



HIS
Claim

Banachi Family Book 2

Wall Street Journal & USA Today Bestselling Author

WINTER TRAVERS

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His Claim (Coming Soon)

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His Claim

Banachi Family

Book 2

••••

Wall Street Journal & USA Today Bestselling Author

Winter Travers

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My Savior

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Coming Soon

About the Author

Excerpt from *Wilder Presley Says He Loves Me*

Excerpt from *Playboy*

“Tell me every terrible thing you ever did, and let me love you
anyway.”

-Edgar Allan Poe

CHAPTER ONE

Tatum

“Murphy?”

“Fuck.”

Yeah, fuck about summed up the last day for me.

Twenty-four hours ago, I had just pulled into my parking spot after work when suddenly a blacked-out SUV pulled up next to my car, and then my passenger window exploded from a gunshot.

Yup, fuck was right. If it were in all capital letters, that would be spot on.

“What is going on?” I asked, dazed. I had been in and out of consciousness, being moved from here and there until I landed at Murphy’s feet.

I had been surprised and shocked when I was kidnapped, and that shock continued when I saw Murphy.

“How did you get here?” Murphy asked.

I scoffed and laid my head on the cold floor. “Carjacking, gunshots, and I think a plane was involved, but I honestly can’t really tell you.”

“You’re shot?” Murphy asked frantically. He struggled against his restraints, and his foot kicked the side of my head.

“Jesus,” I gasped. “I’ve kind of been through a lot,” I muttered. I hurt everywhere, but now the side of my head a little bit more.

“Dammit, Tatum, I’m sorry, baby girl.”

“I’m not your baby girl,” I whispered. I hadn’t been for five years. “Give me a second, and I’ll get up.”

“You’re not restrained?” he asked.

I sighed and closed my eyes. “No, just exhausted. They took my restraints off before they tossed me in here.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Murphy pondered.

“None of this makes sense,” I grumbled. “I can tell you how I got here, but I would like to know *why* I am here.” I knew the type of world Murphy was a part of. This had to do with him. I hadn’t put the kidnapping and him together until he had said my name. “What kind of trouble are you in?” I asked.

Murphy chuckled. “Honestly? Shit from the past none of us saw coming.”

“Does anyone know you are here?” I rolled over onto my back and let out a moan.

“I’m sure Brandt let Leo know,” he grunted. “Not sure what his plan is, but the sooner you untie me, the sooner we can get out of here.”

“I’m beaten and battered. Can you give me a minute?” I whined. I was being dramatic; I knew it.

“Take your time; I’m not going anywhere.”

I grumbled under my breath and managed to get up on my knees. I shoved my hair out of my face and looked up at Murphy. “Please say I don’t look as bad as you.” Murphy’s

normally handsome and chiseled face was bloody, bruised, and swollen.

“You always look beautiful, Tatum.”

I blew out a raspberry and rolled my eyes. “And you were always full of it.” I couldn’t see my what I looked like, but I knew it wasn’t pretty. “Is your nose broken?”

Murphy shrugged. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

I rolled my eyes again and bent over to work on the rope tied around his ankles. “What a grand thing to brag about.”

“Just stating the facts, baby girl.”

I curled my lip, ready to tell him to stop calling me baby girl, but I figured setting him free so he could get us out of here was more important. “Do you have any idea how we are going to get out of here?” I asked.

“Working on a plan.”

I glanced up at him. “So that’s a no.”

“If you’ve got a plan, I’m all ears,” he grunted.

I didn’t. I managed to loosen the knot on the rope and freed his legs. I moved to his arm, tied to the arm of the chair. “My plan is getting you freed, and then it’s all you.” Not exactly rocket science, but this type of scenario was in Murphy’s wheelhouse. I tended to keep my head buried in the sand when I dated Murphy, but I wasn’t dumb. Leo Banachi was a rich businessman who had his hands on everything. Legal and illegal.

Being locked in this room with Murphy obviously had to do with the illegal things he did. God knew working at a bookstore didn't put me in contact with anything illegal.

I freed both of his arms and fell back on my butt.

Murphy jumped up and crouched in front of me. "Are you okay?"

I waved him off. "I'm still breathing, so I'm good."

He ran his hands over my body and worriedly stared at me. "Did you hit your head at all?" he asked. "Anything feel broke?"

I rolled my eyes yet again. "I don't know what broke would feel like since I've never broken a bone."

"It would hurt like hell, baby girl." His hands moved to my face, and he caressed my cheek. "You've got a few cuts on your face but nothing that needs stitches."

"I wish I could say the same for you," I muttered. Murphy's normally handsome face was bloodied and there was a large gash on his cheek. "I should have listened to my mother when she told me to be a nurse. I'm not much help when it comes to blood and gore. I could direct you to the sci-fi section and recommend some of my favorite books, though."

Murphy chuckled and shook his head. "You've still got a great sense of humor."

I batted my eyes. "It's my go-to when I'm in awkward situations or on the brink of dying."

“Which one is this?” he asked.

“I’ll let you know.” It was honestly both. “Why don’t you James Bond us out of here, yeah?”

Murphy stood and did a slow spin, taking in the room. “Where were you before they brought you in here?” he asked.

“Uh, well, there was just a blanket on the ground.”

“That’s it?” Murphy growled.

I shrugged. “I’ve never been kidnapped before, but I don’t think comfort is what they go for.” Leave it to Murphy to be mad I wasn’t given five-star accommodations. “There were two windows.”

“Covered?” Murphy asked. “Like these?” He moved to the window on the opposite wall that was boarded up with streaks of light coming through the cracks.

“Uh, mostly. The top of one was missing a board. I could see trees.”

“Tops of trees, or the trunks?”

I wrinkled my brow. “Uh, well, I guess it was the trunks. Does it matter?”

“Yeah.” He tried to pry the wood off the windows. “That means we’re on ground level. Should make it easier to get out of here.”

I sighed and shuffled back until my back hit the wall. “You wouldn’t, by chance, have a pry bar in your back pocket, would you?”

“Very funny,” he muttered. “The real question is, are you going to be able to keep up with me once I get these boards off? We’re gonna have to run like the devil is chasing us, baby girl.”

“I was all-state in track, Murphy. I would worry more about yourself,” I muttered.

“Good, good,” he chuckled. The board in his hand creaked, and my hopes soared that he was actually going to be able to get us out of here.

“Water and bread, that is it!” A voice boomed from the other side of the door.

“Shit,” Murphy whispered. He dove for the chair he had been tied to and frantically tossed the ropes over his wrists. “Stay there,” he ordered me.

As if I had anywhere else to go.

The door opened, and I squinted at the bright light behind the man. “This is all you get.” He tossed a bottle of water at Murphy and something else sailed through the air. “Have a nice night,” the man cackled. He slammed the door behind him, and the familiar click of locks sounded.

“You know him?” I asked.

Murphy grunted and tossed the ropes off his wrists. “No. I’m assuming he’s one of the grunts Brandt managed to get to work for him.” He stood and moved over to the window. “I wouldn’t eat or drink anything he just gave us. I’m assuming it’s been drugged.”

Just great. “What do you want me to do?”

“Keep watch by the door. If you hear anyone coming close, let me know.” The board he pried on creaked again. “I don’t want them to find out what we’re doing until they come in here to find us gone.”

“You’re pretty confident.”

Murphy glanced over her shoulder at me. “I know what I’m up against, baby girl. Brandt is lucky he isn’t dead yet. For years, he has been trying to take out Leo but can never pull it off. We stop him, and then he slinks off to come up with some other harebrained scheme.”

“This is a scheme?” I asked. “A scheme to get what? If he wants Leo, then why doesn’t he go after Leo?”

“Because to get to Leo, he knows he needs to knock me, Creed, Princeton, and Apollo out of the way.”

“He can’t kill Apollo,” I gasped. “He’s got Greer and the kids.”

Murphy turned back to his task of getting the wood off the window. “It’s nice to hear you are so concerned about Greer and the kids. I’ll be sure to let her know.”

“She was nice to me, and the kids were adorable,” I shrugged. “I do miss her.” Murphy and I had dated for around a year and had gone on a few double dates with Apollo and Greer. She was a sort of an enigma. She was beautiful and elegant, but also so down to earth, you never would have known she was rich as hell and married to the mafia.

“Greer is nice to anyone who is nice to her and the kids,” Murphy mumbled.

“Yeah, but she doesn’t have to be. I like her. Does that make you mad?” He should have been happy I had gotten along with his friend’s wife.

“No, but it does sound like you missed her more than me.”

I rolled my eyes. “We didn’t work, Murphy. I figured you would have moved on from me by now.”

“Why didn’t we work?” he grunted. “Refresh my memory.” A loud creak sounded, and the top board fell from the window. “One board down, five more to go.”

“We really want to take a trip down memory lane?” I asked. It wasn’t some torrid story to tell. It was just zero communication from Murphy.

“Make it a short trip,” he chuckled.

I tipped my head to the side. “I was an open book, Murph, and you were illiterate.”

CHAPTER TWO

Murphy

I stewed on her words.

I wouldn't have said Tatum was an open book, but she did try to tell me what she needed from me.

The problem was, I wasn't ready to give her those things.

Five years ago, I had been guarded about letting anyone into my life. I had wanted someone to share my life with, but I didn't want to actually tell her what my life was. I wasn't some businessman working a nine-to-five with weekends and holidays off.

Tatum knew I worked for Leo, and most people guessed about what type of things Leo did, but no one knew for sure. At least not the people who weren't in his inner circle.

I never let Tatum in that inner circle.

She told me she needed more from me. She needed to feel like she was a part of my life, and not just someone standing on the outside looking in.

I never gave that to her.

"Nothing to say?" she asked. "You were the one who wanted to take a trip down memory lane."

I glanced at her. "I wouldn't say I was illiterate to what you wanted and were saying to me."

"Then what would you say it was?" she asked.

“I heard what you were saying, but I knew I couldn’t give it to you, Tatum.”

“Couldn’t, or wouldn’t?” she whispered. She sniffled and wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

“I couldn’t, Tatum. I’m not a good man who goes to work and comes home every night.” I turned back to the window. “Just look at you now. It’s been five years since we saw each other, and you were kidnapped because of me.” I never would have thought that Brandt would wade through my past and find Tatum.

“Any other ex-girlfriends you’ve had going to be tossed in here with us?”

I grabbed the next board and pulled with all my might. I managed to get the nails from one side out and grabbed closer to the other nails. “Only you,” I grunted. I pulled again and tossed the loosened board onto the ground.

“Only me?”

I nodded and wiped my face with my forearm. “You’re the only girlfriend I’ve had, Tatum. The only one I ever cared about.” She had been there when I thought that I had a shot at a normal life.

I had watched Apollo and Greer together and thought I could have that, too. Apollo told Greer everything, and there weren’t any secrets between them. I had tried to bring Tatum into my world, but the fear of something happening to her because of me was too much to handle.

“I find it hard to believe that you weren’t with anyone before or after me.”

I gripped the next board and easily ripped it off. “We’re about five minutes away from breaking out of here, baby girl. How about we continue this conversation when we’re miles away from this dump?” I suggested. I wasn’t interested in going into what I had been up to the past five years.

Tatum scrambled off the ground and moved close behind me. “This can’t be that easy,” she whispered.

It did seem a bit too easy to me, too, but I wasn’t going to not try to bust out of here. “We’re gonna have to be quick once I bust this window.” I had no idea where Brandt was in relation to the room we were.

“They have guns,” she reminded me.

“I know.” I leaned forward and took in what I could see. “Assuming Brandt and his goons aren’t right below the window, we should be able to make it to the woods before they get their heads out of their asses.”

“What happens when we get to the woods?” she asked.

I glanced at her. “We run like hell until we get to a main road and I figure out where the hell we are.”

“And then what?” she asked again.

I closed my eyes. This right here was why I didn’t tell Tatum what I was doing. I didn’t need fifty questions and the doubt in her eyes. “I figure it out then, baby girl. You gotta trust me right now.”

She tipped her head to the side. “That was something I never struggled with, Murphy. I just wanted to feel like I was a part of your life.”

That was what I had wanted, too. I just didn’t know how to do it.

Focus on getting us out of here, Murphy.

“Just stay close to me, and do exactly what I tell you, okay?”

She nodded and stood straight. “I’m ready.” She tipped her head to the side again. “Well, as ready as one can be when preparing to run for their life.”

I shook my head and turned back to the window. “It looks like the sun is going down. That is going to work in our favor. It’s hard to find what you can’t see.” I ripped off two more boards and handed one to Tatum.

“Uh, you want me to bring this with?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yes. We need anything we can get our hands on for a weapon.”

She looked down at the board in her hands. “Hit them with the side with the nails sticking out?”

I blinked rapidly. “Uh, well, that is a very good suggestion. I was just going to say hit them anyway you can, but if you can get them with the nails, then good.” Here I was worried that Tatum might not be able to keep up.

She gripped the board in her hands and held it like she was ready to swing it like a bat. “Are you taking the last one with

us?” She nodded to the last board over the window.

I ripped it out of the wall and braced it on my shoulder. “I break the glass, I jump out, you follow right behind me.”

She nodded. “Got it.”

Five years ago, I had been worried about Tatum getting caught up in my mess of a life, and now she was firmly in the middle of chaos breaking out.

I took a deep breath and reached out to wrap my hand around the back of her neck.

“What are you—” she started, but I cut her off.

I pulled her close. My lips pressed against hers, and she yielded to my touch instantly.

This was what I missed about Tatum.

Well, I missed a whole hell of a lot about Tatum, but her kisses were at the top of the list.

She never hesitated when I touched her. She gave in to me as if it was second nature. She gave in as if there weren't five years between us.

“What was that for?” she whispered when I pulled away. Her eyes fluttered open, and she stared up at me with her doe eyes.

“Just in case I don't make it, baby girl. I want my last moments to be good.”

She blinked slowly, and her lips parted. “Okay.”

I thought about Tatum often these past five years. Wondering what she was doing, and if she had found someone else. Someone who could give her the type of life she deserved.

“Is... is there...” Did I want to die knowing that Tatum had moved on from us?

“Don’t you think you should have asked that before you kissed me?” she whispered.

I brushed my thumb over her cheek.

“It’s always just been you, Murphy. You stole my heart and never gave it back to me. Not even when you broke it.”

Jesus.

“We make it through this—”

She pressed a finger to my lips. “When we make it through this,” she corrected me. “When we make it through this, we’re going to talk.”

I nodded and pressed a kiss to the pad of her finger.

I didn’t know if it was the adrenalin pumping through my veins, the danger in the air, or the very good possibility I wasn’t going to see tomorrow, but I didn’t want to die without kissing Tatum one last time.

“We’re gonna make it, Murphy.” She smiled softly. “Now break that glass, and let’s see if this all-state track star can beat you to the trees,” she smirked.

I shook my head. “Not a chance, baby girl.” I pressed a quick kiss to her lips. Tatum stepped back, her board at the

ready, and I turned to the window.

It was now or never.

I smashed the window, glass flew everywhere, and Tatum jumped.

“That was louder than I thought it was going to be.”

I couldn't help but smile. We were in the middle of possibly dying, and Tatum was making me smile.

I jumped out the window, my feet hitting the soft grass mere seconds before Tatum catapulted herself out the window, knocking me down.

“Jesus,” I grumbled.

I was worried about Brandt hurting me when it was Tatum I should have been worried about.

“Oh my god,” she gasped. “I'm sorry. I've never jumped through a window before. It's kind of like going down a slide. Count to five Mississippis before you go.”

Tatum struggle to her feet, and I managed to stand. “You're a nut, Tatum.” I brushed my hands on my pants and looked around.

There was no movement.

Odd.

“Why is no one shooting at us?” Tatum whispered.

I looked around. “I don't know, but I'm not going to look a gift horse in the mouth.”

She wrinkled her brow. “I’ve always wondered what that even means. Who has a gift horse?”

I shook my head and grabbed her hand. “Another thing we can talk about later when we’re not running for our lives, baby girl.” I tugged her hand. “Run.”

We took off for the woods, my eyes scanning the area, ready for Brandt to strike.

“I thought there would be more bullets whizzing by us,” Tatum called.

I did, too.

This wasn’t right.

We made it to the woods, ducked behind a large tree trunk, and I looked back at where we had just escaped from.

“Is this normal?” Tatum asked, whispering. “Where are the goons? The bullets? A mad man screaming at us that we’ll never get away?” she goofed.

I didn’t know, but we weren’t going to wait around for them. “They might not have heard or they’re gathering their attack. Either way, let’s go. I don’t know where we are, but we gotta find a phone.”

“Let’s head down the driveway. You know it has to lead to the main road.”

It more than likely did, but it also had a good chance of cameras or goons. “We go this way.” The house was surrounded by woods, which meant it might take us longer to

get to the main road, but it gave us a better chance of actually getting there. “Trust me, Tatum.”

She looked up at me. “Fine.”

She put her hand in mine, and we headed in the opposite direction of the house. I was on alert, looking everywhere at once, and keeping my ears open.

“Do you think I can ditch the board?” Tatum asked after a few minutes of walking. She waved the board in the air. “I’m kind of disappointed I didn’t get to get a few good swings in.”

“You’re one of a kind, Tatum. Most would be happy they didn’t need to fight for their lives.”

Tatum shrugged and stepped over a downed tree. “I guess I’m not like other girls.”

CHAPTER THREE

Tatum

I was like other girls.

So much like other girls.

We had been walking for what felt like hours, and all I wanted was a hot bath and my bed. In that order. I could also go for a cheeseburger, but honestly, I just wanted to feel clean and collapse into bed.

My body was sore from being kidnapped, and now I had way surpassed my daily step goal by thousands.

“Do you, um, have any clue where we could be?” I asked.

“The woods,” Murphy grunted.

I rolled my eyes. “Perhaps more specific?”

Murphy stopped and looked around. “The woods at night,” he grunted. “We’re going to have to stop or we’ll end up hurting ourselves. I can barely see five feet in front of me.”

That was better than the two feet I could see. “Uh, where are we stopping? I don’t see a Motel 6 with free continental breakfast,” I joked.

“How does a trunk of a spruce and my shoulder as a pillow sound?” he asked.

More appealing than he knew. “Fine, but I might leave a scathing review if my pillow is lumpy and talks back.”

Murphy led me over to a large tree and kicked around the pine needles and leaves. “Allow me to fluff your bed, baby

girl.” He sat down and held his hand out to me. “It shouldn’t get too cold tonight. Once the sun comes up, we can keep heading to the road.”

“At least you’re wearing one of your fancy sport coats.” I nodded to his dirty and somewhat tattered jacket. “We can use that as a blanket.”

I plopped down next to him as he shrugged off his jacket. “Whatever the lady wants,” he chuckled.

He leaned against the tree, and I snuggled up next to him. He draped his jacket over us, and I let out a relieved sigh.

“Okay?” he asked.

I nodded and laid my cheek against him. “As good as I can be.”

“You’re doing good, Tatum.”

“I hear a bit of awe in your voice, Murphy,” I giggled. “Did you think I was going to be some whiny, shrieking woman you were going to have to carry through the woods?” I asked.

“Well,” he drawled. “Most people would not be able to do half of what you’ve been through, baby girl. You’re blowing me away with every step you take.” He wrapped his arm around me and rubbed his hand up and down my arm.

“Thank you, I think. Though I’m not too sure how I feel about you doubting me.”

A chuckle rumbled through his body. “Don’t get too twisted about it, Tatum. I don’t even think Greer would have

made it as far as you have.”

“Please,” I scoffed. “That woman is amazing. She would have traipsed through the woods in her stilettos all while carrying you on her back.” She might not have liked being kidnapped and then running for her life, but I knew Greer would kick butt if it happened to her.

“I think you might have Greer a little too high up on a pedestal, Tatum. Her creature comforts of living in her penthouse might have softened her the past five years.”

“Lies,” I muttered. I smothered a yawn with my hand and snuggled into Murphy.

“Try to sleep, baby girl. Hopefully, it won’t be long until we get to a phone, and all of this shit will be over for you.”

“And you?” I whispered.

He sighed and adjusted the jacket over us. “This is my life, Tatum. I can’t run from it.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Murphy

“**B**ut what if they’re murderers?”

I glanced over at Tatum. “I think we have better odds in there than heading back to Brandt’s.”

We were in the middle of fucking nowhere.

I figured Brandt had us somewhere between Rockton and Chicago when we first set out.

The sun had risen this morning. I woke Tatum to get going, and we finally came to a road after close to an hour of walking. Fifteen minutes down that road was a large cabin with two old trucks in the driveway and a beat-up car parked next to the garage.

“What if they know Brandt, and he told them to tell him if they saw us?”

“I don’t know if I followed that, baby girl.”

Tatum rolled her eyes. “I think we should keep walking until we get to a gas station or something.”

“Who’s to say Brandt won’t be at the gas station waiting for us?” I asked. “It’s more likely we would go to the gas station than to this cabin.”

The cabin wasn’t run down and falling apart.

It was well-kept, and the two trucks in the driveway were restored.

“I hope you’re right,” Tatum mumbled. “I should have held onto my nail board.” She pretended she was swinging a bat. “Would have taken out these murderers in one swipe.” She stumbled around, and I grabbed her arm before she tumbled to the ground.

“Easy there, slugger,” I chuckled. I pulled her close and brushed her hair out of her face. “Let’s just knock on the door and see what happens, okay?”

She rolled her eyes but agreed. “Fine, but just know I’m ready to go Babe Ruth on their butts as soon as I find something to swing on them with.”

“You certainly have changed, baby girl. I don’t remember you being this feisty.”

Tatum shrugged. “I was trying to impress you, and I never got kidnapped with you around. One never really knows how they would react in a situation until they are in that situation.”

“You’re a nut, Tatum.” I led her to the house and knocked on the front door.

Tatum moved behind me but peeked around my arm. “I’m ready,” she whispered. “Just give me the signal, and I’ll grab that little red wagon planter.”

