

Chapter One

PENNA

LAS VEGAS

That kid was still staring.

I stood in the lobby of the Bellagio, scanning through my text messages, blatantly ignoring most of them, but when I looked up, the gangly, mid-teenage boy was still gawking. The kid was wearing a Fox Motocross hat and a shirt from the Nitro Circus World Games, and judging by the way he was glancing from me to his phone and back again, he knew who I was.

Luckily, my phone went off, making it easy to ignore the fact that he was probably tweeting out my location right now.

Great.

Little John: ARRANGEMENTS ARE MADE.

Penna: THANK YOU. OUT FRONT IN FIFTEEN?

Little John: I STILL THINK THIS IS A SHIT IDEA.

Penna: I'LL BE SURE TO NOTE THAT.

I slid my phone into the back pocket of my jeans as the kid headed in my direction, glancing to see where his parents were in the check-in process.

“Excuse me?” His voice cracked.

“What’s up?” I asked with a smile.

“I know this is probably stupid, but are you...Rebel?”

Busted.

“Sure am.” I forced the muscles in my face to maintain the curve to my lips.

The kid’s eyes went wide, and my smile turned genuine. “I love you.” He turned ten shades of red. “I mean, I love watching you. Oh crap. I’m not a stalker or anything.”

Laughter gently shook my shoulders. “Don’t worry. I absolutely knew what you meant.”

A couple selfies later, the kid was on cloud nine.

“Do me a favor?” I asked him as I signed his hat.

“Anything.”

“Can you wait a couple hours until you post that on social media? It’s really important.” I knew the kid might do it anyway, but I felt better having a promise.

“Yeah. Sure. No problem!” He gave me an enthusiastic head nod.

“Thanks.” I handed him back the hat as his parents approached.

I had already turned to walk toward the bar when he called out.

“Rebel, does this mean you’re back?”

“We’re about to find out,” I told him just before I slipped out of view.

It always floored me when I was recognized in public, that we’d somehow gotten famous enough for that stuff, but

this time felt different. Maybe it was because I was off on my own for the first time—without Pax, or Landon, or Nick... or Brooke. Maybe it was because I hadn't participated in a Renegade stunt in the last three months.

No. That wasn't it. It was because the kid managed to know me when I was having trouble recognizing myself anymore.

Rebel. I'd earned the nickname early, seeing as I never conformed to the societal norms my parents expected for a little girl. Motocross bikes, snowboards, parachutes, bungee lines, those became my dollhouses. The X Games took the place of cotillion. I bucked every trend, and gold-medaled in the Whip, which, up until me, had been a guy-only event. Instead of joining the Junior League, I gave in to my addiction for adrenaline and extreme sports, founding the Renegades with three of my closest friends who became my brothers. The number one way to get me to do something was to tell me that I couldn't. I rebelled.

But this time was different.

This time, I was rebelling against my friends—going off book.

The noise from the casino assaulted my ears as I headed toward the bar where Patrick said he'd meet me. My flowy tank top and skinny jeans paired with black Vans weren't exactly the norm in the bar, but I was used to sticking out.

A quick scan of the room told me Patrick wasn't here yet, so I headed toward the bar, leaning against its granite top.

"Can I help you?" the bartender asked.

"Ice water with lemon, please," I ordered, sliding into the chair.

"Coming right up," she said and left to fill the order.

"Living dangerously?" A deep, slightly accented voice asked from next to me.

I turned toward him and nearly sucked in my breath reflexively. *What a killer smile.* The guy was gorgeous in a

can't-help-but-stare kind of way, with thick black hair cut military short, deep, chocolate-brown eyes, tanned skin, and a grin that had me leaning against the bar in hope that it would catch the drool no doubt pouring from my mouth. Dimples and... *Oh my fucking arm porn.* The sleeves of his dress shirt were rolled up, hinting at the tantalizing lines of his bicep. My stomach clenched, the first physical reaction I'd had to spotting a hot guy in *years*.

He cocked an eyebrow at me, that smile turning sexy, deadly—he was more than aware of his impact on me, but it came across as playful instead of the cocky, sleazy way I was used to. I let loose a grin of my own and shook my head at myself. I was constantly surrounded by hot, scrumptious, defined men, and here I was losing my shit over a stranger in a bar.

A stranger who didn't know me, what I did, or what had happened to me in the last three months.

"I'm Cruz," he said, turning on his barstool to face me fully.

"I'm Pen—Penelope." My full name sounded odd, since I always went by Penna. But I wasn't Penna tonight. Or Rebel. Hell, I didn't know who I was.

"Penelope," he repeated, caressing my name with his accent.

Never mind, it sounds delicious when he says it. What was that? Spanish? Not quite, but it was just as sexy.

"You're not drinking tonight?" he asked, running his thumb down his still-full glass. No wedding ring.

I thanked the bartender and put a five on the bar as she handed me my lemon water, then turned back to Cruz. "Nope. Need a clear head."

