

It's Kara at the door. A week ago a pair of legs like that would have had me in trouble faster than Jay the Bruiser rushing the quarterback on Friday night. Today, they barely register. Without Em around to get jealous, I don't much see the point of dames. I tell her to come in, and she slinks on into my office.

"You've been causing quite a stir, Fry."

"That supposed to be funny?"

"You tell me," she says. She grabs a chair and spins it around to sit on in a way that almost makes me reconsider my policy on dames. I do my best not to notice the skirt she's wearing. She's tugging on her long, blonde hair.

"I take it you got my message."

"It was a little vague." She reaches into her top and out comes a crumpled sheet of paper with my handwriting on it. "Just four words and a signature: Brick, Tug, Frisco, Pin."

I scan her eyes as she reads each word aloud. Nothing. 'Course the drama kids are always hard to read. "Don't act dumb," I say, playing a hunch. "I know about your call with Em."

Her eyes flash before her lips can lie. "I hadn't heard from Emily in weeks. Word in the halls is that you were the last person to see her alive." She drops the note as her hands go back to her hair. I haven't seen her do that before. If she's playing dumb, she's acting like a real lug.

"And who's been spreading that word?" I ask.

"Information like that doesn't come free," she says "A girl's got to--"

“Let's get down to brass tacks here,” I cut her off. “I know Dode got into trouble sneaking into the teacher's lounge. He's looking at a one way trip to a GED if no one intervenes. But it just so happens that Mr. Claremont owes me a favor. You tell me about Em, and your boyfriend gets to stick around for his third senior year.”

The smile drops, but so do the lies, replaced by a bit of panic. “This isn't something you want to get messed up in, Brendon. Em's gone, just leave it at that.”

“She's not gone, doll. She's dead. Murdered and tossed in a drainage ditch. If she called you I need to know why.”

“If I tell you, they'll kill me,” Kara says. Her melodramatic words are partnered with a better swell of tears than I've ever seen her with on stage. She makes it out the door before I can clear the room to stop her. As I stick my head out in the hall, she's already gone in the sea of people past first period.

“Brick, Tug, Frisco, Pin.” I think of the bits of conversation I heard from Em before she died. She knew it was coming, and this is what she chose to tell me? She had never been the I love you type, but still...

Pin and Tug had been easy.

The Pin was a boss and Tug was his muscle. The classic brains and brawn combo. Everyone knew their reps even if they didn't know the mugs attached to them. Those fellas were bad news, but they ran a civilized racket. They only killed when they had exhausted the more profitable alternatives. And my girl would have been worth more to them alive than dead.

Frisco had taken me some time. Turns out Francisco Hernandez was the subject of Em's last history project. The court physician to the King of Spain back in 15-who cares. Brian had found Em's locker combo in the school registry, and I saw she had called Hernandez "Frisco" in her shorthand. She had been checking out books about him in the library. I forced my way through some of them, and it was almost enough to make me think she could have offed herself.

Brick was... well everywhere. The school had a Brick facade, and there were scattered bricks all around the ditch where I found Em. It wasn't much to go off of.

I was hoping that Kara could give me some information. I had been avoiding a visit to The Pin until it was absolutely necessary-- I always walked away from my meetings with him owing more than I got. And Tug had given me a few bruises in the past as well. But if Kara wasn't talking, there was only one option.

I make my way back across the room to grab my coat and pick up the paper Kara had dropped on the ground before she left. That's when I notice something. Next to my note she had made her own inscription. Cocaine. The little letters are barely visible under the word Brick.

That settles it. The Pin owns half the drug trade in the school, and all of the hard stuff. It's time for me to pay him a visit.

The smell hits me before I find the bodies. The Pin and Tug don't look so intimidating when they've got a pair of holes in them to match my dearly departed Em. The old storage shed on the edge of campus that the gentlemen had been using as their base of operations had plenty of compartments to hide things they didn't want the teachers to see. I bet in all their time here they never thought they'd be hiding their own dead bodies. I lean close to get a better look at the pair.

There had been something off about the bullet hole in the back of Em's neck, but she had been too waterlogged for me to get a good read on it before the teachers showed up. The Pin and Tug have the same tiny entry wounds. I grab Tug's massive shoulders to bring him closer, then I feel a sharp crack on the back of my head and my lights go out.