I twisted and looked at her. “What the hell are you going to do with a planter?” I whispered loudly.

The front door opened, and Tatum shrunk behind me.

“You gotta be shitting me,” I called.

“What?” Tatum whispered.

“What the hell are you doing on my doorstep, kid?”

“Kid?” Tatum asked. “What is going on?”

“What the hell are you doing here?” I demanded.

“You know him?” Tatum asked.

I reached behind me and pulled Tatum to stand next to me.

“Tatum, meet Gravel. Gravel, meet Tatum.”

Yup, none other than Gravel from the Devil’s Knights.

“You know the murderer?” Tatum asked.

“Murderer?” Gravel growled. “What the hell are you talking about, girl?”

I grabbed Tatum’s hand and pulled her to my side. “Gravel is a friend. He’s a part of the motorcycle club I told you about.”

Tatum’s eyes bugged out. “You’re part of the club with all the crazy women who break beds, get arrested, and are just all around crazy? I’ve heard so much about you guys.”

Gravel’s lips thinned. “I’m glad to see the club legacy is Meg and the ol’ ladies being crazy.” Gravel looked us up and down. “What the hell are you two doing on my doorstep looking like you traipsed fifty miles in the woods and got into a fight with a bear?”

“You got the traipsing through the woods right,” Tatum sighed. “Do you think I could use your bathroom? And maybe drink a gallon of water?”

“Gravel? Who is at the door?” a woman called from inside the cabin.

“It’s one of Leo’s men and a crazy woman,” Gravel called. “Get a pot of coffee on, darlin’.” Gravel stepped back and held the door open. “Come on in and tell me what the hell you two are up to.”

We stepped into the cabin, and for the first time in twenty-four hours, I felt safe.

Gravel’s cabin was more than just a shack in the woods.

The outside was half logs as the siding and a high-pitched roof with two peaks.

Inside, it was wide open from the kitchen, living room, and dining room with a hallway off the kitchen to what I assumed were bedrooms and bathrooms. There was a large stone fireplace in the living room with two huge deer mounts on each side of the chimney. Various birds and other stuffed wildlife were hung on the walls.

“Murphy!” Ethel called. “What on earth happened to you?” She tossed down the dish towel in her hand and rushed over to Tatum and me. “You look horrible!”

Leave it to Ethel to tell it like it was.

“You’re Ethel,” Tatum exclaimed. “You are the one who broke the bed with Meg.”

Ethel tsked and shook her head. “I was there, but it was Meg and Cyn who broke the bed. That was ages ago, too. How on earth did you know about that?”

“I might have told her a few entertaining stories,” I confessed. I was surprised that Tatum had remembered them. Though I had found that Meg and the other Devil’s Knights of ladies were pretty damn memorable.

Ethel held her hand out to Tatum. “You know who I am, but I don’t know you, honey. I didn’t know Murphy had someone special.”

Tatum shook her hand but stuttered, “Oh, uh, well... you see...”

“We’re not together, Ethel. I can explain it all after I use your phone. I need to get in touch with Leo right away.”

“Can I use your bathroom while Murphy calls Leo?” Tatum asked. “I’m not really one to like to commune with nature, and I’ve had to do that too many times in the past twenty-four hours.”

“Of course, of course,” Ethel rushed. “Follow me, honey.”

Ethel led Tatum down the hall to the bathroom, and Gravel handed me his phone. “Just know I’m calling King.”

I nodded and grabbed the phone. “We’re more than likely going to need to the club’s help with this one.”

Gravel nodded and sat down in the recliner by the fireplace. “God knows you goons have helped us out when we needed it.”

“We’re not goons,” I muttered. Brandt and his band of idiots were goons. From memory, I dialed Leo’s number and waited three rings before he answered. “Gravel?”

“No,” I called. “It’s me.”

“Holy fuck,” Leo boomed into the phone. “Where the hell are you? Why the hell are you calling me from Gravel’s phone?”

I moved the phone away from my mouth. “Where the hell are we, old man?”

Gravel chuckled. “About three hours north of Rockton. Eagle River is about twenty minutes away.”

“You hear that?” I asked Leo.

“How the fuck did you get all the way up there? I know where Gravel’s cabin is, and it’s in the middle of nowhere.” Leo demanded.

“And that’s how I like it,” Gravel hollered.

“We’ve been searching everywhere between Rockton and Chicago for you. We would never have found you if you hadn’t gotten away.” Leo sighed heavily. “Tell me what the hell happened.”

I ran through the story of Brandt getting the drop on me when Larry, Kitty’s dad, went missing. “I woke up tied to a chair, and then he tossed Tatum at my feet.”

“Tatum?” Leo asked. “The girl you dated years ago?”

“Yeah, her.”

“How the hell did Leo find out about her?”

I didn’t have a clue. “Must have really dug into my past.”

“So, how the hell did you get away?”

“I managed to break a window, and we took off. The strange thing is, Brandt hasn’t come after us. It’s like he wanted us to get away. It’s fucking weird.”

“Shit is always weird when it comes to Brandt. I wish the fucking weasel would just die already.” Leo paused. “He didn’t try anything when you busted out?”

“Nada. We fucking waited for a bit once we were far enough away, and it was like the place was dead. No one there.”

“You think you can get back to the place?” Leo asked.

“I don’t know. I remember what the place looked like, but it’s not like we took roads to get to Gravel’s place. We hiked through the fucking woods for hours before we found this place.”

Leo clicked his tongue. “The fucking odds of you stumbling into Gravel are fucking slim, Murphy. You guys got fucking lucky.”

That was the damn truth. “So what do you want me to do?” I asked.

“Hang tight there if it’s okay with Gravel, and I’ll send Creed and Apollo your way.”

“Just a heads up, Gravel is calling King once I get off the phone,” I offered.

Leo chuckled. “I wouldn’t expect less. Say hello to the old man for me and be careful.” Leo ended the call, and I tossed the phone to Gravel. “Call your kid and let him know we’re here.”

“My kid,” Gravel chuckled. “King will have your ass if he heard you call him kid. Pretty sure he’s older than you, son.”

He was only a few years older, but I still liked to yank his chain by referring to him as Gravel’s kid. “Why weren’t you ever prez of the club?” I asked.

Gravel shrugged and grabbed his coffee cup from the table beside his chair. “Never wanted it. Thought I was going to be stuck with it when Storm got restless, but King stepped up. Showed that he wanted to take over, and I was off the hook.”

“Storm?” I asked. I thought I had met every guy in the club.

Gravel waved his hand. “He was the founding prez of the Devil’s Knights. Stuck around for about fifteen years before he wanted more than what the club could give him. He took off as soon as King was set to be prez, and I haven’t seen him since.” Gravel chuckled low. “For all I know, he’s been dead and gone. He was older than I am. It’s a miracle I’m still kicking.”

“Hush your mouth,” Ethel called. She walked into the kitchen and put her hands on her hips. “No one is dying around here.”

Gravel rolled his eyes and sipped his coffee. “We’re all gonna go some time, darlin’.”

Ethel waved her hand at Gravel. “You’re too ornery to die.”

Gravel shrugged. “She’s not wrong.”

“I set your lady up with some clean clothes, and she’s showering.” Ethel moved to the coffeepot. “She’s got a few

cuts on her face that should heal fine once she cleans them up.” She grabbed two coffee cups and filled them both.

I nodded. “Thank you, Ethel. I don’t know what we would have done if this wasn’t your place.”

She held up the cup to me. “Don’t even need to thank me, Murphy. You’ve always been my favorite of the goons.”

Gravel let out a belly laugh and slapped his knee.

“We’re not goons,” I chuckled.

Ethel winked. “Sure.” She leaned against the counter and smiled. “I’m sure it’s a dumb question, but would you and Tatum like something to eat after you get cleaned up?”

I had heard stories of Ethel’s meals. They rivaled Meg’s, and Meg was the best cook, well, except for Bristol, who cooked at Wyndemere. “I wouldn’t say no if you cooked something.” I would eat a mustard-covered sock at this point.

Ethel laughed and moved to the fridge. “I’ll get cooking.” She looked at me and tipped her head to the side. “The other goons headed this way?” she asked.

I nodded and couldn’t hide my smile. “Yes, ma’am. Creed and Apollo.” As much as I hated being called a goon, I couldn’t be mad at Ethel when she said it. “You might want to make extra.”

She winked and opened the fridge. “Can do.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Tatum

“Oh, that’s gonna leave a mark.” I gingerly touched the cut above my eye and winced.

A knock sounded on the door. “You okay in there, baby girl?”

Murphy.

“Uh, yeah. Just give me one second.” I had taken a nice, hot, steamy thirty-minute shower that would have made the devil hot. I needed to scrub my body clean, and the only way to do that was with scorching hot water and lots of body wash.

Ethel had given me a set of clothes she said Gravel’s daughter had left the last time she visited, and they surprisingly fit perfectly.

I grabbed my dirty, torn clothes off of the floor and opened the door. “Hi.”

Murphy looked me up and down. “I think orange is your color.”

When Ethel had handed me the pale orange jogging pants and matching sweatshirt, I had been skeptical, but also thankful for the clean clothes. “I think anything is better than what I looked like half an hour ago.”

Murphy nodded. “I would have to agree, but I do think orange is your color.”

I tipped my head to the side. “Okay.” I looked him up and down. “Oh my god. I’m just standing fresh and clean while

you're still... not."

Murphy chuckled and ran his fingers through his hair. "Would you believe me if I said this wasn't the first time I've looked like this?"

"After today, yes, I would believe that." I always knew Murphy lived a life I had only read about in books, but seeing it firsthand was intense. Looking back, Murphy had handled the whole situation as if it was just another day. Me being there seemed to be the only thing to throw him off his game. "Uh, Ethel left you a clean towel on the counter, and I left the body wash and stuff I used in the shower for you."

"Thanks, baby girl."

I stepped to the side and tucked my chin to my chest. "I, uh, will just be... somewhere else."

Murphy stepped into the bathroom and glanced back at me. "Ethel is in the kitchen cooking. You can hang out with her unless you want to lay down?"

I shook my head. "I got my second wind from the shower. I should be good for a couple of hours before I pass out."

Murphy hesitated. "Are you okay?" he asked softly.

"As well as one can be after being kidnapped and then rescued by my ex-boyfriend." I pasted a smile on my face. "That was supposed to be funny."

Murphy reached out and gently caressed my cheek. "I'm sorry you got caught up in all of this."

I shrugged and resisted leaning into his touch. “It’s all good. You can’t really be blamed for the crazies coming out of the woodwork, right?”

“This crazy we should have taken care of a long time ago,” he confessed. He dropped his hand and stepped back. “I’ll be back out in a few minutes. Could you ask Ethel for some clothes for me? I forgot.”

I nodded. “Sure can.” I held up my clothes. “And I think I’ll ask her to just put these in the garbage can.”

“Good idea,” he laughed. He closed the door, and I let out a sigh.

Even dirty and bloody, Murphy still made my heart skip a beat. Now that we were safe, and I wasn’t worried about some crazy goons tracking us down, I had a lot to think about.

I had been resigned to the fact that Murphy was completely out of my life. For five years, he hadn’t made a single appearance. At least not physically. God knew I thought about him a lot.

I always wondered if he had been the one that got away. That I hadn’t fought enough for him. When he had broken up with me, I had just accepted it. He said he didn’t want to be with me, and I just took it.

Maybe this was the chance I needed. The chance to see if we really were meant to be.

I headed into the kitchen with my bundle of dirty clothes in my hands. “Uh, do you have a trash can I can put these in, and then possibly some clothes for Murphy?”

“I’ll get the clothes,” Gravel called.

Ethel took my dirty clothes. “I can take care of these, honey.”

Gravel was back in seconds with clothes in his hands. “These should fit your guy,” he called.

The words to say Murphy wasn’t my guy were on the tip of my tongue, but I kept my mouth shut. “Thank you. I’ll just give these to him, and I’ll be right back.”

I padded back down the hallway and gently knocked on the door.

“Just put them by the counter,” Murphy called.

I assumed he was already in the shower and opened the door.

I assumed wrong.

Murphy stood in front of the shower, ready to step in.

Naked.

My mouth dried, and I struggled to breathe.

I had seen Murphy naked before. More times than I could count.

That was five years ago, though.

Five long years ago.

“Baby girl,” he whispered. A smirk spread across his lips. “I said just leave them by the door.”

“Oh, uh, I...” I stuttered. I ripped my eyes off his perfectly fit body and tried to look anywhere but at him. “I thought you

said by the counter.” I tossed them on the counter and spun around. “I’m sorry I saw your...” I zipped my lips and dove out of the bathroom. I slammed the door shut behind me and collapsed against the closed door.

I almost just told him I was sorry I saw his penis.

Oh my lord.

“Everything okay?” Ethel called. She appeared in the hallway, and I quickly stood.

“Oh, yeah. All good. Just got a little lightheaded.” I pushed my hair out of my face and headed to the kitchen. “How about a cup of coffee?”

God knew I needed it.

CHAPTER SIX

Murphy

“Did he hit his head?”

“Probably just a food coma.”

My eyes fluttered open. “Assholes,” I muttered.

“Food coma,” Creed and Apollo sang in unison.

Tatum stirred next to me and buried her head in my neck.

“I told you two to leave them alone,” Ethel scolded. “You haven’t even eaten yet.”

“Just wanted to make sure they were breathing,” Creed called. “All good.” Creed moved away, but Apollo stayed standing over us.

“This is cozy,” he muttered.

“Fuck off, Apollo,” I grumbled.

After Tatum had gotten an eyeful in the bathroom, I showered and put on the sweatpants and shirt Gravel had given Tatum.

When I walked into the kitchen, Ethel had just finished making a batch of scrambled eggs, toast, and bacon. Tatum and I had stuffed ourselves full and then collapsed on the couch, where we both promptly passed out.

“What are you wearing?” Apollo asked. “Is that a Devil’s Knights shirt?”

Tatum laid her hand on my chest and let out a little moan. I didn’t know how she was sleeping through this.

“It sure is. You got a problem with that?” Gravel called.

Apollo held up his hands. “No problem at all. I was thinking that I liked it so much that I should see if King could get me one.”

Apollo didn’t back down to anyone other than Leo, but it seemed that the grumpy old Gravel might have his number.

“Maybe we can see if Leo can make a Banachi shirt,” Creed suggested. “Something like *Banchis, your friendly mafia.*” Creed motioned across his chest. “Maybe like the cityscape of Chicago on the back or something.”

Apollo rolled his eyes and moved over to the kitchen table. “I would like to be present when you suggest that to Leo, okay?” he chuckled. He sat at the table with Creed, and they both worked on piling their plates full.

“Why are they so loud?” Tatum whispered. She had one eye open and looked sleepily up at me. “Do they not know we were kidnapped?”

I brushed her hair out of her face. “Hey, sleepyhead. You want to go lay down in the spare bedroom?” Ethel had offered us the spare bedroom after we ate, but the couch was closer.

Tatum shook her head. “I like it right here.”

Right here was plastered against my side with her head resting on my shoulder.

I liked it, too.

“How long did we sleep for?” she asked groggily.

“Over two hours.” And I needed it. I was dragging my ass as soon as my stomach was full. “Once Creed and Apollo eat, I’m going to head out with them to see if we can find Brandt. You okay with staying here?” I asked.

Tatum’s eyes darted to the left. “Uh.”

“I promise you’ll be safe here, baby girl. Gravel always shoots first and then asks questions.” I rubbed my hand up and down her arm. “And I know he won’t let anything happen to Ethel. You’re more than safe.”

“King and a few of the boys are headed this way,” Gravel interrupted. He raised his hand in the air. “Speak of the devil,” he smirked.

The loud rumble of a pack of bikes shook the cabin.

“How many did he bring with him?” Apollo asked.

Gravel shrugged and walked to the front window that looked out on the driveway. “Looks like five bikes and three ol’ ladies.”

“Jesus,” Apollo muttered. “We’re looking for a psycho, and they brought their ol’ ladies with them?”

Ethel smacked the back of Apollo’s head with the dish towel. “Mind your manners, boy. You’re in my home, not that fancy mansion you boys live in.”

Apollo rubbed the back of his head. “Sorry, ma’am,” he muttered.

I added Ethel to the list of people who could make Apollo cower.

Tatum moved to sit up, and I shifted to the edge of the couch. So much for relaxing anymore.

“Is Meg here?” Creed asked. “Everything she makes is great, but a few years ago, she sent some food to the mansion for something or another,” he smirked, “and one of the things was this banana pudding cake. I don’t know what the hell it was, but I still have dreams about it.”

“Yeah, she’s on the back of King’s bike.” Gravel looked to the left. “Ope, and it looks like Bear and Greta are here, too, in that fancy Bronco of his.”

“Jesus,” Creed muttered. “Did King bring the whole calvary with him?”

Apollo moved to the window. “We might need them. And Greer is going to be pissed at me once she finds out Meg is here. I told her to sit tight at Wyndemere because there wouldn’t be anything for her to do here.”

“When Meg, Greta, Cyn, and Lennox show up, you know there will be chaos,” Gravel rumbled.

“I think you can just say Meg’s name and know that chaos is coming,” I laughed. Of course, I had spent time with Cyn and Greta, but Lennox was somewhat new to the group. She had hooked up with Snapper when he was locked up, and they seemed to be going strong now that he was out.

Tatum slowly stood and winced. “Sleeping on the couch probably wasn’t the best idea when you’re battered and bruised,” she moaned.

“Let me get you some medicine, honey. I have a concoction that should help knock out those aches and pains.” Ethel smiled wide. “God knows after all of these years, I had to help the doctor and whatnot.”

“Concoction?” Creed asked. “Is that code for weed?”

“Don’t be getting into my stash,” Gravel warned. “I need that for when I can’t sleep.”

Ethel waved her hand at Gravel. “Oh, hush. I’m not going into your drawer. I just meant two Tylenol, an ibuprofen, and a shot of whiskey helps heal aches.”

Gravel hmped. “I would beg to differ, but you do you, woman.”

“Did someone say whiskey?” Meg stood in the open doorway wearing a black leather coat, dark jeans, and black boots. Her signature purple hair was piled on top of her head, and she had a tote bag slung over her shoulder.

“Shots?” Cyn called from behind her.

“It’s barely noon,” Rigid grumbled from somewhere behind them.

“Just get in the damn cabin,” King shouted. “My whole life is just herding your dumbasses everywhere.”

“Who are you calling a dumbass?” Meg scoffed. She walked into the cabin and headed straight to the kitchen.

Cyn headed over to Gravel and kissed him on the top of his head while Rigid moved to the side of the door and folded his arms over his chest.

King filed in with a pixie-looking woman behind him, and then Snapper, Easy, and Frost stepped in.

The cabin was full.

Tatum looked at me. “Whoa,” she whispered.

“This isn’t even half of them, baby girl,” I chuckled. While we, of course, knew the Devil’s Knights, it wasn’t like we gathered with them often.

Fayth, Leo’s sister, had married Slider, a member of the Devil’s Knights, years ago, forging the bond between the Banachis and Devil’s Knights. Over the years, we had helped them, and they had helped us.

Today, it was their turn to help us.

“We got time to eat?” Rigid asked. He rubbed his stomach and smirked. “It was a long ride up here.”

Ethel opened the fridge. “If you can give me twenty minutes, I’ll get a new batch of eggs and bacon going.”

“Oh,” Meg called. “Let me help.” She motioned to Cyn. “Get over here and help, woman.”

Cyn grumbled under her breath but moved into the kitchen.

“I can help, too,” the pixie called. She handed her bag to Snapper, and it clicked that this was Lennox.

“Out of the way, coming in.” The door that had partially closed now banged into King, and Greta peeked her head through. “Your mama wasn’t a doormaker, King. Move it or lose it.”

King moved to the side and yanked the door open. “Remind me again why you came?” he growled at Greta.

She reached up and lightly patted his cheek. “Because you love me, and you interrupted my sexy time with Bear. We had to finish on the way up here.”

“Oh my god,” Snapper moaned. “Do you have to say shit like that? I could have lived the rest of my life without the image of you giving Bear road head.”

Greta tipped her head to the side. “Who said anything about road head?” She smirked. “I like being on top anyway. It worked out for the best.”

“Why?” Easy cried. “Why do you have to say this shit in front of me? I’m your damn brother.”

Bear appeared behind Greta and pushed her into the cabin.

“Whoa,” Tatum whispered. “That is a big man.”

Bear more than lived up to his name. He was over six and a half feet tall, stocky, and could murder you with one look. He was a bounty hunter and shacking up with Greta. He was domineering and serious, while Greta was goofy and sarcastic. They somehow worked together.

“Can you please get a handle on your woman?” Snapper asked Bear. “Not even thirty seconds, and she’s telling us about your extracurricular activities.”

Bear looked down at Greta. “Babe.”

One word.

Greta huffed and folded her arms over her chest. “I didn’t say anything that wasn’t the truth. King wanted to know why I came with you, so I told him. You told me to stop telling tall tales to get reactions. Did I not ride—”

“No!” Meg and Cyn hollered.

Meg held up her hands. “Do not finish that sentence. I am all for being crazy and zany, but I think we can all agree that we believe you and can move on.”

“Move on,” Cyn echoed. “Move. On.”

Tatum giggled and looked up at me. “They’re just as crazy as you said,” she whispered.

“You don’t even know, baby girl.”

Greta’s eyes snapped to me. “You.”

I looked around. “Uh, me?” I was glad Greta had moved on from telling us about her and Bear, but I didn’t want to be the center of her attention.

“Another one of you came to your senses and found a woman?” she asked.

Tatum pointed her finger at her chest. “Me? Woman?” Tatum looked up at me. “You?”

“I swear she was talking in complete sentences earlier,” Ethel giggled.

“We dated a few years ago,” I explained. “Somehow, Brandt got wind of it.”

Greta quirked her eyebrow and pursed her lips. “Interesting,” she mumbled. “We’ll dissect that when the guys

leave.”

“Uh, I...” Tatum stuttered.

