his hands, and he set it on a table by the door.

The store was a couple blocks away, and it was raining, and he always seemed to know exactly what our little girl wanted. She was kicking up a storm just now.

I put my hand over my stomach as Mason stepped into the room. His eyes followed my hand, and they warmed. A soft, tender smile washed over his face. It made my heart go pitter-patter every time I saw it.

Recently I'd realized he had a special smile for me, a Samantha smile. And I knew that because now I could see the

other smile he had for our little girl. We'd picked her name already, but we were keeping it secret. We wanted to surprise everyone when she was here.

He nodded. "Jerkoff behind me—" He pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "—was whining, so I figured I'd get you something too."

Logan stepped around him, his own eyes warming when he saw me. Or, I should say, when he saw my stomach.

"Jerkoff," he said absently.

There was no growl. Only smiles here. He didn't care about the insult.

"Thought Whacking here—" He nodded to Mason with his head. "—was an idiot. We don't show up at the house without something for you. We have to have something with us." The side of his mouth tipped up even higher. "We don't want to risk getting killed, you know."

He winked, and I ignored him.

I'd been the least-hormonal pregnant woman—I couldn't say that I knew, because I didn't know many others, but that's what Mason's teammates kept telling him when they came over to the house. They thought I was an alien, or had an alien inside me, because I should've been raging.

I did have my cravings, and I swore I could smell the ice cream in that brown bag.

Whacking. Jerkoff.

I looked at Nate, who was grinning on the other side of Mason. "And you would be?"

"I'm Tug."

Of course. I had no doubt they'd called each other those names in the ice cream shop too. The staff was familiar with them, at least—Logan more than the rest. Logan seemed to stop all the time. That and the local taco place. He claimed he kept getting tacos and ice cream for Taylor, but in the couple years I'd known Logan's other half, she'd never expressed an outright love for either of those foods.

Maybe Logan had his own cravings by sister-in-law proxy? Was that a thing?

“How is the momma-to-be?” Nate asked.

“I'm good.”

Or I was today... Remembering the call I'd gotten earlier, I focused on Mason. “You didn't call Heather, did you? You weren't having her come out to surprise me?”

His green eyes narrowed slightly before he shook his head. He frowned. “No. I was planning on asking her to come closer to your due date, just to be here for you. But not yet. Why?”

Logan snorted, sitting down on one of the leather recliners in the corner. “Bet you fifty bucks Channing was trying to get her out of town for some reason.”

Mason studied him, but didn't say anything.

“You think?” Nate asked.

Logan nodded. “Oh yeah.” He turned to me. “She say that or something?”

“Yeah. Called me from the plane, then something happened and she decided to get off it.”

Mason pulled his phone out, sending a text.

Logan raised his chin. “You texting Channing?”

Mason answered still looking down at his phone. “Yeah. My guess is something’s going on there, and like you said, he wanted Heather out of the way.”

Logan narrowed his eyes. “You thinking we should go out there? Make sure everything is okay?”

Mason lifted his head, his eyes narrowing too. “You looking for an excuse to go back?”

I met Nate’s gaze before we regarded Logan too. Mason was right. Logan sounded like he was fishing for a reason. It wasn’t like him to want to check on Heather.

Logan shrugged. “What? I mean, Taylor might want to visit her pops. Plus, we got folks there now. Folks we actually talk to. We can visit Matteo.”

“I have training.”

“I have school,” Logan shot back at his brother. “Doesn’t mean I can’t swing it.”

Mason’s shoulders raised and lowered slowly. His tone cooled. “This has nothing to do with your sudden idea of franchising Manny’s?”

Logan muffled a curse. “Really? Fucking really?”

“Wait.” I sat up. “What?” I looked between the guys. “Is that an actual thing? Franchising Manny’s?”

Nate sighed, moving behind Mason to sit in the other leather chair. He motioned to Logan. “It’s his sudden brainchild.”

“Not mine. Channing’s. Or, well, Heather’s.” Logan wrinkled his nose, looking indignant.

Mason’s mouth flattened. “Explain more.”

Logan rolled his eyes, kicking his feet up. “Whatever. Yeah, I was talking to Channing a week ago, and he mentioned Heather said something to Brandon about their older brother doing a Manny’s in Florida where he lives. Their dad is there too. It was a bluff from her or something, but I think that’s a good business venture. Heather is kick-ass, plus...” He looked at me. “That means Heather would have to come out here and make that all happen. We could all go in together, get our staff and managers in place, and I think it’d do well.” He motioned to Mason. “Celebrity appearances. It’s a no-brainer, as far as I’m thinking. Plus, it’s something all of us can do together.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And you think Heather would be up for this?”

