

We
Are the
Brennans

CHAPTER ONE

Sunday

The grinding noise and vibration of the rumble strips under her passenger-side tires snapped Sunday to attention. Getting behind the wheel had been a bad idea. She tightened her grip at ten and two. Then she worked her eyes a bit, blinking and widening them, because a passing “Construction Ahead” sign briefly doubled. Her exit was coming up, just a few more minutes. She checked her speed and nudged the accelerator. Denny used to tell her the cops looked for cars going too slow, a sign of drunk driving.

She’d ordered an Uber, but the estimated time of arrival kept getting pushed back. Probably some Hollywood event going on, which always played havoc with the traffic. At some point she looked up from her phone to realize she’d been left alone with the bartender. That’s when she rushed out of there and decided to chance it.

It had been a last-minute invite that afternoon. Mia—or was it Maia?—another waitress who’d only been at the diner for a couple months, asked Sunday to come out for her birthday. She almost said no and went home. Like she did most nights. But if she went home she would open the email from Jackie and stare at the photo again, and that thought was too damn

painful. She wanted to be anywhere other than her lonely apartment that night. So she'd gone to the annoying hipster bar with the LED ice cubes to attend a birthday party for a girl she barely knew.

She leaned forward in the driver's seat and slowed her speed. This work zone was tricky. There were tight lines of orange barrels along both sides of the road, shifting lanes around in some random way. The lights on top of the barrels blurred and blended with the electric speed signs.

That bartender must have thought she was flirting with him because he'd been chatty, offered some cheesy compliment on her dimples. But she'd only been watching him pour her drinks, trying—and failing—to keep count. It was probably mixing alcohols that had put her over the edge. Denny would shake his head and call her an idiot. Her brother always said that was just asking for trouble.

Early in the night she'd had a get-to-know-you-better talk with Mia/Maia, and afterward Sunday had just wanted to quiet her mind for a while. Mia/Maia was turning twenty-four that day, soon to complete her graduate degree, and had recently gotten engaged. The diner job was just a stop-gap because her real life was about to start. Everything Sunday learned about the younger woman was a by-contrast commentary on her own life. If Jackie's email had started her down Regret Road that morning, the conversation with Mia/Maia had sped up the trip.

When the world started to spin in a scary way, along with her stomach, she cursed herself again for drinking so much. What the hell had she been thinking—she knew better. She looked for a place to pull over but there was none. She didn't know what the hell this road project was about, but her car was pinned in between the barrels, which seemed to be taking her through a maze. The swirl of lights and painted lines in the wrong places on the road only made it harder to thread the needle. She bumped up against one of the barrels on her right side and the car jerked back and forth a bit before she steadied the wheel.

All she had to do was make it home. Her exit was up ahead, though it was difficult to spot the turnoff among the sea of orange markers. She'd drink a gallon of water, down a couple ibuprofen, and head straight to bed. No detour to the laptop. No opening Jackie's email again.

When a concrete barrier materialized before her out of thin air she slammed on the brake with both feet. She heard the roaring squeal of tires, felt the violent resistance of her old Toyota as the seat belt dug into her chest and shoulder. But she knew it was too late.

Another Denny-ism came to her: “You have fucked this up on a grand scale.”

Then she slammed into concrete and everything went black.

CHAPTER TWO

Denny

You have fucked this up on a grand scale,” he told himself.

He was staring at the spreadsheets and statements that comprised the pub’s financials. No real purpose in doing that. Glaring at them some more with his hands shoved in his hair was not going to intimidate the numbers into changing from red to black.

The sun hadn’t risen yet. The only light came from the stained glass pendant chandelier hanging above the kitchen table, which was dimmed to a medium glow. He’d given up on sleep an hour before; he could only stare at the ceiling for so long. After making a pot of sludgy coffee—Theresa usually made the coffee and he hadn’t gotten it right since she left him four days ago—he decided to take another look at the ledger. See if he could finagle the loan payment that was months past due from some hidden reserve he’d overlooked. But as his mother used to say, *You can’t get blood from a stone, son.*

He jumped when his cell phone rang in the 4:26 A.M. silence and assumed it was Jackie. Middle-of-the-night calls from his younger brother were not unheard of, though Jackie only called him as a last resort, when he was out of options for a ride home and too far or too shit-faced to walk.