“No, you won’t. Leave Tatum alone.” I pointed from Greta to Meg. “I know you two are the ringleaders of the chaos, so try to keep it to a minimum, okay? Tatum has been through enough. She needs to rest.”

Meg snapped her fingers and frowned. “There went my plans of running a marathon while you guys were gone.”

“Babe,” King called.

“Why are you both calling me out?” she demanded. She held up the whisk in her hand. “I’m just whipping up some eggs.”

“Just keep the fuckery to zero today,” King ordered.

Meg saluted King. “Aye, aye, captain.”

King pointed at Greta. “That goes for you, too.”

Greta curtsied. “Whatever the sir wants,” she replied demurely.

The ol’ ladies went to work on making breakfast for the third time while Creed and Apollo finished their plates.

I grabbed Tatum’s arm and turned her to look at me.

“They seem fun,” she chirped happily.

I was afraid of this.

Meg and the girls were a bad influence. They had fun without any worry about the consequences.

“You need to rest, Tatum. You barely could stand.”

She scoffed. “I just needed to stretch. And I’ll be as good as new once I get that concoction from Ethel.”

“You are not going to mix booze and pills.” That was the last thing she needed. “You just need to rest and relax.”

She propped her hands on her hips and glared at me. “I think I know what I should and shouldn’t do, Murphy. You’re the one who told me I was safe here. You,” she pointed her finger into my chest, “are the ones who are going to be traipsing through the woods looking for some crazy guy. You should be more worried about yourself and not me.”

“I can worry about both of those things,” I muttered. Though I was going to worry a hell of a lot more about Tatum than myself. “Just try to behave.”

“Murphy,” she laughed. “I think you’re overacting here.”

I wasn’t.

Meg and the chaotic tornado that followed her were not myths.

I sighed and placed my hand on her waist. “Just try not to get arrested while I’m gone, okay?” That was all I could ask. “And if you do, call me, not King. He’ll probably let Meg sit there a couple of days before he bailed her out.”

“We’re not going to get arrested,” Tatum laughed. “Have a little faith in me.”

I did. Meg, not so much.

“Come pull up a chair, Tatum,” Meg called.

“See, she’s already pulling you into her web while I’m right here,” I muttered. I pulled her close and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“I promise not to get into trouble,” she swore. She tipped her head back and smiled. “Now, I’m gonna go hang out while you go catch the bad guy, okay?”

She pulled out of my arms and bounced over to the open stool next to Lennox.

“She seems nice,” Easy snickered.

I flipped him off.

Easy nodded at me. “She probably only likes you because of your shirt, though.”

I looked down at my shirt and scowled.

The sooner we found Brandt’s place, the sooner I could return to Wyndemere, my clothes, and be away from the Devil’s Knights.

I could only handle them for a short amount of time, and I was already nearing my tolerance for them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tatum

“You’re sure?”

I nodded. “Totally.”

“I don’t think this is the best idea,” Ethel worried. “Why don’t you think about it some more, honey? I can make you another cup of coffee, and you can mull it over.”

Meg crouched down in front of me. “I love Ethel with my whole heart but don’t listen to her. You don’t need to think about this. It’s just hair.”

“I think this is the chaos Murphy was talking about,” Greta laughed from the doorway.

Meg waved off Greta. “Go make another batch of margaritas.”

“I wouldn’t have to if Gravel hadn’t drunk half of the last batch,” Greta muttered. She headed back to the kitchen, muttering under her breath.

“He’s likes strawberry,” Ethel replied. “I told you to make a different flavor.”

“He’s outside, starting the firepit. Just take the blender into the laundry room, and he won’t know you made more,” Meg advised.

“Or you could bring the blender in here,” Cyn smirked.

“One time, years and years ago, and you won’t let me live it down, will you?” Meg grumbled.

“Wait, what?” I asked. “What happened years and years ago with a blender?” The guys had been gone for close to an hour, and I had already heard a few hilarious stories from Meg.

“Well, it wasn’t a blender,” Cyn confessed. “Meg got Marley drunk and then panicked when Troy and King came back or something like that. Instead of just being an adult, Meg shoved her into the bathroom with a pot of coffee to sober her up and tried to act like Marley wasn’t drunk off her butt.”

“There is so much more to it than that,” Meg muttered. “I didn’t get her drunk just because. She had the deer in the headlights look, and I thought a shot would help.”

“Five, Meg,” Ethel laughed. “She had five shots in a matter of minutes. The girl was hammered before the fifth shot went down.” Ethel looked at me. “Marley is Gravel’s daughter who hooked up with Meg’s best friend. She’s a lightweight and can’t cook to save her life.” Ethel held up her hands. “Great girl, though.”

“Fire is going,” Lennox called. “Though I did have to take the lighter fluid away from Gravel.” Lennox appeared behind Cyn. “He was scaring me when he pretended like he was peeing lighter fluid on the fire.”

“What?” Ethel exclaimed. “What is that old coot trying to do? Start himself on fire?” Ethel pushed past Cyn and Lennox. “Think before you let Meg near you,” Ethel called.

This was the chaos Murphy had talked about.

It wasn't that a big thing that was happening to make it chaotic; it was little things all happening at once that made it so chaotic.

Meg wants to dye my hair.

Cyn is reminiscing about the crazy things Meg has done.

Gravel trying to light the fire pit but possibly lighting himself on fire.

Greta making margaritas.

Gravel drinking half the margaritas; refer back to then wanting to light a fire.

Meg tapped my leg. "Are we doing this or not?" she asked.

Did I want a streak of purple in my hair? Ten-year-old Tatum was screaming yes, while thirty-six-year-old Tatum was just a bit hesitant. It wasn't like I had a job that frowned upon colored hair. The bookstore I worked at was so open and accepting of everyone that they probably wouldn't even bat an eye if I showed up with purple hair.

"Do it," Lennox cheered. She pointed to her hair. "Meg does my pink for me, and she's great."

"See," Meg bragged, "I totally know what I'm doing."

"Underneath," Greta called.

Meg tipped her head to the side. "What the hell is she talking about now?"

The blender whirled for a few seconds and then stopped. "Dye the underneath of her hair."

“Peek-a-boo,” Lennox cried. “That is a great idea. It’s the in-between of having fun hair and being normal. If you want to see your pretty color, flip your hair around or put it up. Don’t want to see it? Leave it down. I think it’s a great idea.”

I leaned my head back. “I kind of really like that idea.”

Meg clapped her hands together happily. “Excellent. Let me mix up the dye, and we’ll get this show on the road.”

“I still am surprised that you brought your hair dye along,” I laughed.

Meg shrugged and squirted a blob of this and another blob of something else into a plastic bowl. “Lennox had mentioned the other day about her hair needing a refresh, so I grabbed my bag when King said we were heading up here. I also just like to always be prepared.”

Meg mixed up the two globs, and I peered into the bowl. “Uh, that doesn’t look purple.”

“It’ll darken up really quick,” Meg promised. “I’m nowhere near being a scientist, but it’s got something to do with oxidizing.”

“I’m going to take your word on that because I barely passed science in high school.”

Meg circled her finger at me. “Spin around.”

I turned and straddled the toilet. “This okay?” I couldn’t see Meg, but I felt her move behind me.

“Perfect. This is going to go super quick. All I gotta do is section off your hair, and you’ll be peek-a-booing in no time.”

“What do you think Murphy is going to think about your hair?” Lennox asked as Meg combed my hair.

“Uh, well...” I really didn’t know what he was going to think.

Murphy was pretty serious, but that was when it came to his work. Did I think he would ever dye his hair a funky color? Heck no. But I didn’t think he would not like what I was doing.

I think.

“As long as you like it, he’ll like it.” Meg patted my shoulder. “Don’t worry. King loves my hair. Snapper loves Lennox’s hair. And I can tell you for a fact that Cyn loves Rigid’s hair. You’re going to look amazing.”

“I’m not doing this for Murphy,” I blurted. “I’ve always wanted some funky hair, but I’ve never had the guts to do it.” Was this the best time to do it? Probably not, but why not? “And Murphy and I aren’t anything. I literally hadn’t seen him for five years until yesterday.”

“Girl,” Meg drawled. “I believe you, but the way that man was looking at you earlier, you might be something more than what you think.”

I rested my hands on the back of the toilet and sighed. “He wasn’t looking at me in any way. He feels guilty that I got tangled up with all this Brandt business. That’s all you saw.”

“Right,” Lennox laughed. “We’ll just let you believe that for now, sweetie.”

“Well, I guess we’re going to see how he looks at you with purple hair when he gets back.”

I felt the coolness of the dye next to my scalp, and I knew there wasn’t any turning back now.

Ten-year-old Tatum screamed with glee, and thirty-six-year-old Tatum knew she had fully and completely become a part of the chaos Murphy had warned her about.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Murphy

“This it?”

I nodded. “Yup.”

“How the fuck did Brandt get a place like this?” Apollo asked.

Now that I wasn’t running for my life, I could take in the place we had escaped from.

It was a two-story house with wood siding and a black roof. A large porch was on the front, and a cement patio was on the back. There was a glass patio table with four chairs around it and a large umbrella. It looked like a family lived there, not Brandt, the psycho.

We had circled the property carefully and hadn’t seen anyone.

King held up his phone and said, “According to the state real estate registry, Greg Chambers owns it.”

“Are we supposed to know who the fuck that is?” Creed asked.

I nodded to Creed. “Text the name to Leo and see if it rings a bell with him.”

Creed pulled out his phone and sent off a message.

“We gonna just stand here looking at the place, or are we going to check it out?” King called from the sidewalk by the front.

“Well, I’m assuming no one is here because they would have taken their shot at us if they were.” I nodded to King. “You take the front; we’ll take the back.”

Creed, Apollo, and I headed to the back of the house while King and the other guys headed to the front door.

“That the window you busted out of?” Creed asked.

Everything looked exactly as it had yesterday. The shattered glass was scattered around the window, and nothing was moved.

This was fucking weird.

What was the point of kidnapping Tatum and me and then just leaving us there?

Apollo cautiously climbed the steps to the backdoor with his gun drawn and pulled open the screen door.

Creed’s phone dinged. “Leo says this place is listed as a rental.”

“So Brandt was renting it?” I asked.

“Well, sort of. It’s one of those places you can rent for a few nights. Like, when you’re on vacation and don’t want to stay in a hotel,” Creed explained.

“Who the hell would want to stay out here in the middle of nowhere?” Apollo asked. He stepped into the house, and we followed behind him.

“Anything back there?” King hollered.

“Nothing,” Apollo replied.

We walked through the mudroom with a washer and dryer and into the kitchen.

“This where you were held?” Rigid called.

We headed toward the front of the house and met King and Rigid in the hallway while Easy, Frost, and Snapper headed upstairs.

I looked inside the room. “Yup, that’s where they had me.” Nothing was different from when Tatum and I had left. The ropes were still on the floor next to the chair, and the boards I had ripped off the wall were scattered on the hardwood floor.

“I’m gonna check the basement,” Bear yelled. He skirted around us, opened the door to the basement, and jogged down the stairs.

“This wasn’t Brandt’s place,” Creed told King. “He just rented it for a couple of days.”

King walked into the room and kicked one of the boards I had ripped off the window. “I hope Brandt didn’t want his deposit back. I don’t think he is going to get it.”

I moved into the room and leaned out the window we had jumped out of. It had only been yesterday that Tatum and I had leaped out, but it felt longer than that.

“Nothing up here!” Easy shouted from upstairs. “Doesn’t even look like anyone came up here.”

“This is the weirdest shit I’ve seen in a long time,” Rigid muttered.

Easy, Frost, and Snapper clambered down the stairs and gathered around the room I had been held in.

“Where did they keep Tatum?” Snapper asked.

“This is the only room that looks like it was touched. Everywhere else is untouched.” King ran his fingers through his hair. “It’s almost as if he wanted you guys to escape.”

“But why?” I asked. “What was the point of this then? Why put in all that effort to kidnap Tatum, grab me, bring us both here, and then just let us leave?” The pieces we’re gathering were not adding up.

“Yo!” Bear bellowed from the basement.

“What is it?” King hollered back.

“We need to get the fuck out of here,” he screamed. His footsteps thundered up the steps as he roared, “There’s a fucking bomb!”

“Holy fuck,” Frost shouted.

Everyone moved at once.

I jumped out of the window with King following behind me.

Frost and Easy spilled out the front door while everyone else ran out the back.

“Run!” King ordered.

Talk about déjà vu.

We both headed to the wood line, but before we made it halfway, we were knocked on our faces as a loud boom

sounded, and the house exploded.

“Holy fuck!” Rigid hollered. “Did you fucking see that?”

I flipped over on my back and watched pieces of the house float down from the sky around us.

“Jesus,” I whispered.

“Fuck,” King grumbled. “Leo owes me a new bike.”

I looked where we had parked and winced. “Maybe we shouldn’t have parked so close to the house.”

“Ya fucking think?” King growled.

Part of the roof had landed on four motorcycles, our SUV, and they were now engulfed in flames.

“Everyone make it?” Apollo called.

A chorus of yay’s and yeah’s went up, and we were all accounted for. Thank god.

“I think we know what Brandt’s plan was now,” I sighed. “He knew I would get out and then come back to look for him once I got help.”

King nodded. “I think you’re right about that. Thank fuck Bear went in the basement when he did.”

“You’re fucking welcome,” Bear bellowed. “That place was wired with enough explosives to blast us to the damn moon.”

“You think we need to call the fire department, or the fire will go out on its own?” Frost asked.

King pulled out his phone. “Oh, we’re calling the fucking fire department. There might not be close-by neighbors, but I bet anyone within a two-mile radius felt that explosion. Rigid, call Gravel and tell him to get his ass over here. I don’t think we can all fit in Bear’s Bronco.”

“Got it.”

Debris still floated in the air, and the basement of the house was nothing but flames. The whole house had blown and then crumbled.

We had been damn lucky.

Brandt had expected Leo, Apollo, Creed, and Princeton to return to the house with me to find him, and he had left a big surprise for us.

He was stepping up his game, and we had walked right into his trap.

Next time, we might not be so lucky if we didn’t find him soon.

CHAPTER NINE

Tatum

“Well?”

I turned my back to the mirror and glanced over my shoulder. Meg lifted the back of my hair, and a bright, shocking chunk of purple was exposed.

“I love it!” I gasped. I had been a little scared the whole time the color had been processed, and Meg wouldn’t let me look, but now I was just excited.

Meg had kept me from the mirror until she had rinsed, dried, and styled my hair.

“Total Barney moment,” Greta laughed. “Isn’t that the same color you use?”

Meg nodded. “Yes, but my hair is dark to begin with. I could bleach mine and then dye it to get my color this bright, but I’m lazy. I’m good with dark purple. It’s served me well the past twenty-something years.” She winked at me in the mirror. “Lo is a fan of it, too.”

I tipped my head to the side.

“King,” Meg laughed. “Sorry, he’s Lo to me. Only Ethel and I call him that.”

“You look way hotter than Barney,” Lennox laughed.

“Yo!” Gravel hollered. “We gotta go.”

“Go?” Ethel squawked. “You’re half in the bag.”

Meg dashed out of the bathroom, and I hightailed it after her.

“What’s going on?” Meg demanded.

Gravel hitched his thumb over his shoulder. “I was outside by the fire, and I heard a boom in the distance.”

“I think the margaritas are making you hear things,” Greta chuckled. She held up the empty pitcher. “Your next one is virgin.”

Gravel swatted her hand toward her. “I know what I heard, girl, and not even five minutes later, King called me. That place Tatum and Murphy were just blew up.”

“Oh, god,” Meg gasped.

“Oh god, is right,” Gravel grunted.

“Is everyone okay?” Ethel asked.

“The guys escaped by the skin of their teeth. King called for a ride. Some of the bikes and the goons’ SUV didn’t survive the explosion, and they need a ride.”

Sirens wailed in the distance.

Meg turned to me. “You’re the only one who didn’t drink. You gotta drive.”

“Me?” I squeaked.

“I got the keys,” Ethel hollered. “My van is parked in the garage.”

“Wait, what?” I sputtered.

“I’ll go with her. King gave me the address.” Gravel pointed at Ethel. “Once we leave, lockdown. No one leaves until I get back.” He headed out the door, leaving it open.

Ethel waved at Gravel’s retreating back. “I know the drill.” She tossed me the keys. “Drive safe, honey.”

I snatched the keys from the air and looked around frantically. Things had done a one-eighty from two minutes ago when I was just excited to have pretty colored hair.

“Oh, poor girl,” Greta snickered. “I still remember my first lockdown. I think I was eleven.”

Cyn nodded. “Yeah, I remember that, but I don’t remember my first one. I’m sure I freaked out like Tatum.”

This was normal for them. *This was normal for them?!?* And I wasn’t freaking out. I was just trying to process what was going on.

Meg waved her hand in my face. “You gotta go, honey. Put your shoes on, and hop in the van. Gravel will tell you where to go.”

This was what I needed. Short, exact directions on what to do. I nodded and looked for my shoes in the pile by the front door.

“Just wear whatever you can find,” Cyn ordered. “You’ve got about ten seconds before Gravel is blaring the horn and hollering for you to get out there.”

I crammed my feet into two shoes, not caring what they were, and ran out the door.

The garage door rose, and Gravel was in the van's passenger seat. I jumped in and fired it up.

“You're quicker than I thought you would be,” Gravel chuckled. “Ethel would have made me wait while she fixed her face and found matching shoes.” He leaned over and looked down at my feet. “You made an interesting combo.”

I threw the van into reverse and careened out of the garage. “Which way?” I asked. I shifted into drive and stopped at the end of the driveway.

Gravel pointed to the left. “That way, and then right at the next stop sign. They're about ten minutes away.”

I turned left and reached to put on my seat belt.

“They're okay, darlin’,” Gravel said softly.

“Is anyone really okay if they barely escape being blown up?” I asked. It sounded pretty darn serious to me. I didn't understand how the rest of the girls weren't freaking out. Ethel seemed a little on edge, but she seemed more than fine with locking down when Gravel and I left.

“I know you're new to all of this, but your guy knows what he's doing. Any other fool would have died in that building. Bear knew what to look for and to get everyone out.”

I glanced at Gravel. “Are you sure we should have left everyone at your cabin?”

“You wanted all of them to cram into the van with us?” he chuckled. He shook his head and ran his fingers through his beard. “Ethel, Meg, and Cyn have been through worse than

this. They know what to do. If this fool decides to go after them, he's really barking up the wrong tree."

"I don't even understand why he is doing this," I confessed.

Gravel patted my arm. "Greed and power, darlin'. They will make men do crazy things."

"Why can't this idiot just get his own money?" I grumbled.

"Because he wants to be Leo. In his mind, Leo is the ultimate power. He knocks off Leo, and then he can step onto his pedestal," Gravel explained.

I got it, and it made sense, but it wasn't logical to me.

"Right," Gravel called.

I slammed on the brakes and careened to the right. I jammed on the gas halfway through the turn, and the van rocked to the left.

"Holy hell." Gravel grabbed onto the handle above the door and braced his hand on the dash. "I didn't know your real name was Mario Andretti."

I glanced over at him and shrugged. "I like to go fast." And wasn't this an emergency?

Gravel shook his head. "Well, as long as you get us there in one piece."

We made a few more turns until Gravel told me to slow down and turn into the next drive. I didn't really need him to tell me where to turn. Black smoke billowed into the air, and

two police cars with their flashing lights were on the side of the road.

Three fire trucks surrounded the house, blasting water on the smoldering debris.

“My god,” I whispered.

Gravel motioned to the side of the house where the guys were standing. “Park there. I would tell you to stay in the van, but I’m smarter than that. Just stick close to us, darlin’, okay?”

I nodded. My eyes were on Murphy in his black sweatpants and Devil’s Knights shirt. His hair was messy, and a frown was on his lips. He did not look happy to see me.

“What the hell is she doing here?” he bellowed as soon as we opened our doors.

Gravel held up his hands. “Easy,” he called. “I needed a driver.”

“They finally pull your license?” Frost asked.

Gravel flipped him off. “No, Greta got me drunk.”

“Not surprising,” Bear grunted.

“Are you shitting me?” Rigid laughed. “We leave you along with the girls, and you can’t handle them?”

“If you guys want to stand around slack-jawing about bullshit, Tatum and I can just head back to the house, and you can call us when you want to come to the cabin.” Gravel turned back to the van and opened the door. “Let’s go, doll.”

I looked from Gravel to Murphy and then back to Gravel. I had no idea what to do. I knew Gravel wasn’t one I should piss

off, but I also didn't want to leave Murphy.

"Knock it off," King called. "Snapper's bike is the only one that isn't on fire. He can ride back himself. You guys take the goons, and the four of us will ride with Bear."

"Can only fit three," Bear grunted.

"Not it," Frost and Easy called in unison.

"Jesus," Rigid grumbled. "I'll ride in the goon-mobile."

"I would be more worried about Tatum's driving than I would be about the other passengers," Gravel cackled. He jumped in the passenger seat and dramatically pulled his seat belt over his shoulder.

"Fucking hell," Rigid grumbled.

I rushed over to Murphy. "Are you okay? What happened? Were you in the house? Obviously not when the bomb went off, but you know."

Murphy grabbed my shoulders and gently squeezed. "I'm okay, baby girl. Bear got us out in time."

"I don't understand," I rushed. "Why did the house explode?"

"Probably has something to do with the ten pounds of explosives in the basement and the psycho that wants Leo dead," Bear joked. "Whoever is riding with me, let's go." He circled his finger in the air and headed over to his Bronco.

"That was a stupid question, wasn't it?" I whispered. This was just all so much, and I couldn't wrap my head around any of it.

Murphy caressed my cheek. “Not stupid, baby girl. We’re all asking the same question. Brandt stepped up his game after all of these years, and none of us know why.”

My eyes connected with his. “And none of you guys are safe until you figure it out,” I sighed.

Murphy nodded. “You’re included in that, Tatum. No one connected to the Banachis is safe until we put Brandt in the ground.”