Nate started laughing.

Mason grinned.

Logan swore again, slumping down in his chair. “No, but I mean, we’re talking future projects. I think it’s a good idea for something long-term.” His eyes darted to mine, a request there.

I already knew what he was going to ask.

I’d be the one to bring it up to Heather.

I’d be the one to quell any of her resistance.

And I’d be the one in charge more than anyone else, because Manny’s was Heather’s baby, and I was Heather’s best friend.

To be honest, I wouldn’t be surprised if Heather went for the idea. There were merits to it, but feeling my little girl kick again in my stomach, I knew I had other pressing matters to handle first.

Circling back to the reason for this conversation, I asked Mason, “Did Channing text you back?”

He pulled his phone out and shook his head. “You can’t get ahold of Heather?”

“Not since she hung up with me. She said it was fine, but she had to go.” I frowned.

“But you’re worried anyway?” Mason asked.

I nodded. “I’m worried anyway.”

He sent another text. “Well, let’s wait. I don’t ask what Channing and his crew do, but I know he’ll get back to me as soon as he can. If you’re worried, he knows Heather will skin his ass alive.”

I nodded, some of my anxiety settling. He was right. Channing was good about getting back to us. So was Heather, as long as she had her phone on her and it was working. She had mentioned wanting to chuck it at one of her chefs one time, and I was pretty sure she’d also thrown it at Channing. He’d ducked and it hit the wall, breaking. It’d been a good week before she got another one.

“Now, if that’s all settled, Sam,” Logan called, already smirking.

“What?”

“What’s the difference between a lawyer and a liar?”

“Logan.” I shook my head. “The fact that you constantly have lawyer jokes and you’re going to be one is just...well...you, I guess.”

“The spelling,” he finished triumphantly. “Ha!”

“Logan, what’s the difference between a lawyer and a gigolo?”

He smirked. “You’re trying to out-lawyer-joke me, Sam? Are you asking for a lawsuit?” He smiled. “There’s no difference. They both screw for pleasure.” He tsked. “Seriously, man. Seriously. How about your turn? What’s the difference between a redhead and a vampire?”

“Don’t even fucking start,” Nate growled, standing up and heading out to the hallway.

Logan followed. “Okay. How about this one? What do you call a redhead with an attitude?”

I could hear Nate shouting from farther inside the house, “I’m not a fucking redhead!”

“No, but you are *fucking* a redhead—”

“Logan, shut up!”

“Come on. One more—”

A door slammed. After a pause, we could hear them again, but I couldn’t make out their words. I turned to look at Mason and found him gazing down at me, a speculative look in his eyes.

“What?” I asked.

“Want to get a dog?”

I almost did a double take. I don’t know what I was expecting, but not that.

“What?” But then I began smiling. “A baby and a puppy? Are you insane?”

He shrugged, coming over to me. Picking me up, he maneuvered us so I was resting between his legs. He sat

underneath me, and his hands cradling our baby.

Seeing him touch her gave me goosebumps every time. I slid my hands over his, and his fingers entwined with mine.

I felt him nuzzle behind my ear. He whispered, “Do you know how much I love you?”

Warmth spread through me. I didn’t need to answer.

He loved me every way there was and everywhere. He loved me totally and completely. He loved me enough to fill up an entire galaxy of stars. He just loved me, and my head fell back to rest against his shoulder. I tipped it up to look up at him from the side.

“Not even a fraction of how much I love you,” I murmured.

His lips moved to touch mine. Tenderly. Delicately. He nipped me playfully at the end, and I felt his cheek moving as he rested his head against mine. “I love you so goddamn much, that’s how much.”

“You think Heather’s okay?” I asked, trying to shake my last shred of worry. I wasn’t just asking about this most recent event. She and Channing had lost their baby after our wedding, and Heather rarely talked about her. I struggled with what to say, and that wasn’t common for our friendship.

But our baby was still coming. She was strong and kicking every day, while they’d lost theirs.

He paused. “I think Heather will be just fine,” he finally said. “No matter their path, no one was made for each other like those two. She and Channing, they’ll get it right.”

I knew he was right, and as if giving her two cents, there came another kick from inside me—this one strong enough

that we saw a quick outline of her foot.

Apparently, Logan Malinda Kade agreed with us.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Oh, holy crap!