One of his black eyebrows rose. "Underage?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" *Are you flirting?* I didn't flirt. Ever. Maybe for the cameras and the crowds, but never

on a personal level.

“I would,” he said, leaning forward.

I met him halfway, whispering in his ear, “I’m jailbait and only here to get you into massive trouble.” God, he smelled good—like warm, expensive cologne...and something I couldn’t put my finger on.

His brows knit, like he was trying to figure out if I was kidding or not. Finally I laughed, the sound bright and unburdened. “Just kidding. I’m twenty-one. I’ll actually be twenty-two next month.”

“Thank God.” The look in his eyes sent every hormone that had lain dormant in my body into overdrive. I took another sip of my water, hoping the temperature would cool down the parts of me that had no business heating up right now.

Before I could throw myself any deeper down the rabbit’s hole, I felt a hard smack to my ass. *Oh, hell no.*

I spun, sending my elbow into the gut of the guy behind me, then finished the turn, putting my hand to his throat as I pinned him against the bar.

Fucking Patrick.

“Relax, Rebel. Just wanted to keep you on your toes,” he said with a slick grin, putting his hands in the air.

“Keep your fucking hands to yourself, or the next time you touch my ass, you’ll pull back bloody stumps.”

He gave me a look of mock surprise. “Man, is that any language for a lady?”

“Shut up, Pat. You never would have pulled that if Pax and Landon were here.” I eased up off his throat and took my barstool, more than aware that I probably looked psycho to Cruz.

Patrick shot me another smile and took the stool next to mine, motioning to the TV above the bar, where ESPN was showing the highlight reel from today’s competition at the X

Games. “Well, they’re not, which is why you called me.”

“I called you because you’re the only Renegade not halfway around the world, or in Aspen, and I need someone I can trust.” My gaze flickered to Cruz, who had turned back to his friends.

All for the best. Not like anything was going to happen there, anyway.

“Yeah, well, the summer games are more my thing,” Patrick said, pulling my attention back to him. He was pretty average for a Renegade. Excellent athlete, but not the best. Good-looking, but not...well, Cruz. He leaned toward me, his breath hot in my face. “And here I was hoping that you just wanted to see me alone.”

I blinked and pulled back. There was no way. Was there?

“Have you been drinking?” I asked, hoping I was wrong. Sure, Renegades were reckless, dangerous even, but there was one line we never crossed—we *never* mixed stunts with substances. That crap would get you killed.

He shrugged. “I had a few. Nothing to worry about. I can still jump.”

“No, you can’t.” I looked away, watching my plans melt faster than the ice in my glass.

“What are you talking about? I can.”

My gaze swung to his. “No. You. Can. Not. Not something this dangerous.” What was I going to do? Abandon it? Wait and call in backup? Admit that I couldn’t handle it on my own?

His stare turned mean. “Who the hell are you to decide that?”

My thoughts stilled as icy anger swept through me. “I’m an Original. This is my stunt. My equipment, and I’m telling you that you’re not on it anymore.”

He scoffed, pushing off the barstool. “Fuck you, Penna. One day someone is going to knock you off that pretty little

pedestal you think you stand on. Everyone knows you're broken. Figure your shit out by yourself. I'm gone."

He walked away without a backward glance, and I suddenly wished my glass was full of vodka instead of water. He was right about one thing—I was broken. That wasn't something I admitted lightly, but when my best friends were currently partying in Aspen, celebrating their newly won X Games medals, and I was holed up in Vegas...well, I was broken.

I should have been there—competing with and against them. Rebel would have been. She was tough, smart, aware of her skills and worth. But I'd somehow left Rebel on the floor of the arena in Dubai, crushed under the weight of a motocross bike and a stadium light her own sister had sent crashing down.

For the last three months, I'd felt like plain ol' Penna, and no matter what I did, I couldn't rouse Rebel, couldn't get her to stand up and take notice that I was withering away.

The doctors had cleared my leg a month ago—just before Christmas—but I'd given every excuse not to get on a bike, a snowmobile, anything that put me back in the seat as one of the Original Renegades. I was out of shape from the months I'd been in a cast, but it wasn't just my body that needed the rehab. My head was clouded—I couldn't focus, and my heart was broken. I missed the one person I wasn't allowed to—Brooke.

Tonight was supposed to be my first step back into badassery. *So much for that plan. You can't do it solo.* Breaking that Renegade rule was just as bad as the substance one. We were clean, sober, and used the buddy system when it came to stunts.

"You okay over there?" Cruz's voice cut through my self-pity party.

"Yeah," I assured him, unable to force a smile. "My plans

for the evening just drastically changed.”

“For the better, if you’re referring to the ass-grabbing asshat.”

“Saw that, did you?” I asked, thankful that ESPN had switched over to hockey highlights.

“Yeah. I would have jumped to defend your honor, but it was pretty clear that you were completely capable of handling it.” He saluted me with his glass but put it back down without drinking.