Creed’s phone rang. “It’s Leo,” he called. He put the phone on speaker and held it out. “You got us,” Creed called.

“Everyone still intact?” Leo called.

“For the most part,” Apollo replied. “A few scrapes and grass stains, but we’re alive.”

“Good.”

“Our vehicle and a few of the Knights’ bikes didn’t make it, though. The old man had to come to rescue us.” Creed smirked. “Though he was drunk, so he had to grab one of the girls to drive.”

“Do we have to be so detailed?” King asked. “We’re good, Leo. For now, at least. As soon as Brandt gets wind that you and your goons aren’t dead, he’s going to come back stronger.”

“This seemed pretty strong to me,” Creed mumbled.

“Head back to the cabin,” Leo ordered.

“Church?” King called.

“Church,” Leo growled. The call ended, and Creed shoved his phone in his pocket. “You know shit is getting serious when Leo starts talking like a biker.”

“Load up. I don’t care what fucking vehicle you’re in as long as you’re in one.” King stalked over to Bear’s Bronco with Frost and Easy following behind him.

“Are you okay?” Murphy asked me.

“Am I okay?” I asked. “I wasn’t almost blown up, so I would say I’m doing pretty good.”

Murphy pulled me into his arms. “I’m sorry you’re being dragged into all of this, baby girl.”

I relaxed into his body and wrapped my arms around his waist. “It’s okay,” I whispered. “My life was pretty boring the past five years. I was due for a little excitement.”

Murphy chuckled and pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “You’re a nut.”

“Let’s go,” Gravel hollered from the van. “I just told Greta to mix up another round of margaritas.”

“Is he really drunk?” Murphy asked.

I glanced over his shoulder at Gravel, who banged on the dash and pointed at me. “He certainly isn’t sober,” I laughed.

Murphy turned and laughed. “I wasn’t kidding with those stories I told you about the Devil’s Knights, was I?”

I scoffed and pulled out of his arms. “If anything, you didn’t tell me the whole truth. They’re all crazier than you

made them sound. Greta might surpass Meg in the crazy department.”

Gravel honked the horn twice.

“He really liked those margaritas, huh?” Murphy chuckled.

“Apparently.”

Murphy ducked into the back of the van, and I slipped behind the driver’s seat. I glanced in my rearview mirror and couldn’t help but smile.

“What’s so funny?” Gravel asked.

“I never thought I would be driving a van with a grumpy biker riding shotgun, with another biker and three mafia guys in the back,” I giggled.

“At least she didn’t call us goons,” Apollo sighed. “There’s hope for her yet.”

I cranked up the van and followed Bear’s Bronco back to the cabin.

Never in a million years would I have believed anything that had happened over the past forty-eight hours, but here I was.

Here. I. Was.

CHAPTER TEN

Murphy

“The girls are working on dinner. We’ve got about half an hour before they get bored and find trouble.” King closed the door to the garage and stood next to Rigid.

“What kind of trouble can they get into while making dinner?” Creed asked.

Bear grunted. “You haven’t spent much time with Greta, have you? She gets bored easily and likes excitement. I say we’ve got twenty minutes tops before they start dying someone else’s hair.”

“Someone else’s hair?” Apollo asked. “They already dyed someone’s hair?”

King nodded to me. “They got their hands on Tatum while we were busy avoiding getting blown up.”

“Uh, what?” I asked. “They didn’t do anything to Tatum.”

King snickered. “You might want to take a closer look, brother.”

I opened my mouth but closed it instantly. I thought back to Tatum picking us up, driving us back, and even talking to Meg and the girls. “She looks the same as she did earlier.” Hell, I had even hugged her.

“Look closer.” Creed’s eyes darted down. “Closer,” he drawled.

“For fuck sake,” Apollo grumbled. “She did not dye anything south of the equator.”

“How would you know?” Creed asked.

Apollo shook his head and pulled out his phone. “Let’s call Leo. The sooner we figure out our next move, the sooner we can get out of here.” He connected the call to Leo and put it on speaker. “We’re all here,” Apollo noted when Leo answered.

“They didn’t get arrested while you guys were getting blown up?” Leo asked.

“Not this time,” King grunted.

“Why don’t we talk about us barely escaping being blown up?” Frost questioned. “What the hell shit are you guys caught up in?”

King glared at Frost and shook his head.

Frost held up his hands defensively. “Sorry for wanting answers,” he muttered.

“He’s fine,” Leo called. “I would be concerned if you guys didn’t want answers.” Leo sighed. “The problem is we don’t have many answers.”

“Well, what do you know?” Rigid asked.

Some answers were better than none.

“It’s Brandt. I got in touch with the rental agency, and his name is on the rental agreement. He rented the place for three nights. He was scheduled to check out tomorrow.”

“Instead, he planned for all of us to check out this afternoon,” Easy muttered.

Leo ignored Easy. “I’m assuming Brandt purposely let Murphy and Tatum escape, thinking he would come back with

me, Apollo, Creed, and Princeton.”

“Instead, he came back with two of us and a bunch of bikers,” Creed muttered.

“Bounty hunter,” Bear grunted. “I’m not a biker.”

King waved his hand at Bear. “Fucking details, Bear.”

“So he figured I would come back with you guys, and then he would blow the house with us inside.” I ran my fingers through my hair. “Which very well could have worked.”

“He had to have cameras on the house or something,” Snapper pointed out. “How else would he have known we were there?”

Rigid held up his hand. “Or it was on a motion sensor or something. There are lots of ways he could have detonated that bomb at the right time. We’re just lucky we got out before it blew.”

“Barely,” Frost muttered.

“What’s our next move?” Creed asked. “We need to do something before Brandt finds out his plan failed.”

“He probably already knows,” Leo sighed. “He’s going to strike again, but we’re going to be ready for him this time. His surprise element is gone now. We know he’s gunning for me, and he’s not going to stop until he succeeds or we end him.”

“I vote on ending him,” Snapper called.

“I think we all vote in favor of that,” Rigid pointed out.

“Once we get a vehicle, we’ll head back to Wyndemere.” Apollo glanced at Gravel. “You think we can borrow your van,

old man?”

Gravel nodded. “I don—”

“No,” Leo interrupted. “No one is coming back to Wyndemere. Brandt wants all of us to be in one spot. That’s what he tried to make happen today. He didn’t consider you would stumble on Gravel and get the Knights to help you. We need to stay one step ahead of him. Princeton, Kitty, and Larry are already heading somewhere safe. Greer and the kids are headed out, too. I texted you their destination, Apollo. You guys are going to do the same thing.”

“Just you guys, not the club, right?” King asked.

“I can’t tell you guys what to do. Do I think Brandt is going to go after you guys? No, but I can’t say for certain. The fact he went after Murphy’s ex is a little surprising. He knows I have a connection with the club through Fayth since she’s with Slider. I wouldn’t put it past Brandt to go after my sister. Battening down the hatches at the club wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

“Jesus,” King muttered. “Never a dull moment.” He nodded to Rigid. “Call down to Hero and tell him to lock it down. Everyone at the clubhouse.”

Rigid nodded and headed out of the garage.

“If we separate, Brandt will only come after me. He doesn’t have the manpower to follow each of us.” Leo cleared his throat. “I’m going to draw him out and take him down finally.”

“I’ll be there in three hours,” Creed called. “I’m going with you.”

“No,” Leo called.

“Yes,” Creed insisted. “You’re going to need someone with you, and I’m the only one that makes sense. Apollo and Princeton have their families, and Murphy has Tatum to worry about. I don’t have anyone.”

“He’s right,” Apollo chimed in. “You know if Greer and the kids weren’t a target, I would be there with you, too.”

“That’s what he wants,” Leo reminded them.

“Just let Creed come to you,” I called. “It makes sense the rest of us spread out, but you need Creed. In the end, Brandt wants you. He wants what you have.”

“But he’s not going to get it,” King called. “The club won’t be on his radar if he’s having to split his resources on you guys.”

“He can’t have more than three guys working with him,” I pointed out.

“It was four, but we nabbed the one at Wyndemere,” Creed added.

“We all go off the radar; Brandt focuses on Leo because he can’t get all of us at once anymore, and we can get the jump on him.” Apollo nodded. “It will work.”

“As much as I hate putting you guys into more danger, this is what we need to do,” Leo grunted.

“We all signed up for this,” I called.

“Hero is locking down the clubhouse and getting calls out to everyone to get to the clubhouse.” Rigid tucked his phone in his pocket. “We should get back, too.”

King nodded. “We batten down the hatches at the clubhouse, and the rest is up to you, Leo.”

“Princeton, Apollo, and Murphy, scatter. Creed comes to me, and we take care of Brandt one last time,” Leo ordered.

“Creed can ride back with us,” King offered.

“Ethel and I will head back to the clubhouse, too. She’s been bugging me to get back to town for a while. Seems like now is as good a time as any.” Gravel nodded to me. “You and Tatum can borrow the car on the side if the garage if you want.”

I nodded and folded my arms over my chest. “Thanks.” For all the times I had complained about the Devil’s Knights, they were now stepping up to the plate when we really needed them.

Easy raised his hand. “If you go into hiding, how will Brandt find you? Don’t we want him to find you so that you can take him out?”

“Oh, trust me. Brandt will find me when I’m ready for him to, Easy. Be here in four hours, or I’m leaving without you, Creed. Apollo and Murphy, get the hell out of dodge. I don’t want you guys to be in the same state as me.” Leo ended the call.

Gravel headed to the backyard. “I better get that fire put out. You guys can handle wrangling your women.”

The Knights followed behind Gravel.

“You think this is the best idea?” Apollo asked.

Creed shrugged. “I think we can all agree that Brandt needs to be taken out once and for all.”

“And this is the way we do it,” I grunted. “We know what he’s trying to do, and we’re not going to give it to him. Creed goes with Leo, and we spread out.” I held up my hand. “But we’re close enough to pounce when Brandt shows his face.”

“You know Leo wants you guys to get as far away as possible. You gotta follow wherever the hell he sent Greer,” Creed pointed out to Apollo.

Apollo glanced at his phone. “Greer and the kids are headed to the safe house in Michigan.” He threw his hands in the air. “Fuck, man. How the hell am I supposed to be at the ready when I’m hours away?”

“Just head there for now. At least until I figure out where Leo wants us to go,” Creed pointed out.

“Leo isn’t going to go for us moving closer to him.” Apollo ran his fingers through his hair. “Fucking Brandt,” he growled.

“Leo doesn’t have to know. At least not until he needs to.” Creed held up his hands. “We all know Leo blames himself for this shit, and he’s doing what he can to get us out of the crosshairs. So we can do what we can to make sure he gets out of the crosshairs, too.”

“He’s gonna be pissed when he finds out we’re doing shit behind his back,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, well, at least we’ll all be alive, then. I’m heading back with the Knights. You go to Greer, and you take Tatum somewhere.”

I looked around the garage. “What if I just stay here with Tatum? There’s no way that Brandt knows about this place. And even if he manages to connect the dots and trace me here, that will take a long time.”

Apollo shrugged. “Not a bad idea. If Greer weren’t already halfway to Michigan, I would steal this place out from under you.”

Creed agreed. “Good. Though you know you are going to have to ask the old man if you can stay here.”

It wasn’t that we were afraid of Gravel; it was just that we all knew to respect our elders.

A smirk spread across my lips. “I’ll get Tatum to ask him. The old man took a shine to her. He won’t say no to her.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Murphy

“I never would have thought you were a coward, Murphy.”

I folded my arms over my chest and shrugged. “I just like to attack problems with the best strategy. I knew the old man wouldn’t be able to say no to Tatum.”

King slipped behind the van’s steering wheel and stuck the key in the ignition. “Well, I guess I can’t argue with that.”

Gravel and Ethel were behind the wheel of one of the trucks, and Apollo was in the other one.

“Besides, we wouldn’t have had enough vehicles if Tatum and I were headed out, too.” There was the beat-up car on the side of the garage, but I wasn’t sure that would make it more than twenty miles down the road.

King nodded. “Fair point.” He closed his door and rolled down the window. “Take care, and call us if you need anything. Hopeful this shit is over soon, and we can all go back to reality.”

“I like lockdown,” Cyn called from the backseat. “I miss the days of all of us hanging out at the clubhouse. I get that back when we lockdown.”

“Babe,” Rigid muttered from the passenger seat. “You hang out with Meg and the girls all of the time.”

“Not the same,” Cyn sighed. “I think it has something to do with the danger in the air that just makes me nostalgic.”

“Agreed,” Meg called.

King fired up the van, and I stepped back. “Let me know when you get back to the clubhouse.”

King nodded and pulled out of the driveway; the van loaded down with Rigid, Meg, Cyn, Snapper, and Lennox. Snapper had been able to get his bike to the cabin, but the front wheel had been bent by the explosion and wasn't safe for him to ride back to the clubhouse. Gravel and Ethel followed behind, and then Bear and Greta pulled out with Easy, Frost, and Creed smushed in the backseat. Bear hadn't been kidding when he said only four people could fit in the Bronco comfortably.

“You all good?” Apollo called.

I nodded. “All good. Take care of yourself, and let me know when you get to Greer and the kids.”

“Say hi to Greer for me,” Tatum called from the porch.

Apollo raised his hand in farewell and headed out.

I watched until his taillights faded and took a deep breath.

Everything was still, and the solitude of it just being Tatum and me settled over me.

Just Tatum and me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Tatum

“This is not at all how I saw this day going.”

“I say that at least once a week, baby girl.” Murphy strolled over to the porch and looked up at me. “It comes with the territory.”

“The territory of working for Leo Banachi?” I asked.

“The territory I tried to keep you away from five years ago,” I explained.

I wrinkled my nose and squinted at him. “I think you just said there wasn’t a place in your life for me. If you had specified things like this, I would have understood more.”

“So if I told you the threat of being kidnapped, blown up, and killed were daily possibilities, you would have been good with me breaking up with you?”

I shook my head. “No. It would have just given me things to argue back with you about. Your blanket statement really packed a punch back then.” Would the truth have scared me, yes? Would I have run for the hills? It might have been a possibility, but I would have liked to have been given the choice to stay or go. “And look at us now. We’ve both been kidnapped, you were almost blown up, and now we’re both in hiding. Everything you thought you were protecting me from still happened.”

“Yeah, look at us now,” Murphy sighed. He glanced over his shoulder at the setting sun. “Why don’t you head on in

while I check the perimeter?”

“You think they know we are here?” I asked. I thought we were staying here because Brandt didn’t know about it.

“Not yet,” Murphy mumbled. “I’ll be inside in a few minutes.”

I nodded and headed inside.

The cabin was beautiful, and I was thankful we didn’t have to drive for hours like the others, but it didn’t seem as warm and inviting as it had when everyone else was here.

Ethel must have started a fire while I was gone with Gravel, and it roared warmly. I kicked off my shoes and headed over to the fire.

When everyone else was here, I didn’t have time to focus on anything I was feeling. The girls were always talking or doing something, and I was trying to keep up with them.

I ran my fingers through my hair and sighed. Then, the guys had almost gotten blown up, and I had even forgotten I now had purple hair. Well, some purple hair. It wasn’t even noticeable unless you knew it was there. Murphy hadn’t even seen it.

I sighed and plopped down in Gravel’s recliner.

Now, I had nothing to do but think about my feelings and thoughts.

My feelings for Murphy. What I was thinking about him being back in my life.

Basically, all of my thoughts were about Murphy.

If he hadn't broken things off with me five years ago, I never would have left him. Even though the year we had spent together, he kept so many secrets from me, I still would have stayed.

What did that really say about me?

Had I just wanted to be with someone that I had been willing to accept whatever they gave me?

No, at least not fully.

I would have stayed because I knew there was so much more to Murphy. I could see it when he looked at me. His world might have been dangerous and so different than mine, but I always felt and knew that I was safe with him.

Like right now.

Even after being kidnapped and beaten, I knew with Murphy, everything would be okay.

I snuggled into the recliner and tucked my feet under me.

The whirlwind and excitement of the day hit me at once, and I was exhausted.

Murphy and I were going to have the talk he promised me back at the house. We needed to figure out what was going on, and I didn't mean only about the psycho Brandt trying to kill everyone.

I smothered a yawn with the back of my hand and laid my head back. My eyes fluttered closed, and I finally slept.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Murphy

I should have moved her to one of the beds, but she had looked so peaceful, and I didn't want to wake her.

She had been through hell the past couple of days, and rest was the best thing for her. She was safe with me, and nothing would touch her as long as I was breathing.

All my feelings for Tatum from five years ago resurfaced when she was tossed at my feet yesterday. All of my doubts and worries about us together had also come to light again.

She was exactly the girl I wanted by my side, but all the danger and uncertainty my life came with was something I didn't want to touch her.

She had already been through so much, and I knew there could be more.

I didn't want her to think lockdowns were fun and something normal.

I stared into the fire, a cup of coffee in my hand and my head full of worries.

My head full of Tatum.

"You look pretty serious."

I turned and watched Tatum stretch, her arms above her head and her shirt climbing up to expose her stomach.

"Sleep good?" I asked.

She nodded and relaxed into the chair. “Pretty dang good for being curled up in a recliner,” she sighed. “How long was I out for?”

“A couple of hours.”

“What?” she squawked. “Why did you let me sleep so long?” She patted her pockets and looked around. She sighed and dropped her chin to her chest. “I keep forgetting I don’t have my phone. Or, well, anything. I don’t even know what time it is.”

“Half past seven, baby girl. I’ve just been keeping the fire going while you snored away.” I had also been keeping an eye out. Common sense told me that Brandt had no clue about this cabin, and he very likely was still under the impression he had been successful in blowing us to smithereens. I had tried to watch TV for a bit, but nothing held my attention.

“I can’t believe I slept through dinner.”

“We’re not on a schedule, Tatum. We can eat whenever we want.”

She pushed down the footrest and scooted to the edge of the recliner. “Ethel mentioned she had some leftovers we could have for dinner. You hungry?”

I could always eat. I learned if there was food available, you should eat. You never know what is going to happen next, and you should always be prepared. “Sure.”

She shuffled into the kitchen and worked on pulling containers out of the fridge.

I added another log to the fire and took a seat at the kitchen island. “What do we got?” I asked.

Tatum peeked in a few of the containers and quirked her lips. “Looks like you have your choice of pot roast, meatloaf, some type of noodle thing, possibly apple crisp, and half a pan of brownies are on top of the oven.”

“Jesus,” I chuckled. “I knew Ethel liked to cook, but that is a hell of a lot of food. We won’t have to make anything for a couple of days.” Or maybe even longer. Gravel obviously ate good.

“What do you want to have tonight?” she asked.

“Uh, let’s go with some of the pot roast and the noodle thing. You can pick what we have for dessert.”

Tatum nodded and put two containers back in the fridge. “We’re totally having brownies and ice cream for dessert.”

“Hopefully, Ethel has some stashed away.”

Tatum grabbed two plates from one of the cabinets and worked on spooning food onto each plate. “She does. Greta was putting a scoop of vanilla into each batch of margaritas she mixed up. She said it was her secret ingredient, which I think was good. I swear Gravel drank at least a whole pitcher by himself.”

I tipped my head to the side. “I wouldn’t think ice cream would be good in a margarita.”

Tatum shrugged and set the plates in the microwave. “I didn’t think it would be good either, but it gave them a creaminess. I am totally doing that if I ever make margaritas.”

“What did you think of everyone?” I asked. When Tatum and I dated, she had only met the guys and Greer. I had told her about the Devil’s Knights, but she had never met them. That would have crossed the line of making her more of my life. God knew if Meg and the girls met someone they liked, they wouldn’t let them go.

“They were all the same but different.”

I tipped my head to the side again. “Not at all what I thought you would say. Is that a good thing?”

She nodded. “Yes. I mean, they were just like you described them, but they were so much more. You never mentioned Greta or Lennox, but I’m assuming that’s because they were teenagers when we dated.”

“Greta is Meg fifteen years ago. Crazy and said whatever came to mind.” I shook my head. “Crazy.”

“I liked Greta,” Tatum laughed. “She’s very sarcastic but funny.”

“She was something,” I muttered.

The microwave dinged, and Tatum stirred everything.

“What do you want to drink?” I asked. Tatum was doing more than enough by warming up my food. She didn’t need to wait on me.

“Uh, I’ll just have water.”

I grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge and set them on the kitchen island. “How come you didn’t drink today?”

She shrugged and set the plates back in the microwave. “I thought it was best to keep my wits about me. Meg tried for about two seconds to get me to drink, and then she let it go.”

I nodded and sat back down. “Sounds like Meg. She wants everyone to have fun but won’t make you do anything you don’t want to.”

“Well, I don’t know if that is entirely true.”

I tipped my head to the side. “What happened?”

Tatum tapped her fingers on the counter. “Uh, well.” She sighed and set the fork in her hand down. “I’ll just show you. But you have to promise to tell me you love it even if you hate it.”

“So, lie to you?” I laughed.

Tatum nodded and turned her back to me. “Exactly.” She gathered her hair in her hands and pulled her hair into a ponytail. The underneath of her hair was a shocking and vibrant shade of purple.

“Whoa,” I laughed. “That is purple.”

She glanced at me over her shoulder. “That doesn’t sound like you like it.”

I held up my hands. “I’m just shocked, baby girl. I never thought you were into funky hair.”

She dropped her hair and spun back around. “I’ve always been too chicken to do it. Having it this way gives me the funky hair when I want it, but when I don’t, I can hide it.”

“Do you like it?” I asked. It didn’t matter if I liked it; all that mattered was if Tatum did.

She smiled wide. “I really do. It makes me feel like a rebel or badass.”

I chuckled and nodded. “Then I like it, too, baby girl.”

She quirked her lips to the side. “Why do you call me that?”

“I always call you that.” Tatum had always been my baby girl from our second date. Something about her made the nickname fit.

“When we were dating, you called me that.” She tipped her head to the side. “And then you broke up with me.”