I can't believe I'm here writing this right now. I always do this part last! I'm just going to do a whole list of my thanks because there's A LOT!

First, thank you to my agent. Kimberly, you push me and kick my ass, and I don't think you know how much I appreciate you for that. Also, you're a pretty amazing agent, and I am so unbelievably lucky to have you as mine.

Thank you to Debra Anastasia and Helena Hunting. You both are always there for anything! Questions, venting, reading over blurbs, etc. Lol! You both are so beyond supportive, it's inspiring.

Thank you to Jessica and all my proofreaders: Paige, Kara, Amy, Chris, and Rochelle. All of you fit me into your busy schedule, and there's usually never a problem and I am so grateful for you all.

Thank you to Crystal, Eileen, and Amy for reading and giving me feedback to help make this book so much better! You're always there for any question I might have.

Thank you to all the ladies in my reader group! You are so active in there, and you have no clue how much I draw support

and inspiration just from you guys. I rarely worry about keeping my reader group going because of you, and if I need a little extra oomph to keep writing that day, I go in, see your posts, and know I must be doing something right! THANK YOU!

Thank you to Nina for being adaptable, and when I pop into your inbox and say, “Let’s do the cover reveal tomorrow.” You don’t even react. You’re just, “Hell yeah!” I love that and appreciate it so much!

Thank you to Crystal for just about everything! You seriously rock.

Lastly, this book was dedicated to my sister and nephew, but I also want to add a third dedication here to my own relationship with Jason.

He’ll know why.

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CREW

CHAPTER ONE

You aren't supposed to want to die.

That isn't what society wants to hear. It's not supposed to be felt or thought. It's supposed to be ignored. But here I was, watching my crew beat the crap out of a guy, and all I wanted was to trade places with him.

I knew that sounded morbid. It was true, though, and not like the off-the-cuff comment when you bomb your history exam and it's "kill me now!" Or your boyfriend dumps you and "Gurrrrl, I just wanna dieeee! WTF?!"

No. I was talking about the *dark* kind of wanting to die, where it's in the back of your mind, where it's a little door you want to open and disappear through...

Some days it was hard to suppress and harder to ignore, so right now I wasn't doing either of those.

"You're not going to touch my sister again," Jordan growled before delivering probably his fourth punch. "Got it, *asshole?*"

It was my face getting bloodied. Not that guy's.

Jordan straightened to sneer at the guy lying at his feet.

Jordan Pitts.

He was the self-proclaimed leader of our crew. Note here: *self*-proclaimed. As in, he announced it one day. No one objected and off he went, embracing his cocky swagger and thinking he spoke for our group of four. The truth is he does, I guess, but only when we don't have a problem with what he's saying.

Our group isn't a dick-tatorship, whether he believes that or not.

Jordan bent down—with his long, six-foot-two self—grabbed a hold of the guy's shirt, and lifted him in the air. He shook him, growling again in his face, but the guy couldn't answer. His face was broken. Literally. Either Cross or Jordan had punched his cheek so hard it looked busted. His whole face was a mess of blood and bruises. I would've felt sorry except for two things: he'd tried to rape Jordan's sister, and when Jordan had asked him to report himself, he'd added a curse word and his middle finger, and spat on Jordan's shoes.

Apparently this guy didn't know the reputation of our crew, or Jordan himself.

Which made sense because Mallory Pitts just started attending a new private school at a neighboring town and that's where this guy met her. If he had known, he would've run the other way. You had to give the guy some props, though. Instead of lying, he was honest. He told Jordan exactly what he thought of that suggestion. And anyway, if he'd lied, we would've followed up, and when he didn't report himself, this whole beatdown would've happened anyway.

That was my crew.

Along with Jordan, there were two others besides myself—Cross Shaw and Zellman Greenly. My name is Bren Monroe, and even though I'm in the middle of this whole dark diatribe,

and even though we look like the bad guys right now, things aren't always as they seem.

Jordan slammed the guy back down to the ground, then bent over him to issue more threats.

Cross stepped back, and I felt his gaze on me even before I looked up. Yes, there it was. The tawny hazel eyes that so many girls loved. We were family—and not that kind of family. But I'd have to be blind not to understand why so many girls at Roussou High salivated over him.

Six-one. Lean, but built. Cross had a strong, square jaw—one that would clench at times—and a face that was almost prettier than mine. He would've been gorgeous even if he was a girl, a fact I loved to tease him about. But teasing aside, Cross got the girls. He could just show up somewhere, and ten would appear around him. He could nod at a girl, and she'd go to his side for the night, usually be down for anything he wanted.