Two things surprise me when I wake up. The first is that I wake up at all. The people responsible for Em, The Pin, and Tug dying clearly don't have a problem with murder. The second is that I'm back in my office. The reason why doesn't take me long to figure out. It's been scattered with Em's things. Stuff that wasn't in her locker or on her body when I found her. Someone's trying to frame me.

I find my glasses, and as the room comes back into focus, so do Em's last messages to me. It all starts to make sense. Brick, Tug, Frisco, Pin.

And the call to Kara. Here I had thought Kara wasn't being helpful, but it was so obvious. Her best performance to date. If I make it out of this alive I might just have to kiss her.

I take the steps two at a time down to the shop room. Knowing the teachers will catch up to me any minute. In my haste I realize I forgot my piece. Hopefully I'll be able to come up with something.

I don't bother with subtlety as I kick in the the shop room door, and sure enough, there he is. Chuck Burns the Long Haired Lug, bent over a circular saw. Carving up a two by four. A massive pile of sawdust on the shop floor.

He shuts off the saw at the sound of my entrance, and immediately pulls on his long hair, sweeping it behind his shoulders. In the rush of it all, I actually laugh remembering how good Kara's impression of this had been.

"Hello, Fry," Chuck says. He fingers the nail gun on his tool belt and I try not to think of what that would feel like in my spine. I trace the line running from the gun to a nearby compressed air tank.

"You killed Em," I say, scanning the room for the rest of the woodworkers. But I don't see any. Then I remember it's third period, and most of the lugs have P.E.

"She found out about my operation, and she threatened to take it to The Pin."

“You were cutting his supply with sawdust. Not a very smart move.” I inch my way closer. If I can get that line free, I might have a chance.

“To the contrary, I got to sell twice as much product, and half of it was without dealing The Pin a cut. Then your precious Emily choose the wrong topic in history class.”

“Frisco.”

“Did you know that no one had ever checked out the original latin volumes of Spanish Medicine from the sixteenth century? They had been the perfect drop point, until one of my bags went missing. I checked the registry and saw little Emily had taken an interest in Hernandez. It wasn’t long after that my nail gun took an interest in the back of her neck. Shame. She was pretty hot.”

Now or never. I dive forward and hear the rush of nails flying over my head. With a roll I grab the air line and pull hard. The tube comes free with a hiss of compressed air. But my victory is short lived. As I reach up to adjust my glasses, the lug grabs me by the shoulders and pulls me to my feet. My stomach falls as I realize the circular saw is still on.

“I really didn’t want to kill you, Fry,” Chuck says as he drags me over to the work bench. “You would have been the perfect scapegoat. The little detective snapped and killed his girlfriend and her dealer.

“She called out for you when she knew she was going to die, did you know that? I had told her we could have a talk, but she saw tank strapped to my back. The gun at my hip. She called out your name and you weren’t there for her. You will be soon. And Kara will take your place as my fall girl.”

Chuck slams my face on the bench, and begins to drag me towards the spinning blade. I struggle, forcing him to hold me with both hands. The buzzing grows louder and louder as the whirring gets nearer. I think of Em, and how she'll never be avenged. I think of The Pin and Tug and how the woodworkers will replace them.

I think of Kara. Another woman I've... Kara. That beautiful, long legged, **long haired** thespian.

In his effort to restrain me, Chuck had forgotten to pull his hair back. I have one chance and I take it. I let go of Chuck's arms, and instead of trying to push myself up and break free, I reach down, grab onto the table, and pull my head past the saw.

It works. Chuck loses his balance, and his hair gets spun into the blade. With a sickening lurch his scalp is pulled clean off. The piles of white sawdust go red to the sound of his screaming.

The sound is enough to finally bring the teachers down. I go quietly. After all, Mr. Claremont does owe me a favor.

I walk up the stairs, arms pinned behind my back, and I think of the last things Em ever said to me. "Brick, Tug, Frisco, Pin". They were so much better than I love you. She gave me the thing I needed most. She gave me closure. Em was a hell of a dame.