



HIS
Reward
Banachi Family Book 1

Wall Street Journal & USA Today Bestselling Author

WINTER TRAVERS

HHS Reward

Benzoni Family Book 1

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Keeping Meg

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Unraveling Fayth

Forever Lo

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Charlie Beck Says I'm His

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About the Author

Excerpt from Wilder Presley Says He Loves Me



Chapter One

Princeton



“WHY AM I ALWAYS THE one pumping the gas?”

“Driver pumps the gas,” Creed shrugged.

I inserted the nozzle into the gas tank and squeezed the handle. “That is some bullshit because I’m not even driving this thing.” I nodded to the black SUV I had been driving that was parked by the curb. “I still have three-quarters of a tank.”

Creed slid his sunglasses over his eyes and smirked. “And?”

“Just put the damn gas in,” Leo growled from the passenger seat of the SUV. “The pilot is waiting for us.”

“You know,” Creed drawled, “why don’t we have our own gas pump? I mean, you just said the pilot for your private jet is waiting for us, and we all know you’re loaded as fuck.”

“*We’re* loaded as fuck, Creed, but we’re not *have our own gas pump* loaded,” Leo clarified.

“Hell,” I chuckled. “There’s a tax bracket above Leo Banachi?”

“One or two,” Leo mumbled. “If you’re looking at being on the legal side of the law.”

A blue sedan pulled up to the pump next to us, and a woman got out of the passenger side.

Creed and I both took in the woman and the car and immediately dismissed them. We were trained to know when a threat was present, and this woman was not it.

Her dark red hair was piled on top of her head, and a dark pair of sunglasses covered her eyes. She was wearing cutoff jean shorts, and a black t-shirt covered her top half. “Pop the gas flap, Dad,” she called.

“I’m going to get a drink.” Creed pushed off the side of the SUV and nodded to the gas station. “You want anything?”

I shook my head. “I’m good.” The plane was always loaded with shit to drink and eat, so there wasn’t any point in spending my money on food.

The woman glanced my way and smiled shyly as she moved, so the pump blocked my view of her.

Creed walked into the gas station, and Leo’s phone rang.

“You not going to answer that?” I called. My eyes connected with Leo’s in the door mirror.

“Not in the mood.”

I chuckled and shook my head. Leo’s phone rang at least ten times an hour. It drove me crazy, and I wasn’t the one who had to answer it. “I’m sure whoever it is, they’ll leave a message.”

“It was Fayth,” he grunted.

Ah, Leo’s sister. She was married to one of the members of the local biker club, and they always seemed to be having some kind of crisis going on. Though most of the time, it seemed to be the ol’ ladies getting into trouble. “Which one do you think is causing problems now?” The pump stopped, and I tried to squeeze in a few more cents.

“Probably all of them. It was bad enough a few years ago, but now all the kids are hooked up, and it seems like the crazy antics of the club are multiplied by ten.”

That was exactly what it was. “And now they’re having kids.” I hung up the pump and closed the fuel door.

The car next to me started, and I was surprised they were already done fueling.

“Dad!” the woman hollered.

I leaned to the side and watched her hastily hang up the pump.

The driver shifted the car into drive and peeled away from the pump.

“Dad!” she screeched. “No!”

The car careened out of the parking lot and headed down the street. The woman took a few steps in the direction of the car, but there was no way in hell she was going to be able to catch up to it. Not in a pair of cheap plastic flip-flops and with the way her dad had the pedal to the floor.

She held her head in her hands and let out a frustrated cry.

“Help her,” Leo sighed.

“We need to get to Chicago,” I pointed out. And I had no idea who the woman was.

“I need to get to Chicago. The plane is waiting for me. Go help her.” He flitted his hand at me. “Creed can take me, and if I need you, I’ll send the jet for you.”

“You were just talking about Fayth and the ol’ ladies being a pain in the ass, and now you are throwing me at the feet of a chick who is possibly the same caliber as them, if not worse?” Leo was losing his mind. “I’ll call the police for her on the way to the airport.”

“What in the hell is going on?” Creed demanded. He jogged over to the SUV with a bottle of soda in his hand.

“Princeton is staying behind to help, and we’re heading to Chicago.”

Creed nodded, jogged around the front of the SUV, and got behind the wheel.

“I don’t even have my phone,” the woman cried.

Creed started the car and laughed. “Have fun with that, bud.” He shifted into drive and smiled wide. “For once, I’m not pissed about having to go to Chicago.”

“Keep me posted on what is going on,” Leo ordered. “If I need you, I’ll let you know.”

I rolled my eyes but stepped back from the SUV. “This is some bullshit,” I muttered.

Creed and Leo headed out of town, and I was stuck at the gas station with god knows what problem facing me.

“Hey,” I called. I hung my head and slowly turned to the woman, but she wasn’t there.

Fuck.

Maybe this could be my way out of this. If she disappeared, then I didn’t have to deal with whatever crisis she was going through.

I looked around and spotted her a few yards down the sidewalk, headed in the direction her car had headed.

What the hell was she doing? Like she was going to be able to track her car down on foot.

“Fucking hell,” I grunted. I pulled my keys out of my pocket and jogged over to my SUV.

“I can’t believe this is what I have to deal with,” I muttered. I slid behind the wheel and cranked it up. I pulled out of the driveway, hopeful I would see her car headed down the street, but it was gone. I pulled up alongside her and rolled down my window.

“Hey!”

She glanced over at me and glared.

“Do you need some help?” I asked.

“No, I’m fine,” she called. She kept walking but moved to the side furthest from me.

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

“That’s good because I know karate and could totally kick your ass.”

“That so?” I laughed.

“Yeah, it is,” she insisted. “So I think you should stop following me in your creeper car and go find someone else to kidnap.”

You have got to be kidding me. She thought I was a creeper trying to kidnap her while she was traipsing down the sidewalk after her car that was more than likely already past the city limits sign? “You think I’m what a creeper looks

like?" I asked. I was driving a blacked-out Escalade that only had ten thousand miles on it, and my sunglasses probably cost more than all her clothes combined.

She scoffed and threw her hands in the air. "A rich creeper. One of those who kidnaps people and then sells their organs on the black market. That is why you're all fancy. You're driving around three kidneys and possibly a lung."

"Darlin'," I chuckled. "That is not the type of business I am in. Just let me help you. I can take you to your car." I didn't understand why she was fighting me to help her.

"That would be great if I actually knew where my car was headed." She stopped and tipped her head back. "Why is this happening to me?" she shouted.

"I heard you don't even have your phone."

She glanced at me and glowered. "I'm sure I'm on a bunch of security cameras, so even though I don't have my phone, the police will still be able to track me. It doesn't matter that I don't have my phone."

"Uh, good?" I didn't know how that was going to help her find her car or dad. "I know a guy at the police department who can maybe help us," I suggested. For once, maybe I could call in a favor to the Devil's Knights. Luna, one of the club members, was hooked up with a detective, and god knew the Knights called in plenty of favors to the Banachis.

She turned to me and folded her arms over her chest. "Why are you doing this? I don't know you, and you don't know me. For all you know, this is some ploy for you to get me in your car, and then I'll kidnap you. My dad will come speeding around the corner, and I'll be selling your organs by dinner," she countered.

I kept my foot on the brake but didn't shift into park. I needed to be ready to go if she decided to take off. "Because you know karate, right? You'll hit me with a kick spin to the head and then steal my car?" I guessed.

"It's possible," she muttered.

“How about we both agree not to kidnap each other, and I’ll just help you figure out where your car is?”

“I still don’t know who you are,” she pointed out. “And I know you don’t know who I am.”

“Princeton,” I called. “I work for the Banachis.”

She closed her eyes and sighed. “Of course,” she whispered. “Why? Why me?”

“Of course what?” I asked.

She opened her eyes and pursed her lips. “Of course, this would happen in front of one of you. I can handle this myself. It’s not the first time it has happened, and it isn’t going to be the last. Have a good day, Princeton.” She turned on her heel and started back in the direction her car had headed.

I lifted my foot off the brake and idled alongside her. “What do you mean, this isn’t the first time this has happened? And one of me?”

She waved her hand at me. “Nothing.”

“Your dad stealing your car is hardly anything.” And I wanted to know what was so bad about being a Banachi. She said one of you like I was the scum of the earth. As far as I knew, the Banachis had a pretty stellar reputation in Rockton.

“He didn’t steal it,” she insisted.

“What the hell do you call this, then?” I asked. “And the longer you argue with me about helping you, the more time we lose looking for your car and dad.”

She stopped again and glanced at me. “I call this my problem, not yours. Please just move along, and don’t worry about little old me. I’m no one to you.”

What in the hell did that mean? “You obviously need help. Your car was stolen, and you don’t even have a phone to call the police.”

She pointed down the street. “I only live a few blocks away. I’m sure my dad just went home.”

“His home is your home?” I asked.

“Yeah. I live with my dad because he needs a caretaker. Can you just call me lame and let me handle this myself?” She started down the sidewalk in the direction she had pointed.

“You’re not lame, but I don’t think we have the time for me to go into the reasons why you’re not. Just get in, and I’ll drive you to your house.”

She threw her hands in the air and stalked over to the SUV. “My god, you are persistent.” She wrenched open the door and threw herself into the car. She stared straight ahead. “Well?”

“You wanna tell me where you live, darlin’?”

She rattled off her address, and I knew right where she lived. Leo owned a few homes in the area that he rented out, and she lived right next to one.

“How often does this happen?” I asked as I pulled away from the curb.

“I don’t mean to sound bitchy, but I don’t want to talk about this because then it means I have to come to some realization I’m not ready for yet,” she sighed and scrubbed her hands down her face. “I just pray to god he is at home like last time.”

“I get it, I get it,” I muttered. “Uh, you wanna tell me your name, or should I just call you lady?”

“Like Jerry Lewis?” she laughed.

I quirked my eyebrow. “No clue what you are talking about, darlin’.”

She sat back in the seat and relaxed against the soft leather. “Never mind. I’m Catharine, but everyone calls me Kitty. My dad started calling me Kitty before I even left the hospital when I was born. It seems to have stuck.”

I nodded and turned onto her street. “You like your neighbors?” I asked.

“You mean the people who rent from you?”

I shrugged. “Not me, specifically, but yeah.”

“They’re fine,” she sighed. Her house came into view, and her shoulders slumped. “Crap. He’s not home.”

I pulled up to the curb in front of her house and shifted into park. “Do you want to try calling your phone?” I asked. “Maybe your dad will answer it,” I suggested.

She wrinkled her nose. “He probably won’t, but it won’t hurt to try.”

I pulled out my phone and entered the code to unlock it. I handed it to her and looked around her neighborhood. “Why don’t you call him, and I’ll go talk to your neighbors quickly to let them know if your dad shows up to call me.” I jumped out of the SUV before she could protest and jogged over to the neighbor to the left of her house and then to the one to the right.

“Well?” I asked as I opened the door and slid back behind the wheel.

“Nothing,” Kitty cried. She handed me back my phone and buried her face in her hands. “I have no idea what to do. I don’t know where he would have gone.”

She didn’t know, and I sure as hell didn’t. “Uh, how about I call my friend at the police station and see what he thinks we should do?”

Kitty was full-blown crying now, and she wiped the back of her hand across her tear-stained cheek. “I don’t know what they are going to do.”

I didn’t either, but I had to assume they would be able to help somehow.

I scrolled through my contacts and swiped on Ransom’s name.

“Yo,” he called. “What the hell do you want?”

Ah, Ransom. He wasn’t the biggest fan of the Banachis, but he tried not to let it show. Sometimes.

I glanced over at Kitty and sighed. The Devil’s Knights owed the Banachis lots of favors, but I hated that Ransom was the one I was needing help from. “I need your help, Ransom.”





Chapter Two

Kitty

This was an absolute nightmare.

I didn't even understand how I had gotten here.

Dad was fine this morning. He talked with me, got his breakfast ready, and we had been out the door without any hiccups.

I glanced at the clock on the radio and frowned. We should be at the doctor's office right now, but that wasn't going to happen.

"Yeah, yeah," Princeton called into the phone. "Let me put you on speaker so you can ask her instead of me relaying back to you what she says." He moved the phone from his ear and held it in between us. "Ransom has some questions for you," he explained. He pressed the speaker button. "She can hear you."

"Uh, hi?" I chirped. I didn't expect to be talking to a detective. I really just needed someone to help me figure out what the heck I should be doing. This had happened three times before, but never on this scale. Never like this.

Dad would forget who I was for a few minutes, and then he would snap out of it. We had been home when it happened, and I was able to talk to him to remind him who I was and where he was.

"Detective Ransom here," the man called through the phone. "Hear you're having a bit of a problem."

It was more than a bit of a problem.

Dad had stolen my car and, more than likely, had no idea where he was or what he was doing. "Uh, I just need a little help finding my dad."

"Where were you headed today?" he asked.

“The doctor. He had a checkup scheduled for today,” I explained.

“Do you think he might have headed there?” Detective Ransom asked.

Oh my god. I should have called there first. I had been telling Dad for the past week about his appointment coming up. “Let me call them.” I reached for my phone but froze. “I can’t call them because my phone is in my car that my dad took for a joy ride.”

“What doctor?” Ransom asked.

“Haas. He has an office connected to the hospital,” I rattled off. We were just going for his yearly checkup, but I was also going to talk to the doctor about the past couple of months.

“Hold on for a second. I’ll call over there and see.”

Music played through the phone, and I stared out the windshield. “You don’t have to be doing this. Your friend, too. I’m wasting his time when he could be doing something that really matters,” I sighed. His friend was a detective, for goodness sake, not a locator of runaway parents. “I’m sure he just went to the doctor since I was pounding it into his head that he had an appointment.”

“Hopefully, he is, darlin’, and I can just drive you over there.” Princeton’s tone was even and calm when it was taking all my willpower not to freak out and run screaming down the street.

I sighed and leaned my head against the headrest. “And if he’s not there, he has to come home sometime, right?” I whispered.

I had moved in with Dad a year and a half ago because his health was declining, but it wasn’t like he needed hands-on care twenty-four-seven. He just needed someone there with him to make sure he was okay and to cook his meals. In the past two months, I had noticed memory loss and mild confusion from him. Late one night, I had gotten the nerve to poke around the internet trying to figure out what was going

on and had scared the shit out of myself when the word dementia flashed on my screen.

“Yo,” Ransom called. “Her dad is at the doctor’s office. I told them to keep him there until she shows up.”

“Holy shit,” I sighed. I dropped my chin to my chest and let out a deep breath. Relief swept over me, and a huge weight lifted. “Thank god.”

“Thanks, man. We’ll head over there right now.” Princeton ended the call and dropped his phone on the center console. “Let’s go.”

“Are you sure? You’ve already done so much by helping me find him. I don’t want to take up any more of your time.” If they knew not to let Dad leave until I got there, I could make the fifteen-minute walk across town.

Princeton shook his head and started up the SUV. “No one takes my time unless I want them to, darlin’.” He shifted into drive and pulled away from the curb.

I threw my hands in the air. I didn’t have it in me to argue with him anymore. If he wanted to spend his time looking for my dad and then driving me to him, then that was what he wanted. “Well, thank you. I can walk if you need to be somewhere else.”

He shook his head. “My plans for the day are gone. Literally,” he chuckled. “Leo and Creed are probably wheels up already on the way to Chicago.”

“You missed your flight because of me?” I moaned. “Oh, my god. I will pay you back your airfare.” Maybe. If Princeton accepted a payment plan of sorts, I could totally pay him back in five to six months. I glanced down at his pristine clothes and quirked my lips. Make it eight to nine months. I’m sure he flew first class.

He smirked. “I didn’t have any airfare.”

I tipped my head to the side. “Uh, then how did you miss your flight?”

“Private jet, darlin’.”

My eyes bugged out, and I gulped. “Uh, I don’t think I can pay you back for that.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “You don’t need to pay me back for anything. Leo was the one who needed to be on that plane, and Creed made sure of that.”

The fact this man flew around on private jets and acted like missing a flight wasn’t a big deal proved that he was in a different world from the one I lived in. “Well, if there is anything I could actually do for you, let me know. I make a hell of a lasagna, and I can crotchet.” I could have left the crotchet part out. As if this man would ever want anything that was crocheted. *Good one, Kitty.*

“I’ll keep that in mind, darlin’. I stayed behind this time; I’ll be fending for myself since the chef takes time off when we’re not in Rockton.”

Of course, they had a chef in that huge mansion they lived in. He could fit my whole house and yard in the pool of that mansion in the woods they lived in. One time, I had taken a wrong turn and wound up at the locked gates. I hadn’t been able to catch a glance at the house, but you had to know with a gate and security as they had, something impressive was at the end of that driveway.

He pulled into the driveway of the hospital and made his way over to park in front of the entrance to the doctors’ offices.

I reached for my purse but remembered I didn’t have it with me. “Thank you.” I unfastened my seatbelt and flashed a quick smile at Princeton, but he wasn’t there. He was already out of the SVU and rounding the front end.

He opened my door and held it wide open. “You coming?” he asked.

I jumped down and tipped my head back to look up at him. “I’m going, but what are you doing?” I asked.

“*We* are going to find your dad.”

I wrinkled my brow. “He’s in there. Your friend said he was.” I scanned the parking lot and spotted my car parked

crooked three rows over. “And so is my car.”

Princeton shrugged and grabbed my upper arm. He pulled me out of the way of the door and slammed it. “He was here ten minutes ago. What kind of guy would I be if I just left you here without making sure you were safe? Just because your car is here doesn’t mean that he is. He could have taken off on foot. He forgot who you were, Kitty, so I don’t think it would be too crazy to think that he would forget what car he was driving.”

“Uh, that would make you like every other guy I’ve known.” We weren’t living in the dark ages where there was a possibility of a dragon or something swooping in and killing me. “I can make it from your SUV to the door without dying, I think. And he’s not that forgetful,” I snapped defensively. I knew I had a lot to come to grips with, but I didn’t need Princeton to be the one to do it in the parking lot of Dad’s doctors.

He sighed and pushed his sunglasses on top of his head. “Just help me ease my mind, darlin’, and let me see with my own eyes that your dad is in there, yeah?”

“You do know this is ridiculous, right? Half an hour ago, you didn’t even know who I was, and now you want to make sure me and my dad are okay.”

He shrugged. “I guess I’m just a gentleman.”

I huffed and pivoted around him. “I don’t know if I would call you that from what I’ve heard around town, Princeton. And I don’t have time to argue with you about this in the parking lot. If you have to see with your own eyes that my dad is in here, then let’s go.” Under normal circumstances, I never would have talked to Princeton like this, but I was still worried about my dad.

He stalked behind me, and his hand was on the door before I could open it. “And you didn’t know me before half an hour ago, Kitty.”

“I didn’t know you personally, but I knew of you, Princeton. A man connected to wealth, crime, and running my

small town.”

He glowered at me. “I can’t get a read on you, darlin’. One minute you’re crying in the road, then you’re running away from me, determined as hell. You bounced between those two at least three times in thirty minutes. You’re all over the place.”

“I was not crying in the road,” I growled. “I was in a stressful situation and figuring out what to do. And my life is all over the place, so why shouldn’t my emotions be?”

“So let’s swing into the emotion of you letting me help you again. I promise it won’t hurt,” he chuckled.

I looked around and threw my hands in the air. “Whatever.” I was up and down, and back and forth, with Princeton. He was trying to help, but he was also pushy. I didn’t know what kind of help I needed, and I sure didn’t want to be pushed into letting him help.

“You are infuriating, Kitty,” he whispered.

And so was he. “You’re welcome. Now can I go inside, or do you need to beat on your chest like a caveman while you tell me what I should be doing?”

He stared at me, but a deep laugh rumbled from his chest. A slow grin spread across his lips, and he shook his head. “This is going to be fun.”

I shook my head and flitted my hand at the door. “No, this is about to be over in thirty seconds. The second we lay eyes on my dad, you can go. Your good deed for the day will be over.”

“Swing,” he whispered. His eyes danced with mischief, and I wanted to pop him right on the nose.

He opened the door, and I charged inside. I didn’t stop at the information desk, but bound up the two flights of stairs instead.

I glanced behind me and saw Princeton was hot on my heels. I was winded by the time I opened the door to the third floor and paused to catch my breath.

Wowza. Maybe running up the stairs was not the best idea.

“You don’t think maybe we could have taken the elevator?” Princeton mumbled behind me. He was standing so close I could feel his body heat radiating against my back.

“Out of shape?” I asked.

“Hardly, darlin’, though it sounds like you might want to take a seat for a second before we go searching for your dad.”

I glared at him over my shoulder.

He wasn’t breathing heavily and leaning against the doorframe. *I was.*

The man looked like he had just strolled down the sidewalk instead of hefting his ass up two flights of stairs.

“I’m the picture of health,” I wheezed. I tried to control my breathing and pasted a smile on my face. *Why didn’t I take the elevator?*

“I see that, darlin’,” he smirked.

“I go to the gym three times a week,” I blurted. LIES! What was it about this man that made me want to appear more than what I was? I couldn’t tell you the last time I had been to the gym, but I knew for sure it was not three times a week.

“More than I go,” he chuckled.

I looked him up and down and knew he was lying straight to my face. The man was walking perfection.

His broad shoulders and muscular physique hinted at the raw power that lay beneath his clothes. With each step he took, his muscles flexed, and his posture radiated an undeniable air of slight arrogance and power. With his chiseled jawline, perfectly sculpted cheekbones, and piercing blue eyes, he possessed a striking and symmetrical face that easily turned heads. His dark brown hair was meticulously styled, adding a touch of boyish charm to his overall appearance.

The man was hot. Plain and simple.

Which also made him completely out of my league. Hell, he was out of my universe.

Not that I was thinking about him that way.

Just an observation.

“I need to go find my dad.” And stop staring at Princeton. In about five minutes, I was never going to see him again, and I would be back to my life.

A life of working remotely so I could be at home for my dad and continue to bury my head in the sand about the fact that not only his physical health but also his mental health was deteriorating.

Yeah, that wasn't a life someone like Princeton would live.

I shook my head and stepped out of the doorway. Why was I even thinking about Princeton like this?

Five minutes and he would be gone forever.

I made my way over to the receptionist and smiled wide. “Hi! I was looking for Larry Hanes.”

“Oh,” the receptionist squeaked. She didn't look a day over eighteen and smiled brightly up at me. “You're quick. Larry had some labs he needed to do, so they took him to get some blood drawn.”