“Yup, I did.” I didn’t regret breaking up with Tatum back then. As much as I told myself that I wanted someone to share my life with, I hadn’t been ready for that. Not then.

Now? Now was a different story.

She was back in my life, and something told me this wasn’t a mistake. Not a one-off, and I shouldn’t brush her off.

She was back in my life, and I needed to figure out if that was where I wanted her to stay.

“Are we going to talk about that or save that for another day?”

I shrugged. “You want to?”

She furrowed her brow. “Uh, how about we postpone it until tomorrow? Or the next day? I kind of like the vibe we

have going right now.” The microwave dinged, and she pulled the steaming plates out.

She set one in front of me and grabbed two forks from the drawer. She held it in front of me. “Do we have a deal?”

“We act like there isn’t unfinished business between us and just enjoy the next couple of days?” I asked.

Tatum nodded.

“You got a deal, baby girl.” I grabbed the fork from her and nodded to the chair next to me. “Now, come sit down and stop waiting on me. I’ll get the brownies and ice cream when we’re done.”

She skirted around the island and plopped on the stool beside me. “You’ve got a deal, Murphy.”

We dug into our dinner, discussing whatever came to mind but keeping it light.

Neither of us wanted to delve into what we were doing and where we were headed.

Life had been fucked enough the past two days.

We could save the heavy and possibly heartbreaking talk for another day.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tatum

Sequins.

Glitter.

Rhinestones.

Leather.

Motorcycles.

Funny sayings.

That was the extent of the clothes I had to wear.

Ethel had a thing for anything sparkly, it seemed, and the clothes Meg had left at the cabin over the course of her visits here were a bit more in line with what I would wear, minus the leather.

Good thing Murphy wasn't in the MC because I didn't think I would fit the stereotype.

Not that I was anything to Murphy other than someone he needed to keep safe for the time being.

Last night after dinner, we had turned on the TV, but only after a few minutes, I started yawning and knew I needed to get my butt to bed unless I wanted to spend the night on the couch.

I had taken Ethel and Gravel's bed while Murphy took residence in the spare bedroom.

I had woken up this morning and was surprised to find Murphy awake. He had been out on the front porch with a cup

of coffee and his phone to his ear. Not wanting to disturb him, I made a cup of coffee and headed to Ethel's closet to find something to wear for the day.

Another problem I had was that Ethel and Meg were different body types than me.

Ethel was more on the svelte side, while Meg was curvy in all the right places.

Neither of their pants fit me unless they were leggings or jogging pants; Meg's shirts were the only ones I would consider wearing. However, the sayings on them just made me giggle.

'Don't Be A Richard' was splashed across the chest of a white shirt. In large font on the other were the words 'That Sounds Like A Terrible Idea,' and then in smaller print, 'What Time?' was underneath.

My favorite one was bright pink that had the ox and covered wagon from the computer game Oregon Trail in the center with the words 'Get In Loser' on top, and in smaller words underneath the ox said, 'We're Going To Die Of Dysentery.'

It called to my geeky girl heart.

"Dysentery and leggings it is," I sighed.

"Words I never thought I would hear together."

"My god," I yelped. I clutched the shirt to my chest and whirled around to see Murphy leaning in the doorway with his arms folded over his chest. His beard was filling in after not

shaving for days, and a huge smile was on his lips. “You scared the hell out of me, Murphy.”

“Sorry, baby girl. I figured you would have heard me come in.”

“I was too busy trying to figure out if I wanted to be a funny old lady or a sparkly one,” I laughed. “Meg and Ethel each have their own kind of style.”

“Did you find something to wear, or do we need to go into town?”

I tipped my head to the side. “We can do that? I thought we needed to be ghosts right now.”

Murphy chuckled and wandered into the room. “We need to lay low, baby girl, not disappear from society.”

I looked down at the shirt in my hands. “I mean, I would love to have some clothes that are more me, but I don’t have money.” I looked up at Murphy. “Or anything. You never really think about the consequences of kidnapping until it happens to you, you know? That came out completely wrong.”

“I get what you’re saying, baby girl,” he chuckled. “We can head into town to get you some things.”

“Did you not hear me when I said I don’t have any money, Murphy?” I sighed and dropped the shirt on the bed. “And I am not going to have any money when I get back home because I won’t have a job. Oh god,” I moaned. The past seventy-two hours had been a whirlwind, and now everything was crashing down on me. “And I won’t have an apartment

because if I don't have a job, then how can I pay my rent?" I tried to take a deep breath but struggled.

"Hey, hey," Murphy called. He gathered me in his arms and pulled me to his chest. "Calm down, baby girl. You don't need to worry about any of that."

"I don't need to worry about where I'm going to live and a paycheck?" I wheezed. "Are you insane? Those are two of the most basic things a human needs." I tipped my head back. "And I am a human."

"Baby," he chuckled.

"This isn't funny, Murphy. I know we are supposed to lay low, but I gotta get back to work." My boss, Jada, was amazing and really liked me, but I knew she wouldn't be cool with me not coming to work and still expecting to get paid.

Murphy shook his head. "You're not going back to work right now, Tatum. You can call your work and see if you can get some vacation time or something."

I blinked slowly. "You want me to call my work where I am supposed to be working right now and ask them for vacation time?"

Murphy nodded. "Yes."

"When you said you live in a different world than me, I think you meant you live in a different world than the whole world. You live in Banachi land. I don't live there. Leo isn't my boss, and I need to clock in when I'm scheduled."

"Where do you work?" he asked. "Are you still at the law firm?"

I wrinkled my nose. “Uh, not for the past four years. I got burned out, sold all my stuff, and got a job at a bookstore.”

Murphy tipped his head. “Seriously?”

“Do you have something against me working at a bookstore? People need to read, and I like to be the one to help them find their next escape. I also like just to be surrounded by all of these books.” Not that I needed to explain myself to him, but I could see why he was a little confused. I had been a personal assistant for a high-profile defense lawyer when he met me.

Leo was looking for someone to represent him for some hot water he had gotten into, and Murphy had been with Leo when he came for a consultation.

Murphy shook his head. “I don’t care what you do for work, Tatum. I didn’t know you quit.”

“A lot happens in five years.” I pulled out of his arms and paced back and forth. “We have to go back. We can stay at my apartment while you keep me safe, and I can go back to work.”

Murphy shook his head. “That isn’t going to happen. We’re trying to make it hard for Brandt to find us. He obviously knows where you live and work, Tatum.”

“I need to work, Murphy. Once this is all over, I won’t have anything to return to.” I stopped with my eyes wide open. “You don’t even know how long this is going to take. What if this Brandt guy disappears for a while? What are we supposed to do then?”

“You aren’t going to do anything.”

“Whatever,” I cried. “What are you going to do if Brandt doesn’t surface? We can’t live like this. I need a job and clothes. A place to live,” I cried.

Murphy looked around. “I mean, I don’t see anything wrong with this place.”

“Murphy,” I whined. “You’re not hearing anything I’m saying.”

He grabbed my shoulders and looked into my eyes. “I hear you, Tatum, and I promise everything will be okay. Until we get Brandt, I will take care of you. You need new clothes? I will buy them for you. You need anything at all? I got you.”

“That doesn’t help with my problems later,” I cried. “I’m going to have no job and no place to live.”

Murphy thinned his lips, and his nostrils flared. He dropped his hands and pulled his phone out. “Where do you work?” he asked.

“A bookstore.”

He looked up from his phone. “I need the name of the bookstore, Tatum. Is it the one across town from your apartment?”

“Uh, yeah,” I mumbled. “Happily Ever After.”

He looked back down at his phone. “Boss’s name?”

“Why?”

He shook his head. “Never mind. I’ll figure it out.” He swiped on his phone a few times and then put it to his ear.

“How many days of work did you miss?”

“Eh, uh, well,” I sputtered. “Who are you calling?” I demanded.

“How many days did you miss?” he asked again.

“Today. Just today. I had off yesterday.”

Murphy nodded and paced in front of the door. “Hi, could I please speak to your manager?”

Oh my god! “What are you doing?” I hissed.

He put his hand over the speaker. “Fixing your problem.” He walked out the door and headed to the living room.

“You’re insane,” I whisper shouted at his retreating back. I followed behind him while he waited. “Hang up right now, and I won’t punch you in the nuts,” I called.

Murphy glared at me over his shoulder. “I would like to see you try, baby girl.”

He would definitely see it if he didn’t hang up the phone right now. “Hang it up,” I hissed louder.

“Hi, yes. I’m Murphy Banks. Who am I speaking to?” he asked.

I closed my eyes and prayed that Jada was in a good mood today. She was always nice and sweet to me, but she didn’t deal well with customers who brought attitude her way.

“Jada, the owner,” Murphy repeated. “Well, it is great to talk to you. I was calling about Tatum. She’s a friend of mine and is going through some things that will require her to miss work for an undetermined amount of time.”

Murphy listened, and I could only imagine what Jada was saying.

“Yes. She’s with me right now. She’s very concerned about losing her job with her unplanned absence.” Murphy glanced at me and winked. *Winked!* The man was insane. I was worried I would lose my job before, and now it was going to be guaranteed.

“Hang up,” I whispered. If he hung up right now, I could maybe salvage this. I could call Jada back and tell her it was an April Fool’s joke... in September. *Oh god.*

“Honestly, Jada. I wish I could tell you when she’ll be back. I’m trying to take care of some business, and it’s best if she stays with me until it’s taken care of.”

Lordy, Murphy was smooth. He didn’t know it, but he was playing into Jada’s love for caring but domineering men. She was probably fanning her face and filing away Murphy’s smooth, deep voice for later.

“Yes, I can certainly put her on the phone.” Murphy moved the phone from his ear and turned on the speakerphone. “She’s right here,” Murphy called.

“Tatum?” Jada called. “Are you okay, girl?”

I rolled my eyes and stepped toward Murphy. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“Please tell me Murphy is as good-looking as his voice sounds.”

I thinned my lips and glared at Murphy.

“You’re gonna need to answer that one, baby girl,” he drawled.

“Oh my god,” Jada called. “I’m going to get a recorder, and I’m going to need you to call her baby girl again, okay?”

This was going off the rails just like I knew it would. Damn, all of the romance novels Jada devoured.

“Jada,” I called.

“Yeah, girl?” she asked.

“I’m not going to be able to make it to work for a few-ish days.”

“Your man mentioned that, but I figured this was all a joke.” She paused, and I imagined her wrinkling her nose and squinting like she had when she had gathered her thoughts.

“He’s not my man, by the way. At least not now. He was like five years ago.”

“Girl,” Jada drawled. “You are hitting me with so much right now, and my brain can’t figure out what to focus on.”

“Focus on the fact Tatum won’t be back to work for a couple of weeks. Do you think you can hold her job for her? I can send someone over to fill in for her if you need,” Murphy offered.

I shook my head and cringed. “What the hell are you talking about? Who are you going to send to the bookstore to fill in for me?”

“Who is it?” Jada asked.

“What? Why do you sound okay with him sending a stranger to take my job?” I demanded. Here, I thought Jada would be upset I wouldn’t be at work and possibly concerned, but instead, she wanted to know who would be filling in for me.

“Look, Tatum, we’re more friends than employee and employer, but I still have a business to run here. If you want me to hold your job for you and your tall, dark, and handsome man can send me someone to help out until you get your butt back here, then you gotta be okay with it, too,” Jada lectured. “I’m also going to need a little more information on why you gotta be with the man while he works.”

I glanced at Murphy. I wasn’t sure what I could tell Jada.

The police obviously hadn’t been involved when Murphy and I had been kidnapped, and I wasn’t sure if the Banachis wanted their business broadcasted to Jada.

“I work for Leo Banachi,” Murphy started.

“*The* Leo Banachi?” Jada gasped. “The man who owns the third largest skyscraper in Chicago and is a silver-haired fox? That Leo Banachi? I saw him in some business magazine, and that man is gorgeous with a capital g. Salt and pepper hair, chiseled jaw, steely blue eyes. Yes, please.”

“The one and the same,” Murphy clarified.

“Oh, girl. You sure know how to pick ‘em. Are you Leo’s bodyguard or something?” she asked. “Are there some *Bodyguard* vibes going on between you and Tatum? You know, except that Tatum isn’t a famous popstar, and you’re not

Kevin Costner?” She paused. “You do have Kevin Costner vibes, though,” she muttered.

“Uh, you could call me Leo’s bodyguard,” Murphy offered.

I folded my arms over my chest and raised an eyebrow. In the simplest way, you could say Murphy was Leo’s bodyguard, but he was way more than that. Murphy had told me the Devil’s Knights were like family, but the same went for the Banachis. I knew they weren’t related by blood, but they treated each other better than a lot of families I knew.

“So what are you doing that you need Tatum with you?” Jada asked. “And when did you two start back up?”

“Oh, well, it’s still pretty new with Murphy and me. We sort of just bumped into each other and, well...” My brain short wired, trying to think of more lies.

“We both realized we missed each other, and we’re picking up where we left off. I have some traveling I need to do with Leo, and I asked Tatum to come with me,” Murphy half explained.

We were doing some traveling, but some of that had been against our own will.

“Oh, where are you two going?” she asked.

“Right now, we’re in northern Wisconsin for a couple of days.”

“Oh,” Jada sighed. “That’s not as exciting as I was hoping. I thought for sure you would have said Spain or maybe Paris.”

I rolled my eyes. “You need to stop reading so many billionaire romances, Jada. They’re going to your head.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she sighed. “Going anywhere else? Somewhere warm and sunny?”

“Undecided,” Murphy chuckled.

“Well, let me know. Wait,” Jada called. “Why didn’t you answer your phone when I called this morning?”

“Oh, uh, I forgot it at home. That’s why I called you on Murphy’s,” I quickly explained. Technically, it’s not a lie. I had forgotten it, but it wasn’t because Murphy had swept me off my feet.

“This is Hottie’s phone number?” Her voice softened. “You can bet your ass I am saving this. I’m going to need you to send me a picture of the hunk so I can attach it to his number. There we go.” Her voice got louder. “You’re all saved. Send me a picture when we get off the phone.”

“Can we get back to my job?” I called.

“You’re good, honey, as long as Murphy sends someone to cover your shifts.” The familiar ding of the front door of the shop opening sounded. “Oh, hell. I gotta go. I should be good today, but get whoever you’re sending over her tomorrow,” Jada called. “And you can bet your ass I will be calling this number back tonight when the store closes. I need some more details, Tatum.”

“Fine,” I grumbled. I hadn’t expected Jada just to take what Murphy told her at face value.

“And make sure I’m just talking to you, Tatum. The hunk can be doing bodyguard things. Later.” She ended the call, and Murphy shoved his phone in his pocket.

“Are you insane?” I demanded. “You just called my boss and acted like you swept me off my feet, and we’re on some amazing trip.”

Murphy shrugged. “Doesn’t really matter as long as Jada has a job for you when you get back.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, but it does matter that I am going to have to tell her a butt load of lies.”

“Isn’t it boatload?” Murphy asked.

I threw my hands in the air and stomped back to the bedroom. “I don’t know. Does it really matter? We’re gonna have a ton of lies to tell people; how about that?” I grabbed the clothes I had picked out for the day. “Everything that is going to come out of my mouth about you is going to be a lie.”

“But you’ll still have your job.”

I spun on my heel and glared at Murphy, who had followed me.

“One problem down. Now we can work on the next one.” He nodded to the clothes in my hands. “Let’s go shopping, baby girl.”

“You’re insane, Murphy Banks. You can’t just fix my problem like they are nothing.” I hissed.

“You have those problems because of me, Tatum.” He stepped toward me and grabbed my arms. “So, that means they

are my job to fix. I'll call Candace at the office and have her send someone over to Happily Ever After to fill in for you."

"It's not your fault Brandt is a psycho," I pointed out.

"I know. Now, get dressed while I call Candace. We'll head to Eagle River to get some clothes."

I frowned and looked up at Murphy. "I don't like this. I can take care of myself."

"I know you can, baby girl, but you don't have to. Not when I'm around." He leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to my cheek. "Be ready in half an hour, okay?"

I nodded gently. "Okay," I whispered.

Murphy being back in my life was nice, but it felt like he was here because he had no other choice. He was here because Brandt was a psycho, and he had to protect me. I wanted Murphy back in my life because he wanted to be, not because he had to.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tatum

“Get it.”

“You’ve said that about everything I’ve picked up or even touched, Murphy. We’re going to need a wagon to get everything to the car if I got everything you told me to,” I laughed.

“I’m not sure that car can haul much more than you and me,” Murphy pondered. “We can have this stuff delivered to the cabin.” He picked up a little moose figurine and turned it over to look at the price. “Reasonable,” he muttered.

I rolled my eyes and dropped the red bandana I had admired back on the shelf. “You do know we’re in Eagle River and not Chicago, right, Murphy? I don’t think they have delivery here.” It was just nice they had places to shop and eat. When we drove into town, I was worried we weren’t going to find anywhere to shop.

Eagle River was a small but busy town. It was a tourist city with a long main street lined with various shops and restaurants.

We had already wandered through the hardware store, two jewelry shops, a sweet shop, and we were in the third gift shop. We had yet to find clothes, but I had glimpsed that the next store, Glik’s, would be where I would get what I really wanted.

“You can get whatever you want as long as you pay well,” Murphy muttered.

“Well, you can rest assured I’m not going to need delivery to get everything back to the cabin. I just want a few shirts and a couple of pants. I am fine with wearing some of Ethel and Meg’s stuff.” I hooked my arm through Murphy’s and pulled him to Glik’s.

This wasn’t exactly what I wanted, but it would work. Many of the t-shirts on the wall had either deer, moose, or some type of wildlife on them or Eagle River plastered all over them. There were a few solid-colored shirts with just a small something on them, and I grabbed two.

“You finally find something?” Murphy asked.

“I just need clothes, Murphy. A phone would be nice, too, but I’ve resigned to the fact this can be a break from electronics until I get back home.” Jeans would be good, too, but I knew that might not be a possibility. I had tried on a pair that belonged to Meg and had been disappointed when they fit in the waist, but I did not have a butt like Meg to fill them out.

“Anything I can help you folks find?” a voice called.

I turned and smiled at an older woman heading toward us.

“We’re just looking,” Murphy replied.

“Actually,” I smiled, “Maybe you can help me. I lost my suitcase, and I have no clothes with me for our vacation. Do you have any jeans or underwear?” I know this wasn’t the type of place I normally bought my underwear, but I was hopeful they would have something. “And a bra,” I blurted. I had been wearing one of Meg’s, and once again, she was a wee bit more endowed than I was.

The woman smiled warmly at me. “We have some things, but there isn’t a huge selection. You’re not the first to lose their luggage.” She led me to the far back corner, and I was pleasantly surprised to see a rack in the back with basic clothing.

“Oh, thank god,” I sighed. “No more glitter and sequins.”

The woman laughed. “If you need anything else, just holler. I’ll be up at the register.” She padded away, and Murphy stood next to me.

“We can go somewhere else for clothes, Tatum.”

I glanced up at him and frowned. “Why on earth would we do that? These clothes are fine.”

He fingered a shirt and shook his head. “It’s scratchy.”

I shook my head and riffled through the rack, looking for my size twelve jeans. “You’re bougie, Murphy. There is nothing wrong with these clothes. I want to be comfy, not look like I just stepped off the runway.” I found two pairs of jeans in my size and grabbed them. “I need to try these on. Why don’t you try to find some clothes unless you like wearing Devil’s Knights shirts.” For the second day, Murphy had the Devil’s Knights logo on his chest, and I couldn’t ignore how snugly they fit him. I didn’t really care what was on the shirt, rather what was under the shirt.

“There isn’t anything in here I want to wear,” he stated.

Oh, was that the case?

“I bet you could make all of these clothes look good, Murphy. I saw a pale orange button-down shirt that would

look great on you.”

“Doubtful, baby girl.”

“I feel like you’re challenging me. I bet I can pull together a great outfit for you from only things in this store,” I offered.

Murphy folded his arms over his chest. “You think so?”

I nodded and poked my finger into his chest. “I know so.” This was more of an outfitter for outdoorsy people, but I knew I could find some clothes Murphy would like.

Murphy held his hand out to me. “It’s a bet, baby girl. I need to make a phone call. You have ten minutes to find me clothes you think I will look good in.”

“You look good in anything, Murphy. This is going to be a slam dunk.”

He turned and pointed in the direction of the woman who had helped me. “She’s going to be the judge of that, Tatum. Old Gertie over there doesn’t seem like she is impressed easily.”

That was a bit of a curveball, but I knew I could still win. “And what will I get when I win over Gertie?” I asked. I batted my eyes at him and stepped closer. I knew I could win, but throwing a little honey Murphy’s way wouldn’t hurt.

“Whatever you want, baby girl.” He squeezed my arm, and his eyes connected with mine. “Whatever you want.” He wove through the racks and displays of clothes and slipped out the front door.

“Whoa, boy,” I whispered. I fanned my face and tried to ignore the deep timber of his voice vibrating through my body.

Jada was not wrong when she said Murphy had a sultry voice. The man could recite the phone book, and I would hang on every word.

I needed to focus on finding Murphy an outfit he would be proud to wear.

Murphy was a gorgeous man who couldn't look bad in anything he wore. His shirt and jeans were far from his normal white button-down shirts and slacks, but I liked the change.

It was time for Murphy to step out of his comfort zone, and the first thing I needed was the light orange button-down shirt on display, and I would see what I could find from there.

This was going to be fun.

Murphy

“Open up.”

“No,” I grunted.

“Come on,” Tatum whined. “It can't be that bad.”

It actually wasn't.

Somehow, Tatum had managed to take lumberjack in the woods and make it something I would actually wear.

The light orange shirt bordered on looking like my typical white button-down shirt, but the material was much lighter. The tag boasted the fabric was great for fishing because it was water-repellant and breathable.

They did not lie.

“They have this shirt in any other colors?” I called.

“You don’t like the orange?” she asked. “I thought it would look nice on you.”