“Thank you.” Being surrounded by guys like Landon and Pax, it wasn’t often that I got to fight my own battles. It was oddly nice to be seen as strong and empowered.

A wedding party came through the door, the bride dressed in a strapless white confection that contrasted with her mocha-colored skin gorgeously. She leaned over the bar next to me, and when the bartender didn’t immediately appear, she whistled.

My kind of girl.

“I need some club soda. My friend trashed her dress,” she ordered.

“So what are you doing with your night now that your other plans have collapsed?” Cruz asked.

I glanced at my phone. Little John was waiting out front.

“I’m not sure.” What *was* I going to do? That was the billion-dollar question.

“We don’t have much planned,” he said, nodding his head toward his friends, “but I’d be more than happy to have you hang with us. Or you and I can sit here a little longer and not drink,” he added with another heart-stopping smile.

Before I could answer, the guys at the bar called him. “Think about it,” he said, and turned back to his friends.

“Girl, I would more than think about that. I would ride that train,” the bride said.

I nearly spit out my water. “I’m sorry?”

“You’re not, but you will be if you don’t jump that.” She gave Cruz a once-over.

A blonde came over, a red splotch on her pale green dress. “I can’t believe I did this,” she said with a southern accent.

“Don’t stress. Pictures are done, and all that’s left is the party,” the bride assured her. “Besides, it wouldn’t be us if stuff didn’t go wrong.”

“Did you get something?” a redhead asked, joining them.

“Here it is.” The bartender handed a small bottle over the bar.

The girl signed a bill for the club soda. “Thanks. Ember, you got that?”

“Yeah, we’re good,” the redhead said, blotting the blonde’s dress.

The bride turned, leaning back against the bar. “So are you going to take him up on it?” she asked me, nodding toward Cruz.

“I...uhh...don’t know.”

“Well, you should. The last time someone looked at me like that...well, let’s just say he climbed up onto a bar for me, and I ended up marrying him,” she said with a grin in the direction of the door.

My phone *dinged* as three guys approached.

Little John: HEY, ARE YOU COMING OR WHAT? YOUR WINDOW IS CLOSING.

I swallowed, my brain going through every possible scenario. What if I did it by myself? Landon and Pax would be pissed, but it wasn’t like they weren’t already going to freak out about me doing this without them. What if I cancelled? Would I ever get up the nerve to get back in the game? I’d never been a toe-in-the-water kind of girl. I was a dive-headfirst-and-see-what’s-at-the-bottom girl.

“Seriously, take him up on it,” the bride urged as a huge,

hulking guy in a tux swept her up over his shoulder.

“Talk time is over,” he said with a smile. “Josh, get the door?”

“Go for it!” the bride stage-whispered with a grin as she was carted away.

“My pleasure,” another guy called out, opening the door as the six of them left.

I wiped the condensation off my glass with my thumb and snuck a few glances at where Cruz’s drink remained untouched. *Maybe...* It was insane, but so was what I was about to do.

“Well, what do you say?” Cruz asked, turning toward me as his friends all stood, preparing to leave.

Jump. It’s what you’re good at.

“How familiar are you with parachutes?”

His eyebrows shot up. “I’d bet I’m more familiar than you are.”

“That’s a bet you’d lose,” I said with a smile I couldn’t contain. My stomach clenched every time his eyes met mine, but I’d never felt better.

“Somehow that does not surprise me,” he said slowly.

“Cruz, you ready?” one of the guys asked.

He tilted his head at me in question.

“I’ve got a better idea,” I said quietly.

“Lay it on me.”

“Want to do something highly dangerous with me?” I held my breath while he didn’t just look at me, but *saw* me. In those few heartbeats, I felt naked even though his eyes didn’t leave my face. Every instinct told me to look away, but his eyes were made for drowning in, and I was already going under.

“Any other details?”

“Nope. You’re in or you’re out,” I said with more bravado than I felt.

“Cruz?” his friend prodded.

I watched the debate silently play out in his eyes before he nodded slowly. “You guys go ahead. I’ll meet up with you later,” he said without breaking eye contact with me.

My heart leaped, my pulse picking up to a gallop. *Holy shit, I’m really doing this.* God, I hoped he wasn’t lying—that he was experienced. What were the odds I’d end up sitting next to someone in a bar who was capable of this?

Fate, my heart whispered.

Shut the hell up, my brain answered.

I didn’t get gooey over guys. Gooey made you soft, made you weak.

“Shall we?” he asked, standing as his friends left.

My feet hit the ground. Whoa. Even at my five-eight height, he still had a good four inches on me, and that *body*. The guy was built, probably even more so than Pax, which was hard to accomplish, and the rippling of those very cut arm muscles told me that the rest of him was probably just as defined.

We made our way to the front of the hotel where Little John waited, our strides evenly matched.

“In all fairness to you, this might be slightly illegal,” I admitted, leading him to where Little John waited outside.

“Aren’t you just full of surprises?” he said quietly as he held the door open for me.

“You have no idea.”

I was even surprising the hell out of myself tonight.