“They?” I asked. I had just found my dad; I didn't need to lose him again so quickly. “Where did they take him?” I demanded.

The receptionist opened her mouth to reply, but a booming “Kitty!” echoed through the waiting room.

Dad.

I whirled around and had never been so happy to see my dad before.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. “Shouldn't you be working?”

He didn't even remember leaving me high and dry at the gas station earlier.

“Uh, I took the morning off for your appointment, Dad. Don't you remember?” I asked. That was dumb to say, though.

If he did remember, he obviously wouldn't be asking me why I was here.

“Oh, you're right.” He smiled wide. “I must have forgotten. You haven't missed much, though. They just poked me a few times and took a bit of my blood.”

“Good,” I smiled. “I'm glad I missed that part. Why don-.”

Dad's eyes turned to Princeton, who was standing beside me. “Did you find a boyfriend while you were waiting for me?”

“Boyfriend?” I sputtered. I knew Dad's memory was fading, but I didn't think it was that bad.

Dad smiled, and his eyes twinkled. He was giving me shit. Yup, that was the man I had known for the past thirty-one years. “Gotcha, honey. We both know that man is too clean-cut for you.”

My cheeks heated, and I knew I was blushing ten shades of pink. “Dad,” I hissed.

The nurse next to him giggled. “Why don't you three have a seat, and we'll call you when the doctor is ready.”

“Two,” I interrupted. “Only two of us are taking a seat.” I hitched my thumb towards Princeton. “He has a private jet to catch.”

“Whoa,” Dad cheered. “Maybe I'll go with him, and you can take a seat, Kitty. The vampire here already has my blood, so she doesn't need much else from me.”

I rolled my eyes and moved over to the chairs in the waiting area. “Sit down, Dad. You are not soaring off with the Banachis today.”

Dad reared back, impressed. “Banachi, huh?”

This was going to be the only time I wished for Dad's memory to slip.

“I do need to get going, but I'll be around. Not flying off today.” Princeton slid his sunglasses over his eyes, and a

panty-melting smile spread across his lips. “I’ll see you later, Kitty.”

I couldn’t speak. Couldn’t argue that he would indeed NOT be seeing me later. The man’s smile exuded confidence, charm, and a hint of playfulness.

A smile like that had never been turned my way before.

Princeton nodded to Dad. “Have a good day, sir.”

Dad gave him a head tip. “You, too.”

Princeton waltzed out of the waiting room, and I let out the breath I had been holding.

“Well, well,” Dad drawled as he sat down next to me. “Seems like you had a pretty interesting morning, sweetheart.”

And it was all thanks to Dad. “Do you remember how you got here, Dad?” I asked.

“I drove,” he replied simply.

“You don’t remember stopping anywhere?” I questioned. *Maybe stealing my car and taking off like a madman?*

“No, sweetheart. Why are you asking?”

I sighed and sat back in my chair. “No reason. Just glad you made it here safely.” I patted his hand and smiled. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here when they drew your blood. Was it bad?”

He shook his head and chuckled. “No, sweetheart. I’ve got tough skin.” He pointed to the band-aid on his arm. “This proves it. She had to poke me three times before she got my vein.”

“Oh, Dad,” I laughed.

He regaled me with the story of the nurse trying to find his vein while I mentally prepared to talk to the doctor about Dad’s fleeting memory.

Back to the world where Princeton didn’t exist, and it was just me and Dad.





Chapter Three

Princeton

“Everything okay?”
“Never better,” I drawled into the phone. I grabbed the loaf of bread out of the bread box and twisted off the tie. I hadn’t been joking when I said I was on my own until Leo returned from Chicago.

“What happened with the damsel in distress at the gas station this morning?” Leo asked.

I sighed and pulled two slices of bread out. “I helped her find her car.”

“I’m going to need a little more information than that,” he chuckled. “You have no idea how much restraint it took me not to call you earlier to see what was going on.”

“Not much to tell.” At least, not that I knew. I had picked up what I could about the situation with Kitty and her dad, but I didn’t think Kitty knew too well what was going on either. That was probably why they were at the doctor today. “Seems like the woman’s dad might be having some memory problems and forgot Kitty was with him.”

“Damn,” Leo sighed. “How long did it take you to find him?”

“Eh, less than an hour. I called Ransom, who helped out.”

“You willingly called Ransom, huh? You must have been desperate.”

I grabbed the jar of peanut butter from the pantry, along with the marshmallow fluff. “I wouldn’t say desperate. I just needed a nudge to figure out where to look first. I’ve dealt with a ton of shit, Leo, but a runaway dad with his daughter’s stolen car was a new one for me today.”

“You telling me a frantic woman is harder to handle than dealing with five guns pointed at you?”

“One hundred times, yes.” I didn’t know how Apollo handled Greer all of these years. “Why the hell do you think we’ve all stayed single all of these years besides Apollo?” Apollo had fallen hard for Greer a lifetime ago, and now it was the norm to have Greer and his kids around.

“I know why I’ve stayed single, but why you, Murphy, and Creed have stayed single is a mystery to me,” he pondered.

I grabbed a knife from the drawer and smeared a load of peanut butter onto one slice of bread. “I think it might have to do with the five guns that can be pointed at us at any time,” I drawled. “Kind of kills the mood, you know?”

And Bryn was also the reason why Leo never settled down.

The rest of us didn’t have a Bryn in our past who haunted us.

We were just too busy keeping Leo safe and the Banachi empire running.

“Maybe you need to go spend some time with the Devil’s Knights while I’m out of town,” Leo suggested. “I’m going to be here at least for a week, and you don’t need to come since Apollo is here as well.”

“Where’s Murphy?” He hadn’t been with us this morning on the way to the airport, and I hadn’t seen him for two days.

The front door slammed, and my hand instantly moved to the gun on my hip.

“I’m home, asshole!”

“He should be with you,” Leo chuckled.

There went my peaceful few days alone in the house. “You sure you don’t need him with you in Chicago?” I drawled.

Murphy waltzed into the kitchen and dropped his keys and sunglasses on the kitchen island. “Are you eating dinner without me?”

“I was eating dinner alone because I thought I was going to be alone.” I twisted open the jar of fluff and slathered it on the

other slice of bread.

“Well, you’re not, and you can make me one of those, too.”

I flipped him off and set the knife on the lid of the peanut butter. “Or you can make your own shit.”

“I see you don’t have the same charm as Bristol does,” Murphy laughed.

Bristol was the chef and wouldn’t be around until Leo got back from Chicago. Or unless Marco showed up. Bristol had actually hooked up with one of the members of the Devil’s Knights, which strengthens the connection between the Banachis and DKMC even more.

“Is Marco meeting you in Chicago?” I asked Leo.

“He was supposed to be on the plane with me, but Royal has an OB/GYN appointment for Leo Junior. He’s heading to Chicago tomorrow with Royal and Kane.”

“Oh god,” I groaned. “Please tell me you are still not petitioning for them to name their baby after you.”

“There is no petitioning. It’s going to happen,” Leo grunted.

“Oh yeah,” Murphy scoffed. “Is that why Marco told me they were going with Jacob? I know how people confuse Leo and Jacob all the time.” Murphy grabbed the loaf of bread and pulled out two slices.

I rounded the kitchen island and hopped onto one of the barstools. “What about Jacob Leo?” I suggested.

“This shouldn’t even be a discussion because you already have your name given to Kane. Did you forget that?” Murphy called. “If anything, Royal and Marco should think about Murphy.”

I wagged my finger at Murphy. “Now I think you are onto something. What about Princeton Murphy?”

“You’re both idiots,” Leo called. “I have a better chance of them going with Leo for the middle name again than you have

of getting Princeton Murphy.”

“What? I kind of like it. It rolls off the tongue,” I argued.

Murphy scoffed. “I wouldn’t argue that. Though Murphy Princeton has a better ring to it.”

“I’m getting off the phone. I have actual business I need to take care of. I have a meeting with Hank and Paul over dinner tonight, and then tomorrow I have an unexpected mess I need to deal with.”

“You sure you don’t want us there with you?” I asked. I hadn’t heard anything about the unexpected mess Leo was handling.

“No, no,” Leo reassured us. “It’s nothing I can’t handle. Just keep an eye on the house, and I’ll see you guys in a week.” He ended the call, and Murphy slid my phone over to me.

“Where the hell have you been?” I asked.

Murphy shrugged. “Same shit one of us does every month.”

Bryn detail.

Even though Leo and Bryn hadn’t been together for years, Leo still took care of her. Not that Bryn knew anything about it. As far as she knew, Leo was in her past.

“You ever wonder what she’s going to do when she finds out everything?” I asked.

“Not our problem.” Murphy sloppily built his sandwich and tossed the dirty knife into the sink. “And why would she be mad? It’s not like he’s meddling in her life. So what if he owns her apartment building and is the silent backer of her company?”

I didn’t claim to know jack shit about women, but I had to assume Bryn was not going to be happy at all, knowing how involved Leo was in her life without actually knowing he was. “I just think Leo is playing with fire and is going to get burned.”

“Well, he’s gone this long without her finding out, so he must be doing something right.” He grabbed two beers from the fridge and sat down next to me. “And it’s none of our business. We just do what Leo tells us to do, and that’s that.”

He was right, but that didn’t mean I had to like everything we did.

“So, I guess we have a sort of vacation for the next few days.” I popped open the top of my beer and took a drink. “What are you going to do?”

Murphy held up his sandwich and motioned to his beer. “Probably a lot of this. Maybe accidentally call Bristol when I order pizza and let it drop that you and I are here having to fend for ourselves.”

“You do that, and you know she’ll be here ASAP, but also have Pie in tow with the kids.” Pie was the member of the Devil’s Knights who had managed to claim Bristol for his own.

“The kids are always here with her,” Murphy laughed. “They call us both uncle.”

“Well,” I drawled. “The choice is up to you, but I’m more than okay with fending for ourselves over the next week.”

“We’ll see how it goes.” Murphy sat back. “You gonna tell me about your day, or are you just going to act like you weren’t rescuing damsels in distress?”

I rolled my eyes. “It was just one damsel, and I’m pretty sure she didn’t really want my help.”

“She a bitch?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Nah, not really, man. She was stressed the hell out, and I was some stranger in her face.”

“But she let you help.”

I nodded. “She didn’t really have much of a choice since her dad had taken off with her car.”

“Her dad was the one who took her car? That’s kind of messed up.”

It was, but not for the reason Murphy was thinking. “Pretty sure the guy has dementia or something. The start of it, at least. Kitty mentioned how things like this had happened before, but normally he was lucid.”

“Has to be tough,” Murphy mumbled.

It had to be. “Yeah, but I left them at the doctor’s office, so hopefully, she figures out what is going on.”

“You get her number?”

I shook my head. “What for?”

“Because Creed told me she was easy on the eyes.”
Murphy wiggled his eyebrows. “Your damsel in distress could be the next Mrs. Princeton Powell.”

“You say next as if there was one before,” I chuckled.

“You know what the hell I’m saying, man. None of us are getting any younger, and if you’re going to want little Princeton’s running around, you better get on it.”

“You just sounded like a mother impatiently waiting to be a grandmother,” I chuckled.

Murphy flipped me off and shoved the rest of his sandwich in his mouth. “Fuck you.” He hopped off the stool and snatched his beer off the counter. “Later, fucker,” he grunted. He headed down the hallway to his room and slammed the door.

That was a weird conversation.

We all were getting on in age, but it wasn’t like we were seventy wanting to be dads. I had a few good years left in me if I decided that being a family man was what I wanted.

It just always came down to what Leo and I had talked about.

I didn’t live an easy life. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say I could have five guns pointed at me at any time.

Life as a Banachi was good most of the time, but when it was bad, it was really bad.

I had chosen and loved this life, but who was I to put this on someone else?

I finished my beer and tossed it in the garbage.

I shut down the house and manned the alarm.

This right here was not the norm. Setting an alarm system and sleeping with a gun beside you because you never knew what was coming at you was not the life of a family man. Apollo had managed to make it work for him, but I wasn't sure I could just find any woman who could accept this life like Greer had. She had grown up around it and knew all of the dangers.

This life gave me many things, but a wife and family were a reward I wasn't going to get in the end.

Apollo was lucky to have found it, and I was just lucky to still be alive.

That was all I could ask for.





Chapter Four

Kitty

“**Y**es, yes, I know, Ms. Payne. I promise the refund will be in your account within five to seven business days.”

“Five to seven business days?” she yelled into the phone. “You took the money within seconds, and now it is going to take you five to seven business days to put it back? What kind of BS is that?” she demanded.

It was BS, but it was out of my hands. I just worked as the manager in the billing and collections department for a TV streaming service. I wish I could give people a better answer than I normally would. “I can put a rush on the return and offer you two months of free streaming for the trouble.”

“I don’t want two free months; I just want my damn money back.” She ended the call abruptly, and I slouched in my chair.

“Kitty?” Mierra called through the headset.

“Put the two free months on her account, Mierra, and I’ll try my best to make sure the refund processes today.” I normally wasn’t on the phone much, but when a customer was as upset as Ms. Payne was, I had to step in. Not like I really made things better, but I guess I was paid a couple of dollars more, so that meant I had to get the brunt of upset customers.

“Yes, ma’am,” Mierra whispered.

I ripped off the headset and tossed it on my desk.

“Bad call?”

I whirled around in my chair and clutched my hand to my chest. “Holy crow, Dad. You scared the crap out of me.”

“Your mother used to say that all the time.” He sat on the edge of my bed and smiled sadly. “I can still picture the

surprise on her face when I told her that normally people say holy cow, not holy crow.”

“Mama always did seem to march to the beat of her own drum.” My mom had been amazing. The type of mom people waxed on about being perfect. That had been Sophia Hanes. But she was quirky as hell. Always wearing bright, colorful clothes and tennis shoes that were either neon yellow or pink.

“That she did. Even until her last breath, she had spunk and quirkiness no one could match.”

I glanced at the large picture I had hanging by the door. “Can you believe she’s been gone for five years already?”

Dad shook his head. “No, because I see her in my dreams every night.”

Gah.

The love my parents had for each other was unmatched. Something I had never seen before and probably never would again.

“Oh, Dad,” I sighed. “You know she’s never left you.”

“I know, sweetheart.” He motioned to my desk. “Are you done for the day?”

I glanced at the clock. “I still have an hour before I can clock out. Did you need something?”

He ran his fingers through his hair. “Uh, I think I did, but I can’t remember what it was.”

I sighed lightly and cocked my head to the side. “What were you doing before you came in here?” I asked. Yesterday at the doctor’s had been hard but good.

I was done burying my head in the sand with Dad losing his memory.

It was happening, and my acting like it wasn’t was only going to make things harder for both of us.

“Uh, I was doing the dishes.” He snapped his fingers and smiled. “I was trying to do the dishes, but we are out of dish soap. That was what I was coming to tell you.”

“Okay. I will add it to the list of other things we need, and we can go to the store when I clock out.” I grabbed the pad of paper on my desk that I had been scribbling on the past two days with things we were running low on and added dish soap. “Maybe we can get something out for dinner?” I suggested.

“What are you in the mood for?”

I shrugged. “You know I’m up for anything.” Dad was the one who was pickier when it came to eating. “Pizza?”

He shook his head.

“Chinese?”

He again shook his head.

See, he was the pickier one. I would have eaten either of those happily. “Breakfast?”

He tipped his head to the side. “We can get that for dinner?”

I nodded and smiled. “We sure can. The diner serves breakfast all day, and I have been craving their biscuits and gravy.”

“We gonna eat there or bring it home?” he asked.

I quirked my lips. “Well, I was thinking we would get dinner to go, but it’s always fun eating at the diner. It’s like going back in time.” The diner had amazing homemade food, and the atmosphere was just cozy and welcoming. “We can eat dinner and then go to the store,” I suggested.

Dad slapped his hand on his leg. “Sounds like a plan, sweetheart. I’ll let you get back to work and get the dishes done.” He stood and shook his head. “I will get the dishes situated in the sink and do them after we get back from the store with the soap.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Okay, Dad. Holler if you need anything, okay?”

He made it to the door and glanced back at me. “Maybe you could ask that Banachi fellow to dinner. He seemed like quite the character.”

“Dad,” I scolded. “That Banachi fellow is someone you can forget.”

“I don’t know about that, sweetheart. There was something about the way he was with you that makes me think he’s not going to just disappear like you want him to.” He smiled wide and walked down the hallway whistling.

I hadn’t heard that in a while.

Growing up, Dad had always been whistling or humming under his breath. That had stopped when Mama died.

I wasn’t sure what had brought it back for him, but I was glad to hear it.

Maybe just acknowledging the fact things were changing for Dad was just going to make things easier. He was going to have good days, and he was going to have bad days. I just needed to hold on to the good days and hope the bad days don’t come too often.

And, of course, he would remember Princeton from yesterday.

He had mentioned him over breakfast this morning and again right now.

Why?

The doctor said Dad’s short-term memory loss would be more noticeable and to find ways to help him remember like I had when he couldn’t remember why he had come in here. But his short-term memory meeting Princeton was on point.

I turned back to my desk and slipped my headset on my head.

I was not going to invite Princeton to dinner tonight or any night. I just needed to wait out Dad until he forgot about him, and I would never have to think about him again.

He lived in a different world than me, and our two worlds would never meet again.

He was private jets and opulence, and I was in the cargo hold area, eating peanuts.

Complete opposites.





Chapter Five

Princeton



“WHAT IN THE HELL DID you do?”

Murphy dropped the smoking pot into the sink and cranked on the water. “I was making dinner.”

“That is dinner?” I laughed.

The smoke alarm beeped loudly, and the automated voice loudly blasted that the fire department had been alerted.

“You think you can turn that damn thing off?” he growled. “We don’t need the damn fire department coming here because I forgot about the noodles boiling on the stove.”

I jogged to the control panel and canceled the call to the fire department. The beeping stopped, and the house was quiet with the stench of burned noodles in the air.

“Thank fuck,” Murphy called. “I know after the fire a few years ago, we upgraded the fire alarm system, but I think we might have gone a little too far.”

I walked back into the kitchen and waved my hand in the air. “Fuck man, I think it’s just about right. You almost burned down the kitchen.”

Murphy raised his middle finger in the air. “And that is the last time I will try to make your dumbass dinner.”

I coughed and shook my head. “I didn’t ask you to make me dinner.” I was more than fine eating peanut butter and fluff for the next week.

He turned off the water and opened the garbage can. “We will never speak of this pot again, you hear?” He grabbed the pot out of the water, and dropped it in the garbage can.

“You know Bristol is going to ask where it is. Those pots and pans are like her babies.” Bristol had written an inventory

of everything in this kitchen. I thought for sure she had some type of sixth sense when it came to the kitchen and knew when a spoon was out of place.

“We play stupid and tell no one,” Murphy ordered. “If you rat me out, I’m taking you down with me.”

“Or we just replace the pot before she comes back,” I suggested.

Murphy nodded. “See, now that is the good idea I was looking for. We can run to town to get the pot and grab some dinner while we are at it.” He pulled out his phone and pulled the pot out of the garbage. He snapped a picture of the bottom and shoved his phone back in his pocket. “Let’s go. The quicker we replace that pot, the less chance we have of Bristol finding out what we did.”

“WE?” I laughed. “*We* did nothing. *You* burned the shit out of the pot and almost burned the house down.”

“A man needs to eat, and you weren’t making anything for dinner.”

I shook my head. “Because I was going to order something in.” Or make a peanut butter and fluff. I really wasn’t picky.

Murphy dropped the burned pot back into the garbage. “Get your keys and let’s go.”





Chapter Six

Kitty

“**A** half order of biscuits and gravy, two sausage links, two sunny side up eggs, and hashbrowns.” I closed the menu and smiled up at the waitress. “Oh, and can you add cheese and onions to the hashbrowns?”

The waitress scribbled on her notepad with a smile on her lips. “Girl, this sounds amazing. You can bet I will be having the same thing when I go on break.” She tucked her pen in her pocket and grabbed the menus from Dad and me.

“Maybe I should have got what you ordered, too,” Dad laughed.

“Nah, the western omelet with extra ham and toast sounds amazing, too. I might have to steal a bite.” I wiggled my eyebrows and took a sip of my coffee. “We should do this more often.”

“Yeah,” Dad agreed. “Your mom and I used to go out for breakfast every Thursday. She would always get the breakfast sandwich with a half order of hashbrowns and an orange.”

“And that also sounds delicious. Maybe I’ll get that next time.” I didn’t want to be sad when we mentioned Mom. I wanted to remember all the fun and great memories I had with her and just be happy that I had her for as long as we did.

For as long as Dad was going to have his memory, I wanted to hear all of the stories he had about her.

“Did the rest of your workday get better?” Dad asked as the waitress brought over our drinks.

I added two creamers and some sugar to my coffee. “Well, as good as my workday can be. Most of the time, I’m not on the phone with customers, but today I wasn’t that lucky.”

“You like that job?”

“I like that it pays my bills.”

“Kitty,” Dad scolded. “How many times have I told you that if you don’t like what you’re doing, your job will drag you down.”

“Well, not paying my bills will also drag me down, Dad. I like living in a house and not on the streets.” I took a sip of my coffee and sighed. “Besides, I don’t know what else I would do for work, Dad.”

Dad splayed his hands out. “Anything, Kitty. You can be doing anything. It’s a great big world, and you’re stuck in a job you hate.”

“I don’t hate it,” I mumbled. “It’s just a bit...” I didn’t know what it was, but it wasn’t great.

“Not what you want to be doing for the rest of your life.”

It wasn’t, but at this point in my life, making money was more important than loving what I did.

“As soon as I can afford to love my job, I will quit.” Which was going to be never.

A black SUV pulled into the parking lot and parked next to my car.

Oh, boy. It wasn’t Princeton. There were plenty of people around town who drove blacked-out SUVs. Tons. *Well, a few.*

The driver’s door opened, and I held my breath.

“Hey,” Dad called. “It’s your Banachi fellow.”

I closed my eyes and slouched down in the booth. “He is not my fellow, Dad.”

Dad raised his hand and waved at Princeton.

“Stop,” I hissed. “We’re getting our food to go. We can eat at home.” I covered my face with my arm and slouched even lower.

“Nonsense. We still have to go to the store after this, and I don’t want to eat my food an hour from now.”

The bell above the front door rang, and I didn’t have to turn to see who had walked in.