Denny would never say no, but Jackie would have to sit through a gnarly lecture about growing the fuck up the whole drive home.

He grabbed the buzzing phone before it woke anyone else. “Yeah?”

When the crisp male voice on the other end asked if he was Mr. Dennis Brennan, his gut twisted. It wasn’t Jackie. But maybe it was another collect call from Westchester County Corrections informing him that Jackie had been arrested again. He sat up straighter while he confirmed his identity to the caller.

“Mr. Brennan, this is Officer Becker with the LAPD. I’m calling about Ms. Sunday Brennan. There’s a card in her wallet that identifies you as her emergency contact.”

A low ringing started in Denny’s ears. He didn’t have time to be relieved about Jackie. “Yeah.” He swallowed. “She’s my sister.”

“Mr. Brennan, your sister was in a car accident tonight. Looks like she’s gonna be okay, but she’s on her way to Cedars-Sinai.”

Denny took a breath. “What happened?”

“She hit a median barrier on the highway and flipped her car. Fortunately she was wearing her seat belt, and no one else was involved.”

“But she’s all right?”

“Appears so. She was conscious and talking at the scene. She was damn lucky.”

Flipped her car? Jesus. When was the last time he even talked to Sunday . . . Probably last Christmas when she called and they each took a quick turn saying hello to her. She only bothered to check in a few times a year.

“I don’t recognize this area code,” Becker said. “Are you in California?”

“No, I live in New York.” He glanced around the large, cluttered kitchen, laid his hand flat on the thick trestle table, as if to confirm where he was.

“Is there someone here in LA that can get to the hospital and check on her?”

They had no family out there. He didn’t know any of her friends, didn’t even know if she had a boyfriend. It’s not like she kept them informed. “I don’t really know much about her life out there. I’m not sure who can check on her.”

“Well, maybe you or another family member should get out here.”

Something sounding like judgment had crept into Becker’s voice. Denny was tempted to describe how much he had on his plate, what would be involved in making a sudden trip to the West Coast right now. For a sister who had all but disappeared from their lives five years ago, he might add. And there was no one else who could go. Jackie would have been the only realistic option, but he couldn’t violate his probation by leaving the state without prior approval.

“Mr. Brennan, you should know your sister was drinking heavily. We didn’t even need the BAC to know she was drunk. We could smell it.”

Getting drunk had never been Sunday’s thing.

“She’s pretty beat up,” Becker said. “Her driver’s license will be confiscated, and she’ll be facing charges.”

Nice. Another sibling facing charges. And how did anyone live and work in LA without a car? Denny wasn’t even sure exactly what she was doing for a job, just that she had a position with some media company. Or maybe it was an ad agency.

His eyes drifted to the double doors of the stainless fridge, which were covered in calendars, Molly’s drawings, and family photos. He sought out a particular picture, the one of him and his three younger siblings from nine years ago at their parents’ anniversary shindig, a surprise party Sunday had worked like a dog to pull off. There was an obvious resemblance thanks to the thick brown hair, hazel eyes, and square chins. You couldn’t tell from the picture that Sunday had gotten no sleep the night before, because twenty-year-olds could do that. Young and fresh in a breezy summer dress, the only girl nestled among her brothers in their khakis and white button-downs. Long wavy hair loose around her shoulders, infectious smile revealing deep dimples. But he remembered how, right up until their startled parents walked into the room, she’d been running to and fro, checking off lists, ordering the rest of them around. She’d wanted everything to be perfect for their parents. That was the kind of thing Sunday did back then.

Denny pictured her waking up. Alone. “Do you have any idea how long she’s going to be in the hospital?” he asked.

“At least a couple days. And I’m guessing she’ll need some help after that, getting home and whatnot . . .”

Who was he trying to kid, he was going to LA. He would get out there, make sure she was okay, maybe learn a little about her life. He was curious, particularly after this call. Perhaps things hadn’t worked out for her quite as well as he’d assumed. Or maybe it was just too much partying. Either way, it seemed Sunday had received some of that comeuppance their mother used to warn them about.