Cross was the quiet, nice guy...except he wasn't really either of those at all. I mean, he was, but he wasn't. He was generally quiet, but he talked to me. And he was nice, but he could be lethal. Piss him off, and you'd never see him coming. He wasn't like Jordan with the growling and throwing people around. He'd come right up to you, and then you'd be waking up in the hospital a couple days later.

And while I loved Jordan and Zellman, they weren't Cross.

They weren't my best friend, the guy whose closet I crawled into so many nights when I needed a sanctuary from my own hell called home.

I met his eyes as he came toward me. His golden hair and tanned skin made him every pretty boy's nightmare. When

would he wake up and realize he had more potential than all of us? He could go to New York and be a model, or go to Hollywood and be an actor. Why he stayed in Roussou was beyond me.

He wasn't messed up like the rest of us. He wasn't messed up like me.

"You got the look," he said, coming to stand next to me.

Yeah. I knew what he was referencing, but I didn't take the bait.

"Okay, fuckhead," Jordan announced. "We're going to leave you now, and if you think you'd like to turn any of us in, don't forget what we have on you. Got it? Nod your head, dickwad."

Jordan was the intellectual here. He was smart.

The guy made a gurgling sound and managed to move his head a bit.

It sufficed for Jordan, and he nodded. "Good." He turned, his long legs crossing the ground toward us.

I leaned against the bed of his truck, Cross still next to me, as Jordan opened the driver's side door.

Zellman had been standing nearby at the ready. That's what he tended to do—always lurking behind Jordan and waiting. Since Jordan had come over to us now, so had Zellman. He launched himself up to the opened truck bed behind us.

I heard the cooler open, and he tossed a beer Jordan's way.

"Bren? Cross?" he called.

Cross shook his head.

I turned around to look at the guys. “I’m good. Thanks.”

“You sure?” Zellman extended a beer.

“I am.”

Jordan’s eyes flicked upward—his response to a lot of the things I did. We had each other’s backs, but to Jordan that meant doing everything he wanted. Sometimes we disagreed, and every time I didn’t do what he did, he took that as disagreeing with him.

Family doesn’t work that way.

I watched him, just for a moment.

One day we would battle.

One day it would be me against him.

One day his disapproval would make me snap, or one day he wouldn’t *just* be a jerk because I wasn’t doing what he wanted. He would go too far, and that would be the day I’d meet him halfway.

I already knew how the lines would shift in our group when that happened. Cross would back me up. Zellman would probably back Jordan. It’d be two against two. Even though I was the only girl in the group—one of only two girls in the entire system—I could handle my own, and I knew I would enjoy lighting into Jordan on that day. But that day wasn’t today, and I hoped it would take a long time to come. I did care for Jordan like a brother, though he wasn’t my actual blood.

“So.” Jordan slammed the door shut again, the force rocking his truck for a second. He propped up a leg. “What’s the plan for tonight?”

This was the last night before our senior year started.

Sunday night. People had been to church this morning, and we'd beaten someone bloody this evening. There was irony in there somewhere. I was just too tired to find it.

“Ryerson has a party tonight,” Zellman offered. “I say we go.” His shaggy curls bounced around as his blue eyes darted between us.

“Yeah?” Jordan’s eyes lit up.

Zellman nodded. “I’m down to go. I think Sunday Barnes got new boobs this summer.” He grinned. “I’m hoping to check ’em out personally.”

Jordan laughed. “I’m good with that.” He tipped his head back, finishing his beer, and then tossed the bottle into the trees behind us. “Bren, Cross, what about you guys?”

Cross would wait for me, so I said, “I’m good for the night.”

“No party?”

“I’m gonna head home.”

Jordan’s disapproval settled in the air over us, but no one said a word.

“Think I’m down with you guys for the party,” Cross added after a moment.

Zellman thrust a fist in the air. “Hell yeah. Take it.” He offered his half-emptied beer.

Cross laughed, but shook his head. “I’ll wait for the good liquor there. Ryerson always has something.”

“Yeah! That’s what it’s about.” Zellman finished his beer and reached into the cooler for a second. “Jordan?”

“I gotta drive.” He glanced to me. “Ride home?”

I looked over to where the guy still lay on the ground. He hadn't moved.

I shook my head. "Think I'll walk. I can cut through the trees."

"You sure?"