What in the world was Princeton doing at the diner? This was not the type of place I figured Princeton would show his face at.

“Mr. Hanes,” Princeton called.

Dad motioned for him to come over, and I shook my head. “What are you doing?” I hissed.

We were having a good evening, and now he was inviting Princeton to come sit with us.

“They can eat with us. We just put our order in, so there is still time for them to order.”

Them? They? I turned and peeked around the side of the booth.

Oh, no.

Princeton wasn't alone.

He pushed his sunglasses on top of his head, and I shrunk back into the booth.

“Did you guys order already?” Princeton asked. He stood in front of our table with his friend next to him. A smirk spread across his lips when he looked down at me. “I used to sit that same way when my mom would take me out to eat, and she didn't get me dessert.”

I slowly rose up until I wasn't sitting like a sulking kid. “Uh, I dropped my napkin.”

Princeton nodded, and that sexy smile spread across his lips.

“Sit, sit,” Dad called. “We just ordered, but I'm sure we can flag down the waitress and get you some food ordered.”

Princeton motioned to the man next to him. “This is Murphy. He tried to make us dinner and almost burned down Wyndemere.”

“Been there,” Dad chuckled. “Though it was an apartment and not a mansion, I almost burned down.”

Dad scooted into the booth, and Murphy sat down next to him.

Princeton quirked his eyebrow, and I begrudgingly scooted in. Princeton sat next to me, and suddenly the spacious booth was not so spacious. His shoulder brushed against mine, and my knee bumped into his leg.

Murphy waved over our waitress, and I tried to become one with the wall.

Why was this happening to me? Was it a full moon, and I didn't know?

Not once I have ever seen Princeton in my life, but now he was turning up everywhere I was.

The waitress hustled over and handed Princeton and Murphy menus.

"Just order what Kitty did, and you'll be full until this time tomorrow," Dad advised.

I rolled my eyes and scooted my coffee cup in front of me. "I just ordered what I wanted."

"You ordered half of the breakfast menu," Dad joked.

"I'll have what she ordered." Princeton handed the menu back to the waitress and sat back.

Murphy shrugged. "Same for me, though I'll have a Coke instead of coffee. I drink coffee, and I won't be sleeping anytime soon." The waitress took the menus back and headed to get their drinks.

Princeton shook his head. "You do know Coke has the same amount of caffeine as coffee does, right?"

Murphy wrinkled his nose and shook his head. "Not the same."

"Are you two brothers?" Dad asked.

"No," they replied in unison.

"Everyone always thinks we are. Hell, they think Leo, Creed, Princeton, Apollo, Marco and me are all brothers."

Murphy shook his head. “Only Leo, Apollo, and Marco are related.”

“But I thought you were all Banachi?” I asked.

Princeton shook his head. “We work for Banachi.”

“But you call yourselves Banachi,” I interrupted.

“No, we don’t,” Murphy laughed. “Everyone else calls us Banachi.”

“We just go with it because it’s easier that way.” Princeton shrugged.

“Do you like what you do?” Dad asked.

I closed my eyes and wanted to slink down in the seat until I disappeared.

“Uh, yeah.” Princeton laid his hand on the table and draped his other arm over the back of the booth. “Every day is never the same, and sometimes we’re in a different city every day for a month straight.”

“Ugh,” Murphy moaned. “I don’t know if I would say that is a perk. There is something about sleeping in your own bed every night that even waking up with the Eiffel Tower outside your window every morning can’t replace.”

“I suppose that’s possible when you have a private jet at your disposal,” I muttered.

“It does make things a little easier,” Murphy chuckled. “Though we have Leo to thank for that. We just keep his ass safe while he wheels and deals.”

“What is it exactly that Leo does?” Dad asked.

Leo was in the mafia. The Banachi *were* the mafia.

“Leo is in acquisitions and real estate,” Murphy explained. “He’s like King Midol. Everything he touches turns to gold.”

“Midas,” Princeton sputtered. “He’s like King Midas, not Midol.”

“Same thing,” Murphy scoffed.

I smothered my laugh with my hand, and Dad couldn't fight the huge smile on his lips. "I thought you were trying to say he invented Midol or something."

I couldn't hold it back any longer. A laugh erupted from my mouth, and we all busted out laughing.

"What is so funny?" Murphy demanded.

"Look up what Midol is, Murphy, and then you'll understand what we're laughing about," Princeton guffawed.

Murphy begrudgingly pulled out his phone and furrowed his brow while he typed.

"Here we go," the waitress called as she walked up to our table with a tray laden down with loads of food.

Murphy sat back, and his shoulders dropped. "Do you know how many people I have told that Leo is King Midol?"

"Hey," I snickered. "I bet that would impress most women. Midol is like gold to women during their time of... need." I cleared my throat and fiddled with my napkin.

Princeton chuckled and leaned into me as the waitress set down our plates.

"I'll be back with the rest of it."

Murphy shoved his phone in his pocket and took in all the food on the table. I guess I had ordered a lot, and when Princeton and Murphy ordered the same thing, it was a ton of food.

"And here we have the six sunny-side-up eggs with loaded hashbrowns." She set three more plates on the table, and I swear the table swayed.

Dad chuckled loudly. "I hate to say it, but I don't have my toast."

Finally, we all had our food, and there was a good five minutes of silence while we all devoured it.

"I always forget how good the food is here." Princeton finally set his fork down and took a sip of his coffee.

“Better than your private chef?” I asked.

“Same,” Murphy sighed. “At least when it comes to breakfast. Whoever is cooking back there could totally throw down against Bristol, and it be a tie on whose food is better.”

“Don’t tell Bristol that. She’ll tell you to come to eat at the diner instead of eating her food,” Princeton warned.

“Tell her, and then Kitty and I can hire Bristol to come to cook for us if you say she cooks better than this.” Dad ripped a bite of toast off and smiled wide.

“No, no,” Murphy laughed. “You are not poaching Bristol from us. It’s bad enough we have to share her with the Devil’s Knights.”

“You mean her husband and his club?” Princeton pointed out.

“Details,” Murphy mumbled. “And the club has Meg. They don’t need Bristol.”

Dad leaned toward me. “Do you have any idea who and what they are talking about?” His eyes twinkled with humor, and a playful smile played on his lips. “Maybe we should be taking notes on all of these names.”

We finished our meal, well, I didn’t finish mine but ate what I could, and the waitress dropped the checks on the table.

“You can get those on the way out.” She nodded toward the counter where the cash register was.

Princeton snatched the tickets and jumped up from the table.

“What on earth?” I gasped.

He waltzed over to the cash register and paid both bills before I could get up from the table.

“Stop that,” I called. I stumbled out from the booth and snatched my purse off the seat. “You are not paying for our dinner,” I called out.

Princeton grabbed the receipt from the waitress, and I snatched it out of his hand.

“You’re too late, darlin’. I already paid.”

I glowered at him and read the receipt. “True, but that doesn’t mean I can’t pay you back.”

He yanked the receipt from me and shoved it into his pocket. “You can’t pay me back if you don’t know how much your bill was,” he smirked.

I rolled my eyes and pulled two twenties out of my wallet. “Take this.”

He shook his head and leaned against the counter. He grabbed a toothpick and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. “Not taking that, Kitty.”

“And I’m not accepting you buying me dinner.”

“Just think of it as our first date.”

My jaw dropped. “Our first date?” I sputtered.

“I know it wasn’t ideal since Murphy and your dad were here, but I think it was a good time.”

“You’re crazy,” I whispered.

Princeton pushed off the counter and leaned into me until his lips were a breath away from my ear. “I’ll see you around, Kitty.” For a split second, his lips brushed against the shell of my ear, and my breath caught. My eyes closed, and time stood still.

The bell above the door jingled, and my eyes drifted open.

Princeton was gone, and Murphy walked past with a smug look on his face.

“Tell me again how he isn’t your fellow?” Dad called.

I dropped my head back and stared up at the ceiling.

“God help me,” I whispered. I couldn’t tell you what had just happened, but I knew my heart was racing and goosebumps still covered my skin.

Whoa.





Chapter Seven

Princeton

“It doesn't look anything like the pots she has.”

Murphy held up the new pot we had bought in town last night next to one of the pots in the cabinet. “You really think she is going to notice?”

“One is black, and the other is silver, Murphy. If she doesn't notice, we should send her to the optometrist,” I laughed.

“Why the hell are there so many different kinds of pots and pans?” Murphy muttered. “This was supposed to be easy, and now I'm probably going to have to go hunting for a damn pot.”

“Just see if they have the same one online,” I suggested. “Or you could just tell Bristol, and she can get the pot.”

Murphy shook his head and set the new but wrong pot on the counter. “I am not going to tell Bristol about this. She'd buy the new pot and then try to clock me upside the head with it.”

“I don't think Bristol would be that violent about a pot.” Sure, the kitchen was Bristol's sanctuary, but I don't think she would commit a felony over it.

“Chicks are weird, man. Just look at that chick you tried to help the other day.”

“Kitty?” I asked. There wasn't anything weird about Kitty.

Murphy nodded. “Yeah. You were just trying to help her, and she was fighting you. And then you paid for her dinner, and she about broke her neck trying to stop you.” Murphy held up his hands. “Fucking weird, man. If someone wants to buy me dinner, I will more than gladly let them.”

“Kitty isn't weird. She's just got a lot on her plate and didn't need me trying to swoop in to save the day.”

I understood it. She didn't know me from a stranger walking down the street, and yet there I was, trying to help her. I would question and be wary of someone who was like that to me, too. Hell, wary and cautious was how all of us were with new things and people in our lives.

"You know I'd love for someone to come save the day so I don't have to put up with any bullshit," Murphy pondered.

I furrowed my brow. "So you would like to be the damsel in distress?"

"No." Murphy tipped his head to the side. "I mean, not really. I don't really fit the description of a damsel. Dude in distress?"

"When the hell have you ever been in distress?" I laughed.

Murphy shrugged. "I mean, we're all in distress when the bullets are flying, right?"

"So you just want someone else to do all the work? Take the flying bullets while you sit by on the sidelines?"

"I mean, would you say no to that?"

I rolled my eyes. "You're a dumbass, man. Our job is the complete opposite of sitting on the sidelines. What the hell is going on in your head?"

Murphy shrugged. "More like I'm fucking bored with nothing to do." He nodded to his phone. "Well, nothing more to do than search the internet for a pot."

"I'd rather be bored than be shot at," I reasoned.

"I would like there to be a happy medium. Not bored, but also not being shot at." Murphy grabbed his phone and leaned against the counter. "Now, if you will excuse me, I need to begin the exciting task of finding a matching pot so Bristol doesn't kill me when she comes back in a week."

"You want me to call Leo? I'm sure he'll tell you nothing exciting is happening in his meetings." Sure, Leo was having meetings with some of the most powerful men of the Chicago underworld, but they were just meetings.

“Please,” Murphy scoffed. “I said I don’t want to be bored. Creed and Apollo are probably sleeping from the minute the meeting starts until it ends.”

“I think you’re just asking for a lot, man. Enjoy the quiet because you know the chaos is just around the corner.”

Murphy squinted at his phone. “Add to cart,” he muttered. “And, drumroll, please.” He turned his phone to me, and his eyes bugged out. “When does it say it will get here?”

“Uh, well, that says it will ship in five to seven business days,” I laughed.

Murphy dropped his phone and buried his head in his hands. “We’re fucked.”

No, we were not fucked. Murphy was fucked. “I still say you just call up Bristol and tell her what you did. You know she’s cool, man. How bad is it going to be?”

“And I say you just call up Kitty and actually ask her out. How bad is it going to be?” he countered.

“That is completely different,” I grunted. “I’m not calling Kitty.”

“Yeah, different in the fact that Kitty is not going to hit you over the head with a frying pan after you call her. My phone call to Bristol will pretty much be like arranging my own funeral.” Murphy pointed at my phone. “The only way my phone call is going to happen is if you call Kitty.”

“Why the hell do you care so much about me and Kitty?” Last night after dinner, Murphy had grilled me about Kitty, wanting to know when I was going to pull my head out of my ass.

We hadn’t planned on eating at the diner last night, but I had spotted Kitty’s car in the parking lot. I should have just ignored her car and kept driving.

But I didn’t.

The want to see her again was too much to pass up.

“Because I’m bored, and you and Kitty seem like good entertainment until something more exciting happens,” Murphy explained.

“My dating life is not your entertainment,” I growled. “And if I do call Kitty, your ass is not going to be on our date.”

“Call her, and then I’ll call Bristol. Hell, you call Kitty, and then we can drive over to the clubhouse and tell Bristol in person that I fucked up her pot.”

I cocked my eyebrow. “Now, that would be a show I would be willing to pay to see.” Bristol ripping Murphy a new asshole in person? Sign me the hell up.

Murphy thought Kitty and I were his entertainment. Well, the pot fiasco was my entertainment.

He grabbed my phone and unlocked it. “Call her, and then we’ll head over to the clubhouse.”

“How the hell do you know my password?” I asked.

“I know everyone’s passwords.”

“What the hell?”

He swiped a few times and then hit the speaker button. “It’s for security. What would I do if something happened to you, and I need to get into your phone?”

I cocked my head to the side and flattened my lips. “I have so many questions.”

“Hello?” Kitty called.

Murphy bugged his eyes out and pointed at the phone.

“Uh, hey.”

“Princeton?” she asked cautiously.

I cleared my throat. “Yeah.”

“Did you call me before?”

I tipped my head to the side. “No.”

She sighed heavily. “Weird.”

“Weird, what?” I asked.

“It’s probably nothing.”

“Tell me what nothing is, and then I can decide for myself if it’s nothing.”

“Princeton,” she laughed. “I just had a few weird phone calls from an unlisted number. I’m sure it was just someone calling the wrong number.”

“How many times did they call?” I asked. I was always suspicious. It was my job to be.

“Uh, well, I think it was something like nine or ten calls I answered.”

“Were there any that you didn’t answer?”

The line got quiet.

“Kitty,” I called.

“Hold on. I’m looking.” The line was scratchy, and then she was back. “I have thirteen missed calls from an unlisted number. I’m sure it was some bored teenager. Or maybe a persistent telemarketer.”

A bored teenager would call a random number once or twice and then move on. Over twenty times seemed a bit excessive. And telemarketers rarely called the same number twice, especially not over twenty times.

Murphy cocked his eyebrow and shook his head.

He didn’t think it was a bored teenager or rogue telemarketer either.

“Are you at work or home?” I asked.

“Yes,” she laughed. “I’m at work, but I work from home. And I actually need to get back because one of my agents just put out an SOS.”

“What?” Over twenty weird phone calls and now an SOS. What the hell kind of job did Kitty have?

“I’m a manager for a billing and collections department. When a customer gets unruly, agents put out an SOS message

for a manager,” she explained. “It’s much more boring than it sounds. I do need to go.”

“Wait,” I called.

“Yes?”

“Uh, what are you doing tomorrow night?” I asked.

“Probably the same thing I do every night.”

Murphy mouthed something at me, but I couldn’t read his lips.

“Mind if I come over and do it with you?” I cringed. “The same thing,” I stupidly clarified. “That you do every night.”

“You don’t even know what the same thing is, Princeton,” she laughed. “It could be sorting socks and putting a ten-thousand-piece puzzle together.”

“I’ll bring dinner?” I suggested. “Enough for us and your dad?” I offered. I didn’t really care what the hell we did as long as I got to spend some more time with Kitty. She was different than any woman I had ever met before, and I wanted to be around her.

“You’ll bring dinner after I told you we could be sorting socks and doing a puzzle?” she laughed.

I had assumed she was joking, but maybe that was what I would be doing tomorrow night. “I’ll be there around six.”

“Uh,” she hesitated.

“Just say yes, Kitty,” I urged.

She sighed lightly. “Yes,” she whispered.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. And if you get any more weird phone calls, let me know. Bye, Kitty.”

“Bye, Princeton.” She ended the call, and I sat back in my chair.

“I thought I was bored and desperate for entertainment.” Murphy shook his head. “You just agreed to sort some socks and do a puzzle. Are we sure Kitty isn’t just a really young looking seventy-year-old?” Murphy held up his hands. “I

mean, I'm not one to judge someone by their age, but it is nice to know what you're dealing with. Hot granny or just a young chick who likes to do old lady stuff?"

I shook my head and chuckled. "Kitty is not seventy, Murphy, and I'm pretty sure we won't be sorting socks or doing a puzzle." At least, I didn't think so. I did figure we would spend some time with her dad, but I hoped to be able to get some alone time with her.

"You think her dad is going to be there?"

I shrugged. "I assume so, man. They live together so she can keep eyes on him."

"So she must have only had one eye on him the other day when he stole her car," Murphy laughed.

I rolled my eyes and finished my coffee. "You ready to go?"

"Go where?" he asked.

I smirked. "To go keep up your end of the deal. I called Kitty, so now you have to find Bristol and tell her about the pot you destroyed."

"Right now?" Murphy gulped. "I was hoping to enjoy my coffee before I started my day?"

I nodded to the cabinet behind him. "Pour it to go, man, because I am ready for my entertainment."

"You mean torture," he grumbled. "Maybe I will just order the pot and wait to see if Bristol notices."

I shook my head. "Not going to happen, man. Get your coffee, find your courage, and let's go."

"You sick, sick man. You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

I put on my sunglasses and grabbed my empty mug. "Just as much as you enjoyed calling Kitty two minutes ago."

"Hey," Murphy protested. "That was only going to end good in your favor. A blind dude could see she's into you. I just gave you a little nudge to find your balls and ask the chick out."

“And now I’m giving you the nudge you need to get your ass handed to you by a five-foot-five feisty ball of fire.” I grabbed my keys and shoved them in my pocket. “Let’s go.”





Chapter Eight

Kitty

What had I just said yes to?
Princeton was coming to my house for dinner and god knows what else.

Well, he thought it was going to be socks and puzzles, but we didn't even have a puzzle in the house, and the laundry was all done.

What was I going to do with him?

Oh boy.





Chapter Nine

Princeton

““T here is one in the pantry.”

Murphy’s jaw dropped, and even I was shocked as shit.

“What do you mean, there is one in the pantry?” Murphy demanded.

Bristol laughed and swept a tottering Duke into her arms. “I mean, I have extra pots and pans in the pantry because I go through them rather quickly with all of the cooking I do. Besides, the shipping time is ridiculous. If I waited until I absolutely needed them, I wouldn’t have anything to cook with.”

“So you’re not even pissed at him for wrecking your pot?” I asked.

Bristol bounced Duke in her arms and shook her head. “No, not really. Though I am glad you told me because I’ll need to order a replacement when I come back.”

“You could come back now?” Murphy suggested. “That way, I won’t wreck any more of your pots and pans.”

Bristol rolled her eyes. “Or you two can fend for yourselves for a few more days. There are plenty of things you can eat that don’t include having to use the stove.”

“You want us to eat bread and butter for five days?” Murphy shook his head. “That is an inhumane way to treat us. How are we supposed to go from gourmet, home-cooked meals to plain bread?”

“Dude,” Pie chuckled. He was leaning against the pool table with a pool cue in his hands. “Did you look in the freezer? I know for a fact Bristol has a shit ton of meals already made that you just need to pop in the microwave.”

Murphy furrowed his brow. “Seriously?” He turned to me. “Why didn’t you look in the freezer?”

I held up my hands. “I am more than okay with peanut butter and fluff, man. You are the one who thinks they need to have some hot meal all the time.”

“Hey,” Murphy protested. “If I wouldn’t have burned the noodles, you never would have seen Kitty again, let alone land a date with her.”

“Kitty?” Bristol asked. “Who are you talking about?”

Murphy smugly crossed his arms over his chest. “See, this is what happens when you take time off. You miss Princeton meeting his future wife.”

I reared back and flattened my lips. “Future wife? What in the hell are you talking about?” First, Murphy tricks me into calling Kitty, and now he was calling her my future wife? “You’re jumping the gun.”

“Am I?” Murphy asked.

“Why are we even talking about me?” I demanded. “Murphy is the one who burned noodles and ruined one of your favorite pots.”

Bristol wrinkled her nose. “Not my favorite pot. I really only used it to boil pasta or potatoes.” She glared at Murphy. “Now, if I find out you messed with my nine-inch fry pan or my chef’s knife, there will be hell to pay.”

“Don’t even know what either of those things is, babe.”

“That’s what worries me,” Bristol mumbled.

“Oh, god.”

I glanced over my shoulder, and Fayth stood in the doorway. “Hello, Fayth.”

She rolled her eyes and stepped into the common room. “Do I want to know why you two are here when Leo and Marco are in Chicago? What mess are you two here to clean up?”

“No mess,” Murphy laughed. “At least not one we know about.”

“We’re all too busy making babies and raising them,” Pie laughed. “The only trouble we ever have is when we forget to buy diapers or formula.”

Fayth held her arms out to Duke, and he about leaped out of Bristol’s arms. “There is my Duke bear,” she cooed. He buried his face into her neck and let out a peel of laughter when she blew a wet raspberry on him.

“Princeton met someone,” Bristol told Fayth.

“I don’t believe you.” Fayth pressed a kiss to Duke’s head and then swooped him through the air and set him on his feet. “I never thought I would see the day where one of you found a girl, let alone it be Princeton.”

“Hey,” I protested. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Fayth ran her fingers through her hair. “It means you, Murphy, Creed, and Leo don’t live a life most women choose to step into.”

“She’s supposed to have a choice?” Murphy laughed.

“Please don’t tell me this is some girl you two kidnapped for Leo, and now you think you are going to make her into your pet.”

I reared back and tipped my head to the side. “That is very specific.”

Fayth waved her hand in the air. “Ignore me. I’ve been reading this dark mafia romance, and it always messes with my reality.”

“Your brother is in the real mafia, but you’re reading about fake mafia?” Bristol asked. “I feel like I wouldn’t be able to separate the two.”

Fayth shrugged. “The fake mafia is way more entertaining than Leo and his goons.”

“Did she just call us goons?” Murphy asked.

“Yeah, she did because you two are goons,” Pie laughed.

“Who are goons?” Slider walked into the kitchen and grabbed a beer from the fridge.

“These two,” Pie called.

Slider looked up and a smile spread across his lips. “Boys,” he called. “What the hell are you two doing here?”

“Murphy messed up one of my favorite pots, and Princeton got a girlfriend,” Bristol explained.

“You just told me you don’t even like that pot and that you have an extra one in the pantry,” Murphy grumbled.