“Okay,” he said. “I can get there by tonight.”

“I’ll let the hospital know.”

Denny thanked him for the call, which seemed an ironic thing to do, and hung up.

By any measure this was not a good time to be leaving, and more than once that morning it occurred to him that he was inconveniencing himself to such a degree for Sunday, who had checked out of this family long ago. He could have just called her at the hospital, sent some flowers. But that didn’t feel right. Maybe it was knowing he was her emergency contact—that, despite the time and distance, she still wanted him to look out for her.

Arrangements had to be made for coverage at the pub since Kale was away—this all would have been much easier if his business partner had been home instead of attending a funeral in Ireland. Denny broke the news about Sunday’s accident to his dad and Jackie, who both had a lot of questions Denny couldn’t answer. Most of them amounted to: *What the hell was she thinking?* They all agreed not to tell Shane until they had more info on her condition, though there was a possibility his dad might slip. Lately his short-term memory was inconsistent. Denny called his auntie Clare and asked her to check on his dad each morning, make sure he took his pills. He couldn’t afford to mess with his blood pressure meds. Clare said of course she would check on her brother, didn’t she always? And, she added, she’d known living in that debauched city would do Sunday in. Denny could practically hear the sign of the cross over the phone.

In the middle of all that he paused to take Molly to kindergarten. It

was the highlight of each morning and he wasn't about to give it up just because Theresa had taken their daughter and left to stay with her sister, Angie, because he "wasn't communicating" with her. But it meant he had to drive to Angie's place first to pick her up.

He lit and relished a long-awaited Marlboro—if Theresa was going to take a break from their marriage, he was going to take a break from his vow to never smoke again—while he drove through the neighborhood he'd lived in his whole life. West Manor leaned toward upper middle class. It was thirty miles north of Manhattan, largely a commuter town because the high-paying finance jobs were in the city. There was a lot of Colonial and Shingle-style architecture, traditional homes that were roomy but close together. His parents had found West Manor thirty years ago while looking for relief from the growing younger crowd of McLean Avenue in Yonkers, the self-proclaimed thirty-third county of Ireland. Located twenty miles farther north along the Taconic State Parkway, West Manor was a family-centric suburb with good schools and athletic fields, a thriving construction industry, and the small but strong Irish Catholic community Denny's mother had craved.

Angie lived in the Manor Condos on the far west side of town, along with a lot of other divorced people, which, to Denny, didn't bode well. Before pulling up in front he tossed his cigarette out the window and popped in some gum.

His entire mood lifted in a single instant when Molly came bounding out to greet him, her little arms wrapping around his neck as he scooped her up high. Her soft black curls were pulled into a long ponytail, and she wore denim overalls and her favorite jacket, a black parka with her soccer club name, West Manor Strikers, embroidered across the back in red letters. It was too warm for April, but Molly would not be parted from it. Theresa followed her down the walkway in a long cardigan over a tank top and the yoga tights he liked to watch her move in, her wild hair gathered high on her head.

He busied himself wrangling Molly into her car seat, which gave him a moment to choke down the emotion that surged through him. The ini-

tial relief at seeing them was followed by some combination of panic and anger that rose up every time he had to drive to this fucking condo complex on the other side of town to *visit* his family.

“Daddy . . .” Molly rolled her wide eyes. “You’re not doing it right.” She pointed out where he’d gone wrong with the car seat straps. He deliberately went wrong again and she laughed at him, the dimples she’d somehow inherited from her aunt digging into her soft round cheeks.

After he had Molly buckled in, he closed the door and turned to Theresa. She stood with one arm across her middle, a coffee mug in the other hand. Theresa was five foot nine, just a couple inches shorter than him. She had a boot-camp-workout body and an attitude that dared anyone to mess with her. But the skin around her eyes looked tender, like she hadn’t been getting much sleep either. He wanted to ask questions: Why was she putting them all through this? When would she come home? How much longer did she think it would take Molly to realize this wasn’t just a visit with Aunt Angie? But he could tell from her arched brows and the no-nonsense set of her mouth that she would just give him the same answer he’d already heard—*I’ll come home when things change*. So instead he told her about Sunday’s accident, hoping it would prompt some sympathy, maybe even an offer to come back and help out. But all she said was, “You better go check on her. That doesn’t sound like Sunday.”