I smoothed my hand down the front and turned to the side. “It’s fine.”

“Murphy,” she whined. “Just let me in.”

I chuckled and reached to open the door, but it busted open before I could touch it.

“I’m coming in,” Tatum announced.

I stepped back and bumped into the wall. “I can see that, baby girl. I was coming out.”

She looked me up and down, and a slick smile spread across her lips. “Wow,” she whispered. She twirled her finger in the air. “Spin. I want to see the pants.”

The pants weren’t anything special. She must have found them on the rack with all of the other jeans, but I would wear them. I didn’t want to admit it to Tatum, but anything was better than wearing Gravel and King’s old clothes.

I turned slowly, and she gulped loudly. “Everything okay back there?” I asked.

“Better than ever,” she whispered. “You’ve worked out a bit the past five years, Murphy.”

I glanced at her over my shoulder, and her eyes were pointed directly at my ass. “I don’t really have time to hit the gym regularly.”

“Your butt would disagree.”

Apparently, the jeans were on the snug side and didn't leave much to the imagination.

“Jeanie is totally going to crown me the winner.” She looked up at me, her eyes dancing playfully.

“Jeanie?” I asked.

“I made friends while you were outside talking to whoever was on the phone,” she smirked. “Jeanie lives on the other side of town with her three cats and a parakeet. She invited us over for dinner, but I told her that once I won this bet, one of my demands would be where we eat dinner. Who were you talking to?” she rambled.

“Leo,” I replied. “I was talking to Leo.” He was still on the move, and I checked in to ensure he and Creed were fine. “And you have demands if Jeanie likes the clothes you picked out?”

Apollo was in Michigan with Greer and the kids, and Princeton had settled in Ohio. We were spread out while Leo was still moving. He was hoping to catch on to Brandt following him and get the jump on him. So far, they hadn't seen any sign of Brandt, and Apollo couldn't find a trace of him. None of his credit cards were being used, and his name wasn't popping up on the web for reservations or whatnot.

He very well could have been using an alias, but none of the ones Leo knew of were being used either. Brandt had ghosted again, but we knew he could and would pop up at any

time. Odds are it was going to be by Leo, but we were all still on alert.

“You said if Jeanie liked the outfit, I got whatever I wanted.” She stepped closer to me and circled her finger around one of the buttons on my chest. “I made a list while you were gone.”

“You’re pretty confident, baby girl,” I whispered. I hooked my finger under her chin and tipped her head back. “But you haven’t won yet.”

She rolled her eyes. “As if you had time to think of a list of demands while you were on the phone with Leo.”

“I would only have one demand, baby girl.”

“Just one?” she whispered.

I leaned close, and she raised up on her tiptoes. My lips were a breath away from hers, and I wrapped my arm around her waist. “One.”

Her eyes darted down to my lips and then back to mine. “I think that’s on my list, too.”

“Then we’ll both be winners.” All I wanted was Tatum. Anything she would give me, I would take gladly.

Right now, I wanted her mouth. Her lips on mine, and her body pressed against me.

“Kiss me,” she barely whispered.

I wasn’t dumb.

I wasn’t slow.

Anticipation hung in the air.

I closed the remaining distance between us and pressed my lips to hers. She melted into me, and a soft sigh escaped her mouth.

My hand cradled her face, and I relished the soft, delicate kiss.

Time seemed to slow, and for a brief moment, it was just Tatum and me. No one or nothing else mattered.

“Knock, knock.”

The words penetrated our connection, and Tatum pulled back. “Uh, just a minute, Jeanie,” Tatum called. Her voice cracked, and she breathed heavily.

“I don’t like Jeanie very much,” I whispered.

“Same,” she agreed. She pressed her lips to mine for a brief kiss and then stepped back. “I just added another thing to my list of demands if Jeanie likes your new outfit.” She winked and pushed open the dressing room door. “Here we go,” she called as the door swung open. She stepped out of the dressing room and shouted ta-da.

Jeanie’s scrutinizing eyes looked me up and down and motioned for me to spin.

“No touching the goods,” I grunted. I quickly turned and folded my arms over my chest. “Well?” I asked.

Jeanie glanced at Tatum and nodded. “That’ll do.”

Tatum clapped her hands together happily and jumped up and down. “I won!”

I was more than okay with Tatum winning because I was pretty sure I was going to like each of her demands, but all I got were two words from Jeanie. That'll do.

“Head on up front, and I'll get you guys rung up.” She headed back to the register, and Tatum stepped in front of me.

“She interrupted us for that?” I asked. “Leo would have said more than that.”

Tatum shrugged. “Were you wanting a dissertation about how good you look?” she asked.

“Well, no, but something a little bit more than that'll do,” I grumbled. “She treated me like a piece of meat to look at.”

Tatum reached up and trailed her fingers down my cheek. “Like you don't know how good you look, Murphy. A blind man could see it.”

“You're the only one I care about liking how I look,” I growled. I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her close. I didn't care that we were in the store with people milling around us. My need for Tatum hadn't changed from all those years ago.

“Yeah?” she whispered.

“We need to get out of here, Tatum, or I'm going to take you back into that dressing room and show you what we've been missing these past five years.”

“That's on my list,” she whispered.

God. Damn.

“Ring us up, Jeanie,” I shouted. “We're going home.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tatum

We made it back to the cabin in record time, and Murphy pressed me against the front door.

My knees went weak, and I held onto his shirt to steady myself.

Murphy's thumb brushed my cheek, and his eyes connected with mine.

"We doing this?" he asked.

I chewed on my bottom lip and nodded. "Yes." I needed Murphy more than I needed my next breath.

He pulled me to him, jammed the key into the lock, and we stumbled into the cabin. Murphy grabbed the hem of my shirt and pulled it up with such force that I didn't have any choice but to raise my arms.

His hands went to the buttons on his new shirt, but he gave up after that. "Fuck it," he growled. He pulled the shirt over his head and tossed it. He wrapped his arms around my waist and hoisted me into his arms. He stalked down the hallway and into the bedroom. As quickly as he picked me up, I was down on the bed with Murphy on top of me. "Been waiting five years for this. I never forgot you, Tatum."

I reached up and cupped his cheek. "It's always been you, Murphy. No one could ever compare to you."

He pressed a kiss to my palm and then trailed kisses down my arm. He pulled the cup of my bra down and twisted his

head down to cover my nipple with his mouth. “So fucking sweet,” he breathed against my skin.

“Oh god,” I moaned. I arched my back and pressed my body to him. His hands went to the waist of my pants, and he tugged them down. His hand pushed my underwear down, and he cupped my wet pussy.

“Wet for me,” he growled. His middle finger slid between my lips, and I gasped at the electric current racing through me.

“Murphy,” I gasped. Oh. My. God. I remembered we were great together five years ago, but I had forgotten just how good.

His fingers started moving, touching, pinching, and sliding while his mouth tugged on my nipple. With each pull on my nipple, more wetness surged between my legs. His other hand rolled my nipple between his thumb and forefinger while I just struggled not to come right then and there. It had been a long time since anyone had made me feel the way Murphy did.

My hips bucked into his touch, and I dug my heels into the bed.

His mouth left my nipple and came to mine.

“Fucking beautiful,” he growled while his fingers brought me closer to the edge.

“Murphy,” I gasped.

“More?”

“Please.”

“You’re going to come all over my hand, and then I’m going to bury my dick so deep inside we won’t be able to tell where you end and I begin.”

My arms moved around his shoulders, and my hips moved with his hand. “Yes,” I moaned. I wanted all of that and anything else Murphy would give me.

His fingers moved fast, my orgasm rushing over me. His hand left my nipple and delved into my hair. His lips assaulted mine, mimicking the swirls and licks his fingers were doing. “Mine,” he growled against my lips. “You’ve always been mine.”

“Yes,” I cried out, my orgasm washing over me like a rogue wave, covering me and taking my breath away.

“Good girl,” Murphy whispered. His hand left my pussy, and he got on his knees between my legs. I watched in a haze as he worked his pants off and tossed them on the floor. He finished pulling my pants off, and they joined his on the floor.

“Spread wide for me, baby girl,” he ordered.

I spread my legs and waited.

Murphy hesitated, his eyes running over my body before him.

“I’m yours,” I whispered. He wasn’t touching me, but I felt him all over me.

His eyes heated with lust, and he slowly moved over me. He wrapped his hand around my throat and squeezed gently. “My baby girl,” he whispered. His hand moved down, trailing his fingertips between my breasts, down my stomach. “Mine.”

Murphy was the only one for me. I couldn't deny it.

"I need you, Murphy," I pleaded. His hands had made me come, but now I needed all of him.

His body moved over mine, and he pushed into me like we were puzzle pieces made for each other.

"Yes," I breathed into his ear.

My hips moved with his thrusts, taking him deep and needing more. My knees lifted, his thrusts hitting deeper.

God, this felt good. Murphy felt good.

My hands glided down his back, and I trailed my nails back up.

I lifted my hips and wrapped my legs around him.

His thrusts quickened, and a growl rumbled from his lips.

"Faster, faster," I pleaded. "I'm close." It had been so long since I felt Murphy, and it was too much. I couldn't handle it.

My orgasm washed over me again, and Murphy followed behind. His deep, guttural groans urged me on. I dug my heels into his back and arched into him. "Yes," I shouted. His weight bore down on me while he tried to catch his breath.

"Fucking hell," he gasped. Sweat beaded on his brow, and his breathing slowed. "Mine." He whispered it like a vow.

He shifted some of his weight onto his forearm and rolled to the side. He tucked me to his side, and I laid my head on his chest.

"I missed that," he whispered.

I nodded and pressed a kiss to his skin. “So good.”

He reached out, grabbed the blanket’s corner, and pulled it over us.

“Everything okay?” I asked. I knew I was great, but I guess I needed to hear it from Murphy.

“Oh yeah.”

“Positive?” I asked softly.

“My dick wet from your pussy and my come inside you? Fuck yeah, baby girl. I’m great.”

Well then.

“Okay,” I whispered.

“You good?”

I closed my eyes and sighed. “Never better.” And I hadn’t been. Not five years ago. Not when Murphy had left me, and I figured out my life.

Right here, right now. This was the best I had ever been, and I hoped that feeling never went away.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Murphy

“What else was on your list?”

Tatum shrugged and popped the last of her brownie into her mouth. She was perched on top of the kitchen island, wearing my shirt. Only the bottom three of the buttons were done up, and each time she moved, I got a glimpse of her tits.

Life was fucking good right now.

Nothing outside of these cabin walls mattered.

It was half past midnight, and we had finally surfaced from the bedroom to find some sustenance.

“Name one thing,” I urged.

“White Spruce,” she blurted.

I tipped my head to the side. “A tree?” I laughed.

“No,” Tatum giggled. “It’s a restaurant I heard Jeanie telling some people. She said they had the best eggplant fries and smoked meatloaf. I had figured we could get dinner there, but,” she cleared her throat, “you had other plans.” Her cheeks blushed pink, and she pressed her thighs together. “Not that I am complaining.”

I set my cup in the sink and stalked to her. She spread her legs, and I moved between them. I cupped her face and studied her eyes. “You think of me?”

“Uh, what?”

“Did you think of me all of these years?” I clarified. “Five years is a long time.”

She blinked rapidly. “Uh, well, yeah. I tried not to, but I could never forget you.”

I believed her. I had pushed her away because I didn’t want to get caught up in my life, but also because I knew I could and would lose myself in her.

I had wanted to find someone to spend my life with, but with Tatum, I realized I needed her. That scared the shit out of me.

I had never needed something in my life before.

Want, yes. Need, no.

I ran from that.

Now, I was ready to run straight to Tatum.

She wrapped her legs around me and pulled me to her. “You look pretty serious right now, Murphy. What are you thinking?”

I caressed her cheek. “I never should have broken up with you, Tatum. I was stupid.”

She smiled softly. “I’m glad you did,” she whispered.

“What?” That was not what I wanted to hear. I was coming to grips with the fact I needed Tatum, and she was glad I broke up with her years ago.

“If you wouldn’t have, we never would have lasted. We weren’t ready for each other. You needed to figure out what you really wanted, and I needed to just live.”

“You weren’t living with me?” I asked defensively.

“Um, you’re the one who broke up with me, Murphy. Bring it down a notch,” she laughed. “I’m just saying we both obviously needed to do some growing on our own.”

I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her tight. “You’re right, I just don’t like hearing it.”

“And you say I’m the nut,” she wheezed. “I can barely breathe, Murphy.”

I loosed my hold, and she sighed. “Sorry, baby girl.”

She sighed sweetly. “I love it when you call me that.”

“Really?” I leaned back. “You looked like you were ready to kill me when I called you that a couple of days ago.”

“Oh, I liked it then but was too stubborn to admit it to myself,” she confessed.

“I think we’re both a little stubborn,” I chuckled.

She rested her head on my shoulder. “Accurate.”

“Ready to go to bed?” I asked. We needed to talk about a lot more, but tonight, I was good with where we were.

“You mean round three?”

“You’re insatiable, baby girl.”

She ran her hands up and down my back. “Only for you, Murphy.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Tatum

“Murphy.” I planted an elbow in his side, and he stirred.

“What?” he grumbled.

“Your phone is going off,” I muttered. “Answer it.”

“God dammit.” He rolled away from me, and I snuggled into the empty space. It smelled like musk and man.

I inhaled deeply and smiled.

The bed dipped, and I listened to Murphy shuffled around. “Where the fuck is it?” he growled. The phone stopped ringing but started up seconds later.

“Your pants,” I called. “Where did you leave them?”

“Jesus.” Ten seconds later, the phone stopped ringing, but Murphy answered it this time. “What?” he barked.

Uh, oh. Someone did not wake up on the right side of the bed.

“Be nice,” I laughed.

“She’s fine,” he growled. “We got distracted last night.”

My eyes popped open. “Oh shit,” I gasped. I had forgotten to call Jada last night. I tossed back the covers and jackknifed up. “Give me the phone.” Jada had been cool about everything yesterday, but I knew she was probably hot right now.

Murphy tossed the phone to me. “Chill out your girl, baby girl. You’ve never been safer.”

I scrambled to grab the phone and put it to my ear. “I’m alive,” I called. “I am alive and amazing.”

Murphy shook his head, pointed to the door, and mouthed the word bathroom.

I shooed him away and waited for Jada to go off on me. It would probably be best if Murphy weren’t around for this.

“Tatum Sally May Betty Charlene Booth.”

Uh, oh. I knew the more middle names Jada gave me, the more pissed off she was.

“Uh, yes?” I asked.

“Do you know where I went last night?”

Maybe this wasn’t going where I thought. “Uh, no, I don’t.”

Jada clicked her tongue audibly. “Your apartment, Tatum.”

Uh, oh.

“You wanna know what I found before I even got out of my car?” she asked. “My car that I parked right next to yours,” she demanded. “You wanna know how I found your car?”

I closed my eyes and winced.

“With the goddamn window blown out, Tatum,” she screamed. “There was glass all over the place and your purse was on the ground! What in the hell is going on?” she demanded. “And you better spin me a better fucking story than you met up with an old flame.”

“Uh, well, I wasn’t lying when I said Murphy and I dated. It’s just that we didn’t bump into each other.” I cleared my throat and scrunched my nose. “I was kidnapped by some bad guys who were trying to get to Murphy. They kidnapped him, too. Murphy managed to break us out, and we’re safe for now.”

“For now?” Jada screamed. “What in the romantic suspense novel bullshit are you part of?”

“It’s not as bad as it sounds. I’m safe. The safest I can be,” I promised.

Murphy appeared in the doorway and folded his arms over his chest. “Don’t tell her anything more, Tatum.”

I wasn’t sure Jada would be okay with not knowing anything more.

“If you are safe now, why can’t you come home?” Jada demanded.

“Uh, well, because we got away, but the bad guys are still out there.” It felt like I was talking about a book and not my life. “Murphy and his guys are working on taking care of everything.”

Jada quieted. “Do I want to know what you mean by taking care of everything?”

“Not unless you want to be an accessory,” I whispered.

Murphy rolled his eyes.

“My god, Tatum. When you want to spice up your life, you sure know how to do it.” She sighed heavily. “Does this

involve Leo Banachi, or were you two just blowing smoke up my butt with that one?"

"No smoke on that one." Murphy pushed off the doorway and stalked toward me. "I promise I am safe as safe can be. Murphy won't let anything happen to me."

Murphy grabbed the phone from me and pressed the speaker button.

"The window on your car was shot out, and you were kidnapped, Tatum. I think the man has already failed to keep you safe. I'm calling the police," Jada threatened.

"Call the police, and never hear from Tatum again," Murphy thundered. "You don't know what we're dealing with, and if you involve the police, you'll set us back to never ending this."

"That was before, Jada," I cried. "Murphy had no idea they were going after me. They kidnapped him at the same time. Just listen to me, please."

"How am I supposed to believe all of this, Tatum? For all I know, he's got a damn gun to your head and making you say all of this."

Murphy shook his head and ended the call.

"What are you doing?" I demanded. "She's going to for sure call the police now."

He glared at me and muttered under his breath about having enough shit to deal with. He swiped a few times on the phone and then held it up to his face. "Put on my shirt," he ordered.

“What are you—” The phone rang twice, and then Jada’s voice sounded.

“Doing,” I whispered. I dove off the bed and grabbed Murphy’s shirt. I hurriedly shrugged it on and jumped back on the bed.

Murphy turned the phone on me, and I waved. “Hi!”

Jada leaned in closer. “Do you have a cut on your face?” she asked.

Oh, Jesus. “Yeah, but Murphy didn’t do it. It’s from the—”

“Bad guys?” Jada finished. She sat back. “Give the phone to Tatum.”

I looked up at Murphy.

Jada was skating a thin line. Murphy wasn’t a caveman who didn’t like women telling him what to do. He didn’t like *anyone* telling him what to do.

“Please, baby?” I whispered. I pulled Murphy’s shirt closed and held my hand out to him. No reason for Jada to know what we were doing all night, though knowing her it would only take two seconds for her to figure it out..

Murphy scowled but stepped toward me and handed the phone to me.

“Happy?” I whispered to Jada.

She shook her head. “Now, put the camera on him.”

I was going to get whiplash.

Murphy stepped back a few feet back from the bed and looked hella pissed. I rolled my eyes but did what she asked. Murphy folded his arms over his chest and glared at the phone.

“I should have known you were going to be shirtless,” she muttered. “And you’re even prettier than I imagined.” A clicking sound came from the camera. “And I took that screenshot so I have something to show the police if I don’t hear from my friend at least once a day by seven every night. You feel me, bad boy? I talk to my best friend every day, or I call the police and track you down.”

“Your best friend is safest with me. You’ll hear from her every day.” Murphy grabbed the phone and ended the call.

“Murphy,” I called. “I know you said what she wanted, but you could have been a little nicer about it.”

Murphy tucked his phone in his pocket. “Because she was being nice to me? Your friend has a little bit of an attitude I don’t like, Tatum. I’m not the type of man who should be questioned when all I’m doing is keeping you alive.”

I rocked up on my knees and crawled to the edge of the bed. I reached out, and he put his hand in mine. He closed the distance between us, and I wrapped my arms around him.

“Don’t be angry,” I whispered. “You can’t blame Jada. This is all new to her. She didn’t even know about you.” I really didn’t expect anything less from Jada. She cared about me and wanted to ensure I was cared for if she wasn’t there.

“That’s another thing I’m a bit annoyed about.” He pulled back and looked down at me. “If she’s your best friend, why

the hell didn't she know about us?"

I laughed and shook my head. "I bet that annoys you more than her questioning what you're doing."

He grunted but didn't deny it.

"She may not have known about us, but she does now, okay? I guess I didn't want to go into how the most handsome man broke up with me because he didn't think I fit into his life."

Murphy shook his head. "I broke up with you because I was trying to avoid shit like this happening. I didn't know my life would still touch you even if we weren't together."

I tipped my head to the side. "So since it is touching me, you might as well be touching me, too?"

He frowned. "I'm glad you can joke about this, Tatum."

"If I don't joke about it, I'm going to cry, Murphy." I laid my hand on his chest. "I'm glad you and I are back to us, and as much as I hope bad things happen to Brandt, a tiny piece of me has to thank him for bringing us together again." It was a shitty truth, but that's what it was.

"Brandt doesn't get credit for anything, Tatum. He's living on borrowed time right now. We should have put him down a long time ago," he growled.

I nodded. I didn't want Murphy to be upset about Brandt right now. I was damn near close to being naked, and I had all the goods to distract him. "I know, honey." I rubbed my hand over his chest. "Why don't we do something other than talk

about Brandt or Jada?” I suggested. “I could use a shower and maybe some breakfast.”

Murphy grabbed the lapel of my shirt and pulled it out of my grasp. “Feeling dirty, baby girl?”

A smile spread across my lips. “Will you wash my back for me?”

That did the trick.

Murphy bent, planted his shoulder in my stomach, and hoisted me up. “I’ll wash your front, too.”

He slapped my bare butt, and I let out a scream. “Ow!”

Murphy stalked to the bathroom, and we didn’t get to breakfast until we were both squeaky clean.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Murphy

“Minnesota?” I asked.

“What the fuck is there?” Apollo asked.

“Not a lot,” Leo chuckled. “We’re in the middle of nowhere. Creed found the place through Candace. It’s her grandfather’s place.”

“We are surrounded by soybean fields, guys. I can see for a mile all around us.” Creed laughed. “We’re going to see Brandt coming before he knows what’s coming.”

“Good,” I grunted. “I’m ready for this bullshit to be over. Hopefully, it won’t be long until he shows his face again.”

“Things not going good with Tatum?” Apollo asked. “Greer was asking about her the other day.”

It had been ten days since Tatum and I had been thrown together again.

Seven days since we both gave in to what we wanted.

Seven days of acting like the world outside of the cabin didn’t exist.

“Things are fine,” I grunted.

“You seal the deal with her yet?” Creed asked. “I was thinking if you didn’t, I might throw my hat in the ring.”