Bristol shrugged. “I said it wasn’t one of my favorites, not that I didn’t like it.”

“Do you ever think the Banachis are just like the Devil’s Knights if you switch out the motorcycles for blacked-out SUVs?” Fayth pondered. “And there are fewer of them.”

“That’s because we can do the job with six people, not seventeen,” I explained.

“We’re not seventeen, are we?” Pie asked.

“Technically sixteen, though I do tend to count Greta and Bear as part of the club even if they’re not.” Bristol quirked her lips. “And if you want to count in the rest of the ol’ ladies because, let’s be honest, they are part of the club too, then we’re at thirty-three. Or it might be thirty-two. I really can’t keep track. And then, if you want me to add in all of our kids, we are well over forty.”

“Holy shit,” Pie bragged. “We’re like a small army.”

That was a fact. The Devil’s Knights had certainly grown over the years from their eight original members.

“So, who is the girl?” Fayth asked.

“Kitty,” Murphy grinned. “Princeton tried to save her when her dad stole her car the other day.”

Bristol grinned. “Okay. I like the trying to save her part, but you kind of lost me when you said her dad stole her car.”

“It’s a long story,” I explained.

Fayth looked around. “I don’t have anywhere else to be, and I don’t know if anyone else does, either.”

“Yeah,” Pie agreed. “It’s not like you guys have Leo’s ass to be up right now. He’s a good two hundred miles away.”

I glared at Murphy. “This is not how this is supposed to be going. You should be getting a verbal ass beating from Bristol while I watch.”

Murphy shrugged. “I guess that wasn’t meant to be.”

“It’s not some exciting story.”

Fayth shrugged and grabbed a chair. “There is something nice about a low-level excitement, Princeton. I’ve had enough excitement in my life.”

Fayth wasn’t going to let this go. Neither was Bristol. And if I didn’t tell them, then they would get the rest of the ol’ ladies in on it, and I wouldn’t be able to sleep until I told them about Kitty.

After ten minutes, I finally got the whole story out, including the latest development from this morning, and there was a unanimous consensus.

Date her.

Well, Bristol had actually said marry her, but I downgraded that to date her.

“You do know I barely know this girl, right?” I pointed out.

“Knowing someone is overrated.” Bristol crouched down and handed Duke a cereal puff. In the span of me telling everyone about Kitty, Bristol had laid out a few snacks while Fayth played with Duke.

“I have to agree,” Fayth smiled.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Slider asked.

“You get to know someone over time. It doesn’t happen overnight or even over the course of a few days. If we were to

decide that we weren't going to be with someone because we didn't know them, then you didn't give yourself enough time to know them."

"Which means knowing someone isn't a base to decide if you're going to be with someone."

"Are they speaking a different language?" Pie asked.

"I think I might know what they are trying to say, but I can't explain it without sounding like them." Murphy threw his hands in the air. "Can't even make that make sense." He looked into his glass. "What the hell did you guys drug me with if I'm understanding what you girls are saying?" he muttered.

"Look," Fayth laughed, "all I'm trying to say is you've only known this girl for a couple of days, so you aren't going to know a bunch about her. Don't sit there and say you don't know her and talk yourself out of getting to know her."

I tipped my head to the side. "I think I get what you are saying, but it's still a little confusing."

"Welcome to my life, brother." Slider slapped me on the shoulder. "Just fucking do what you want, and fuck anyone who doesn't like it."

"Now that I get," I laughed. Though that was pretty much how I had always lived my life.

"Yeah, don't let anyone tell you that it's lame to sort socks and do puzzles," Murphy jeered.

"It's not lame, and it sort of makes sense that a date like that doesn't make you run for the hills." Bristol handed Duke another cereal puff, and he waddled over to Fayth with his arms outstretched. "You have a high-stress job, so why would you want a high-stress relationship? Kitty can be your safe place."

Fayth swung him up in her arms. "We all need a soft place to land. Why do think the Devil's Knights all fell like dominos? Snapper and Lennox are the best examples of that. For so long, Snapper was running until he landed in prison.

Lennox appeared and gave him the safe place to land that he had been looking forever for.”

Murphy snapped his fingers. “Dude in distress.”

“What?” Bristol laughed.

“Really?” Slider scoffed. “You’re going to look at him like he’s crazy when it just took you five minutes to explain what you and Fayth were trying to say?”

“Can I flip him off?” Bristol asked Fayth.

“Too late. I’m already doing it.” She raised her middle finger at Slider and stuck out her tongue.

“Really? In front of the baby?” Slider laughed. “What kind of grandma are you?”

“The fun kind,” Fayth laughed.

My phone buzzed, and so did Murphy’s.

I swiped the screen and saw a group message.

Code Red

Oh, fuck.





Chapter Ten

Kitty

“I thought you said Princeton was bringing dinner.”

I pulled the sheet cake out of the oven and set it on the hot pads. “He is, Dad, but I thought it would be nice if we had something for dessert.”

“He’s going to be here in half an hour, sweetheart. How are you going to have that steaming hot cake done in time?”

I waved the dish towel over the cake to speed along the cooling process but knew that Dad was right. “Well, I don’t know. I planned on having ice cream with it so I can make it a deconstructed ice cream sundae with cake.” Or something like that. No matter what I did with it, it would taste good.

“One time, your mama was really craving cake and didn’t want to wait until it was cooled to frost it. She smeared that frosting on there, and by the time she was done, it was dripping all over the counter and floor. Didn’t stop her from eating it, though.” Dad smiled. “It sure did taste good.”

“Was it her icing?” I asked.

Dad nodded. “You know it was. Once we got married, I never had one of those store-bought cakes. It was your mother’s homemade cake and frosting, or it was nothing. The woman spoiled me rotten.”

“Me, too,” I laughed. “I remember when I went to a birthday party in sixth grade, and they had a cake from the grocery store. I thought all cakes tasted like Mama’s, but boy, was I wrong.” I took one bite and promptly decided I was too full to finish my slice.

“Why don’t I set the cake on the porch, and it will cool faster,” Dad suggested.

“That’s a good idea. I still need to make the frosting, anyway.”

Dad grabbed the hot pads and carried the cake outside while I started whipping up the butter for the frosting.

“Dad?” I called five minutes later when he still hadn’t come back in from the porch. “Dad?” I wiped my hands on the dish towel and hastily made my way to the porch. “Dad?” I called when I opened the door.

“There you are, sweetheart.” Dad was standing at the bottom of the porch steps talking to a man I had never seen before. “I was just talking to one of Princeton’s friends.”

I tipped my head to the side. “Oh, uh, really?” Princeton hadn’t mentioned any of his friends coming over, and I didn’t know why they would.

The man was wearing dark dress pants with a matching sports coat over a white button-down shirt. His hair was slicked back, and he had dark sunglasses covering his eyes.

“I was just in the neighborhood checking on one of Mr. Banachi’s properties, and I thought I would stop by to see if Princeton was around,” the man explained.

This didn’t feel right.

Not one bit.

“Uh, he’s on the way over. He should be here any minute.” I moved to the top of the steps. “I can actually call him to see how far away he is.”

The man swiftly shook his head. “No, no. I really only had a few minutes to spare before I need to be somewhere. Just tell him I stopped by.” The man pivoted on his heel and headed toward the road.

“Um,” I called. “Who should I tell him that stopped by?”

The man half turned back and smiled. “Brandt.”

“First name?” I asked.

“Just Brandt. He’ll know who I am.” He walked to the end of the sidewalk, and a black sedan pulled to the curb.

Brandt got in the back, and they sped down the street.

“Sweetheart,” Dad called. “Maybe you should call your Banachi fellow.”

I was already connecting the call before Dad finished his sentence.





Chapter Eleven

Princeton

“I still can’t believe you aren’t letting me come over.”
“I just had to spend the past twenty-four hours with you nonstop, Murphy. I think some time apart is going to be good.” I pulled up to the front of the house. “Get your food.” My phone rang and I didn’t want to even look at it.

Ever since the code red alert came over our phones yesterday, we had been running nonstop.

“Answer it,” Murphy laughed. “If mine was ringing too, I would be a little concerned.”

I grumbled but pulled my phone out. “It’s Kitty. Hopefully, she’s not trying to cancel our date.” The call connected to the speakers in the car. “Hey, darlin’. You’re on speaker with Murphy here.”

“Oh,” she gasped. “Uh, I was hoping you were on the way over.”

“I will be as soon as Murphy gets his ass out of the car,” I chuckled.

Murphy flipped me off and reached for his food in the backseat. “The disrespect from you is astounding.”

“I was calling because someone named Brandt was just here looking for you. He said he’s your friend.”

My smile slipped off my face. “Who did you say?” I closed my eyes and prayed I had heard her wrong.

“Brandt. I asked for his first name, but he said you would just know him by Brandt,” she replied.

“I know who you’re talking about. Is he still there?” I asked.

Murphy turned back to the windshield and pulled his seatbelt over his chest. I shifted into drive and rocketed down

the driveway.

“No, he left. He got into the back of a black car after I asked him his name. Is everything okay? He was outside talking to Dad for a few minutes before I knew he was here.”

“Is your dad okay?” Murphy asked. He opened the glove box and pulled out his Rock Island .38 Special. Murphy’s pride and joy. He double-checked to make sure it was loaded and placed it in the cubby on the door.

“He seems fine.” Her voice lowered. “What is going on, Princeton? I was worried before I called you, and now I’m terrified.”

“Where are you?” I asked. I turned onto the main road and headed into Rockton. I was fifteen minutes away from Kitty, and there was no way I could get there faster.

“Uh, Dad is on the sidewalk, and I’m on the front porch.”

“Jesus,” Murphy growled.

“Darlin’, I need you to get your dad in the house and lock the door.”

“He’s in the area, Princeton.” Murphy pulled out his phone. “I’m calling the Knights to head over there. What’s the address?”

I rattled it off to him.

“Princeton,” Kitty called.

“Just get your dad in the house and lock the door, Kitty. Murphy is calling someone who is close to you to come over until we get there.”

“I... what?” She was confused, and I couldn’t be mad at her.

“Everything is going to be fine, Kitty. All I need you to do is take care of your dad. I’m going to stay on the line until—” I glanced at Murphy.

“King and Hero,” he muttered.

“King and Hero get there, okay? They’ll keep you safe. Put the phone on speaker and get your dad in the house.”

“We’re not safe?” she whispered.

I didn’t know if she was or wasn’t. Having Brandt on your front step was not a good thing. “You are, but I just want to make sure. I need you to just do what I said, darlin’. Put your phone on speaker and get your dad in the house,” I ordered again. “That’s all I need from you.”

“Okay, okay,” she whispered. The phone was muffled, and then her voice came through. “Dad, why don’t you come inside while the cake cools?”

“Something wasn’t right with that man,” I heard her dad faintly reply.

“I’m sure it was nothing, Dad. Princeton is on the way over, and he’ll make sure everything is okay.”

“We need a gun and a dog, Kitty,” Larry gruffed. “This world is going crazy.” His voice grew louder, and I heard the front door slam shut.

“You want to help me make the icing?” Kitty asked.

“No,” her dad replied. “Get me on the internet so I can see what kind of guard dogs are for sale.”

“Dad,” she laughed softly. “I don’t know if we have to jump to getting a dog instantly.”

“German shepherd,” Murphy called. “I know a guy who has a litter for sale.”

“What in the hell?” Larry shouted. “They’ve bugged the house, Kitty, and they’re listening to us. Get the tin foil.”

“No!” Kitty shouted. “I have Princeton and Murphy on speaker.”

Murphy scoffed, and I couldn’t help but smile. “Hey, Larry. We’ll be there in a few minutes. We have two friends coming over who are going to keep an eye on the house until then.”

“You mean friends like that slick Rick that was just here?” he shouted.

“You don’t have to shout, Dad. They can hear you when you talk normally.”

“This is normal,” Larry shouted again.

“Dear god,” Kitty sighed heavily.

“I’m going to keep watch at the window. You go make the icing for the cake, Kitty,” Larry ordered. “I’ll take care of everything.”

The phone was silent.

We were five minutes from the city limits and nine away from Kitty’s house.

“Princeton?” Kitty whispered.

“I’m still here.”

“I took you off speaker for a second. Is it okay for my dad to be standing in front of the window right now?”

I glanced at Murphy, who shrugged. “It’s better than him standing out front. King and Hero should be pulling up any second.”

“Holy crow, Kitty, there are two motorcycles here!” Larry shouted.

“Uh, I think they’re here,” she laughed softly. “Should I let them in?”

“They’ll probably check around the house first and then come in,” I informed her. “Once they’re in, just do what they tell you to, okay? I trust both of them with my life.”

“I know now is not the time for this, but you are going to have a lot of explaining to do, Princeton.”

I shook my head. “No sweeping this under the rug?”

“You’re gonna need a huge rug to sweep this under,” she laughed.

“They’re coming to the door,” Larry called.

“Answer the door, and I’ll see you in five minutes, darlin’.”

I ended the call, and Murphy called Leo.

“We found him,” Murphy called when Leo answered. “He was just in Rockton at Kitty’s house.”

“The woman from the gas station?” Leo asked. “What the fuck was he doing at her house?”

“No fucking clue. He told Kitty’s dad that he was a friend of mine.” I turned onto the main road into Rockton. We were four minutes away from Kitty’s.

“What the fuck is his game?” Leo pondered. “I know he’s pissed off at me, but why go to Kitty? Why basically announce that he is in Rockton? He had to know that Kitty would call you right away.”

“Is he trying to draw our attention here and then hit somewhere else?” Murphy suggested.

“But why is he even trying to hit us? This isn’t the first time I have said no to one of his shit ideas.” A loud bang sounded over the phone. “Mother fucker,” Leo growled. “Get your woman and her dad safe. Apollo is getting a pilot lined up, and we’ll be in Rockton by tonight. Greer and the kids will be with us, too. Marco is staying in Chicago with Royal. He doesn’t want her anywhere near Rockton with Brandt on the loose there, and I don’t fucking blame him. This asshole needs to die.”

The call disconnected.

“Remind me how you were saying you were so bored before?” I growled. “Is this the type of excitement you were waiting for?”

“Fuck no,” Murphy scoffed. “I would have taken a flat tire or something.”

I chuckled and shook my head. “Don’t jinx us, Murph. We’re not to Kitty’s yet.”

“You got a plan for when we get there?”

“Part of me hopes Brandt shows his face, but then I hope he just stays the fuck away until we can get Kitty and her dad out of there.” We careened around the corner to Kitty’s street, and her house came into view.

“We bring them back to Wyndemere?” Murphy wondered.

“That’s the only place we can keep them safe.”
Wyndemere was a fortress, and there was no way Brandt would be able to get to us there.

We turned into Kitty’s driveway, and I was out my door before the SUV stopped rocking.

“I’m going to check around, and I’ll meet you inside.”
Murphy rested his hand on the gun on his hip and moved around the side of the house.

“Does he not think we checked outside?” Hero called from the porch. “This isn’t the first psycho we’ve dealt with.” He was sitting in a rocker by the front door with his gun resting at his side.

“I don’t know,” I called. “It’s been a few months since you dealt with Snapper’s psycho stalker.”

“Please don’t remind me of that,” Hero drawled.

“You see anything?” I looked around, but nothing looked out of place. Kitty lived in a quiet neighborhood off the main road with barely any traffic. I climbed the porch steps and stood in front of Hero.

“Not here. We sent Easy, Frost, and Zag to look for him, too, but so far, nothing.”

I shook my head. “The guy can turn into a ghost when he wants to.”

“He learn that from you guys?” Hero asked.

A deep growl rose from my throat. “Careful what you say, boy.” Brandt had worked for Leo fifteen years ago. He had risen through the ranks and became close with Creed and me.

Then things changed.

Something snapped inside of Brandt, and he wasn't interested in working for Leo anymore.

He wanted to be like Leo.

Hell, I'm pretty sure the asshole thought he could be Leo.

He had a couple of failed attempts trying to knock off Leo, but obviously, none of them were successful.

Though, each time, he got a little bit closer than the last. And each time, we couldn't solidly prove that it was Brandt behind it all.

Code red was for when Brandt resurfaced.

Yesterday it had been all hands-on deck securing Leo's Chicago house, offices, and Apollo's family home.

"Hey, we all need the reminder every now and then that we're not invincible and perfect." Hero smiled smugly.

"You two done having a chat and want to get your asses in here?" King thundered from the other side of the screen door.

"Better be glad your prez saved your ass," I growled.

Hero tsked and stood. "As if you would do anything to me."

"You are just a little too cocky for my taste, Hero. You might want to tone it down before you get knocked on your ass." I brushed past him and into Kitty's house.

Ninety-nine percent of the time, the Banachis and the Knights got along just fine, but there were definite moments when I would love to punch each of their lights out.

Hero was at the top of the list for me. He was a little too cocky, knowing he was going to be the next prez. It was going to happen, but it hadn't happened yet.

"Thanks for coming so quickly."

King shook my hand and nodded. "I've lost count of the times you guys have helped us, so it was a no-brainer to get here for you."

“Hero said you guys didn’t see anything when you got here?” I asked.

King nodded. “Everything was fine. No sign of Brandt around. I sent a few guys out to look around town, but so far, they haven’t seen a trace of him.”

“I told you all of this,” Hero muttered as he pushed through the screen door.

“You got a problem with me double-checking? This isn’t a game we’re playing here,” I growled.

“Princeton?” Kitty called. “Is that you?” She walked out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dish towel and a smear of something white on her cheek.

She was fucking adorable.

“I’m here, darlin’. Murphy is checking around the house,” I explained.

She rocked back on her heels and smiled. “Uh, good. I was just working on the frosting for the cake, and Dad was chatting with King.”

I looked around but didn’t see Larry.

“He go somewhere?” I asked.

King hitched his thumb toward the backyard. “He spotted Murphy going around back and headed that way.”

“I better go check on him,” Kitty worried. She sped walk out the back door, and the screen door slammed behind her.

“Uh, was I not supposed to let him go in the backyard?” King asked.

I wasn’t sure. Larry had been good whenever I was around him. He cracked jokes and seemed to be able to keep up with conversation easily. But I wasn’t will him all of the time. Kitty knew best if Larry was having an off moment or day.

“You’re good, man. There was an incident a few days ago that scared her,” I explained.

“Oh,” Hero gulped. “She was the one who called Ransom for help.”

“What?” King asked.

Hero cringed. “Uh, I think I forgot to tell you about that.” He clicked his tongue and pointed double-finger guns at King. “I’ll tell you all about it when we get back to the clubhouse.”

King shook his head. “I’m never going to be able to retire at this rate,” he muttered. “I might have to wait for the third generation to get old enough to ride before Meg and I can ride off in the sunset.”

“How was I supposed to know we were going to be here?” Hero asked. “If I would have told you about it right away, you would have told me to stop spreading stories or some shit.”

“We’ll talk about this back at the clubhouse.” King slapped me on the back. “If you need anything else from us, just call. You know we’ll be there.”

“Uh, well, I might be taking you up on that. I’ll need to get with Leo and the rest of the guys, but we might be really locking down Wyndemere until we get our hands on Brandt,” I explained.

“You’ve been trying to do that for years,” King chuckled. “Is Leo going to actually get it done?”

He needed to.

I wasn’t going to let Brandt mess around with Kitty and her dad.

They were off-limits.

“Leo will call you when we have a plan in motion. All hands on deck will be appreciated.”

King nodded and slid his sunglasses over his eyes. “Anything. Just call.”

King prowled out the door with Hero following.

“I can go outside, Kitty,” Larry grumbled. “It’s not like anyone is after me.”

“Well, I don’t know about that, Larry,” Murphy sighed.

The three walked back into the house, with Kitty bringing up the rear.

“See, Dad. We might be in danger,” Kitty scolded.

They were in danger, and we needed to get them out of here and to Wyndemere.

“I didn’t see anything around the house. I checked the houses next door, and they hadn’t seen a trace of Brandt or anything suspicious.” Murphy slid his sunglasses on top of his head, and his eyes connected with mine. “Doesn’t mean he hasn’t been here without anyone knowing.”

Brandt was a fucking ghost when he didn’t want anyone to know where he was.

That was a skill he had before he joined up with the Banachis.

Hell, that was a big reason why Leo had brought him into the fold.

Now that was coming back to bite us right in the ass.

“We need to get out of here before dark,” I sighed.

“Out of here?” Kitty asked. “What do you mean?”

“Both of you are going to have to come to Wyndemere until we figure out what Brandt is up to,” I explained.

“Wait, wait. I really think you are skipping a lot of what is going on.” She put her hands on her hips. “Why don’t we start off with who is Brandt and why was he here looking for you?”

“I really think all of the questions need to wait until we are in a more secure area,” Murphy suggested. “We’re pretty much sitting ducks here.”

“Well, I’ve got a suitcase in my closet, but I’m going to need help getting it down,” Larry interrupted.

“We’re not going anywhere, Dad,” Kitty insisted. “At least not until we understand why we need to leave our home.”

Murphy nodded. “Uh, why don’t I go with Larry to his room to help him pack, and you two can talk.” He herded Larry up the stairs, and I was left with Kitty.

“What in the hell is going on, Princeton?” she demanded. “My father is a retired factory worker, and I’m a billing manager. Both are pretty safe occupations that shouldn’t garner crazy men waltzing up to our doors.”

I held up my hands. “I don’t know why Brandt came here, but I’m going to keep you safe while we figure it out.”

“Figure it out?” she seethed. “I could be standing here dead right now.”

I tipped my head to the side.

“You know what I mean. I could be dead right now, and my father would have no one in this world.” She planted her finger in my chest and tipped her head back. Her eyes connected with mine. “I can’t let that happen. That man is my life.”

“Nothing is going to happen to you or your dad, Kitty. I swear on my life,” I promised. “But in order for me to keep that promise, you are going to have to do what I tell you to.”

“I don’t think moving my dad into a new place is going to be good for his memory. He’s been doing really good these past couple of days, and that’s how I want it to stay.”

“This is the only way, Kitty. If there was a way to stay here, we would, but it’s not safe here. Wyndemere is a fortress.”

“How long are we going to be there? This surely can’t take that long, right?”

I had no way of knowing how long it was going to take to find Brandt. One of the Devil’s Knights could have already found him, or Brandt could already be underground and hiding. “Just bring anything you will need for a couple of weeks.”