Once they were on their way Denny explained he would be gone for a couple days and Molly started in with the questions.

“Daddy, why don’t I know Aunt Sunday?”

“Because she moved to California before you were born.” He glanced in the rearview mirror to see Molly’s forehead scrunch up.

“Why doesn’t she visit?”

He’d asked himself that one many times. “She’s very busy with work.”

She considered that for a moment, her little arms crossed while she looked out her window. “Well, if I had brothers I would visit them.”

He let that sit.

“Daddy?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you give Granda his pills this morning? I don’t want him to forget since Mommy’s not there.”

“Yeah, baby. I gave him his pills.”

“And did you check Shane’s calendar?”

He’d forgotten about that. “Yep. Don’t worry.”

She spent the rest of the drive telling him about a boy in her class who was “super annoying” because he wouldn’t settle down during reading time. Apparently Molly was trying to counsel him, AKA tell him what to do, but he wouldn’t listen to her.

Most parents pulled up to the curb and watched their kids run inside, but Denny parked and walked with Molly, like he did every morning. As soon as they were out of the car her little hand burrowed into his. He would have stopped time if he could, and listened all day as she prattled on about her art projects and plans for recess. At the front steps he knelt down and gave her a hug.

When she stepped back her perky nose wrinkled. “You smell funny, Daddy. Like the guys who smoke outside the pub.”

Jesus, she didn’t miss much.

She kept her hands on his shoulders. “Maybe when you get back it will be time for us to come home.”

Denny swallowed through a squeeze in his throat. “That would be great, Molls. But it’s nice you and Mom are helping Aunt Angie out for a while.”

Molly nodded and rolled her eyes. “Yeah. She needs it.”

They hugged again, then Denny watched her jog up the steps and into the school before he headed back to his car.

Taking this trip right now was a bad idea. He should stay here and meet with Billy Walsh about missing another loan payment. He should stay and make sure there were no more delays with the opening of their second location. If one more thing went wrong at the new site, one more unexpected expense came up, he was sunk. Not only would he lose the business, he’d likely lose his family as well.

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He arrived at LAX around 7 p.m. and Uber'd straight to the hospital, a half-hour ride through the congested highways and streets of his sister's adopted city. It was hard to picture her there, among the hazy sprawling metropolis that went on as far as the eye could see. If she'd been looking for the complete opposite of their hometown, with its population of ten thousand and village-feel, she'd found it.

Once Denny had been alone on the plane, nursing a beer with nothing but time to think, it had really sunk in. Sunday could have been killed or killed someone else. She'd always been so responsible, annoyingly so at times. This just didn't fit with the sister he knew. Truth was he didn't know her anymore. Whenever they spoke it was all surface info, fleeting and forgettable. Everything she said indicated she was living the dream.

The dream had brought Sunday to the West Coast in the first place. She'd always wanted to be a writer, and five years ago she up and moved to LA after receiving a job offer to write content for websites. Anyone who knew her was dumbfounded by her decision. She'd never so much as mentioned leaving New York. Her entire family was there, and they were a tight-knit group.

But what truly stunned everyone back then was that she left Kale. Not a family member or friend saw that one coming. Certainly not Kale.

The Uber dropped him in front of the vast medical complex that was Cedars-Sinai and it took him a few minutes to locate the non-intensive care unit. A nurse looked Sunday up in the computer and pointed him in a direction with a room number, informing him that visiting hours were over soon. He wheeled his carry-on down the wide, hushed corridor. His hope was to get a key to Sunday's apartment and stay there, avoid the cost of a hotel. Though she didn't know he was coming yet; he'd decided to surprise her. And maybe he'd been a little afraid she'd tell him not to bother.

The door to her room was open, the lights lowered for the evening. He parked his case under the window, turned to her, and sucked in his breath.

