



RAVEN

DEVIL'S MURDER MC

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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RAVEN



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Author's Note

Raven is the second book in the Devil's Murder MC.

It's filled with dark and gritty content, a supernatural twist, steamy scenes, violence, biker slang, torture, kidnapping, miscarriage, and references to SA. Mature readers only. Heed the CWs and proceed with caution. Tough subjects occur in this book, please don't read if they will cause you discomfort.

I've been asked on occasion why I include dark content in my books. I see no reason to hide the horrors and inhumane acts that one person can do to another, it only keeps these atrocities in secret, hiding in the dark where they can grow and thrive and continue. I don't seek to harm the reader, but to inform them, give strength and the will to fight, to persevere, overcome, and survive. Most of all, I want to bring hope and shine light into the darkness. Every soul is beautiful and deserves to be loved, even the damaged ones.

There's a little piece of me in every book I write but this one stole a large chunk and I hope you enjoy the journey.



If you're a fan of the Royal Bastards MC Tonopah, NV Chapter, you'll find a surprise inside.

Dedication

To all who have fought against corruption, have championed those who don't have a voice, and seek to end violence against the innocent:

You are appreciated.

You are needed.

You are hope.

Never stop fighting.

Common Terms

D MMC Devil's Murder Motorcycle Club. One-percenter outlaw MC with several chapters within the U.S. Founded in Henderson, NV 1981.

The Crow Shifter ability & shared soul of every Devil's Murder club member; a black feathered, predatory bird with enhanced traits.

Murder A group of crows, an omen of death.

Kraa An intense cry from a crow, fueled by strong emotion.

The Roost Bar & clubhouse owned by the Devil's Murder MC.

Bull's Saloon Second home to club members, bar owned by Lucky Lou.

Mobbing Individual crows assembling together to harass a rival or predator by cooperatively attacking it.

One-percenter Outlaw biker/club

Pres President of the club. His word is law.

Ol' lady A member's woman, protected wife status.

Cut Leather vest worn by club members, adorned with patches and club colors, sacred to members.

Church An official club meeting, led by president.

Chapel The location for church meetings in the clubhouse.

Prospect Probationary member sponsored by a ranking officer, banned from church until a full patch.

Full Patch A new member approved for membership.

Rook Former president, son of Jackdaw.

Crow Third generation club member, son of Rook, president.

Hog motorcycle

Cage vehicle

Muffler bunny Club girl, also called sweet butt, cut slut.

DDMC Dirty Death MC, rival motorcycle club.

RAVEN Playlist

Crows – Saliva

Body Bag – I Prevail

Behind Your Walls (Acoustic) – The Offspring

Black Vultures – Halestorm

The Shadow of a Black Crow – Melissa Etheridge

Never Die – All Good Things

Paint It, Black – Ciara

Kill Or Be Killed – Muse

Tell Your Heart to Beat Again– Danny Gokey

After Dark – Mr. Kitty

Little Do You Know – Alex & Sierra

Through the Fire and Flames – DragonForce

In the Name of Love – Martin Garrix & Bebe Rexha

Don't Let Me Go – RAIGN

Die for You – Otherwise

Separate Ways (Worlds Apart) – Journey

Don't Stop Believin' – Journey

Faithfully – Journey

You can listen here on Spotify: [Raven Playlist](#)

RAVEN

•DEVIL'S MURDER MC•



Raven, the V.P. of the Devil's Murder MC, is no stranger to loss.

Four months ago, his best friend Rook, president of the club, was gunned down and left for dead.

Vengeance becomes his only focus as Rook's son Crow returns home to take his place as the new president.

The hunt begins for Rook's murderers, leading Raven to an abandoned house outside Las Vegas.

When he enters and finds an innocent young woman being held against her will, terrorized by the rival club Dirty Death, his rage unleashes.

Raven's protective instincts kick in.

He won't let anyone harm Brianna, even if that means he goes rogue to keep her safe.

But he doesn't expect the men who took her to attack so soon.

Brianna is in danger, and he can't allow her to be kidnapped again.

Going off-grid, he sneaks away in the night, taking her to a safe house.

And that's when he realizes he'd do anything for her, anything
to keep her with him.

Even if that means battling the ghosts of his past, his dead
wife, and all of Nevada to have her.

Chapter 1 – Raven

Ten years ago –

“You’re headin’ out now?” Rook asked, eyeing the sky like I’d lost my damn mind.

“Sarah needs me,” I slurred, reaching for his shoulder and missing it as I stumbled.

He caught me before I could faceplant on the asphalt, pushing me against the cold concrete façade of The Roost’s exterior. “I know you’re hurtin’, brother. Damn near kills me to see you like this.”