“A couple of weeks?” she fumed. “I have work I need to be at every day, Princeton. How am I supposed to do that

when I'm at Wyndemere?"

"You work from home, right? Just bring whatever you need with us. There are plenty of rooms that we can set one up for you however you need it to be."

Her lips thinned, but she didn't protest.

"If this wasn't necessary, Kitty, I wouldn't have even mentioned moving."

"If my dad even so much as has one tiny episode of forgetting where he is, we are back here instantly." She dropped her hand and stepped back. "I need half an hour to pack and then make sure Dad has everything."

"Murphy is helping him," I pointed out. If it was going to take Kitty half an hour to pack, it was probably going to take her that long to check over her dad's packing. We needed to be out of here before nightfall.

We didn't know what Brandt had planned, but we had to be prepared for everything.

"I will check what he packed before we leave," she growled.

I raised my hands and tried not to smile. "Whatever you want, darlin'. Whatever you want."

She turned on her heel and stopped in her tracks when she glanced into the kitchen. "My cake," she cried. "I haven't even frosted it yet, and it's still sitting on the porch."

"I'll wrap it up while you pack, and you can finish it up at Wyndemere," I offered.

She glanced back at me. "Do you ever call it a house, or is it always so formal?"

I shrugged. "That's what we call the house."

"But never just house?" she asked.

Wyndemere was not a house. It was a fortress. Leo had made it that way. "You can call it whatever you want, darlin', as long as you pack, and we're out of here in an hour."

She huffed and headed up the stairs. “I am doing this under protest,” she hollered.

I ran my fingers through my hair and headed into the kitchen.

Earlier, I had been worried about not knowing much about Kitty, but it seemed like fate had stepped in, and I was going to start spending a lot of time with her.

A whole lot.





Chapter Twelve

Kitty

The whole downstairs of my house could fit in this bedroom.

I wasn't even going to think about the massive room Princeton had shown me that I could use to work in.

It was huge in all capital letters.

"I have the view of a lake out my window," Dad called. "And it's not some tiny lake either. I can't even see the other side of it."

"That's probably because it's dark out, Dad," I laughed. I rolled off the bed and wandered into his room that connected to mine.

I had been apprehensive, thinking Dad was going to be somewhere in this huge mansion and not being able to get to him if he needed me. I hadn't even mentioned it to Princeton on the ride over, but I didn't even have to say anything because he gave us connecting rooms.

"It kind of feels like we're on vacation, huh?" I asked. I leaned against the doorframe and folded my arms over my chest.

Things had been a whirlwind when we arrived at Wyndemere.

The house was huge, and there were tons of people running here and there, preparing the house for unexpected guests.

Us.

Princeton had shown us to our rooms and then had disappeared on the promise he would be back in a little while.

Dad laughed and flopped back on the bed. "A vacation that we would never be able to afford."

That was the truth.

“Then I guess we better enjoy every second of it, right?”

“You have to be crazy to not enjoy being here.” Dad sat up and sighed. “I just wish the circumstances were a little better. A crazy guy on the loose is not the best.”

“Knock, knock!” A woman stood in the doorway from the hallway with a tray in her hands. “Princeton mentioned you guys didn’t have anything to eat yet. Is it okay if I bring this in?” she asked.

“Yes, yes,” I assured her. “Uh, let’s put it on this table by the chairs.” Did I mention in both of our rooms, we pretty much had our own dining room table with plush chairs around it? And our own bathrooms.

The only thing I would have to leave my room for was food, and it seemed for the time being that was being delivered to us.

The woman set the tray on the table and started laying everything out. “I’m Bristol, by the way. I’ll be cooking all of your meals, but you are more than welcome to be in the kitchen whenever you want. If there are any special foods you guys would like in the house, just let me know. I tend to go to the store at least every other day, if not every day.” She finished laying out the plates and stood. “I love being at the grocery store.”

So this was the amazing private chef I had heard about. And apparently, a lover of grocery stores.

“Uh, hi,” I laughed. “I’m Kitty, and this is my dad, Larry.” I motioned to all of the food on the table. “And thank you so much for dinner. You didn’t need to do this for us.” I was just about to ask Dad if he wanted to wander around until we found the kitchen. No need to now.

“Nonsense. This is what I am here for. Besides, it’s nice to do something a bit out of the norm. Usually I just lay everything out on the kitchen island, and the guys descend upon it. There is no pretty plating with them.” She motioned to

the beautifully plated food. “I kind of went hog wild when Princeton asked me to bring some food up.”

“Princeton asked for this?” I whispered.

“Well, he didn’t know I was going to go off like this, but yes, he asked me to make sure you got dinner. He mentioned the plans you two had got interrupted, and he’s pretty busy right now.”

“Mama!”

“Hey, hey,” a man called. “Get your little butt over her. Mama is working.”

“Oh, dear,” Bristol laughed. “I think I have a stalker.” Bristol backed up until her back was to the wall, and she pressed her fingers to her lips.

“Mama?” the little boy called. He appeared in the doorway, teetering back and forth with a goofy smile on his lips.

“Duke,” Bristol called.

“Mama!” he screeched.

Bristol jumped away from the wall, and Duke fell back on his butt in a fit of adorable baby laughter. “Duke!” she laughed. “Did you follow Mama up the stairs?”

A man scooped up Duke in his arms and swung him up in the air. “There you are, rascal. You made quick work of those stairs.”

“Did he climb the stairs all by himself?” Bristol asked. I wasn’t sure if she was surprised or upset.

“Sure did.” The man pressed a kiss to Duke’s cheek and tucked him to his side. “I was one step behind the whole time, Bri, don’t even look at me like that.”

Duke laid his hands on the man’s face and blew a wet raspberry.

“I hope so, Pie,” Bristol sighed. “This is Kitty and Larry.” She motioned to Dad and me. “And this is my husband, Pie, and our son Duke in case you missed that,” she laughed.

Dad wandered over to Pie and Duke and gave Duke a little wave. “Hello there, wee one. Have you had dinner yet?”

“Duke is always hungry,” Pie chuckled.

“Well, come have some of this feast with us, then,” Dad called.

Pie glanced at Bristol, and she shrugged. “I’m fine with it as long as Kitty and Larry don’t mind Duke crashing their dinner. I need to get back down to the kitchen to clean up.”

“Your husband and Duke are more than welcome to eat with us. I don’t think Dad and I will be able to eat half of what you brought up,” I laughed.

“Nice,” Pie smiled. “Duke and I can handle the half you can’t eat.”

Bristol smiled and pressed a kiss to Pie’s cheek and caressed Duke’s cheek as she walked past them. “I’ll be back up for the tray in a little bit,” she called.

“Uh, well,” Pie drawled.

Suddenly, things were a bit awkward.

“Come sit,” Dad called.

Duke wiggled to get out of Pie’s arms and dashed across the floor when Pie set him down. He ran straight for Dad and climbed into his lap.

“Duke hasn’t ever really met a stranger,” Pie chuckled. “If he gets to be too much, just let me know. I can distract him by finding some more stairs to climb.”

I shook my head and silently watched Dad light up as he showed Duke all the food and helped him find the right orange slice to suck on.

“Nothing too big, Dad,” I called.

Pie made his way over to the table and grabbed a small plate. “How about I make this little monster a plate, and you can help him?” Pie asked Dad.

“Oh, good.”

I whirled around and was surprised to see Princeton in the doorway. “It’s you.”

He smiled. “It is me.”

I blushed and tucked my hair behind my ear. “I didn’t think you would be up here so soon. Bristol mentioned you were up to your elbows with the chaos.”

“Did she also mention I was the one who asked her to bring you a tray for dinner?”

I giggled and tipped my head toward the table. “Well, she brought a feast, but yes, she did mention you were the one who asked for it.”

“Gotta make sure I get credit.” He winked, and I felt my heart flutter in my chest. “I was going to see if you wanted to go for a tour of the house, but if you haven’t eaten yet, it can wait.”

“Uh, Dad is eating, but I’m not hungry yet.”

“Go,” Dad called. “I’ve got good company with Pie and Duke.”

“And I can give him the grand tour when we’re done eating,” Pie offered. “At least hit the main highlights of Wyndemere. Arcade, theater room, and the kitchen.”

“This big place and there are only three places that make the highlight reel?” I asked.

Pie shrugged. “I like to eat, play games, and watch movies. Those are the only rooms I need in this mansion. I’m a simple man.”

Dad nodded at Pie. “I’m going to stick with him. You two go on the mega tour, and I’m going to the highlights once we’re done eating.” He handed Duke a cracker, and he smiled wide.

Princeton stepped to the side. “After you, darlin’.”

My heart did another flip, and I tried to ignore it. I stepped out of Dad’s room but stopped. “Uh, I have no idea which way to go from here,” I laughed.

“Left, Kitty. I already showed you where your office will be. There are only bedrooms on this floor.”

“And just how many bedrooms are there?” I asked. I knew I was going to be shocked by his answer.

“Eleven. Each with their own bathroom.”

I dropped my head and bugged my eyes out. “Shut up.”

“That’s on the second floor,” he pointed out. “On the first floor, there are four more, and in the basement, there are two.”

“Shut up again,” I laughed. “What on earth do you need all of those bedrooms for?” I asked. “Are you guys throwing crazy slumber parties every weekend?”

“Tons,” he drawled.

“Is that a sense of humor I detect?”

“It comes out every now and then.” He winked and grabbed my hand. “Let’s get this tour going, darlin’. It’s getting late.”

“Does the serious mafia man have a curfew?” I laughed.

“Yes.”

I glanced up at him and busted out laughing. “So serious.”

He smiled, and we headed down the vast staircase. “No curfew, but I’m not much of a night owl, darlin’. I’ve always believed the earlier you start your day, the more day you’ll have in front of you.”

“So you start your day at six, and then it’s over around eight-thirty?” I teased.

“Nine-fifteen?” he mumbled.

“Oh, god, Princeton, you’re a regular old man. What are you pushing? Eighty-nine?”

“More like thirty-eight, but some days it feels more like eighty-nine.”

Hmm, Princeton was a tad older than I thought he was. “You don’t even stay awake for the ten o’clock news.”

He shrugged, and we turned to the right when we got to the bottom of the stairs. “Who even watches the ten o’clock news anymore?” he countered. “Everyone is so attached to their phones that they know the news before the news stations do.”

“Very true,” I muttered.

“Here is our first stop.” He opened a double door and turned on the lights.

“Holy crow,” I exclaimed.

“Cow.”

I shook my head and stepped inside the room. “No. I say crow because that’s what my mama used to say. She was a unique kind of woman.” I tipped my head back and took in the tall ceilings and the huge movie screen on the far wall. “Pie wasn’t exaggerating when he called this the theater room.”

“And he was right, ranking this as one of the highlights.”

“I would say this makes my top three.”

“This is the first room you’ve seen,” he chuckled.

“That’s not true. You showed me my office and bedroom, too.” I smiled wide and ran my fingertips over the back of one of the leather recliners. “That is my top three. You can stop the tour.”

“Just wait until you see the kitchen.” He threaded his fingers through mine and pulled me back into the hallway. He pointed and motioned at different doors and rooms, telling me what they were, but we didn’t stop again until we were in the massive and beautiful kitchen.

Elegant white cabinets, luxurious granite countertops, and a magnificent centerpiece were the crown jewel—a large kitchen island. The interplay of the white cabinets, stunning granite countertops, and the grand kitchen island created a harmonious balance of opulence and functionality. The space felt open, airy, and inviting.

In the center of the island was my cake and bowl of icing. “My cake,” I gasped. “I totally forgot about it.”

“Hey!” Bristol called. She walked into the kitchen with a basket full of food under one arm and a gallon of milk in the other. “I was going to ask you when I came for the tray if you wanted me to finish the cake or leave it for you.”

“Oh, uh, would it be okay if I do it tomorrow morning?” I asked. I didn’t want to intrude in Bristol’s kitchen, but I did want to finish the cake myself.

“Of course,” Bristol cheered. “Come down anytime you want, and I’ll get you set up with a spatula and piping bag.” She set the basket on the counter and put the milk in the fridge. “I’m just restocking a few things, and then I was going to run up to check on Duke. I hope he’s not bugging your dad too much.”

“Are you kidding?” I laughed. “My dad is in heaven with Duke. He’s always had a soft spot for little kids.”

“Well, that’s good to know since Duke is here as long as I am.” Bristol emptied the basket and lined up the cans on the counter. “He loves the guys, but it’ll be nice for him to have someone new to pester for a while.”

“Dad will welcome the pestering with open arms.” I ran my fingers over the smooth granite and smiled.

“Does that smile mean the kitchen is making its way into your top three?” Princeton asked.

I shrugged. “The jury is still out on that. I think I should leave my ranking until the end of the tour.” The kitchen was coming in as number one. “What is your favorite room at Wyndemere?” I asked Bristol.

“Uh, mine isn’t a room.” She pointed out the kitchen window. “It’s the dock on the lake. It’s beautiful.”

I tipped my head to the side. “Ah, now that sounds nice. Too bad it’s dark out.”

Bristol wrinkled her nose and shook her head. “Right now is the best time to go down there.” She nodded to Princeton. “You’re going to have to show her because there is no way to describe it.”

“Oh, please?” I gasped. A beautiful shoreline seemed like the only thing that could knock the kitchen out of first place.

“You don’t want to see the arcade?” Princeton laughed. “That is in Pie’s top three.”

Bristol rolled her eyes. “It would be. I’m sure he said theater, arcade, and kitchen.”

I smiled wide. “That is exactly what he said.”

“So predictable,” she sighed and headed back into the pantry. “Enjoy the lake.”

Princeton grabbed my hand and pulled me back to the front door. The air was crisp and cool, and it carried the soft whisper of the night as we strolled hand in hand. We walked to the edge of the driveway and onto a softly lighted path. Tiny lanterns lined the way, their warm illumination cast a gentle glow upon the landscape. The path, paved with soft gravel, seemed to guide us toward a world of enchantment.

“This is beautiful,” I whispered so as not to disturb the tranquil sounds of crickets chirping.

The lighted path offered a serene escape from the bustling world. From the chaos back at the house.

We reached the end of the lighted path, and a sense of awe washed over me. The lake stretched before us, a breathtaking escape. It was just Princeton and me, with the stars and moon as our companions.

“I can’t even count the number of times I’ve been out here, but I’ve never actually looked,” Princeton murmured.

I laughed softly and stepped closer to the dock. The faint sound of lapping waves reached my ears, creating a soothing symphony that harmonized with the surrounding stillness. “Bristol might have been right when she said this was her favorite place. It feels like we’re a million miles away from Rockton and Wyndemere.”

“I’m sorry about today, Kitty. If I would have known helping you would have caused all of this...” he trailed off.

“You would have left me crying on the side of the road?” I laughed. I bumped into him and smiled. “How rude.”

“I would have called the police to let them know you needed help,” he replied defensively.

“Isn’t it crazy to think that just one thing could change everything? If you would have just driven by that day, would I have ever met you? Would I have ever been able to take in this beautiful sight and meet your friends and family?” I sighed and tipped my head back. “One moment in our lives can send us down a path we never imagined.”

Princeton moved closer, and his arm wrapped around my waist, encircling me with comforting strength. His touch is gentle yet firm, conveying a sense of protection and support.

A wave of warmth and security washed over me. I turned and nestled into his chest, finding solace in his arms. The world around us faded even more into the background.

“We’ve only known each other for days, Princeton, but why does it feel like I’ve known you forever?” I whispered.

“I don’t know, darlin’, but I feel the same. There’s something about you that just keeps pulling me in.”

I tipped my head back, and our eyes locked, and a silent conversation passed between us. Nervous excitement danced in the air as if the universe held its breath in anticipation. He leaned in, and it felt like my heart was going to pound out of my chest. His lips gently brushed my lips, and time seemed to slow at the delicate connection. It was a sweet and hesitant kiss, filled with hesitation and the hint of a new beginning. Our tongues mingled in a shared rhythm of anticipation and desire.

His hand found its way to the small of my back, drawing me closer as if he was afraid I might slip away. I responded by threading my fingers through his hair, deepening the kiss ever so slightly.

The kiss deepened, growing bolder with each passing second. Lips moved against lips, exploring the contours and

tastes that were uniquely ours. There was an electric charge that seemed to spark with every touch.

When we finally pulled away, our eyes met once again in a silent acknowledgment of the magic that had just happened.

“That was...” I didn’t know what it was. Amazing? Phenomenal? Out of this damn world?

Yes, to all of that.

“Again,” Princeton growled.

This kiss was fueled by raw emotion, an outpouring of unspoken attraction. Every brush of our lips sent shivers coursing through my body, igniting a fire that burned hotter with each passing second.

His hands roamed my body, pulling me in until our bodies were tightly against one another. The heat between us was palpable, a fusion of desire and urgency. We exchanged hungry kisses, our breaths mingling as if trying to claim every inch of each other.

I melted into his touch, my fingers gripping his hair, pulling him deeper into the embrace. Princeton’s hands explored the curves of my body, igniting sparks of pleasure with each caress.

Our lips broke apart again, but only momentarily, as we both gasped for air, our foreheads resting against each other. Our eyes locked once again, now filled with a newfound depth of connection. It was a kiss that had spoken volumes, a language of passion that needed no translation.

It was as if we sought to consume each other, to drown in the sea of desire we had created.

“God,” I gasped.

“Holy crow, darlin’,” Princeton whispered.

“That’s my saying,” I giggled.

“I guess you are wearing off on me.”

“It’s only been four days, Princeton. You’re highly impressionable if that’s the case.” I pressed one last kiss to his

soft lips. “But very sexy.”

“Princeton!”

I closed my eyes, and Princeton groaned against my lips.

“You down there?” someone called.

I pulled back from his embrace and wrapped my arms around my waist. “And the magic of the night is broken. Back to the chaos.”

A light bounced over us, and fast footsteps approached.

“What the hell do you want, Murphy?” Princeton sighed.

“Leo is here.”

Yup, it was back to reality.





Chapter Thirteen

Kitty

“I’m going to need the recipe.”

I rolled my eyes and dried the last of my dishes. “I find it hard to believe that you think my mother’s cake is that good.”

Bristol licked every spec and crumb off her fork. “Uh, you better believe it because I am about to have another piece and hide it from anyone else.”

“You are not,” I laughed. Mom’s cake was good, and Dad swore it was the best, but we were both biased. Didn’t everyone think their mom made the best?

“Girl, did you hear what my husband’s road name is?” she asked. “They named him Pie because his love for pie barely inched out his love for cake. If he was here, he would sniff this out and eat it within five seconds.”

“Pie isn’t here? I thought he was here if you were?” There were lots of people milling around Wyndemere today, and I wasn’t sure if this was the norm. Dad and I had made our way to the kitchen for breakfast, but we were the only ones who actually ate in the kitchen.

Murphy had been on the phone when I saw him, and I had glimpsed Princeton outside while washing the dishes.

Bristol shook her head. “Nah, not during the day. He’s working at the clubhouse. He’ll be back tonight for dinner.” The baby monitor next to Bristol sounded with a wail from Duke. “See, he must have smelled the cake and woken up. He’s definitely Pie’s son.”

“If he joins the club, his road name can be Cake,” I suggested.

“Oh, gosh,” she giggled. “I’m going to keep that to myself for a while. I’m not sure Cake is a good road name.”

“His dad is Pie,” I pointed out. “It seems pretty perfect to me.”

Bristol grabbed the baby monitor and turned down the volume. “I’ll be right back,” she laughed. She headed down the hallway to her bedroom, and I listened to her coo to Duke.

“Cake?”

I whirled around and was surprised to see Princeton a few feet away from me. “When did you get in here? I just saw you outside.”

“Two seconds ago,” he chuckled.

“I didn’t even hear you.”

“Because I didn’t want you to hear me.” He closed the distance between us and pulled me into his arms.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

“Getting my good morning kiss.”

“Oh, we’re doing good morning kisses?”

He nodded, and our eyes locked. “That okay with you?”

I bite my bottom lip and nodded. “I think I can get on board with that.”

The air between us crackled with electricity as if a current passed through our bodies, drawing us closer. He reached out, his hand gently caressing my cheek. I leaned into his touch, my eyes fluttering closed, savoring the sensation.

Our lips met, a tender and exploratory connection. Our mouths moved in sync, our breaths mingling, sharing the same air.

His arms tightened around my waist and pulled me even closer. I melted into him, my arms wrapping around his neck, holding him as if I never wanted to let go.

Our tongues entwined, dancing together in a passionate rhythm. Time seemed to stand still as we lost ourselves in the intoxicating taste of each other.

The world around us faded away, and all that mattered was the connection we shared.

“Oh god.” Bristol’s voice shattered our private cocoon, and I jumped back from Princeton.

“Bristol,” I whispered. “I thought you were grabbing Duke.” I felt like a chastised teenager who had been caught by her parents making out with her boyfriend.

She tipped her head to the side and bounced Duke in her arms. “I did. I didn’t have to go to the moon to grab him, so sorry it was so quick,” she laughed. “Next time, I’ll take a lap around the house to give you guys more time.”

My cheeks burned, and I wrapped my arms around my waist.

“You’ve been hanging around the club too much,” Princeton grumbled.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Bristol demanded.

Princeton grabbed my hand and tugged me to him. I stumbled over my feet and planted a hand on his chest to keep from faceplanting.

“Are you okay?” he whispered.

I nodded shakily.

“I have some work to do. I’ll check in with you in a little bit, okay?”

I just kept on nodding.

He pressed a soft, swift kiss to my lips, and he walked out of the kitchen as stealthily as he had entered.

“I didn’t mean to embarrass you,” Bristol apologized.

I nervously wiped my hands on my shirt. “Nothing to apologize for. If I would have known Princeton was going to kiss me, I would have tried to not do it in your kitchen.”

Bristol laughed and turned to the cabinet. She grabbed a canister of cereal puffs and placed Duke in his highchair. She poured a few on the tray and popped a few in her mouth. “I

swear they put crack in these things.” She brushed her hands together and leaned against the kitchen island. “Back to me apologizing for teasing you about kissing Princeton.”

I didn’t want any apology. I just didn’t want to talk about the last minute. Ever. Especially not with Bristol.

“Uh, it was nothing. Honestly. Don’t even remember it.” Lies. Big, huge lies.

“So it’s going to be like that,” Bristol laughed. “I can barely remember what it was like when Pie and I first connected.” She tipped her head to the side. “I do remember this one time in the pantry...” she trailed off. Her cheeks flushed pink, and she fanned her face with her hand. “Yeah, I think I’m going to add the pantry to my top favorite places at Wyndemere.”