Fading sunlight streamed across a sleeping Sunday, who looked small

and shrunken in the adjustable hospital bed with the side rails. The first thing to grab his eye was the large splint on her left arm that ended above her elbow. It was propped on a pillow beside her. As his gaze moved upward, he couldn't help the "Jesus Christ" that slipped out. Her face was covered in varying shades of deep red, which, he knew from personal experience, would turn lovely hues of purple. There was a white bandage across her nose; maybe she'd broken it. The longer he looked, the more details seeped in: small cuts on her cheeks, presumably from glass. Lacerations on her arms, some creeping out from under the splint. An angry gash on the left side of her forehead that had been stitched up. They had an IV going into her arm and a heart rate monitor clipped to her finger.

Without taking his eyes off her battered face, he lowered himself into the chair by the bed. Memories hit his gut like tennis balls from a machine: Sunday running to him in tears in grade school because Bobby Brody flipped up her skirt. Denny and Kale had made Bobby pay sorely for that one, and it had been well worth the parent conferences and detentions. The time she had to serve a three-day in-school suspension in junior high after punching a boy who called Shane a retard. Throughout her sentence Denny, Kale, and Jackie had taken turns giving her the thumbs-up and making faces through the classroom window for moral support.

He thought about what a good sport she'd been, up for a Hot Wheels session when he had no one else around, letting the boys rope her into ball games and skateboard stunts. How she would stand with her arms crossed and hip cocked when she meant business. The way she cheered louder than anyone else at his and Kale's soccer games, and spent endless hours helping Shane.

Floating just under the anger was the stinging realization that he missed her. Or maybe that was part of the anger. He didn't know.

Dr. Kelley, thatch of white hair on a tall rumpled frame, stopped in a few minutes later to provide a report. Her arm was fractured and would be put in a hard cast the next day. She had sustained a concussion that could cause short-term migraines or nausea. The cuts on her cheeks and nose

would heal, though the gash on the side of her head would leave a scar. And the bruising would fade over time, but first it would get worse. Dr. Kelley—Dad would be glad to know her medical care was in Irish hands—wanted to see how she was doing with the head injury, but she'd likely be discharged in two to three days.

When the doc mentioned her blood alcohol level had been 0.19 Denny felt his shoulders slump. He'd assumed she was over the limit, but not by that much. As the owner of a pub he was well versed in BAC levels. At around a hundred and twenty pounds, Sunday had probably consumed five to six drinks, possibly more depending on how long she'd been at it. Maybe this was a thing with her now, this kind of drinking.

He ended up spending the night in the hospital, dozing in the chair next to her bed. But he'd had to work for it after the nurse initially said no.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Brennan—"

"Please, call me Denny."

The young brunette in blue scrubs smiled up at him. "Denny. I'm sorry, but it's against hospital policy."

"I totally understand. The last thing I want is to get anyone in trouble." He ran a hand through his hair, mussing it slightly, and stepped closer to her, glanced at her name tag. "It's just, I traveled across the country today, Amy, so I could be here when my little sister wakes up. You know, so she's not alone, and scared."

She glanced over her shoulder and leaned in. "Tell you what. I'll try to be the one to check on her tonight so no one else comes in here."

He gave her a broad smile. "Thank you."

"But, if someone else catches you . . ."

Denny touched her arm. "You were never here."

She pointed at him and grinned. "I'll see if I can find an extra dinner tray for you."

He winked at her as she turned to go.

"Some things never change."

It took a moment to realize the raspy voice belonged to Sunday. She peered at him from the bed, her eyes so puffy it was hard to tell they were open.

He pointed after Amy. "She's going to bring me dinner."

One side of his sister's mouth curled up. "Course she is."

He sat down in the chair next to the bed. She was like someone he hardly knew and yet so familiar. Strangers with shared memories.

"I can't believe you came," she said.

"Thought I better see what the hell was going on out here. How're you feeling?"

She took a breath and winced. "Like it's all about to start hurting." Her voice cracked and her speech was slow, probably due to her swollen everything. "How do I look?"

"Like hammered shit."

She tried to smile.

He crossed his arms.

After a moment she turned toward the ceiling and swallowed, blinked several times. Tears spilled down toward the pillow and Denny's body deflated a bit. He had planned to keep his distance, fulfill his obligation in a cool and professional manner. Be the big brother and make sure she was okay but allow his disapproval to leak through.