“Oh,” Princeton drawled. “You are an idiot, Creed.”

“Say that again,” I growled. Creed didn’t stand a chance with Tatum because she was mine. We still had some things to

work out, but she was mine right now.

Creed chuckled. “Just making sure you’re not going to throw in the towel like you did five years ago.”

“Fuck. You.”

They all laughed.

“Are we done here?” I growled. “Maybe we should all get back to trying to find Brandt before he finds us?” I suggested.

“Easy,” Leo called. “Creed isn’t interested in Tatum, Murphy. That’s just his bonehead way of telling you to not fuck this up again.”

“I got it,” I grumbled.

“I gotta get back to Greer and the kids. We were in the middle of a riveting game of Monopoly.” Apollo lowered his voice. “I love my family, but if I have to spend another ten days with them, and only them, I am going to hunt down Brandt by myself. You got me?”

Now, that made me laugh. “Maybe Creed can take Greer off your hands.”

“Don’t even open your fucking mouth, Creed,” Apollo threatened. He then sighed heavily. “Let’s just find Brandt and get things back to normal, yeah?”

“The best idea I’ve heard. Keep your eyes and ears open, and watch your backs. Call in if you get even the hint of Brandt, right?” Leo asked.

We all promised, and the conference call ended.

Something was going to have to give.

Brandt wasn't going to give up; it was just a matter of time until he struck again.

"Everything okay?"

I had wandered to the end of the driveway and turned to see Tatum on the front porch with two cups in her hands.

"One of those for me?" I asked.

She held up one. "I made Greta's famous margaritas. One scoop of ice cream."

"Still sounds... odd." I headed up the driveway and took the drink from her.

Tatum nodded. "Just trust me. You are going to be blown away."

I took a sip and was surprised. "It's creamy."

Tatum nodded happily. "And delicious." She looked up at the sky. "Looks like it's going to rain."

"That's what the weatherman is saying. Possible thunderstorm." It was just a little after four, and the sky was already dark.

Tatum looked even happier. "We should make a fire and watch a movie after dinner. I love rainy nights. I wonder if Ethel has some hot chocolate in the cabinet."

"Margaritas and hot chocolate?" I asked. "I think I'll just settle for the fire and a movie."

"We're not going to drink them at the same time." She held up her drink. "We're drinking these while we make dinner, and

then we can have the hot chocolate when we're snuggled up by the fire."

"How long is it going to take to make dinner?" I asked.

She stepped toward me, and I wrapped my arm around her waist. "Probably half an hour. I found a casserole in the freezer. It just needs to be heated."

"Oh, well, we have a bit of time to waste, huh?"

"Have anything in mind we could do?"

I set my drink down and swung her into my arms. "I can think of a few things I could do to you."

"Murphy," she shrieked. "You do know I can walk, right?"

I pressed a kiss to her lips and walked into the house. "You can, but I like having you in my arms."

"Awe," she sighed. "So sweet."

I was about to show her just how sweet I could be.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Tatum

“The fire is dying.”

Murphy’s light snoring was the only answer I got.

We were laid out on the living room floor in front of the fireplace with the credits rolling on *Aquaman*. Jason Mamoia had always given me a bit of a thrill, but Murphy was lying next to me to give me butterflies all night.

Even though he was sleeping right now, I would choose Murphy over anyone in the world, Jason Mamoia included.

Firewood needed to be brought in, and I didn’t want to wake him up to do it. He needed his sleep as much as I did, and right now, I wasn’t tired at all.

“I’ll be right back,” I whispered.

I slipped out from under the blanket and slipped my feet into a pair of Meg’s sandals.

The rain had finally tapered off, but it was still sprinkling. Lightning streaked across the sky when I opened the door, and the roll of thunder sounded in the distance. Maybe the bad weather hadn’t passed yet.

I left the front door open and made the fifty-yard dash to the woodpile by the shed on the side of the cabin.

“Whoa,” I laughed when I hit a puddle and my foot slipped. I managed to catch myself on the woodpile and loaded up my arms. Murphy had been the one to bring in the firewood and really anything around the cabin.

We had taken walks around, exploring the land around the cabin, but never at night.

“Tatum!”

I whirled around, surprised to see Murphy running toward me. “Hey,” I called. The wind picked up and whipped my hair around me.

“What the hell are you doing?” he demanded.

I reared back and juggled the wood in my arms. He sounded mad. Mad at me. “Uh, we ran out of firewood, and I came to get some. I didn’t want to wake you up.”

He grabbed the wood from me. “It’s not safe out here for you,” he growled.

“Because of the rain?” I asked. Another bolt of lightning streaked across the sky, and the thunder rolled closer. “It’s just sprinkling.”

Murphy shook his head. “Get in the house!”

I didn’t know why he was so mad. “I was just trying to h—”

“Get in the house!” he roared.

I skirted around him, the rain pelting me with every step. I rounded the garage and ducked into the house.

Murphy was hot on my heels and slammed the front door.

“What are you so mad about?” I demanded.

He stalked to the fireplace and tossed the pile of wood at the log holder. “I know you think we’re in Lala land here,

Tatum, but in case you forgot, there is a madman out there trying to kill me.”

I reared back and scowled. “When have I said we’re in Lala land?”

Murphy threw his arm at the door. “Well, you just strolled out of the house without a care in the world.”

“I was getting firewood.” I raised my voice and stepped toward him. “You were sleeping, and I didn’t think I needed to wake you up to get a few logs.”

“You step foot out of this cabin; I need to be with you. I thought we both understood that.”

Murphy had never said those words to me. How was I supposed to know I couldn’t go outside alone? Sure, I didn’t think I could get in the car and take off, but I figured I could get firewood by myself. “Don’t you think you’re being a little overprotective?”

He stalked toward me and didn’t stop until the toe of his boots touched my flip-flops. I stood straight, my face tilted up, and he was still a good three inches taller than me. I wasn’t afraid of Murphy.

“My job is to keep you safe, Tatum. If you want to call that being overprotective, then that’s fine.”

“I’m not a job, Murphy,” I spat.

“Yes, you are. That is the only way I am going to be able to keep you safe is if you’re my job.”

I wrinkled my nose and shook my head. “Do you hear yourself? The next thing I know, you’re going to tell me to get lost because I don’t fit in your life.” The only time I had witnessed Murphy being this cold and angry was when he had broken up with me. “I’m sorry I went outside by myself.”

“You don’t get it, Tatum.” He turned on his heel and paced in front of the fireplace. “You think I’m only acting this way because of Brandt, but this isn’t going to stop when he dies. I will always be worried about you and have eyes on you. You won’t be able to go back to your life. You go to work, someone will be with you. It might not be me, but someone will be watching you. This doesn’t end with Brandt,” he ranted. “I know you hear me talking, but I don’t think you are comprehending what I’m trying to tell you.”

“Then tell me!” I shouted. “Spit out what you aren’t telling me.”

“I’m not a good man, Tatum,” he shouted. “This isn’t the first time we’ve dealt with people trying to knock us out. You don’t understand the reason *why* people are trying to knock us out.”

“For money,” I replied. Wasn’t that the reason behind most bad things that happened in the world?

Murphy shook his head. “Power, Tatum. The money is good, but at the end of the day, it’s all about the power. Leo has been ruling and conquering not only the business world but also things you don’t see. Bad things that don’t touch you, and I will never let them touch you.”

“I know.” Did I know the things that were bad? No, but I got it. “But you’re not a bad man, Murphy.”

“How do you know that, Tatum? Good people aren’t kidnapped, hunted, and blown up.”

I stepped toward him. “I know that because I know you, Murphy. I see in your eyes the man you are. I saw it when you broke up with me five years ago. You weren’t thinking about yourself. You were worried about me and something happening to me if I was with you.”

“Yes!” he shouted. “All of this,” he circled his arm wildly, “is because of me. Because of my family. I can’t and won’t get away from this, Tatum. I live a life I can’t walk away from.”

I threw my hands in the air. “Fine. I’m not asking you to walk away from it. Leo, Princeton, Apollo, and Creed are your brothers. I would be foolish to ask you to choose me over them.”

“But I would,” he sighed. “I would give up everything for you, Tatum. I will give my life to keep you safe. I sacrificed my heart five years ago to keep you safe and look at you now. It didn’t work. You’re forever tainted because of me.”

I stalked toward him and didn’t stop until I grabbed his hand. “Because you claimed me, Murphy. Six years ago, you claimed me when we met at the law office. Each day after that, you took a little bit more of me until you had all of me. You can get mad at me and try to tell me you’re too dangerous and you’re a bad man, but I’m not going anywhere. I leave here now without you; I’m leaving without my heart.” I gulped and threaded my fingers through his. “I loved you back then and

still love you today, Murphy. You could tell me every big and little bad thing you have done, and I will still be here. I will love you anyway.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” he whispered. “I’ve tortured men until they’ve given in. I’ve killed men.” His eyes connected with mine. “And I will do it again.”

“Are you killing the guy working behind the deli counter because he cut your ham too thick? Or the mailman because he delivered your mail late? No!” I shouted. “The people you hurt are the bad men. I know you, Murphy. I know you’re not killing innocent people. I knew that when you claimed me, I would always be safe with you. You claimed me, and I am not going anywhere.” I smiled softly. “Except to maybe get firewood if you’re sleeping. Then I might leave, but I’ll be back in two minutes as long as I don’t slip and fall on my butt.” Tears stung my eyes. “I love you, Murphy. I get why you pushed me away five years ago, but a part of me, deep down, knew that we would always be together. We’re two puzzle pieces that were made for each other. We don’t fit with anyone else.”

“Tatum,” he whispered. He sounded so broken and torn.

“Stop fighting it, Murphy, because I will just fight back stronger.” I reached up and cupped his face in my hands. “Stop. Fighting. It.”

“I love you, Tatum. I love you more than my next breath. When they tossed you on that floor in front of me, it was like my heart laying there.”

“Then pick me up and never let me go, Murphy.”

He wrapped his arms around me and crushed me to his chest. He lifted me off my feet, and I wrapped my legs around his waist.

“I love you, Murphy,” I whispered into his neck.

His arms stayed tight around me, and he laid me on the couch. His body covered mine, and his lips claimed mine. It was light and gentle at first, almost as if he was afraid to hurt me. I delved my fingers into his hair and rocked my hips up to him.

I didn't want gentle.

I wanted Murphy to give me everything he had.

The kiss turned heavy and warm.

His hands pulled and tugged at my clothes while I pulled his damp shirt over his head. Our kiss broke for a second, and then his lips were back on mine.

My toes curled, and butterflies floated around my stomach. This kiss was longer, deeper, and even more delicious.

He broke the kiss, and his lips glided over my cheek and down my throat.

My hands found the button of his jeans and worked them down his hips. I needed him naked, and I needed it now.

He made quick work of my clothes, and soon, we were both naked.

Our bodies join, two pieces of a puzzle connecting, and that's when I felt it.

I knew Murphy was mine, and I would never be away from him again.

He finally and fully claimed me.

I was forever his.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Murphy

....

“HOW IS IT?”

Tatum sighed and licked her fingers. “The best meatloaf I have ever had in my life.”

I stabbed a bite off her plate and tried it. “Yeah, I think you might be right. You will never hear me say that in front of Bristol, though.”

“Well, I guess I will reserve judgment then if this is the best meatloaf until I try Bristol’s.”

“That would be a wise decision.”

We were at the White Spruce on the edge of the Eagle River, finally seeing if Jeanie’s recommendation was good.

She was right. The food was good, and the drinks were strong.

“Do you stay at Wyndemere most of the time?”

I nodded. “For the most part. Leo used to spend most of his time in Chicago, but he seems to prefer the slower pace in Wisconsin.”

“So you’re always with Leo.”

“At least one of us.” I reached across the table and threaded my fingers through hers. “What is with all of the questions, baby girl?”

Things were good between Tatum and me.

I was still worried that she was going to get hurt because of me, but my love for her was stronger than that fear. I was doing everything I could to keep her safe, and at the end of the day, I knew that was all I could do.

I had talked to Apollo and Princeton, and they told me they had that fear, too, that Greer and Kitty could get hurt because of them, but they didn't let that fear rule their lives.

"I guess I'm just trying to get a picture of your life when you don't have a madman trying to wipe you guys out."

"You better be picturing you in it, Tatum." I pulled her hand to my mouth and pressed a kiss to the back of her hand.

"I have a job in Chicago, Murphy. Remember, you called up Jada, got her to keep my job, and had someone from the office go help her." She tipped her head to the side. "What office, by the way? I know Leo is a big businessman, but I didn't think he dabbled in bookstores."

"You'll learn Leo has his hands in most things, including a temp agency. Candace sent over a temp to cover for you."

"Nice," she smiled. "I was wondering how you sent over a person that actually helped Jada. She told me she got to take two days off in a row the other day."

"She normally doesn't do that?" I asked.

She wrinkled her nose and shrugged. "Jada could, but she doesn't. I guess since her best friend isn't working, she doesn't feel the need to be there all of the time."

I chuckled and shook my head. "Soon, you'll be back in the bookstore with Jada."

“Even though you aren’t Jada’s biggest fan?”

It wasn’t that I didn’t like Jada; she just rubbed me the wrong way. It probably had something to do with the fact she questioned everything I said, but I wasn’t going to waste my time figuring it out. Tatum called her every day by seven, and she had some questions or demands of me each day.

I was getting sick of it.

Getting Jada off my ass was a big motivator to find Brandt. The sooner we did that, the sooner Jada would leave me the hell alone.

My phone vibrated in my pocket.

“Maybe that is Jada wanting her daily visitation call,” I muttered. I pulled my phone out and was surprised to see Creed’s name.

“Is it her?” Tatum asked.

I shook my head. “Creed.” I connected the call and put the phone to my ear. “Hello?” I had talked to Leo and the guys earlier today and didn’t expect to hear from Creed so soon.

“He’s moving,” Creed replied softly.

“When?” I demanded.

“One of his aliases popped up two hours ago at a motel outside of La Crosse. We got confirmation from the front desk guy that it is Brandt.”

Son of a bitch. I knew it would only be a matter of time before he moved on Leo. “I’m assuming Leo knows.”

“Of course. He wanted me to call and let you know.”

“Does he know that Apollo, Princeton, and I will be there in the morning?”

Creed chuckled. “That would be a negative. He’s still got it in his head that you guys must stay as far away as possible.”

“Well, sometimes Leo doesn’t always know best.” My eyes connected with Tatum, and she looked at me expectantly. “I’ll let you know when we’re headed your way.” I ended the call and set my phone on the table.

“Good news?” she asked.

I nodded and stole another bite of her meatloaf. “How does spending some time with the Devil’s Knights seem, baby girl? I need to get some work done in Minnesota for a few days.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Tatum

“Come home to me.”

“You calling the Devil’s Knights clubhouse home now?”

I rolled my eyes and draped my arms over Murphy’s shoulders. “Home is wherever we’re together.” Sappy, I know, but I was about to kiss Murphy goodbye, and there was a chance he might not come back.

“In that case, I’ll come home to you, baby girl.” He pressed a soft, sweet kiss to my lips.

We had left the cabin early this morning, making the trip to the Devil’s Knights clubhouse in just under four hours, and had only stopped for a light breakfast and gas when we were halfway.

Apollo and Princeton had arrived last night, and their families were already settled into the clubhouse. I didn’t want Murphy to leave, but I knew this was the best place for me. I had tried to argue that I should go with Murphy, but that lasted about five seconds.

“It feels like so much longer than fifteen days ago this all happened,” I confessed.

“Yeah, well, only a couple more days, and we can put all this behind us.”

“And then we can start our new life.”

His eyes connected with mine. “Together.”

“I talked to Jada yesterday.”

“Yeah,” Murphy drawled. “You do that every day, baby girl.”

I nodded and rocked back on my heels. “She said the bookstore is doing really well and was thinking of opening another store.”

Murphy eyed me closely. “In Illinois?”

I shook my head and smiled wide. “I told her Wisconsin needs some of the fairytale magic from Happily Ever After. She said she would ask her accountant if she could swing it.”

“Tell her to cancel the call. I know of a private backer who would love to have a slice of Happily Ever After.”

“Leo?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Me, baby girl. I’ve got a nice nest egg socked away. I’ve been making money with Leo for years and nothing to spend it on.”

“Murphy,” I whispered. “You don’t have to even think about this. Jada said she could probably swing it.” She wasn’t one hundred percent sure she could expand, but she sounded hopeful.

Murphy shook his head again. “It would be a good investment for me, and you can tell Jada I would be a silent partner. God knows the only way I would go into business with her would be because of you. I’m doing this for you, not her.”

I rolled my eyes. “You two are going to like each other. You just didn’t meet under the best circumstances.”

“Kiss me, and tell me you love me, baby girl. Apollo and Princeton are two seconds away from blasting the horn at me.”

Apollo was in the driver’s seat of a blacked-out SUV, and Princeton was in the passenger seat.

I had briefly met Kitty and Larry and was excited to spend some time with Greer and the kids. And, of course, all of the Devil’s Knights ol’ ladies.

The next few days were going to be like a big sleepover.

I kissed him hard and prayed this wasn’t the last.

He strutted over to the SUV and slid into the back.

I watched them pull out of the driveway and didn’t move until I couldn’t see them.

“Come home to me, Murphy,” I whispered.

Come home to me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Murphy

The clubhouse faded out of view, and I sat back in my seat.

Apollo looked at me in the rearview mirror. “You ready?”

I nodded and took a deep breath. “Let’s do it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Tatum

“I can’t believe how big the kids are.”

Greer smiled and sipped her margarita. “Girl, time is just flying by. I can’t believe it either.”

The clubhouse was pretty much exactly how I had pictured it.

One huge ass room with pool tables, poker tables, a big ass TV, a couple of couches, a bar, and a kitchen. Down a long hallway were all of the rooms.

Meg had shown me to my room, and I was glad to see that Greer was right next door with the kids.

Kitty flopped down on the sofa next to Greer. “I’m already tired and worried,” she laughed.

Greer patted her leg. “The guys will be fine, sweetie. Have a margarita, and try to relax.”

“Oh,” Kitty laughed. “I’m not worried about the guys. I mean,” she sputtered, “I’m worried, but I’m not *worried*. It’s my dad,” she sighed. “He’s been having a lot of good days, but I know that can all change at the drop of a hat. Especially when his routine changes. Being at the clubhouse might not be the best thing for him, but I’m just going to have to roll with the punches until the guys wrap up their business trip.”

Greer snickered and downed the last of her margarita. “You’re too cute, Kitty.”

“I’m really worried about the guys,” I blurted. I had been trying to play it cool and not be a frantic basket case, but I couldn’t hold it back anymore. “I just got Murphy back, and I’m not into losing him again.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Greer cried. “You’re not going to lose him. I know it may seem like Brandt has the upper hand, but the Banachis always come out on top.”

“But why has he been able to get so close? He got me and Murphy, and then he almost blew up some of the guys and half of the Devil’s Knights,” I wondered.

“Because Leo thought he would just go away after failing so many times,” Greer pointed out. “He didn’t think Brandt had that much perseverance in him. They’ve got his number now,” she replied confidently.

But did they really? I wasn’t going to be able to breathe easily until Brandt was dead and in the ground.

“Who wants another margarita?” Greta called. “They go great with a stack of pancakes.”

Greer raised her hand. “I need a refill over here, girlfriend,” she called.

“Who would have thought up margaritas and pancakes?” Kitty laughed. “It must be a biker thing.”

Greta filled Greer’s glass and handed me an empty cup. “Hold that,” she instructed.

“Uh, I don’t really want to start drinki—”

Greta didn't care what I wanted. She started pouring even though my cup was cockeyed. I quickly righted it, and she filled it to the brim. "Bone apple titties," she cheered.

Greer raised her glass to Greta and let out a laugh. "Man, whenever I hang out with these chicks, I wonder if I made the wrong choice in being a goon's wife."

"Greer," Kitty giggled. "You know the guys hate it when they get called goons."

Greer shrugged. "I guess that must be the *I don't give a fuck* ol' lady coming out of me." She took a long drink of her margarita. "Can you imagine Apollo in a leather vest and riding a Harley?" She fanned her face with her hand. "We would have had ten kids."

"Is she daydreaming about being an ol' lady?" Meg wandered over to the couch and perched on the armrest. "Whenever we ply her with alcohol, she thinks Apollo should join the MC."

"I just want the cut for a night or two." Greer smiled. "And a motorcycle."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Murphy

“Oh shit.”

“Fuuuuck.”

“What the hell?” I scowled.

“I knew Creed wasn’t going to be able to keep his mouth shut,” Apollo laughed.

We had arrived at the gas station next to the motel Brandt was staying, and Leo was there instead of just Creed greeting us. And he did not look happy.

“Uh, I think I’ll just stay in the SUV,” Princeton muttered.

“Coward,” I laughed. The list of people I was cautious and slightly afraid of was short, and Leo was at the top of that list.

“I just don’t get how he found out we were coming,” Apollo grumbled.

Leo moved to the SUV. “Might as well get this over with,” I muttered. I opened my door and stepped out.

Apollo and Princeton followed suit, but none of us were moving fast. We gathered in front of the SUV and all cased the area before anyone spoke. It was a busy gas station, but no one seemed to be worried about what we were doing.

“Is this what you assholes are going to do now? I give an order, and you decide to do your own thing?” he demanded. “I told you I would handle Brandt.”

“That’s bullshit, Leo. There’s no reason why you have to take Brandt down on your own,” Princeton pointed out.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “We all want to put him in the ground. Why should you get all of the fun?”

Leo shook his head. “Because if anything happens, I’m the only one who goes down for this.”

“Again, why?” Apollo asked.

Leo growled and looked at each of us. “Because you have families, women you care about.” His eyes flashed at me. “Women you would die for.”

“I’ve been with Greer for years,” Apollo pointed out. “Why the sudden change of pulling us from taking care of business?”