“Oh, god,” I laughed. “Please tell me you had the dock as your favorite place because you and Pie hook up there.”

Bristol shrugged and poured a few more cereal puffs onto Duke’s tray. “I’ll never tell,” she sang. “But from the kiss I just walked in on, I would think you have the same experience I did down on the dock.”

“Oh,” I gasped. “Would you look at the time? I need to get to work before I get into trouble.” I flitted my hand at the cake. “Uh, do what you want with that. If you want to save it all for yourself, then I would find a place to hide that.” I hadn’t been able to wrap my head around what happened down at the dock yet, and I wasn’t ready to talk about it out loud.

I fled from the kitchen with a weak bye to Bristol and headed straight to my room.

Everything was chaos, and I had no idea how to deal with any of it.

It was time to bury my head in the sand.





Chapter Fourteen

Princeton

“There have been zero sightings of Brandt. He just vanished into thin air.”

Leo drummed his fingers on his desk. “How? How is there zero trace of him? Did we ask the neighbors if they have surveillance cameras up?”

I nodded. “That was one of the first things I did. No one within a five-mile radius has a security system, let alone surveillance cameras.” It had been frustrating as hell to talk to the neighbors when I had been so used to having my moves constantly watched.

“What about anyone he’s worked for since he flaked on us?” Leo asked. “I want to know every person he has ever glanced at. There has to be a connection out there that knows him and can at least point us in a possible direction that he is.”

“I guess what I want to know is how he even knew about Kitty and Larry,” I asked. “He had to have been watching me to know about her. It’s not like she’s been in my life for years, and everyone knows about her.”

“He or one of his dumbasses was watching you.” Leo pointed at Creed. “I want you to get every surveillance video you can each time Princeton was even remotely close to Kitty. If there is video, Brandt has to be on it.”

That was another problem.

Brandt has his own people that worked for him. There wasn’t a lot because he couldn’t actually afford to pay anyone, but he had them.

Creed nodded. “I’ll get on it right away.”

“We were at the gas station on Fifth the first time I saw her. We drove from the gas station to her house that day. Then to the doctor’s office,” I replied.

“Any other times?” Creed asked.

“The diner the night after. Murphy and I were going to get Chinese, but when we drove past the diner, I spotted Kitty’s car.”

Creed scribbled in his notebook. “Got it. I should have all of the surveillance in the next hour or so.”

“Let me know as soon as you have it,” Leo ordered.

“You manage to figure out what set Brandt off this time?” Apollo asked. “In the past, we’ve been able to sort of pinpoint the reason why he bugs out, but I don’t know what would have done it this time.”

Leo threw his hands in the air. “The fuck if I know, Apollo. Maybe he just finally fell off his rocker. Maybe he’s still pissed about something stupid from the past. Maybe we aren’t going to know, but we need to stop him.”

“Are we going to bring the Devil’s Knights in on this?” Murphy asked.

Leo shrugged. “We have, but they are throwing out a wider net for Brandt around town. We’re going to keep Wyndemere completely locked down while the Knights keep their finger on the pulse of Rockton.”

“The real fucking problem we have is the fact that Brandt knows a lot about us. He trained with us and was inside our heads for a time,” Murphy grumbled. “We should have killed the fucker the second he decided that he wanted to go up against us.”

“Yeah,” Leo chuckled. “Let me go get a fucking time machine, and we can go back in time to solve our problem.” His smile dropped, and he slammed his fist on his desk. “We can sit here for hours and talk about everything we should have done, but none of it is going to change right now. Brandt went AWOL, and we have to stop him before it’s too late. We have to get inside this dumbass’s head and know his next move. We aren’t going to stop pursuing him until Brandt understands no one fucks with the Banachis.”





Chapter Fifteen

Kitty

“Dad?” I stepped into his room, but he wasn’t there. A piece of paper was on his bed, and my worry slightly subsided as I read it.



Went fishing with Murphy.

Be back for dinner.

“**E**verything okay?”

“I’m trying not to freak out over the fact Murphy took my dad fishing.” I held up the note. “Says they will be back for dinner, but I might haul my butt to the shore just to check on them.”

Princeton chuckled. “Or maybe I can distract you until they get back?”

“Dad had been really good since we moved in here, but I’m just constantly on alert, ready for his memory to slip.”

“So you think constantly worrying about that happening is going to stop it from happening?” He leaned against the doorframe and tucked his hands in his pockets.

“I’m not constantly worrying,” I muttered. “I’m just slightly,” I held up my thumb and pointer finger with them an inch apart, “on alert.” I cringed and dropped my hand. “All of the time.”

“Darlin’,” Princeton laughed. “I think what you really need is to unwind and just enjoy the moment.”

“And let me guess,” I giggled. “You are going to be the one to help me do that.”

A sexy grin spread across his lips. “I do think I am the best candidate to help you. Though, you might need to change into something else.”

I looked down at my jeans and T-shirt. “Change?” I hadn’t packed all of my clothes, and the ones I had packed all looked like this.

He pushed off the doorframe and unbutton the top button on his shirt. “Did you pack a swimsuit?”





Princeton

““**Y**ou are absolutely sure this is the only swimsuit in my size?”

I dropped two towels on the chaise lounge and glanced over my shoulder at Kitty. “Yeah. Does it not fit or something?”

She wrapped her arms around her waist and looked around nervously. “Uh, it fits, it’s just not what I would normally wear.”

I pulled my shirt over my head and tossed it next to the towels. “I’m the only one who is going to see you in it, Kitty.”

The indoor pool at Wyndemere was a slice of paradise. Encased within the walls of the elegant architectural masterpiece of Wyndemere, the indoor pool stretches out like a gleaming oasis.

Lush greenery and vibrant tropical plants adorn the perimeter, infusing the air with a hint of freshness and creating a serene atmosphere. Lounge chairs and plush seating were thoughtfully arranged around the perimeter of the pool, offering a cozy retreat. Nestled in a private alcove, separated from the indoor pool, was a hot tub that called to you with its alluring warmth to help dissolve away your worries.

“That might be what is making me so nervous,” she laughed. She pointed back to the door. “I think I’m just going to go for a walk. That will help me unwind. I can do that without taking my clothes off.”

I chuckled and stepped toward her. She stepped back, and I saw in her eyes she was getting ready to run. “Give me five minutes, Kitty. If you still want to go for a walk, then that’s what we’ll do.”

She looked around wildly but didn’t run.

“I’m going to get in the pool, and you can just sit on the edge with your legs in. You don’t need to take off any of your clothes to do that,” I reasoned. Even though I would love to get her clothes off. The only suit I could find in her size was a teal bikini that I knew would look amazing on her.

She obviously didn’t agree.

She nibbled on her bottom lip but nodded. “Fine, but only my legs.”

I held up my hands and back up. “Fine by me, darlin’. My only goal is for you to relax and clear your mind for a little bit.”

I turned, took five steps until I was at the edge of the pool, and jumped in. The slight chill of the water jolted my senses but made me feel alive.

“Is it cold?” Kitty called.

I slicked back my hair and wiped the water from my face. “It’s perfect. Would you expect anything less?”

She moved to the edge of the pool and cautiously dipped her toes into the water. “Everything seems to be perfect at Wyndemere.” Her eyes connected with mine. “Almost makes it feel like we’re living on a different planet.” She plopped down on her butt and dangled her legs in the water.

I waded over to her and glided my hand up her leg. “See, this isn’t so bad, is it?”

“This isn’t bad. It’s the swimsuit that could cause nightmares,” she whispered. “I’m a little bigger than whomever this suit belongs to.”

I nestled myself between her legs and stood. I placed my hands on her thighs, leaving a wet handprint on her gray shorts.

“You’re getting me wet, Princeton,” she whispered.

A spark flared in the pit of my stomach. “Kitty,” I growled. I moved my hands up, and I wrapped my arms around her waist.

“I thought you were going to swim?” she asked.

We were face to face, and our eyes connected.
“Eventually.”

At that moment, time seemed to stand still. With a tender touch, I brushed my fingers against her cheek, savoring the softness of her skin.

I could feel the electricity in the air.

Our lips met; it was as if the world around us faded into insignificance. That seemed to happen when Kitty’s lips were on mine. The taste of her was sweet and intoxicating, and the spark ignited into a fire within me. Our kiss was a harmonious dance of desire and need. Need for each other that I wasn’t going to run from.

The coolness of the water, contrasting with the warmth of our embrace, created an intoxicating rush.

“Princeton,” she gasped against my lips.

Time seemed to lose all meaning as we explored the depths of our connection. Our lips danced in a rhythm that was uniquely ours, each touch conveying a thousand unspoken words. With every gentle yet hungry caress, the boundaries between us dissolved, merging our desires and passions.

I pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it by the chaise loungers. “I knew the swimsuit would look amazing on you.” The deep teal color complimented her fair skin and vibrant red hair. The fabric of the suit clung to her like a second skin, highlighting her lush breasts that were overflowing the cups.

Our lips met in a hungry, searing kiss as my hands molded to her breasts. Her hands roamed over my body as my lips trailed down her jawline, and my teeth grazed her neck, eliciting a gasp of pleasure from her. She moaned into my mouth and pressed her body into me. “I need you,” she whispered.

I pulled her off the edge of the pool, and she wrapped her legs around my waist. Lost in a haze of passion, I tore off her top, desperate to feel skin against skin.

Her hands roamed my body, igniting every nerve ending with her hurried touch. She arched into me, and the ache to surrender was too much to ignore.

“I need you,” I gasped.

“Take me, Princeton.”

I stalked to the stairs and emerged out of the pool while Kitty pressed fevered kisses along my jawline and neck. Droplets of water cascaded down my body, and I set her on her feet. She tore at my swimming trunks, and I tugged the waistband of her shorts down.

With fevered need, our clothes disappeared, and Kitty stood before me gloriously naked. “This is way better than any swimsuit.” I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her flush against me.

Our lips met again, the kiss now a declaration of our undeniable connection.

I stumbled towards a lounge, and we tumbled on it with a hunger that defied reason. The heat between us threatened to consume me, and I didn't want it to ever burn out.

Time was a blur as we devoured each other.

Kitty chanted my name like a plea for more. Our hands roamed over each other until we were both panting for our release.

She wrapped her fingers around my dick, and her other hand cupped my balls. “I've never wanted something so much in my life before,” she moaned.

“I need you, too,” I growled.

Kitty stroked my dick and moved on top to straddle my waist. She positioned my dick against her wet pussy and slowly glided down.

Her sweet pussy wrapped around my dick like a slick, wet vise. Her head dropped back, and she planted her hands on my chest for leverage to move up and down.

“Princeton, please,” she gasped. She moved faster, and I gripped her waist, helping to control each movement.

My balls tightened, and I knew the end was close. I slid my hand to her pussy, pressing my thumb against her clit. “Oh, god,” she shouted. I circled around her sensitive bud, and my name fell from her lips.

“Are you going to come for me, Kitty?” I growled.

An inaudible groan fell from her lips, and she leaned forward. Her hips moved fast, and a tremor rocked through my body. “Get there, darlin’,” I grunted. “Get there!”

“Yes!” Kitty shouted as her pussy milked my cock, and I exploded inside her.

“God damn,” I gasped.

She collapsed on top of me, and she laid her head on my shoulder. I caressed her back and tried to figure out what just happened.

“Wow,” Kitty whispered.

“Yeah, that was definitely wow.” For lack of a better word. I reached up, grabbed one of the towels, laid it over us, and closed my eyes. “We can’t stay here, but I’m going to need a second to get my strength back.”

Kitty giggled and traced lazy circles on my chest. “Whatever you want,” she whispered.

I tightened my arm around her and pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

Kitty was what I wanted, and now that I had her, I was going to do everything I could to keep her.





Chapter Sixteen

Kitty

I was hungry.

And the only problem I could see living in a huge mansion was you had to trek halfway around the world for a snack.

I took off my headset and stretched my arms over my head.

It had been a long day, and it was only eleven thirty. I was going to need some major substance to make it through the rest of my day.

Bristol had told me she could bring up a tray of food whenever I needed it, but it didn't feel right having her wait on me. It was strange enough to have her cooking for me all the time. The least I could do was make the trek to the kitchen.

I headed down the hallway toward the stairs and stopped by Dad's bedroom first. "Dad?" I called. His door was open, but he wasn't there.

I jogged down the stairs, looking all around, and tried to squelch the panic growing in the pit of my stomach. "He's fine," I whispered.

He hadn't been showing any signs of dementia like he had before, but that didn't mean it couldn't happen at any time. I didn't know what triggered it or even if there was a trigger.

"Can I help you with something?" the guard dude at the door asked.

"Uh, did you see my dad at all?" I asked. I had been told his name, but I couldn't remember it. Apostle?

"He headed toward the kitchen a few minutes ago." He nodded toward the kitchen. "He had Duke with him."

Of course. My dad was forging quite the friendship with Duke. They were mighty cute traipsing around Wyndemere as

if they both owned the place.

Speaking of owning the place, Leo jogged down the stairs and stopped next to me.

“Good morning, Kitty,” he drawled.

I knew all of these guys were mafia or whatever, but Leo was the only one who exuded the typical mafia persona. Each move he made was deliberate and commanded respect. His voice was laced with authority, and each word that rolled off his tongue felt calculated and exact. There was an aura of mystery surrounding him, almost a veil of secrecy that not many could penetrate.

“Uh, good morning Mr. Banachi.” I cringed and knew I had made a mistake. Leo had told me countless times to call him Leo, but I just couldn’t.

“Leo, Kitty. Please, just call me Leo.”

I nodded and plastered a smile on my face. “Of course. I’ll get it right tomorrow.”

Leo chuckled and nodded toward the kitchen. “I was going to grab something to eat. My breakfast this morning doesn’t seem to be holding me over. Care to join me?”

Same, mafia man, same. “Uh, well, I was going that way, too. Apostle said he saw my dad headed there with Duke.”

Leo tipped his head to the side. “Apostle?”

I pointed to the guard dude.

“It’s Apollo,” Leo corrected. “Though you were at least close.”

“I’d like to know what she thinks everyone else’s names are,” Apollo called. A smile played on his lips, and I prayed to god he wasn’t offended that I got his name wrong.

“Murphy and Creed,” I replied.

Leo smirked. “Apparently, you were the only forgettable one, Apostle.”

“No, no,” I insisted. “I’m just really bad with names, and I need to either be around the person a ton or think of a rhyme to remember their name.”

“You can remember Murphy and Creed, but not Apollo?” Leo asked.

I chewed on my bottom lip. “Well, I remember Murphy by using my Mom’s favorite TV show, *Murphy Brown*, and Creed is that other newer *Rocky* movie, *Creed*.”

Leo smiled wide. “Have you ever watched the movie *Creed*?”

“Uh, well, no. I just remember all of the commercials.”

Apollo chuckled. “I’ll let Princeton know he might want to plan a date night to watch the movie.”

Now it was my turn to tip my head to the side and be confused. “Uh, okay?” Did I really need to watch the movie that helped me to remember Creed’s name? Seemed kind of foolish, but okay.

“Let’s go find your father and see what food Bristol has prepared today.” Leo held his arm for me to take.

I looped my arm through his and couldn’t help but think the gesture fit right in with his mafia man attitude.

We walked into the kitchen, and I was surprised to see Princeton crouching under the kitchen island. He pressed his fingers to his lips and shook his head.

“Where can Princey be?” Bristol called. She cupped her hand over her eyes and searched the kitchen with Duke on her hip. “Once we find Princey, we’ll need to find Papa Bear,” she laughed.

Princeton jumped out from under the counter and threw his hands in the air.

Duke let out a peel of laughter and clapped his hands wildly.

“You found me!” Princeton yelled. “But I bet you’ll never find Papa Bear!”

Dad's loud chuckle sounded down the hallway.

"I think I hear him," Bristol exclaimed.

"Bear," Duke shouted. He pointed down the hallway, and Bristol tiptoed to where Papa Bear was.

"So this is what I'm paying you for now?" Leo asked. "I suppose this is better than those three months Duke had colic."

"Oh," Princeton called. "There was one thing that calmed him, and I'm pretty sure it was his uncle Leo holding him."

Leo glowered and rounded the island. "I wonder what Bristol has to eat."

"There are sandwiches in the fridge," she called. "Give me a second, and I'll put them out." A peel of laughter echoed from the pantry, and Dad let out a cheer.

"I think Papa Bear has been located," Princeton chuckled.

Leo opened the fridge and grabbed a large, wrapped platter.

"Get out of my kitchen, Leo," Bristol scolded. She walked out of the pantry, and Dad followed behind with Duke in his arms.

"I'm pretty sure it's my kitchen, Bristol." Leo set the platter down and tore off the plastic wrap. He grabbed three sandwich halves and rushed out of the kitchen.

"Am I the only one who is terrified of him?" I asked.

"Yes," Princeton and Bristol replied in unison.

"We've both worked too long for that man to be afraid of him." Bristol rearranged the sandwiches to fill the hole Leo had created and grabbed a stack of plates from the cabinet. "The only people who should be afraid of Leo are his enemies."

"Like Brandt?" I asked.

Princeton nodded his agreement. "Exactly like Brandt."

"Are you any closer to finding him?" Bristol asked.

“What is it your husband would say if you asked him that question about the club?” Princeton asked.

Bristol growled and opened the fridge. “Club business, but you guys aren’t a club.” She grabbed a large bowl and shut the door. “You’re just the mafia.”

“Just the mafia,” Princeton chuckled. “We’re like pussycats.”

“Uh, oh,” Dad called. “It smells like someone made a stinky.” He waved his hands in front of his nose. “It wasn’t me,” he sang.

“Bedroom,” Bristol ordered. “You would wait until I put a new diaper on you to poop.”

“Come on!” Dad scooped Duke into his arms and headed toward Duke’s bedroom.

“Your dad is so good, Kitty,” Bristol smiled. “Having him here to help with Duke is a godsend.” She wiped her hands on the dish towel and motioned to the sandwich. “Eat before everyone else descends on the food.” She jogged out of the kitchen behind Dad and Duke.

And then it was just Princeton and me.

A mischievous twinkle danced in Princeton’s eyes. He moved closer, his footsteps barely audible against the tiled floor. I felt a surge of anticipation, a tingling sensation that spread through every inch of my body. The atmosphere crackled with electricity, stoking the always smoldering ember between us.

With a sly smile, he closed the remaining distance between us, his hand gently cupping my cheek. The warmth of his touch sent shivers cascading down my spine. Time seemed to slow down as he leaned in, his lips hovering just inches away from mine.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered.

“Have you?” I asked. “And just what exactly have you missed?”

“This.”

In that stolen moment, everything else faded into insignificance. The soft echoes of talking, the hum of the refrigerator—they all dissolved into a distant blur. There was only the magnetic pull between us. I could feel his breath mingling with mine, a tantalizing tease that set my senses ablaze.

And then, in a heartbeat, his lips met mine in a stolen kiss—a delicate blend of tenderness and urgency.

Princeton's kisses were an intoxicating elixir, igniting a fire within me that burned brighter with every passing second. It was a fusion of longing and longing fulfilled, a celebration of the undeniable chemistry that crackled between us. I could taste the sweetness of his lips, a flavor that lingered on my tongue, imprinted on my memory.

As we pulled away, a breathless silence hung in the air.

Fear and uncertainty gripped my heart, holding me back from revealing the truth that simmered beneath the surface.

I had fallen for this man whom I had only known for a handful of days. Every time I saw him, my heart fluttered in my chest, and a million thoughts raced through my mind.

How did things change so quickly?

I wanted to tell him how I felt, to let him know that he occupied my thoughts day and night, but the fear of rejection held me back. And also the fear that this wasn't real. That I was caught up in the magic of Wyndemere and being secluded away from the world.

When this was all over, what would happen?

Would Dad and I move back to our house, and Princeton would fade away?

"Kitty," Princeton called. "Darlin," he chuckled. "You disappeared on me."

I blinked rapidly and shook my head. "Uh, sorry. I was just thinking."

"You were pretty zoned out there. Must be something pretty serious." He pressed a soft kiss to my lips and tucked a

stray strand of hair behind my ear.

“Nothing, really,” I whispered. That was my chance to talk to him. Tell him what I was feeling and know if he was on the same page as me. Was this all a fairytale break from reality, or could this be my new reality? “I should get back to work. I just snuck away to check on Dad and grab something to eat.”

“And to sneak in a few kisses with me?” he asked.

“This was a pleasant surprise.” And it truly was. It just made me think even more about what the future was going to look like after Brandt was found.

Uncertainty gnawed at me, creating a whirlwind of emotions.

“Don’t let me keep you from work, darlin’.” He took a step back and grabbed a plate. He laid two sandwich halves on the plate, and I pried back the lid on the bowl.

“Oh, fruit.” I picked a few pieces out and set them on my plate. I reached to grab it from Princeton, but he pulled it back and shook his head.

“Not until I get one more kiss.”

“I do actually need to work, Princeton. I have bills that need to be paid.” I leaned up on my tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his lips. I snatched the plate from him and stepped back. “Now stop distracting me.” I fled the kitchen before he could reel me back in and retreated to my computer.

I had a lot to think about when it came to Princeton, but that thinking never lead to the answers I needed.

What were Princeton and I doing? Was it a reality, or were we just chasing a fairytale?





Chapter Seventeen

Princeton

Kitty was everything I could dream of—beautiful, intelligent, and captivating in every way. She loved her dad more than life itself, and she projected the same care and compassion on everyone she met. But with each passing day, doubt began to creep into my mind.

Thoughts of unworthiness consumed me. How could someone as incredible as Kitty ever see something special in someone like me? I was a man whom anyone connected to me could be in danger at any time.

The business I was in was never going to change. I had committed my life to the Banachis, and that wasn't something I was going to go back on.

Kitty and her Dad hadn't signed up for any of this, but they were right in the middle of a years-long feud with Brandt.

"Remind me again why I stay in Chicago, where I have to cook my own meals?" Greer sat down on the front steps next to me and laughed. "Though I know if I lived here for longer than a week, I would blow up like the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man."

"And Apollo would still want you," I reasoned. "Stay in Chicago where you have to cook or come to Wyndemere more often and gain a few LBs?" I reasoned.

She bumped me with her shoulder and scoffed. "You're such a man."