Instead, he reached out and gave her good hand a squeeze.

She squeezed back. "Thanks for coming."

When the Uber turned off the highway the next morning and headed into an industrial area, he questioned if he'd gotten the address right. He didn't know LA, but he knew a sketchy part of town when he saw it.

He was glad he had stayed with her overnight, even though actual sleep was impossible in the rigid plastic chair. They didn't talk much. She was exhausted and even minimal movement caused pain. Besides, she had no memory of the accident, had trouble sustaining a simple conversation. But throughout the night she woke for short intervals, turning to him each time, as if to make sure he was still there before she drifted off again. When someone came early in the morning to prep her arm for a cast, he figured that was his chance to catch a shower at her apartment.

He was dropped off in front of a nondescript two-story stucco building crisscrossed by a rusty metal fire escape. There were bars on all the

lower windows. Over the years Sunday had hinted at a nice building, a trendy neighborhood. He had no idea when she moved to this shithole. Maybe she'd always been there.

His concerns were confirmed when the key she'd given him actually fit the exterior lock. He climbed a flight of stairs, walked down a dim, narrow hall, and entered her studio apartment—or was there a name for something smaller than a studio? It was barely a room, with a phone-booth-sized bathroom and a “kitchen” that amounted to a mini-fridge, a microwave, and a hot plate.

But as he soaked it in he had to smile: tiny as it was, she'd made it hers. The walls were painted a light gray, and the large area rug was a swirl of muted pastel colors. A double bed sat along one wall, the comforter covered in large blue butterflies. The opposite wall was occupied by a gold retro love seat and a simple desk, which held a laptop and a pile of yellow legal pads.

There were more signs of his sister in the narrow jam-packed bookshelves, with more books stacked on the floor, and a linen bulletin board hanging above the desk. It was covered with photos, most of them pictures of family. Him and his siblings at various ages. Their parents in front of the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston a few years before Mom died. A large picture of the exterior of the pub, the Gaelic translation of their name front and center over the door: Ó'Braonáin. There were also pictures of Kale and Sunday together, a couple from high school, others from years later. None of the photos were recent, and none with faces he didn't recognize.

Several small framed drawings sat on the desk—a sketch of their house in West Manor, simple portraits of each family member. Jackie's work. He must have sent them over the years. With a little prick of resentment Denny wondered if Sunday stayed in closer contact with Jackie than she did with the rest of them.

He sat in her desk chair and swiveled around to take a closer look. Some landscape prints on the wall, probably Impressionists, because those were her favorite. A clothing rack that was less than half-full, but Sunday had never been big into clothes. A corner shelf with a few basic dishes. He

picked up a black polo shirt that was lying on the arm of the love seat. A badge pinned to the upper left side read "Welcome to Dick's Diner!"

None of this jibed with the life he thought his sister was living, with her intimations of a developing career and busy social life. How many times had he lambasted her in his mind while he schlepped Mom and Shane to all their appointments, tried to save Jackie from himself, moved his family back into the house because Dad needed help . . . Visions of her soaking up sun at the beach or partying on some roof deck, living the life of Riley. No one to worry about but herself. At least in that scenario he could understand why she left and stayed away. This was worse. Her life here appeared downright lonely, but she still chose it over coming home.

After she was discharged the next day they both took an Uber to her apartment. She was quiet on the drive; she had been most of the morning, like she was deep in troubled thought. It had started when she carefully heel-toed to the mirror in the hospital bathroom to survey the damage up close.

"My God. I look like something from a horror flick. Look at my eyes." Her irises were swimming in pools of crimson and her face was moving into full-stage blue-purple bruising, darkest at the bridge of her nose. Her choice of a black cast exacerbated an already bleak picture.

"You burst a bunch of capillaries," he said. "They'll go back to normal."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. It happened to me once after a fight in high school."

Shortly after that they were visited by a brusque LAPD officer who skipped all pleasantries, officially cited her for driving under the influence, and confiscated her license, replacing it with a temporary driving permit that was only good for thirty days or until her court date. Given her uneasy expression since then, the consequences seemed to be truly dawning on her.

Her movements were slow and unsteady as they climbed the stairs to her apartment, and as soon as they got inside she collapsed into her chair, resting her bulky cast on top of her desk.