Cross moved around us, clapping Jordan on the shoulder. "Let's go. Bren can take care of herself." He glanced back to me, circling around the front of the truck to get into the passenger side. He knew I wanted to be on my own tonight. He knew it because he could feel it. Just like I could almost hear his thoughts now.

She always has.

I finished in my own head, *Always will.*

Cross' statement seemed to settle the other guys, and Jordan started the truck. He circled around me, kicking up a cloud of dust, and zoomed back down the way we'd come. He saluted me with a finger as he passed by. Zellman had settled into the bed, sitting by the cooler, and he held up his beer as his goodbye.

I shook my head, the smallest hint of a smile tugging at my mouth, but that was all the reaction they got.

Once they were gone, it was just me, the bloodied guy, and the same dark quiet I'd felt earlier.

It came out of nowhere at times, swallowing me whole. Some days it would vanish just as quickly. Other times, like tonight, it lingered.

It used to scare me. I now missed it when it wasn't here, but I always knew it would move on. It was like a firefly

slipping away into the night. When that happened, I was left with the feeling that I'd let something slip through my fingers.

This night, that firefly remained.

It warmed me.

Click here for more [Crew](#).

LOGAN KADE

CHAPTER ONE

“Logan Motherfucking Kade.”

I heard the slow and sensual drawl behind me and smirked. I'd always know that voice, no matter what frame of mind she was in. Tate Sullivan had screamed underneath me, at me, and behind my back. Anyway there was, I'd had her. Lover. Enemy. Friend. Fuck buddy. We were all of those, and she dropped a bomb on her way out the last time she was in my life. Turning around, she was walking towards me with a sexy stroll, midriff showing under a white halter top and swinging those hips encased in tight-as-skin jeans. I narrowed my eyes and leaned back against my Escalade, sliding my hands inside my front pockets. “Tate Mother Slutting Sullivan.” There was no warmth in my voice. “What do you want?”

She stopped and lifted an eyebrow. “You're mad.”

I grunted. That wasn't a question, and she knew better than to give me an opening. I'd fillet her alive, but instead, all I said was, “You fucked with my relationships the last time I saw you.”

“Uh. Yeah.” Her frosted pink lips pressed together, and her eyes glanced away for a second. “About that, you know that wasn't to get at you, right? That was to fuck things up with your brother. He's the asshole I wanted to hurt.”

“Not making it better, Tate.”

“Well.” She gestured behind me to the lit up mansion. Hip-hop music blared, even sounding loud where we were, a few yards away in the parking area. “I saw Mason and Samantha inside. They seem happy and still sickeningly in love, so all’s still good in the Kade/Strattan trio.”

“You told Sam that I was in love with her.”

“To my credit, I thought you were.”

“Bullshit.” I pushed off from the Escalade and started toward her. Her eyes widened, and she backed up. I kept advancing. I wasn’t going to hurt her. With all the history between us, physical violence had never been present. Manipulation. Backstabbing deceit. Her just being a slut as she propositioned my brother when we were dating—yeah, that had all been there, but when Tate came back in our lives, she and I became friends. Well, we were fuck buddies, but those were the best types of friends in my opinion.

“You’re scared of me now, Tate? Not when you told my brother’s girlfriend that I was in love with her. You didn’t just hurt Mason. You screwed with all of us. I love Sam. Always have, but only as a friend and a future sister. How’d you feel if I did something like that? If I fucked with your family, the people who you hold most dear?”

She stopped, her back against a truck, and I stepped closer. Looking down, holding her gaze, I let her see the anger there. She didn’t look away. There was shame in her blue eyes, but resolve, too. Her chin trembled and then hardened, and she lifted her chin higher, standing higher as we stood toe to toe. “You did fuck with my life.”

“You mean when we dated for two years, I was in love with you, and you went to my brother’s room to have sex with him? You mean after that, when he called me while you were propositioning him and my dad was nice enough to get you a driver to take you home?”

She bit down on her lip, her eyebrows pinching forward together. “I was naked, and you were both going to cast me out like that.”

I shrugged. “Who was the one who took your clothes off?”

Her. The truth was silent from Tate, until she said, softly, “I thought we were okay, Logan. That’s why I came out here.” She leaned forward, grazing her breasts against my chest. “We were friends when I left.”

We were more than friends, and I reached up, cupping the back of her neck. She shivered, closing her eyes as I said, “When are you going to learn, Tate?”

Her eyes opened. She waited.