I slid my sunglasses on top of my head. "Can I ask you a question, Greer?"

"Oh, boy," she laughed. "This sounds pretty serious."

"How did you deal with Apollo's job? Like right now when it's spilling over onto you?"

“Spilling over?” she laughed. “What are you talking about?”

I motioned around us. “Your life is in Chicago, but at the drop of a hat, you had to load up your life and family to come here because there is a threat. You don’t have any connection to what Leo and we do, yet you have to deal with the consequences of our actions.”

She tipped her head to the side. “Uh, well, I guess I’ve never really thought of it that way. I’ve always known what Apollo did, and I wasn’t going to change that. I love him, and I love what he does. What you guys do isn’t bad. Sure, you might be on the morally gray side sometimes, but it’s not like you’re in the black market of organs or women.”

“Leo looked into the organ side of things a while ago, but the risk wasn’t worth the reward.”

Greer slowly turned toward me, and her eyes bugged out.

“I’m joking,” I laughed. “You know Leo. He’s into making loads of money but not at the expense of anyone other than deadbeats.”

“Definitely morally gray,” Greer mused.

“We are morally gray, but that also means trouble is always on our doorstep. Take Brandt, for instance.”

“We are not taking Brandt, for instance, because that guy is a douche canoe. I hate that we are giving this guy all of this attention. You know he’s somewhere, watching us go to all this trouble because of him, and it’s just driving him to be an even bigger douche canoe.” Greer sighed. “Douche canoe,” she growled.

“You think the guy is a douche canoe, Greer?”

She elbowed me in the side but laughed. “I have a feeling why you’re asking me this, Princeton, and I just gave you my answer. The only reason things work between Apollo and me is because I know everything. I went in with my eyes open, and even all these years later, he gives me the whole truth. If you want this to work with Kitty, then you’re going to have to give her everything. Lay it all out, and if she says yes even

after you tell her all the bad, good, and in-between things that come with working for Leo, then she's the one for you. You're not wrong for worrying how hard this life can be on a relationship, but you can't run from every relationship because this life can be rough."

"Apollo lucked out when he found you, Greer."

"Yeah," she laughed. "But I'm not one of a kind. There are other women out there like me who are strong and level-headed. I may not know Kitty through and through, but I've learned how to read people pretty quickly, Princeton. She's got it in her. She's not dumb and burying her head in the sand." She stood and brushed her hands on her pants. "Besides, this is pretty much the worse thing that can happen right now, and I haven't seen her trying to scale the walls to leave."

"Not yet," I sighed.

Greer patted me on the shoulder. "Don't sit out here and worry about something that may never happen, Princeton. Do what I told you, and you'll find out really quick if Kitty is yours."





Chapter Eighteen

Kitty

I leaned in, feeling the warmth of his breath against my skin. The world seemed to hold its breath, waiting for the moment of connection. Our lips met in a gentle collision, igniting the fire between us. Our bodies connected in a frenzied rush of need and passion.

When we kissed, it was a symphony of passion and tenderness. The soft pressure of his lips against mine sent a shiver down my spine, awakening every nerve ending in my body. It was a delicate balance, a perfect blend of desire and respect.

Our mouths moved in a harmonious rhythm, exploring and savoring the taste of one another. His touch was both gentle and commanding as his hand caressed the nape of my neck, pulling me closer and deepening the connection.

His hips moved in sync with mine. When he would thrust, I would rush up to meet him. Unable to wait for the ultimate connection. There was nothing else but the intoxicating sensation of our lips and bodies entwined in a fusion of desire and emotion.

“I need you, Princeton,” I whispered against his lips.

I could feel his heartbeat against my chest.

I could feel everything when Princeton was touching me.

When we finally parted, a thin thread of desire lingered in the air, connecting us even in our breathless state. Our eyes met once again, and in that fleeting moment, I saw a reflection of my own longing mirrored in his gaze. It was a promise of more to come. I hoped.

“How is it possible that every time is better than the last?” he asked.

I pressed a kiss to his shoulder and laid my head down. He pulled the comforter over us and wrapped his arms tight around me.

This was amazing.

Our stolen moments at night when all of my doubt and worry would disappear.

It had been two weeks since the day we had to hurriedly leave my house and find safety in the walls of Wyndemere.

Two weeks since it felt like I had even remotely been planted in reality.

The only thing that made me know this wasn't a dream was the fact I worked every day. Other than that, I was living in a fantasy world.

"I can feel the wheels in your head moving, Kitty," Princeton whispered. "What is going on in that pretty head?"

"I think we should get your eyes checked," I mumbled. Pretty I was not. I was a wallflower that blended into the crowd. Plain.

"So I can see even clearer how gorgeous you are?" He pressed a kiss to the side of my head and rolled us until I was on my back and he was above me. "Yeah, gorgeous," he repeated.

I rolled my eyes and slapped his chest. "I know you are full of shit. It's dark, Princeton. You can't even see me."

"I don't have to see you to know that you're gorgeous, Kitty." His thumb feathered over my cheek. "I see your beauty when you're helping your father. When you pretend to be a dinosaur and chase Duke around the kitchen island, and you have the biggest smile on your face. I see your beauty when you sneak into the kitchen to make a recipe your mom used to make. I see you, Kitty, and that is never going to change."

"I see you, too, Princeton," I whispered. "You're a hard man to miss." I wasn't even trying to fight the undeniable magnetism that pulled me toward him. It was as if an invisible

force enveloped me, rendering my willpower useless in the face of his charm.

“Irresistible, huh?” he chuckled. He lay on his side and stuffed the pillow under his head. “

“I wouldn’t go that far. I think if I called you that, you might get a big head.” His lips were temptingly close, inviting, and mesmerizing. “Are we going to sleep or what?”

He leaned in and closed the distance between us. “Or what,” he replied.

I lost myself in the taste of his lips, savoring the sensation of his mouth against mine.

I lost myself in Princeton and never wanted to be found.





Chapter Nineteen

Princeton



“DO YOU THINK WE COULD go to my house at some point?”

I grabbed an orange from the fruit bowl and a piece of paper towel. “What for?” I asked.

“I could stand to add some more clothes to my rotation,” she laughed. “When I packed, I didn’t think we would be here more than a couple of days.” She looked down at her yellow shirt and frowned. “Would you believe that this shirt was once neon?”

“You need more clothes,” I stated. “Order what you want and have it delivered to the house.” I peeled the orange and set it by the empty stool next to Kitty.

“Am I too early?” Greer breezed into the kitchen and put her hands on her hips.

“Early for what?” I asked.

“Lunch.”

I glanced at the clock. “Uh, yeah. It’s only ten o’clock, Greer.” She was about two hours early.

She wrinkled her nose and sighed. “And this is the problem when your internal clock wakes you up at four o’clock in the morning. Meals come much sooner than they normally do.”

“I think Bristol made egg salad. I could dig up some bread if you’d like,” Kitty offered.

Greer instantly shook her head. “No, no. I am perfectly capable of making my own lunch. I do it every day in Chicago. I just like when Bristol makes it because food always tastes better when someone else makes it.”

“How is Bristol going to make an egg salad sandwich taste any better than if you make it?” I asked. “She made the egg salad so just put it between two slices of bread and call it a day.”

Greer stuck her tongue out at me. “I don’t think I was talking to you.”

“There is only Kitty and me here, Greer,” I pointed out.

“So I was talking to Kitty, not you.” She smiled at Kitty. “Do you want me to make you a sandwich?”

“I, uh, well...” Kitty stammered. “Sure?”

“Hey,” I laughed, “I just asked you if you wanted an orange, and you said you were still full from breakfast.”

“I’m hungry now.”

“Yeah, she’s hungry now. And who the hell offers someone just an orange? You’re literally offering her juice that she had to use manual labor to get to.” Greer shook her head and grabbed the egg salad. “Where is the bread?” she asked.

“Bread box by the sink. There should be sourdough in there that would be great if you toast it, and spoon the egg salad on top. Open face.”

Greer smiled wide. “You know what is just as good as someone making you food?”

“I doubt I’m going to understand the next words that come out of your mouth, but I’m still going to ask. What is just as good as someone making you food?” I asked. Crazy was about to come out of Greer’s mouth.

“Having a great recipe to follow so you can make great food.”

I rolled my eyes and threw my hands up in the air. “You’re ridiculous, Greer. Is this what happens when you spend all of your time alone in Chicago? She told you how to make a sandwich.”

Greer shrugged and grabbed the sourdough out of the bread box.

“Oh, and add some chives on top when you’re done,” Kitty added. “Bristol told me she harvested a bunch of garlic chives from the garden this morning that I bet would taste amazing.”

Greer dropped the bread on the counter next to the egg salad. “Uh, that sounds good, but I have no idea where I would find the chives.”

Kitty jumped off her stool and headed to the fridge. “The crisper drawer is where Bristol keeps the lettuce and spices. I’ll get the chives if you want to drop the bread into the toaster.”

“You got it, sister.” Greer opened the bread bag and pulled out four slices of bread. “I would ask if you wanted one, Princeton, but you’re being kind of weird about the fact food tastes better when someone else makes it. Your girlfriend agrees with me.”

Kitty dug around in the fridge and pulled out a baggie with a paper towel inside. “Jackpot!”

“Hold on,” I called. “We were in the middle of an important conversation before you waltzed in here needing food made by someone else.”

“What important conversation?” Greer asked.

“I want to go to my house to get some more clothes, and Princeton just told me to order new ones.”

“Dear god,” Greer laughed. “Why on earth would she order new clothes when she already has perfectly good ones?”

“Because she doesn’t need to be going to her house. You both know that Brandt is on the loose, and we all need to stay vigilant.” These two could wax on about food being better when someone else mad it, but they didn’t get that there was a crazy psycho looking to hurt anyone connected to the Banachis?

“So take her to her house and stay vigilant. It’s not like you’re going to be there for hours.”

Kitty grabbed a cutting board and put the chives on it. “And it’s probably good for me to go and make sure the house

is okay.”

“Make sure the house is okay?” I repeated. “I can give you a one hundred percent guarantee that the house is doing fine. We locked it up tight, and there is nothing getting in there,” I promised.

“So then take Kitty there to see it with her own eyes.” Greer shrugged. “Unless you are afraid to take her there.”

“Afraid?” I boomed. “I am hardly afraid of going to Kitty’s house. There just isn’t any need to.” What was the big deal?

Greer’s phone rang, and she wiped her hands on the dish towel. “I need to get this. I’ll be right back.” She connected the call but pointed her finger at me. “Take her to her house, and don’t ignore me. If you don’t do it in the next four days, I will do it myself, and it’s going to be a much bigger deal if I have to do it.” She pressed her phone to her ear as she wandered out of the kitchen, and Kitty took over making the egg salad sandwiches.

“Why do you have to go to your house, Kitty?” I asked softly.

Kitty’s eyes connected with mine, and she smiled. “I guess I’m going a little stir crazy being here, Princeton. I figured going to my house was safer than going to the grocery store or something.” She grabbed the toast from the toaster and pulled a large spoon out of the drawer. “If you think it is too dangerous, then we don’t have to.” She plopped a huge dallop of egg salad on the toast. “Though I’m not going to order clothes to be delivered.”

I watched as she finished the other piece of toast and snipped chives on top. “Do you think you could make me one of those?” I asked. It looked delicious, and I was suddenly hungry, too.

“Only if you agree to take me to my house sometime this week.”

It was only Monday, and we had the whole week in front of us. It could also mean that it was the beginning of the week,

and I would have the opportunity to push off taking her to her house. “This is that important to you?”

“Yes,” she replied simply.

I sighed heavily but nodded. “One day this week, I will take you to get some more clothes and to check on your house.”

She beamed at me and pushed the plate toward me. “See, was that so hard? It is literally going to take us an hour.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered.

I didn’t know how she did it, but all Kitty had to do was ask, and I would move heaven and earth to make it happen.

“Jesus,” I whispered. I took a bite of the toast, and I hated to admit it, but it tasted fucking fantastic.

Maybe Greer and Kitty were on to something.

Food made by someone else was delicious. Even egg salad.





Chapter Twenty

Kitty

“**A**nd this is Kitty. She is dating Princeton.”

“Is that the really tall one?” Meg asked.

“No, that is the one with the scruffy beard,” Cyn corrected.

“Wrong,” Bristol laughed. “Though he could be the tall one, but they are all kind of the same height.”

I shifted nervously on my stool and cleared my throat. “Uh, he’s not my boyfriend.”

Meg, Cyn, and Bristol stared at me.

“You did not just say that,” Bristol laughed. “What would you say you are then?”

“Friend?” I shrugged. I didn’t know.

“You’re his girlfriend because even I have heard of you, and that never happens,” Cyn sighed. “I always seem to be in the dark.”

“Why is it you know who I am?” I asked.

“Because you’re dating Princeton,” Meg replied simply.

None of this made sense. And I wasn’t Princeton’s girlfriend. We had never had that conversation and I didn’t want to assume anything.

I had again wandered downstairs during one of my breaks with the intention of raiding the fridge and had been pleasantly surprised when Meg and Cyn were already in the kitchen with Bristol. Bristol had been making homemade bread, and Meg and Cyn were perched at the island, drinking coffee and watching.

Meg was married to the president of the Devil’s Knights, and Cyn was married to the VP. That wasn’t what made them so cool, though.

Sure, it added to their coolness factor, but it was their banter and repertoire with each other that made them so funny and entertaining which transferred into coolness.

“Are you having sex with Princeton?” Cyn asked.

And they both said whatever they wanted whenever they wanted.

“Oh, god,” Bristol laughed. “You’ve done it now, Kitty. You’ve got Meg and Cyn on your case.”

“Uh, can I plead the fifth on that one?” I didn’t want to advertise that Princeton and I were having sex like bunnies all over the place. Because even though we were, in my head no one knew it, and that was how I wanted it to stay.

Though I very well could have been off on that if Meg and Cyn knew.

“They’re doing it,” Meg sang. “This is so cool. I never thought I would see the day when one of Leo’s goons actually found women who could put up with their life.”

“Put up with their life?” What on earth was that supposed to mean? “And they aren’t goons, they are bodyguards,” I corrected.

“We’ve known the Banachi for a long-ass time. There are times when they don’t come home for months, and when they do, it’s only for a few days, and then they are back to work flying here and there. Not many women would be fine with being apart from their men for that long,” Meg explained.

“Greer is one of those women,” Bristol interrupted. “She’s been with Apollo for years, and they have one of the best marriages I have ever seen besides Meg and King.” Bristol straddled the line between the motorcycle club and the mafia world. Though from what I had been picking up on, the only difference between those worlds is what type of vehicle you drove. Blacked out SUV or motorcycle.

Meg preened and smiled wide. “Thank you, honey. Though I have to tell you, two days ago, I was ready to divorce King because he keeps leaving his dirty socks lying around. I found three not matching socks shoved into the

couch cushions. He's like a dog burying shit in the couch cushions." Her lips thinned and her right eye twitched. "The reason it's driving me insane is I don't understand where the matching socks are. Like, is he just shoving the left sock in the couch and keeping the right one to throw into the laundry?" She rubbed her temples and took a deep breath. "I thought by the time I got to my age, men would have their shit figured out by now."

"I don't think the age exists where men have their shit together." Cyn took a sip of her coffee. "At least we haven't gotten there yet."

I had never met King and Meg, but if the past five minutes of pure laughter and chaos were any indication of what kind of people they were, I one hundred percent loved Meg and King. And also Cyn.

"How often is Princeton gone?" I asked. I had been at Wyndemere going on four weeks, and he hadn't left yet. At least not that I knew about, and if he had, he was always back by the time I was done with work.

"Well," Bristol drawled, "if you would have asked me that question a few years ago, I would have had to tell you it was all the time. I mean, like they were gone more than they were here." She floured the counter and turned the dough out. "Thankfully, I'm salary, so it was pretty nice for them to be gone all the time, and I was still getting paid."

"Oh, boy," I whispered. Maybe I was here with the exception of them being at Wyndemere a lot. Once this whole Brandt thing was over, Princeton would return to jet-setting around the world, and I would be forgotten.

"Don't look so sad," Bristol laughed. "That was in the past. Now they are home *way* more than ever before. Take now, for instance. They used to make us all go to Chicago when something like this would happen, but now we all stay at Wyndemere."

"That's because Leo spent a fortune making this place into a damn near impenetrable fortress," Meg sighed. "And they're all getting old."

“Speak for yourself,” Cyn laughed. “I am young.”

“You mean you’re a young grandma?” Meg muttered. “Because god knows we are not young in the simple sense of the word.”

“What in the world do you mean by that?” Cyn demanded. She brushed her hair off her shoulders and puckered her lips. “I’m one of those cool moms. Hip.”

Meg cringed. “And that right there makes you not hip. Or young.”

“Speak for yourself,” Cyn grumbled. “You’re older than I am.”

“Ladies,” Bristol called. “You know I live for a good tangent between you two where we go off into uncharted territory about absolutely nothing, but I think we need to ease Kitty into the ol’ lady realm. And also give her an answer to her question.”

“There was a question?” Meg laughed.

“I don’t think there was. And if there was, the question led us here. You have to accept the here, and the answer will find you.” Cyn splayed her hands out in front of her. “Let the tangent guide you.”

“Are you gouda or something?” Meg asked. “Let the tangent guide you,” she mimicked.

Cyn blinked rapidly and cocked her head to the side. “I think you mean Buddha. Or at least I hope you do.”

“I don’t know,” Bristol pondered. “Gouda is some damn good cheese. I would take the compliment of being damn good cheese.”

A huge smile spread across my face.

Meg tipped her head to the side. “I said gouda?”

“Yes, girl,” Cyn cackled. “I think you’re losing your mind more than normal.”

“Maybe it’s finally just lost.” Meg cocked her head to the side. “The tangent guided me to the lost side.”

Cyn hummed the *Twilight Zone* theme song and flitted her fingers through the air.

“Alright,” Bristol laughed. “Which one of you spiked the coffee?”

Cyn and Meg pointed at each other. “She did,” they replied in unison.

“See, this is what you have to look forward to if you stick around,” Bristol smiled. “Ol’ lady antics.”

I was in for that, but it was going to be up to Princeton if I stuck around. “What happens after they find Brandt?”

Meg circled her finger around. “Uh, the same as this, except you can leave the compound when you want.”

“Compound sounds like we’re in a cult, Meg,” Cyn scolded. “Don’t scare Kitty away. I want her to be one of us.”

“One of us,” Meg sang.

“I’d like to tell you they’re normally not this crazy, but it would be a lie.” Bristol kneaded the dough and divided it into equal sections.

“Can I ask what the question was?” Cyn asked.

“It was more a statement from Kitty that she’s not Princeton’s girlfriend, but if she wasn’t Princeton’s girlfriend, then she wouldn’t be here.” Bristol formed each section into a uniform ball and then placed a towel over the balls.

“You’re in the denial phase.” Meg patted me on the hand. “It happens to the best of us. You’ll get over it quickly.”

“I’m not in denial over anything,” I countered.

“Is Princeton your boyfriend?” Cyn asked.

“No,” I answered.

“Denial,” Meg, Cyn, and Bristol sang in unison.

“I’ve seen the way the man looks at you, Kitty. I’ve watched him with your dad. The man is fully in love with you, and you’re in denial over it.” Bristol clutched her hand to her

chest. “It’s so sweet to watch. I still remember Pie and I going back and forth when we first met.”

“But what happens when this is all over?” I asked again. That was what was holding me back. I understood what Princeton’s life was like and about, but I didn’t know how I would fit into it.

Bristol shrugged. “Well, you’ll get married, have babies, and grow into Meg and Cyn.”

Meg clinked her coffee cup against Cyn’s. “We’ve become the example.”

“Of what crazy looks like?” Cyn laughed.

“Well, yes, but also of what ol’ lady bliss looks like.” Meg fluffed her hair and sighed. “It’s a good life.”

“But how do I know if Princeton wants me for ol’ lady life?” I interrupted. “I was dropped into his world. It wasn’t like he chose me.”

Meg tipped her head to the side. “But you’re here, Kitty. You’re here because he chose you to be. He could have easily left you on the side of the road when you needed help.”

“We all were chosen,” Cyn explained. “It was actually Meg who set the Devil’s Knights choosing ball in motion.” She tipped her head to the side. “Chosen ball? Why does that sound weird coming out of my mouth?”

“Because everything sounds weird coming out of your mouth.” Meg winked at Cyn. “I also started the weird ball rolling.”

“Amen to that,” Cyn muttered.

“Let me run this down quickly with a few examples, okay?” Meg pointed at herself. “Lo chose me at the Dollar Store when I helped his mom through a low blood sugar episode. He easily could have thanked me for helping his mom, and that be it. Spoiler, that wasn’t it.” She pointed at Cyn. “Rigid chose Cyn when she was in a shit-tas-tic place when her ass hat ex messed with her. He very easily could have looked right past her and found a less crazy ol’ lady.”

Cyn rolled her eyes.

“Who had the best choosing?” Meg pondered. “Troy and Marley were good, but I’m partial to their story since Troy is my best friend.”

Cyn again rolled her eyes. “He’s my best friend,” she parroted.

“Marco and Royal,” Bristol called. “He not only chose Royal, but he also chose Kane, too.”

“That’s Leo’s nephew, right?” I asked.

Bristol nodded. “Yes, though you haven’t met him yet because they decided to stay in Chicago.”

“Funny how they say everyone has to be at Wyndemere, but then some stay in Chicago.” Meg held up her finger. “Bullshit.”

“So, did we answer the question?” Cyn asked.

“What was the question again?” Meg muttered.

“We need to carry a dry-erase board around with us so we can take notes.” Cyn pulled out her phone. “I’m ordering one right now.”

“Cool, cool,” Meg sighed. “It’ll add to our hip factor.”

Bristol shook her head and leaned toward me. “I guess what we’re trying to say is that we’ve seen this before. Meg and Cyn more than me, but I see it, too. Princeton chose you. It might be hard for you to see right now, but it’s there.”

“But what am I supposed to do?” And did I want it?

Meg grabbed my hand and squeezed. “Just hold on tight and enjoy the ride, honey.”





Chapter Twenty-One

Princeton

“I heard Meg was over earlier.”

Kitty laughed. “I have never met someone like her before. Cyn, too. They were crazy and funny but smart.”

“Smart?” I asked.

Kitty nodded. “Yeah. Really smart.”