“I lost him, pres,” I mumbled in agony. “I lost my son.”

He didn’t argue that my boy had never been born or that the miscarriage at thirty-two weeks didn’t mean I ever had a living child. Rook understood I’d already bonded to my kid and felt him moving in Sarah’s womb.

I’d heard his fast heartbeat through the monitor and watched his little arms and legs kicking at the three ultrasounds I’d gone to, in awe of his sweet, perfect little soul.

And now ... he was gone.

“I can’t pretend to understand that hurt, Asmon. It’s too fucking awful to comprehend.”

Comprehend? Was that even possible? Because I. Was. Gutted.

Last month I’d shown those fucking ultrasound pictures to the entire club, so goddamn excited to be a father that it never occurred to me something so wonderful could be cruelly yanked away. Pushing forty, I thought the chance to have kids had passed. When Sarah conceived, I felt complete. I had my mate and my son, and that was all I needed besides my club. Life was good ... until it wasn’t.

Loving that hard, that deeply, and then having someone rip that person from your life left a bitterness behind that soured everything and everyone else around you.

I was a broken man.

That tiny life sparked joy and light, a peace and hope for the future that I never expected with the life I led. An outlaw shunned by polite society, I didn't care about shit like good neighborhoods and expensive private schools. That changed when Sarah's pregnancy test showed positive. My heart had believed for the first time that I could be a man worthy of a second chance, of raising a kid who'd grow up better than I did, with all the opportunities I never got.

When he died, he took all of that with him.

The absence of my son only left darkness behind. I became a shell of the man I'd been, harboring anger, resentment, and so much pain that it ate me up inside. I could hardly function.

It wasn't fair to Sarah. She lost the baby she'd been growing inside her. A miracle child she never thought she'd get to have, and it shattered her when she lost him.

A miscarriage. The doctors said there was nothing she did wrong. It wasn't her fault.

She blamed herself anyway.

I turned to alcohol, and she withdrew from the world. My nights were spent at the bar, dulling the pain. Her days were nothing but a blur, spent in bed and ignoring the world. We grew apart until we were nothing more than strangers sharing the same house.

Months later, nothing changed.

And that was how I ended up here on another day fated to change my world forever. Through bloodshot eyes, I scanned the Nevada skyline, watching as a haboob blew in from the west—a strange word for an act of nature.

The dust-laden whirlwind moved across the region and toward Henderson, blowing hot, dry air and kicking up sand, marked by high electrical tension and strong winds bearing clouds of dust that swirled so thick they blocked out the sky. They could last from a few minutes to an hour and were incredibly unpredictable.

Visibility was reduced to near zero in mere minutes during a haboob and blocked out the sun fast. If you happened to be motoring down the highway or riding, as I never used a cage much, it could become life-threatening. Winds gusted upward of seventy miles per hour or higher. Pile-up collisions and highway accidents happened often.

Dangerous ... and I didn't care.

"I need to get back to Sarah." It wasn't a lie, exactly. I did need to go home and check on her; I just didn't have to risk my safety in the process. Not that it stopped me.

Maybe I wanted to face that danger and feel something besides rage and loss and agony.

Rook saw right through me. "This isn't about Sarah." He slammed me up against the wall, pissed. "You got a death wish? Want to ride into that storm and see what awaits you in the afterlife? I can't stop ya, Raven."

"Fuck off, Rook."

We weren't the president and vice president of the club at that moment. No, we were two best friends, one fighting to stay alive and the other battling to keep him afloat in a sea of despair and agony.

"Fuck off?" he snarled, lifting his fist and slamming it into the wall. "Go. Race into hell if you want." His chest heaved as he stared at me, his features twisted in pain. "I can't watch you suffer anymore."

Blinking, I no longer felt the effects of the liquor in my bloodstream. All that settled within me, leftover from the void I'd fallen into, was heartbreak. I huffed a couple of deep breaths as my body shook. All that pain was flooding my system with unresolved emotion. I didn't want to let it loose, not here. The storm could absorb my fury but not Rook. I wouldn't do that to him.

"I have to," I choked, forcing breath into my lungs, "I've got to do this."

He grabbed the collar of my cut, his forehead pressing to mine. "Don't you die on me, you stubborn sonofabitch. Face

your demons. Do what you need to do but come back for church tomorrow. I need my V.P.” He swallowed hard. “I need my best friend.”

Fuck. My hands gripped his shoulders, using him to anchor myself to the ground before I collapsed to my knees. “I’ll be back,” I swore.

His head lifted, the pain he felt on my behalf a shocking reminder that I didn’t ride this life alone. I shared the path with my brothers in the Devil’s Murder MC.