“I’ve been pulling you for years, Apollo; you just never caught on to it.”

Creed tipped his head to the side. “Now that you mention it,” he drawled. “There were a few times I was pissed off that Apollo got to hang back when we went in guns blazing.”

Leo nodded. “I may be a ruthless and heartless man when it comes to business, but when it comes to you guys, I will do anything to keep you spinning around on this planet for as long as possible. Sending you three away while I took care of business was my plan this time, but obviously, you three didn’t fall in line.”

Princeton held up his hands. “Sorry, Leo, but at the end of the day, we’re family, and family comes first. We weren’t going to let you do this yourself.”

Leo ran his fingers through his hair. "Alright," he grunted. "I can't go back and fix this, so we're just going to have to handle this together." He nodded to Creed. "Creed has been watching the place since we got word he was here."

"Anyone with him?" Apollo asked.

Creed nodded. "He's got two guys with him. One was in the back and one in the room with him. The guy in the room is keeping watch over the front door."

Brandt hadn't picked the best motel to shack up in. He was on the ground floor, and each room had its own access to the parking lot.

It would have been easy to take down Brandt without a guy watching the door.

"I'll take the guy in the back," Creed offered. "Two of you can take the front door of the room. Brandt's grunt drank four cups of coffee this morning and should be needing to use the head soon. He's got the blinds pushed back enough to where we can see into the room."

"This is going to be like shooting fish in a barrel," Apollo laughed. "You would have at least thought the idiot would keep his curtains shut."

Leo shrugged. "I'm not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. We know Brandt is more lucky than he is skilled. We get in the room, take him out, and we are out of here before anyone can remember our faces."

Simple, but simple was always best for these types of things.

“Apollo and Princeton take the door,” Leo ordered. “Once you’re in, Murphy and I will follow.”

“Let’s get it, boys. It’s time for Brandt to see just who he had been messing with.” Apollo nodded to Creed. “You’ve got three minutes to revitalize the back before we move on to the front door.”

Creed smiled. “I’ll only need one minute.”

“Let’s go,” Leo grunted.

We loaded into the two vehicles and drove around to the motel parking lot.

Creed crept around to the back, and the rest of us waited.

“I bet he’s already got him,” I laughed. “You know Creed don’t mess around with shit like this.”

“Yeah, you’re more than right,” Apollo agreed.

A loud whistle sounded.

“How the hell is he so fast?” Princeton wondered. “That wasn’t even a minute.”

I didn’t care that Creed was quick; it just meant we could handle this quicker.

We watched the window of Brandt’s room, and like clockwork, the guy on the door got up and went to the bathroom.

“We’re gonna be home by dinner,” Apollo laughed.

We moved out of the SUV. Apollo and Princeton approached the door while Leo and I stayed by the SUV.

“You don’t need to do this, Murphy.”

I glared at Leo. “What the hell are you talking about?” I asked.

“You finally got what you wanted. Tatum is back in your life, and I don’t want Brandt to mess it up any more than he already has.”

I shook my head and held my gun at my side. “Brandt isn’t messing with my life anymore. He’s got about five minutes left of sucking air, and then he’s dead. I’m not missing it.”

Leo shook his head but didn’t argue.

“You’re family, Leo. All of you. I’m not going to turn my back on you because I have Tatum now. If anything, it makes me want to stand up more to the pieces of shit who think they can take knock us off.” I shook my head. “No one is going to take what we have. Brandt is going to be an example of what happens when you try to mess with the Banachis.”

“Fine,” Leo muttered.

Apollo and Princeton kicked in the door to the room, and shouts interrupted from the room.

“It’s showtime,” I smiled.

We quickly jogged to the room and met Creed on the way.

We shut the door behind us, and Creed closed the curtains.

“All good in back?” Leo asked.

Creed nodded. “Taken care of.”

Apollo walked out of the bathroom, wiping his hands on a towel, and tossed it in the sink. “Asshole shot himself before I could even lay a hand on him.”

“It’s always nice when the trash takes itself out,” I laughed.

Princeton had Brandt pinned to the floor with a knee in his back and a gun to his head.

“Fuck you!” he yelled. “Fuck you all!”

“Was he always this charming?” Apollo asked.

“Flip him over,” Leo ordered. “I want him to look me in the eye when I take his life.”

Princeton flipped him over, and Apollo moved to help hold him down.

“Stop flailing around,” Apollo grunted. “You’re just gonna make this worse.”

Brandt kicked his leg and missed Apollo’s head by a couple of inches.

Leo moved over him and drew his gun. “You couldn’t just leave us alone,” Leo drawled.

Brandt spat at Leo and cursed him out. “Fuck you, asshole. You think you own everything and everyone, but you don’t! You don’t even know what’s happening right under your nose.”

I tipped my head to the side.

Leo glanced at Apollo.

“What the fuck does that mean?” I demanded. “You think we don’t know what you were up to?”

Brandy laughed manically. “You didn’t have a fucking clue what I was doing until I grabbed you and that bitch woman of yours.”

I landed a kick to Brandt’s side, and he groaned in pain. “Even think about my woman, and I’ll shove your dick down your throat, asshole.”

Brandt moaned and groaned.

“What do you mean I don’t know what’s going on under my nose?” Leo demanded. “Tell me what that means.”

A slick smile spread across Brandt’s lips. “You think you’re so slick, and your business is clean.” Brandt shook his head and bucked under Creed and Apollo. “For years, you’ve had a traitor,” he screamed. “How do you think I was always two steps ahead of you? I knew you were coming here before you even did.”

Leo glanced at Creed. Candace was the one who had given Leo and Creed the place to stay in Minnesota.

“Putting it together?” Brandt called. “All along, you’ve had a snake just living with you, Leo. She knew your every move; all she had to do was tell me. I can’t tell you how many times I could have taken you out, but I didn’t.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Creed screamed.

“You can kill me, but she’s not going to stop. She’s not going to let you go.” Brandt laughed manically. “My sister is going to kill you each, one by one. When you least expect it,

she's going to kill you. For fifteen years, she's watched and studied you. It's only a matter of time—”

Leo pulled the trigger and shot a bullet right between his eyes.

Brandt instantly went limp, his eyes open and mouth agape.

“Holy fuck,” Apollo gasped. “Candace is Brandt's sister?”

“How the fuck did we miss that?” I demanded.

Leo shot at Brandt again, this time at his heart, and then dropped his arm to his side. “Clean this up, and let's get a move on.” Leo looked at each of us. “We've got some exterminating to do back home.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Tatum

“Hello?”

“Baby girl,” Murphy responded.

My heart leaped at the sound of my nickname. I was worried I would never hear it come from his lips again.

“Are you okay?” I asked frantically. It had been close to six hours since I had heard from him, and each minute that had passed by made me worry even more.

“I’m good, Tatum. We’re just packing up, and then we’re on the way back.”

“Home,” I whispered.

“Yes, baby girl, I’m coming home to you.”

I closed my eyes, and tears streaked down my cheek. “Home,” I whispered. Greer had told me not to worry, but I couldn’t stop. Hearing Murphy’s voice was the only thing that calmed me.

“Tatum,” he called. His tone was serious, and my eyes snapped open.

“What is it? Did something happen?”

Murphy sighed. “We did what we came to do, but it’s not over. I’ll explain more when I get home, but things aren’t going to go back to normal yet, baby girl. I’m sorry.”

“But they will, right? Whatever happened, you guys can fix it.” I had one hundred percent faith in Murphy and the

Banachi family.

“Yes, Tatum. I promised to keep you safe, which hasn’t changed. It’s just going to take a little bit longer until we get to the bottom of everything.”

This was my life.

I signed up for this when I fell in love with Murphy six years ago.

I knew all the dangers that came with loving him, and all the love and joy ahead of us far outweighed the danger.

“I love you, Murphy Banks, and whatever is to come, I’m ready for it.”

He sighed softly. “God dammit, Tatum. My heart claimed you all those years ago, and all that’s changed is I love you more today than I did yesterday.”

“Come home to me, Murphy.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Jada

The bell above the door dinged, and I looked up from my phone. A red-haired woman in a tan pantsuit walked in with dark sunglasses over her eyes. “Hi,” I called, “we’re a couple of minutes from closing. Feel free to browse for a minute; otherwise, you can come back tomorrow morning.”

I was not about to stay late. I was ready for my day off tomorrow and was starting it the minute the clock struck seven.

The woman nodded at me and pushed her sunglasses on top of her head. “I was just looking for a book for my brother.”

“Oh, uh, well, is he into anything particular?” I asked.

Her back was to me, and she trailed her fingers over the books on the table by the door. “A little bit of this, a little bit of that,” she shrugged. “I was hoping you could help me, Jada.”

“Uh, do I know you?” I asked. Many regulars came to the bookstore and knew my name while I didn’t know theirs, but this woman didn’t look familiar.

She shook her head and slowly turned toward me.

My stomach dropped to my feet as she raised her arm and pointed a gun at me. “You don’t know me, but I have a feeling you and I are going to become really close. Lock the door, and don’t do anything stupid.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wall Street Journal and USA Today bestselling author Winter Travers is a devoted wife, mother, and aunt-turned-author born and raised in Wisconsin. After a brief stint in South Carolina, following her heart to chase the man who is now her hubby, they retreated up North to the changing seasons and to the place they now call home.

Winter spends her days writing happily ever afters and her nights being a karate mom hauling her son to practices and tournaments. She also has an addiction to anything MC-related, puppies and baking.

Winter loves to stay connected with her readers. Don't hesitate to reach out and contact her.

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Check out the first chapter of

[Wilder Presley Says He Loves Me](#)

Chapter One

He's back...

Shelby Lyn

“**H**e's back.”

I snagged the last roll of black ribbon and dropped it into my basket.

“I saw him this morning at the diner. When he walked right by, I was getting my two scrambled eggs with wheat toast and maple sausage.” Missy clicked her tongue. “He looked as fine as fireworks on the fourth of July out on Mason Lake, let me tell you.”

My eyes searched the shelf for the second time hoping for more black ribbon to magically appear. “Maybe they have more black ribbon in the back,” I mumbled. I needed at least five more yards to ensure I had enough to finish the wreath Mrs. Baxter ordered. Halloween was fast approaching, and I needed to get a jump on my yearly orders.

“Shelby Lyn.” Missy snapped her fingers in my face. “Have you heard a word I've said?”

I stepped back and swatted her hand out of my face. “Yeah, you ate your breakfast this morning, and it was as good as the fourth of July fireworks.”

Missy scoffed. “You missed the important part.”

Missy spoke a mile a minute, and while I'm sure most of what she said was necessary to someone somewhere, most of the time, I tuned her out. After almost twenty years of friendship, I learned that if I missed something important that came out of her mouth, she tended to return to it until I heard her. This was one of those times. "Then tell me the important part while we wait for Jack to get his ass out of the backroom and help me."

"You know he's probably reading the old *Playboys* back there." Missy visibly shivered. "Thank god I never had a boy. I don't think I could have handled the crusty socks and forty-minute showers."

"Missy. Did you need to go there?" Dear god in heaven. I did not need that mental picture painted in my brain. "I doubt Jack is doing anything in the backroom. Please, he's eighteen. I hope he can control himself till he gets off work."

Missy shrugged. "Girl, you remember how boys were when we were eighteen. Horn dogs looking to rut."

"Uh, rut?" Was she talking about men or deer? *Sometimes the lines did blur.*

She scoffed and grabbed the dark blue ribbon. "Dad was watching the hunting channel last time I stopped by. What about this one?"

I shook my head. "It's navy."

"Nonsense. This is black," she insisted.

I grabbed the ribbon from her and set it back on the shelf. "It's navy, and it won't work." The backroom door swung

open, and Jack walked out. “There’s Jack.”

“Oh lordy. See, he’s tucking his shirt in.” Missy hissed. “Whatever you do, do not touch his hands,” she advised.

“Jack,” I called. “Can you check to see if there is any more one-inch black ribbon in the back?”

Jack gave me a two-fingered salute and backtracked to the backroom.

“Gonna be ten minutes before he surfaces again. You gave him an excuse to read a few more pages,” Missy laughed.

“You’re a nut, Missy.” I moved over to the selection of orange ribbons and tried to figure out which shade would be perfect. It needed to be bright, but not neon bright.

“Can we get back to what we were talking about before?”

“Your breakfast? It must have been pretty good if you want to keep talking about it.” I fingered a light shade of orange and wondered if it would clash with the dark shadow of orange I already had at home. Mrs. Baxter was as sweet as pie, but she would have a bird if the colors weren’t right for her fall wreath.

Missy scoffed. “Wilder Presley is back, Shelby,” she shouted.

I dropped the light orange ribbon, and Missy’s words hit me like bullets to my head. “Uh, what?” There was no way she had just said *that*.

No.

No, no, no.

Missy snapped her fingers in my face. “Now you’re gonna listen, huh?” she laughed. She shook her head and turned to the rack of ribbon. “What if you did a dark purple instead of black?” she suggested.

I grabbed her shoulder and spun her back to face me. “We’re not going to talk about ribbon right now,” I spat.

“You’re about a minute behind on your shock, Shelby. I’m over having to tell you about Wilder.”

“I was listening all along,” I muttered.

“Wilder Presley is back in Adams, Shelby Lyn, and you look like you saw a ghost.”

I glared at Missy. “I heard you the first time you said it.”

Missy cackled. “Second time I said it, you heard, but I had to repeat it because the look you get when I say his name says so much.”

I didn’t get a look when she said his name. There was no reason why I would get a look. *None*. “Where is Jack with my ribbon?” I grumbled.

“So you’re just going to act like I didn’t tell you *the* Wilder Presley is home?” Missy smirked. “You can’t act like this with me, Shelby. You told me what you said the day he left.” She wagged her finger in my face. “I have known you for nineteen years and one hundred ten days.”

I rolled my eyes. I wasn’t acting anyway, just like I hadn’t had a look when she said Wilder’s name. “And this isn’t his home,” I insisted. “When you leave for more than nine years, the place you go to becomes your home.”

“Is that a rule?” Missy questioned.

“Here ya go,” Jack called. He held up three rolls of black ribbon. “These are the last of them.” He made his way to me, and I grabbed the rolls from him.

“Thanks.” I nodded to the orange ribbon. “I need to grab a couple of rolls of orange. I’ll meet you at the register.”

Jack nodded. “Sounds good.”

I grabbed two shades of orange and hoped they would work for the wreath, but my mind was too wound up about Wilder to even notice what I grabbed.

“Shelby,” Missy called.

My eyes darted to her. “What?”

“What is going on in that head of yours right now?” she demanded.

I shrugged and dropped the orange ribbon into my basket. “I think I have two days to finish this wreath, and then I need to start thinking about the Christmas wreaths for the church while I work on the twenty other orders I have for fall or Halloween wreaths. I’m busy, Missy.”

Missy tipped her head to the side and crossed her arms over her chest. “You are so full of shit, girlfriend. The man you had a crush on all of your life is back in town, and you’re going to tell me you’re thinking about wreaths? That you didn’t tell him you loved him?”

I nodded my head. “Yes, you will believe that because you are my best friend, and you know I don’t want to have this

conversation at the craft store. And I told him I loved him as a friend. It was a “Have a great life, buddy. I love you.” Turning on my heel, I headed to where Jack stood behind the check-out counter.

“You know I’m just going to come over to your house after I get off of work,” Missy called after me.

I raised my hand over my head. “I wouldn’t expect anything less from you, Missy.” Missy had been my best friend for almost twenty years. She had moved to Adams when we were both ten and had become one of my close friends that summer.

“You want wine or hard booze?” she asked.

I needed a damn tranquilizer if what she had told me was true. “Bring the Southern,” I replied.

“Woo, wee,” Missy chuckled. “This is going to be a fun night.”

I rolled my eyes and set my basket on the check-out counter. “You wouldn’t by chance have a bottle of booze behind the counter, would you, Jack?” I blew my hair out of my face and sighed.

“Uh, well, I think my dad might have a bottle hidden in his office,” Jack stammered. “I could see if I could get you a glass.”

Oh, sweet Jack. He was just a little too naïve for his good.

I nodded to the basket. “I think I can make it home without a glass. Thank you, though.”

Jack looked visibly relieved.

Five minutes later, I was sitting behind the steering wheel of my truck and closed my eyes.

Wilder Presley was back in town.

Twelve years ago, I had watched that man drive out of my life with not so much as a backward glance. He had broken my heart that day, and he hadn't even known it.

Wilder Presley was back, and so were all those feelings I thought I had buried.

No amount of Southern was going to make this any easier.

••••

Check out the first chapter of *Playboy*

Chapter One

Playboy

Just another Saturday?

“WHERE ARE YOU GOING?”

I dropped my cigarette to the gravel and snuffed it out with the toe of my boot. “Bed.”

Jet inhaled deep on his cigarette. “Alone or you got company joining you?” he wheezed before blowing out a plume of smoke.

“Right now, alone, but we both know that can change from here to my bedroom door.”

It was early Saturday morning at the Sacramento Skinz strip club, and I was ready to call it a night. Most of the dancers were offstage and done for the evening which meant I was going to have my pick of the girls to warm my bed tonight.

“Barracuda talk to you?”

I nodded. “Tried to avoid him, but he tracked me down.”

“That means you’re in charge of the new weekend muscle?”

That was exactly what it meant. “He tried to shine it up by saying I was the head of security, but we all fucking know it means I’m the one throwing out drunk assholes Friday and Saturday nights.”

Jet chuckled. “Well, at least you have a week to get used to it.”

“I’d rather Barracuda work out whatever shit is going on with the security company than have the club do security.”

“Hey, just think of it like when the club first opened Skinz. We rotated nights, and it worked.”

That was before the club became so well known. Now, with Skinz being popular, there were easily one hundred and fifty people in the club at any time. When there was an event going like jello wrestling or bubble parties, that number almost tripled.

“Well, I can handle it for a little bit, but I fucking hope Barracuda is looking for a new security company.”

“You’ll have your first shot at the girls if you’re working security.”

I rolled my eyes. I had first shot at the girls either way. I wasn’t called Playboy for nothing. “I’ll catch ya later, Jet.”

I opened the door to the club, and the loud thumping of the bass hit me along with the smell of whiskey and cheap perfume. God knew these girls made a shit-ton of money, but it seemed like they all wore the same fucking overly sweet scent.

Normally, I knew what girl I wanted. They seemed to rotate through with barely any lasting more than a few nights. Tonight, it was different.

I made my way through the back of the club, my eyes darting to the changing room for the girls.

“You need some company tonight, Playboy?”

My gaze fell on Raine. She waltzed over to the door and leaned against the frame.

“What do you have in mind, sugar?”

She shrugged and draped her arm over her head. “Whatever you want, baby.”

Raine was one of the first girls I had slept with when the strip club opened, and she had been clamoring to get back into my bed since. “Don’t you think Tank and Rebel will mind me honing in on you?”

She reached out and trailed a finger down my chest. “You know they won’t mind. Hell, Tank would probably join us.”

That was true, but it wasn’t anything I was interested in. “Maybe another time, Raine.” She should have gotten the hint by now that I wasn’t interested in her anymore, but obviously, she hadn’t clued into it yet. Adding Tank into the equation was her latest ploy. *Hard pass.*

“We all know you don’t want to be alone tonight, Playboy.”

I gently grabbed her hand and dropped it. “Who said I was going to be alone?”

She scoffed and pushed off the doorframe. “Waste of my damn time,” she mumbled under her breath.

My eyes darted around the room filled with loads of mirrors, half naked women, and a plume of hairspray that

hung in the air. Nothing held my attention for more than a second. “Have a good night, ladies,” I called.

I made my way down the hallway and pushed into the main room with a nod to one of the prospects who was guarding the door from the dressing rooms into the club.

Next Saturday, I would be one of the poor saps making sure the drunks don’t get too handsy and try to run back to the girls when they get off stage. I was going to make sure the prospects took all the shit duties, and I can hopefully find a corner to sit in and just keep an eye on everything.

Prospects were supposed to have the shit jobs. I had been down the prospect path, and I had no intention of heading back down it even if Barracuda told me to do it.

Vivid Vanessa was on the stage, and she had the attention of every dick in the room. The one girl who had yet to look my way, and I was strangely okay with it. She had moves like no other on the pole, but something made me take a step back from pursuing her. She seemed like she would want a whole hell of a lot more than I had to offer. She didn’t mess with any of the club guys, and she just had a classy air about her.

I was at the door when a petite hand grabbed my arm. “Looking for company tonight, Playboy?”

Bray. I looked her up and down and smiled. “Maybe, but you might want to put on some more clothes. It’s pretty chilly on the back of my bike.”

Bray flitted her long lashes. “Give me ten minutes? I need to count my drawer and change.”

I nodded. “Meet me at my bike.” Bray wasn’t exactly what I was looking for, but she would keep my bed warm for a bit.

“Ten minutes,” she promised. She turned on her heels toward the bar, and I pushed open the door to the outside.

My bike was in the front row and off to the right. Four other bikes of club members stood parked by mine, and there were about twenty other cars in the lot. My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it up to my ear.

“Sup?”

“Where you at?” Six-Gun asked.

I sat down on my bike and pulled my keys out of my pocket. “Just leaving the club.”

“You got someone here looking for you.”

I stuck the key in the ignition but didn’t turn it. “Who is it?”

“A chick.”

That wasn’t really surprising. “You wanna be a little bit more specific than that?”

“Brown hair. Dressed like a fucking librarian. Possibly hot if she took off the glasses and her eyes stopped darting around like a scared animal.”

I knocked up the kick stand. “She got a name?” I had no idea who the hell Six-Gun was talking about, but I was fucking intrigued.

“Won’t tell me. I asked her twice, but all she did was shake her head.”

“She’s still there?”

“That’s why I fucking called you, brother. She’s here, and she wants to talk to you.”

I glanced over my shoulder toward the club. “I’ll be there in five minutes.” I shoved the phone in my pocket and started up the bike.

Bray was going to have to find someone else to keep her warm tonight.

••••

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