“Now you have me intrigued. What were they smart about?” I turned onto Kitty’s street and scanned the neighborhood.

I had wanted to put her off about going to get clothes, but I didn’t know when we were going to catch Brandt.

I had cleared it with Leo, and he had been fine with us going as long as we took extra security. We still didn’t know why Brandt had visited Kitty’s house, and we were putting every precaution in place.

We had an SUV with two guys in front of us and the same behind us.

Nothing was going to happen to Kitty as long as I was breathing.

“Nothing in particular,” she sighed. “They just are smart.”

I wouldn’t argue with that. I hadn’t spent a ton of time with either Meg or Cyn, but I could understand what she meant.

“Wait until you meet the whole crew. All of the Devil’s Knights and their ol’ ladies at the same time is a fucking trip.”

“Isn’t there like fifty of them?” she asked. “They would have to come to Wyndemere just to fit in the same building.”

I turned into her driveway, and the two SUVs parked at the curb. “We can figure something out after this Brandt thing blows over.”

She nodded. “Sounds good, but I’m kind of glad it’s not right now. I’m still struggling to remember everyone’s names. I don’t want to add in another fifty faces and names to the mix.” She snapped her fingers and pointed at me. “That reminds me. I called Apollo Apostle. I told Leo I have a trick to remembering people’s names, but couldn’t think of one for Apollo. I try to relate them to something, so they click in my brain. I told him I remembered Creed’s name because of the movie *Creed*. I’ve actually never seen it, though. He said I should watch it.”

I tipped my head to the side. “Apostle?”

She cringed. “Yes. I felt like an idiot because I did it in front of Leo and Apollo.”

“And they told you to watch *Creed*?”

“Yes.”

I grabbed her hand and squeezed. “Honey, Creed’s full name in that movie is Apollo Creed.”

Her eyes widened. “I’m an idiot,” she whispered. “Oh gosh.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re not an idiot. If you hadn’t seen the movie, you wouldn’t have known.” Though we would have to watch all the *Rocky* and *Creed* movies now. They were some of my favorites.

Without a second thought, I leaned forward, closing the distance between us. My forehead gently pressed against hers, and I could feel the warmth of her breath mingling with mine.

I closed the remaining gap, my lips meeting hers in a tender, passionate kiss.

Her softness enveloped me, and I lost myself in the depth of our shared embrace.

“You’re kissing an idiot right now,” she whispered against my lips when we were both out of breath.

“You’re not an idiot, though I wish you would have told me sooner. I’m calling Apollo Apostle from now on.”

“Princeton,” she laughed. “At least I was somewhat close.”

“Yeah, you got the first letter right, darlin’.”

She groaned and closed her eyes. “Can we just go inside and forget this?”

I nodded. “We can go inside, but this will never be forgotten.”

“Ugh.” She unfastened her seat belt and opened her door. “I never should have told you.”

Leo and Apollo would have eventually told me.

We made our way into the house, and Kitty headed upstairs. “Twenty minutes,” I called up the stairs.

“Thirty,” she countered.

“Twenty.” I wasn’t going to budge on this. I didn’t like being here in the first place, so we weren’t going to be hanging around all day.

“Whatever.”

I left her alone to pack what she wanted, and surprisingly, she was down the stairs ten minutes later with a suitcase and a duffel bag.

She sniffled and wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She dropped the suitcase and duffel bag. “What are we doing, Princeton?”

I cocked my head to the side. “Uh, getting clothes because you needed more.”

“No,” she moaned. She motioned between the two of us. “I mean, what are you and I doing? I was upstairs packing up more of my life to bring over to Wyndemere, but what about after?”

“After what?”

“After you catch Brandt. What happens when it’s over?”

“When what is over?” I demanded. What in the hell was she trying to tell me?

“When you find Brandt, and no one’s life is in danger anymore,” she clarified. “When I’m not living in some mafia movie. When I’m back here? What happens?”

I motioned between us. “Then this becomes even better. I can be with you without having to worry about that psycho popping up out of nowhere and trying to take you from me. Why in the world are you worried about that?”

“Because I don’t know you without there being some crisis going on. We met when my dad stole my car, and then literally a day later, a crazy man comes to my house.” She whirled her arm in the air. “And then I’m poofed here where a normal reality doesn’t exist.”

“You think the past weeks I’ve been putting on some type of act for you, Kitty?” I ran my fingers through my hair. “What you’ve been getting from me is me. No matter if we’re running from a psycho or laid up on the couch watching movies, you’re getting me. You’re getting the same guy.”

“But this house is my reality, Princeton. What about my dad? I’m his caretaker. I’m always going to be there for him. He can’t live on his own anymore, and I’m not going to put him in a nursing home. He’s with me forever.”

“Okay.” I knew this. From day one, I knew that Kitty was a package deal with her dad.

“Okay?” she squawked. “All you have to say is okay to the fact my dad is always going to live with me?”

I looked from side to side. “Sounds good?” I didn’t know what she wanted. I was great with her dad being around. We got along well, and that was that.

“He’s going to get worse, Princeton.”

“Okay.”

She sighed heavily. “You’re not getting it.”

Getting what? What else was there to get? “I don’t think you’re getting it that I *am* getting it.” I stepped toward her and

grabbed her hand. “You love your dad. He will always live with you. I love your dad. I will always want him to live with us.”

“Where? Where are we going to live? Your life is at Wyndemere, Princeton. How are you going to live with me when you have to be there all of the time.”

“You’ll be there with me.”

“And what about my dad?”

What about her dad? “He’ll be there with us.”

“Me,” she corrected.

“Us,” I replied firmly. “Your dad will live with us.”

“Where?” she cried.

“There!” I thundered. “I don’t know if you realized this, but Wyndemere is pretty fucking big, darlin’. There is more than enough room for you and your dad there.”

“How is that place going to be my home?” she demanded.

“How is it not going to be your home?” I retorted. “It’s fucking huge, has state-of-the-art security, and everything you could ever need.”

“As if Leo is going to want my dad and me to move in.” She rolled her eyes and stepped back. “That wouldn’t work.”

“You’re wrong, Kitty. It would be perfect. You and I can be together, and your dad will be with us, but he’ll still have freedom.”

“Until it gets to be too much. Until it gets to the point where I can’t leave him alone, Princeton. To where he doesn’t know who either of us is. That is what I’m trying to say. He has early signs of dementia. His memory is not going to get better. My life is not going to get easier. No matter where we live, that isn’t going to change.”

“Then we get help. We find the best doctors. Get him treatment. We do anything we can. I know it’s not going to be easy. It’s going to be hard, and I am going to be with you

every step of the way. I want you. I want your dad. I want to live at Wyndemere. I want us there.”

“My dad,” she whispered. “If you want me, then you want my dad.”

“Package deal, babe. I’m ready to sign on the dotted line.” I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her flush against my body. “I never thought I’d have this, Kitty. I never thought a family was something I deserved. I live a hard life, and I do some morally gray things. Things that don’t warrant me the love you give me.”

“You deserve love, Princeton,” she whispered. “You do morally gray things, but do them for the right reasons.” She pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “You navigate through shades of gray, never fully embracing the realm of black or white. Your actions and decisions might make some people question your motives and struggle to determine whether you’re a hero or a villain, but I know what you are. You’re my hero, and I’m your reward. You saved me that day. You saw I needed help, and you came to my rescue without hesitating. Not many men would do that.”

“Any man who wouldn’t have helped you that day is a fool.”

She shrugged and trailed her finger along my jawline. “You’re the only man I want, Princeton. You’re it. You saved me and forever changed my life. I’m yours forever if you want me.”

“I want you, Kitty,” I gritted out. “I’ve known you were mine since we sat in that booth beside each other. I’ve known this whole time that you would be mine. I still don’t think I deserve you, but I’m a selfish bastard, Kitty. I’m going to take everything and give you all that I have.”

“I love you, Princeton,” she whispered. “I’ve loved you for a while.”

“Thank fuck,” I growled. I swooped her up in my arms and whirled her around. “I love you more than my next breath, Kitty. My future is with you, darlin’. No one else.”

She was my reward, and till my last breath, I would do everything I could to be worthy of Kitty.





Chapter Twenty-Two

Kitty

“Princeton,” I called.
“I see it, darlin’.”

A plume of black smoke billowed and loomed by Wyndemere as we made our way up the driveway. The smoke rose with eerie grace, twisting and swirling like a venomous serpent seeking its prey. Princeton raced up the driveway, and the house came into view.

“That’s a lot of cars out front.” I leaned forward and peered out the windshield. “And people.” Five black SUVs lined the driveway, and a group of men were gathered on the front steps of Wyndemere.

Princeton sped the rest of the way and came to a skidding stop in the grass. He was out of the SUV before I could get my seatbelt off. He left his door hanging open and ran around the front of the SUV to my door.

“What’s going on?” I demanded as he opened my door. I tossed my belt off, and he lifted me from the truck.

“I don’t know,” he grunted. “Stay with me, and do as I say, okay?”

I looked up at him and nodded. This was what he did. He knew what to do when the world was burning down around him.

We ran up the steps, and the group of men turned with Leo standing in the middle.

“What the hell is going on?” Princeton demanded.

“There was an explosion down by the dock,” Leo explained. “One of the boats exploded.”

“An explosion?” I gasped. Oh my god.

Princeton threaded his fingers through mine and pulled me close.

“Accident?” he growled.

Leo shook his head. “Bomb.”

“Anyone hurt?”

Leo’s eyes darted to the side. “Almost everyone is accounted for.”

“Almost everyone? Who is missing?” Princeton demanded.

My stomach dropped to my feet, and the weight of unease settled in my chest.

“We can’t find Larry or Murphy.”

His words hit me like a tidal wave crashing against me. The impact was jarring, almost knocking me off balance as if the ground beneath me had given way. Time seemed to freeze, the world around me fading into a blur as I grappled with the weight of the news.

“Do we know if he was down by the dock?” Princeton asked.

“He had mentioned wanting to go fishing. Murphy was getting the fishing poles when the boat and dock blew,” Leo explained.

“But was Larry by the boat?” Princeton demanded. “Was anyone watching him? I told you he needed to be watched!” Princeton thundered.

Leo held up his hands. “The last Murphy saw him was in the house. He had told Larry to meet him at the dock in fifteen minutes.”

“How long ago was that?” I asked. “When did the boat and dock explode?” I needed all of the answers right now. I needed to know everything so I could find Dad. “Where was he when the dock exploded?” I demanded.

Princeton pulled me to his side and squeezed my hand. I knew I needed to calm down, but that wouldn’t happen until I

saw my dad.

“About ten minutes ago,” Creed called. “We have men searching for Larry.”

A radio crackled, and a static voice came through. “Pfst den by the dock.”

“What?” I screamed. “What did he say?” All I could make out was by the dock. What was by the dock? Was my dad by the dock? Had they found the guy who had blown up the dock? BY THE DOCK, WHAT?

“Repeat, repeat,” Creed called.

I didn’t have time for whoever was on the other end of the walkie-talkie to repeat. I broke free from Princeton and ran frantically toward the dock.

My heart pounded in my chest like a relentless drumbeat. Every step felt urgent as if time was slipping away, pushing me to move faster and cover more ground. I had to get to the dock. I didn’t know what I would find, but I needed to go there.

“Kitty!” Princeton shouted behind me.

I wasn’t going to stop.

The world around me became a blur, my focus solely on finding Dad. I pushed my body to its limits, ignoring the burning ache in my muscles and my sharp gasps of breath.

I scanned the surroundings, my eyes darting from one spot to another, hoping to catch a glimpse of any sign, any trace that could lead me closer to Dad.

I called out, “Dad!” my voice echoing through the air, a desperate plea for their presence.

Nothing.

“Dad!” I screamed again.

Princeton caught up to me when shards of smoldering wood came into view, and the now destroyed boat was partially submerged. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to his chest. “Stop,” he demanded. “You can’t just

run around when you don't know what you are running to," he tried to reason.

"Dad," I gasped. "I have to find my dad."

"We will, Kitty. You just need to calm down."

I scanned the area again, hoping to find something that pointed me toward Dad. My heart skipped a beat as a group of men emerged from behind the boathouse.

Two men were fighting to restrain a man by twisting his arms behind his back. Confusion surged within me as I tried to comprehend what was happening. His movements were frantic, fueled by a raw determination to twist free.

I scanned the two men behind them, but they weren't Dad. And then time stood still as Dad gingerly stepped out from behind the boathouse.

"Dad!" I screamed.

A surge of relief flooded over me as I stumbled over my own feet and hastily tried to get to Dad. The sight of him, seemingly safe and unharmed, filled me with overwhelming emotions. My heart raced, and my breath caught as I hurried toward him.

My arms wrapped tightly around him, pulling him close as if I could never let go. "Daddy," I cried.

"Shh, sweetheart," he cooed. "I'm all right."

I couldn't speak. My emotions crashed over me, and I could only cry for joy that he was safe.

"Dammit, Larry." Princeton's voice quivered, and he wrapped his arms around me and Dad. "You scared the shit out of us."

Dad laughed, and I had never been so happy to hear that familiar chuckle. "Well, I didn't mean to worry you."

I moved back to look up at him but didn't let him go. "What happened? Did you see the boat and dock explode?"

"Sort of. I was about halfway to the water when the shore exploded. I got down here as fast as possible and saw that guy

running away. I chased after him and tackled him to the ground.”

“You tackled him?” I gasped. “Dad! You should have run back to the house.” What on earth was the man thinking, running toward an explosion? “He could have tried to hurt you.”

“Oh, I’m sure that is exactly what he thought he would do, but he didn’t expect me to grab one of the oars and slam him upside the head with it.” Dad smiled proudly. “I was able to keep him down until I heard those guys rush down to the dock.”

I breathed another sigh of relief, thankful Dad was okay.

“Let’s get you up to the house and have you check out just to be on the safe side,” Princeton suggested.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Dad muttered.

“Better safe than sorry, Dad,” I agreed.

I held onto Dad’s arm and walked alongside him up the path and to the house. Sirens wailed in the distance, and by the time we made it to the house, a firetruck and ambulance were pulling up to the house.

Dad tried to protest getting checked out in the ambulance, but I wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

Princeton and I stood back as they helped him into the back and started looking him over.

“Oh my god,” I whispered.

Princeton gathered me close and held me tightly, his arms wrapped around me in a protective embrace. I nestled into his chest, seeking solace and refuge in his strength.

“He’s okay, darlin’. He’s okay,” he whispered over and over.

“What was he thinking chasing that guy?” I muttered.

Princeton chuckled. “I guess your dad has a little bit of a hero inside him, huh?”

I rolled my eyes but smiled. “He’s protective of the things he loves, just like you. Though he should have run the other way,” I shouted into the ambulance.

“I’m fine,” Dad called.

I buried my face in Princeton’s chest and took a deep breath. “I love you,” I mumbled.

“What?” he asked.

I tipped my head back, and my eyes connected with his. “I love you. Even though you have made my life five million times more exciting and slightly dangerous, I love you.”

A smirk spread across his mouth. “Well, I will say that your life will probably never be boring anymore, Kitty.”

I rolled my eyes and laid my hands on his chest. “Just as long as not every day has this level of excitement, I’ll be fine with that.”

“I can make you that promise, darlin’.” He leaned down, and his lips met mine. A wave of warmth and safety washed over me.

Even with danger all around us, I knew I was safe with Princeton.

His kiss was tender and caring, like a feather dancing across my lips.

“I love you, Princeton,” I whispered.

“And I love you, Kitty.”





Chapter Twenty-Three

Princeton

“**W**hat is your name?” Leo demanded.

The man grunted but didn't open his mouth.

I planted my foot in his stomach, and he groaned in pain.

Kitty and Larry were safely tucked away in the house while the fire department worked on extinguishing the smoldering boat and dock.

Creed and Apollo had moved the suspected bomber to the garage, where he was on his knees in front of Leo. He was refusing to speak even though I was beating the shit out of him. Each time he refused to answer Leo.

A loud beep came from the man's pocket.

“Get his phone,” Leo ordered.

I rummaged through his pockets and found his cell phone. I tried to open it but needed the douchebag's face to get in. I grabbed a fistful of his hair and wrenched his head back. “Say cheese, fucker,” I growled. I held the phone to his face, and the phone unlocked. I released his hair, and he fell in a heap on the floor.

“Nice,” Apollo laughed.

I tossed the phone to Leo, who swiped a few times, and his face hardened.

“You messed with my life and took what belongs to me. Now I take what belongs to you. The end is coming for Murphy.” Leo let out a guttural cry and threw the phone on the ground. “Son of a bitch!” he shouted. “Find him! He's got Murphy!”





Chapter Twenty-Four

Murphy

The blade sliced through my skin with ease.

A fire ignited as the blood seeped from my arm and a steady pulse beat.

I twisted against my restraints, but I couldn't move.

"Tsk, tsk," Brandt sang. "Just where do you think you are going?" He crouched in front of me, and an evil grin spread across his lips. "Do you want some company?"

My mouth was duct taped, but I was licking the adhesive to get it off. "Mhps hnm gnm."

Brandt cupped his hand to his ear. "Yes, you would like some company?" He stood and let out a shrill whistle.

The door to the right opened.

"Throw her in," Brandt called.

A body flew through the air and landed at my feet.

"You two have a nice reunion. I'll be back in later to see how things are going?" Brandt strolled out of the room, whistling, and slammed the door behind him.

There was only one light in the room, and it was dim as hell. I couldn't distinguish the person at my feet, but I could tell it was a woman.

I struggled against the restraints on my legs and tried to twist out the handcuffs. My feet shuffled next to the woman's head, and she stirred. Her blond hair was over her face, and she groggily reached up and pushed it out.

Her eyes fluttered open, and my heart sank.

Tatum.



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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

“He'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 My
Biker**

Chapter One

Sloane



“YOU OWE ME.”

I dropped a tote of books on the bed and sighed. “Don’t act like you didn’t have a hell of a time, Dove.” I blew my hair out of my face and sat on the edge of the bed. “And we’re not even done yet. We still have to see Jamie Begley, Winter Travers, Kristine Allen, KL Donn, and Laramie Briscoe.”

“The fact you can name these authors like they are your best friends is crazy to me.” Dove combed her fingers through her long, black hair. “Half of the time, I can’t even remember what day it is, let alone the author of a book I read.”

“It’s Saturday, and you need to grab a drink, and then we are heading back down to the signing. We still have two hours.” I had splurged on the VIP tickets with early entrance times, and we would take advantage of every minute.

Every. Minute.

I needed to tell Jamie Begley how much I loved the Last Riders, Winter Travers that I aspire to be Alice and find my own Wrecker, Kristine Allen how I adored the Iced series, KL Donn how I loved Cage and Magnolia, and Laramie Briscoe needed to know I loved every word she has ever written.

“Why don’t you go down there, and you can call me when you need a wheelbarrow to bring your books up to the room.” Dove motioned to the five stacks of books on the dresser under the TV. “Hell, I really do think I am going to need a wheelbarrow to get all of these to the car. How much money did you spend, girl?” Dove laughed.

“That is a number only god and I know.” And that was how it was going to stay. I worked hard, and I spent my money the way I wanted to after all of my bills were paid.

“A thousand?” Dove guessed.

I shrugged and grabbed my cup off the bedside table.

“Am I hot or cold?” she asked.

I pursed my lips. “Cold.”

Dove’s mouth dropped open. “Higher?”

I stuck out my thumb and motioned up.

“Sloane,” Dove groaned. “You are insane.”

I was not. I had been planning to attend Motorcycles, Mobsters and Mayhem for over a year, and I had calculated and saved for these six hours.

“But these are all of the books you got, right?”

My eyes darted to the floor, and I took a sip of my water.

“No,” Dove gasped. “More?”

A lot more. “I need to finish up the Last Riders series, and Winter was having a deal on all of her books.”

“All of her books? How many is all?” Dove demanded.

I squinted and pretended to think about it. “Uh, I think it’s like sixty or something.” *It was actually seventy-two.* And I had also got most of Kristine’s, KL’s, and Laramie’s to pick up as well.

We had about one hundred and fifty more books to get before the day was over.

Yeah, I would keep that number to myself. Dove could be surprised once we got them all.

“You really are crazy.” Dove bent over and opened the mini-fridge. “I’m going to need an energy drink to help get me through the next two hours.” She grabbed a bright pink can and popped the top. “Please tell me we can just lay by the pool all night once the signing is over?”

“If that is what you want to do, then I am good with that.” I wasn’t sure I would actually wear my swimsuit, but if Dove wanted to chill by the pool, that was the least I could do for her. “Hopefully, we can get food by the pool.”

Dove wagged her finger at me. “If we can’t, then we’ll eat and then go to the pool. I swear Texarkana doesn’t get as hot as Lake Conroe does. I am sweating my titties off.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re crazy, Dove. It’s the same temp here as it is back home.” Yes, we were over four hours away from home, but we were in the south in either place.

Hot here and hot at home. I screwed the lid back on my bottle and set it on the dresser. “Now, let’s go. Time’s a-wastin’.”

“Are you sure we have to go back down?” Dove whined.

“Yes.” And we needed to get back down there if we were going to fight the lines and see whom I wanted to. “We can stop by Darlene Tallman’s table and get you another shot, deal?”

“And I want to find the moonshine,” Dove insisted.

I rolled my eyes and patted my back pocket to make sure I had money and my ID. “I don’t care what you do as long as you’re not too drunk to help me get everything back to the room.” Dove would more than likely drive me insane if she stood in line with me.

Dove tsked and flitted her hand at me. “I can handle my booze, woman. I just want you to know that I may not know what right now, but you are going to owe me huge for this weekend.”

I adjusted the messy bun on top of my head in the mirror and quirked my lips. “I look like a hot mess.” My purple hair was a literal rat’s nest on top of my head, my makeup had all but melted off my face, and I had given up trying to pull my shorts out of my non-existent thigh gap. My thighs were eating my shorts, and I wasn’t going to get them back until I got undressed later.

“You got the hot part right, Sloane. You are hardly a mess, though.” Dove moved next to me and put her arm around my shoulders. “Now, let’s get going because I think there were Jell-O shots by the moonshine.”

“This is a book signing, Dove, not a frat party.”

She winked at me in the mirror. “Oh, Sloane, I more than know that. Those frat boys wouldn’t know what to do with a room full of sexy romance authors and readers.”

Now that was something I could more than agree with.

Book signings were a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and Motorcycles, Mobsters and Mayhem was no exception.



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