“When you fuck with one of mine, you fuck with me.” I leaned forward, my forehead resting against hers. “And you fucked with my family.”

She knew this wasn’t going anywhere. She pulled her head back, out of my hold, and leaned against the truck again. Her shoulders lowered a centimeter. “I didn’t think you’d get hurt by what I said. I really didn’t mean that. I just wanted to hurt Mason. He’s the asshole.”

“No, Tate. We’re both assholes. You just like how I feel inside of you.”

“God.” She shoved me back. Her eyes flared. “You can piss me off.”

My lips curved up. I was being the asshole she liked to screw, and we both knew it. I saw the old lust coming back over her. Her skin was warming. Her lips parted. Her nipples hardened under her shirt. But I meant what I said. “What are you doing here, Tate?”

Her bottom lip stuck out. “You’re going back to Cain U tomorrow.” She rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “I thought one last night, but I can see that’s not going to happen.” She gestured around the parking area. “I thought you were waiting for me. That’s what we used to do. The party’s inside, and you’re out here.”

“Who said I was waiting for you?”

She opened her mouth, then stopped. No sound came out. “God, you’re a prick.”

I rolled my shoulders back. “You’re lucky this is all you’re getting. Did Mason see you inside?”

“No. I saw ’em in the back with Nate, then saw you heading out here. I thought maybe you saw me, too, and here I came.”

My mouth twitched. I could do so much with that last statement, but I held back. She’d take it as flirting. “I came out here for a chick, but it wasn’t you. Sorry.”

“Same old Logan.” Her eyes slid down me and back up, a soft sigh leaving her. “Screwing girls, partying, and,” her eyes fell back to my hand and lingered there. She touched my red knuckles. “still fighting.”

I pulled my hand away. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

She sighed, touching the corner of my mouth before letting her hand fall back to her side. “I’m sorry for hurting you. I know I did.”

She was sincere and I frowned at that. “That was a long time ago. I got you back. We made your life hell in school afterwards.”

She groaned, grinning up at me. “You did. Holy shit, you and Mason both did, but I still want to apologize for what I did. I did you wrong, and I’m sorry for that.”

“Apology accepted.” I waited. Tate didn’t do anything without reason. She probably did come out here to proposition me for one more night, and if this had been two years ago, I would’ve taken her up on that, but she hurt my family. There was no going back from that. “What’s going on with you, Tate? Why’d you really come out here?”

“I really did come out to get in your pants, but I know that’s not going to happen.” She lifted up her slim shoulders. “I came to this party to find you and to apologize again. I heard through the grapevine that what I said to Sam had hurt you too. I’m off to my college tomorrow, too, so who knows the next time I’ll get the opportunity to do this in person again.”

I nodded, my suspicions still clouded in my mind. “Okay. Thank you for apologizing again.”

“Logan!”

Tate glanced over her shoulder, seeing the real reason I’d come out to this parking lot, and she rolled her eyes before meeting mine. The girl didn’t matter. She had a good rack, and I loved how she gave blow jobs, but who she was wasn’t important. Both Tate and I knew that even if the girl thought she was, I never lied to them. I never made promises where they’d be my girlfriends. On the rare occasion, I’d have to hurt their feelings, but more often than not, they accepted what I offered. A good time. That was all, and with this girl, I’d

forget her name in the morning, or even in an hour depending how good she was. For once, a shadow of doubt crossed my mind. I had loved Tate, or I thought I had. She was my first serious girlfriend and I only had one other since her. I loved sex. I loved to party. And yes, I loved to fight, too, but I never considered changing...until I saw the disappointment in my first ex.

Then I shrugged that off. That was crazy.

“Okay. Well, see you, Logan.”

I nodded. “See you, Tate.”

She turned, one hand hooked in her jean pocket as the other girl slowed, passing her by. Tate ignored the girl and said, “Give me a call if you ever change your ways.”

My side-grin turned cocky. “Tate, if that ever happens, you’d be the last girl I’d fall for.”

She laughed. “And there’s the asshole again. Thanks. I almost forgot for a second there.”

“No problem. I’m here if you need an asshole.”

She shook her head and sauntered away, holding two fingers up over her shoulder. “Deuces, Kade. I never thought I’d be saying this, but I really do hope your next year is a great one.” She paused, glancing back, and her voice came out softly, “I hope you fall in love. You can feel what the rest of us feel.”

She left after that, and I shook my head, before pulling the girl against me. That was never going to happen, and then I lowered my head, my lips finding hers, and I stopped thinking altogether.

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