"You hungry?" he asked. "I could run out and get something."

She shook her head. Her face and body sagged as she looked around her apartment. He could almost watch reality setting in. She'd be thinking about her next steps: calling work, losing her license, lawyers' fees, and hospital bills.

He sat on the love seat and made a decision he'd been deliberating about for the better part of a day. "I have an idea I want you to consider."

She raised her ruined face to him and he tried not to wince. It still caught him off guard to see her that way.

"I think you should come home."

Her eyebrows pushed down and then shot up. "To New York?"

"At least until you get back on your feet. Hear me out, Sun. The doc said you need time to recover. I would assume by now you lost your job. At the *diner*. But even if you haven't, you're going to lose your license for a long time and have no way to get there."

"I can figure all that out." She gestured around her apartment. "This is where I live. I can't just leave."

He sat forward, his elbows on his knees. "Everyone's worried about you. You haven't been home in almost four years, and that was just two days for the funeral. And now, you get into this accident—"

"No one needs to worry about me. I'm fine."

He tilted his head and gave her a pointed look.

"I made a bad decision the other night, Denny, but I like my life here."

He sensed that was true, to a degree. Her signature was all over this apartment and, based on the notepads on her desk filled with longhand, it seemed she was doing some kind of writing. But in the three days he'd been there he'd only seen evidence of loose friendships—an old guy next door checking on her, a couple of brief calls she received at the hospital—but no signs of people that were a significant part of her life. Meanwhile she had a house full of family back in New York who needed her.

He pulled out the big gun. "I could really use some help at home."

She flinched, almost as if he'd yelled at her.

"Dad's getting worse," he said. "He refuses to get evaluated, but I'm afraid it might be early-stage dementia. He's forgetful, and he can't drive at night anymore. He gets confused and his vision sucks. A month ago

he hit the big beam in the middle of the detached garage, took out the electrical. The ceiling almost came down.”

She turned to look out the small window over her desk, like she didn’t want to hear any more.

“Jackie’s checked out,” he said. “Shane’s doing pretty good, but his anxiety acts up a lot. Kale and I are trying to open the Mamaroneck location, but we’ve had major setbacks—”

“That’s enough.”

“Sorry if it’s hard for you to hear, Sunday. But some of us are in it every day, taking care of things.”

She thrust her face toward his and pointed to her chest. “I have been there and done that. I gave everything I had to this family. And look what it got me.”

“What the hell does that mean? You *chose* to leave.” He glanced around her apartment. “You chose this life.”

She shook her head. “I’m not going to let you emotionally blackmail me into coming back.”

Maybe that’s exactly what he was doing. But she’d stayed away for five years. If he couldn’t get her to come home now, she probably never would. “Theresa took Molly and left to stay with her sister,” he said. “She said there’s too much going on at the house, and with the business. That I’m stressed out all the time and things need to change.”

She drew a sharp breath and for the first time since they started this conversation, her eyes softened. “I’m so sorry, Denny.”

Sunday was the last one in the family to know about the separation. There’d been a time when she would have been the first person he talked to about it. Just sitting with her now, sharing all this, provided some degree of relief. Like he wasn’t totally alone in it. For a second he was even tempted to tell her about Billy Walsh and the loan. But she could do nothing to help with that.

When she spoke again it was so quietly he wasn’t sure he heard her. “Maybe I could go. For a little while.”

“Seriously?”

She didn't answer. Instead her eyes roamed around the room while she chewed her bottom lip.

"Look, I know it wouldn't be easy, coming back. You had your reasons for leaving. But you have no idea how excited everyone would be."

"Not everyone."

He shrugged a shoulder. "Don't worry about Kale, I'll talk to him."

"What about this DUI? I don't even know when my court date is yet."

"I got a lawyer buddy back home. He said you're free to leave the state while all that is resolved, and he hooked us up with a DUI guy out here."

"I don't know," she said. "I just got out of the hospital. I need a little time."

"What you need is your family. And right now, they need you too."

She stared at him for a long moment before sighing in surrender. "Okay. I'll come home."

He slumped back against the couch. Thank Christ.