A caw caught my attention, and I noticed the black crow that landed on the roof nearby. He fluffed his feathers, preening as he pranced around on two feet.

And I also had my crow. The black raven never left me, even when I blocked him out. He was as integral as the veins and arteries pumping blood throughout my body.

I’d been a fool.

The storm was blowing in, swirling dust and debris in the air around us. I had to leave. The sudden urgency didn’t make sense, but I couldn’t ignore its call.

My crow opened its beak, the black beady eyes staring with purpose. *Caw...caw.*

I had to follow.

Rook watched as I rushed from his side, throwing a leg over my bike as I slammed my ass down on the seat. I yanked a bandana out of my cut, tying it off behind my neck. It would protect me when the worst of the storm caught up. My sunglasses slid on, anchored over my ears, and held in place by the black band I used on occasion so the wind wouldn’t rip them off my face.

I was out the gate in less than twenty seconds, gliding across the pavement and merging onto the road, riding hard toward the edge of town. The storm was hot on my heels, blowing past me and churning up a wicked mix of sand, rocks, and cactus needles. My skin pricked with irritation as I lowered my head, pulled back on the throttle, and raced against the wind.

A strip of black streaked by on my right, whipping through the high-velocity current. More debris smacked me in the face and scratched the back of my head and neck. Fully immersed in the storm, I sank my body lower, gripping those handlebars as tightly as possible.

It must have lasted at least ten minutes before it occurred to me that I couldn't see shit, and this was a fucking death wish. If I slammed into a cage, I'd fucking splat against the asphalt in a blob of red goo. For the first time since my child's death, I realized I didn't want to die. Not yet.

Someday I would see him, and maybe if there was a God, he'd let me hold my son and stare into his perfect face. Perhaps I'd get to watch him grow up and hear him call me Dad. It was a secret wish I'd hold onto for many years into the future.

I slowed down the bike, fishtailing all over the damn road before pulling into a ditch. A strong gust whipped my clothes around my body, and I lay down the bike, rising to my feet.

Arms outstretched, I lifted my chin and faced the full brunt of the storm. I couldn't say how many times I felt punched, smacked, and beaten by that invisible force. It nearly knocked me down a dozen times.

My mouth opened, and I hollered into the wind, unleashing all that emotion I'd kept bottled up inside. The hate. The rage. All the accusations and pain. Every ounce of bitterness that had taken root in my soul. I pushed back, shouting, crying, groaning my sorrow into that vicious, bloodthirsty whirlwind of dust that pummeled my body as I stood in its way.

A solid barrier that refused to back down.

It must have been half an hour before the churning mass of destruction finally stopped, dissipating as quickly as it had started. Even though I had on the bandana, my lungs still felt irritated. I coughed, wheezing a little as I breathed.

Caw...caw.

The crow. He didn't leave me. That fucking bird with its inky feathers raised its beak and defied the heavens, swooping

down to land at my feet.

“You have my attention,” I replied gruffly, choking down the dry air in my throat. He turned, flopping around a few times before lifting and flying to a nearby tree. He landed on a branch.

Caw...caw.

“You want me to follow.”

His head bobbed.

“Give me a minute.”

I always carried a gallon of water in my saddlebags in case of emergency.

Lifting my Harley, I pushed it upward and kicked down the stand. Rummaging around in the bags, I found the water and twisted off the cap, dousing my tongue and swishing around the contents in my mouth, spitting out the remnants of sand.

The crow flapped his wings, clearly impatient.

“Alright. I’m comin’.”

He flew off once I was ready, turning the front tire to merge onto the road as I kept him in view. Smoke billowed into the air in the distance. Black, thick. The type of smoke that only occurred with a fire.

“Shit,” I cursed, pulling back on the throttle to increase my speed, shifting gears as I rode fast toward the location.

I didn’t know what I expected to find, but it wasn’t the black Mustang that crashed at an intersection. The front end had smashed into the traffic light, probably due to the limited visibility of the storm. Nothing of the windshield remained. Glass had shattered across the pavement, followed by streaks of blood.

Red asphalt. Just like those old videos they used to show us as teens so we wouldn’t drive recklessly.

A body lay face down, not too far from the driver’s side. As I approached, I squatted down, staring at the poor kid who never stood a chance. He probably didn’t wear a seatbelt. A

mistake he'd never get a chance to repeat. His head resembled a squashed pumpkin.

"Fuck," I whispered, turning toward the vehicle.

Black smoke was pouring from the engine, and I could smell gas. I hoped no one else was inside as I ran to the right, gazing into the interior.

"Shit!" I shouted, seeing the young girl strapped inside, her legs crushed by the front end. Brown hair obscured her face from view. She didn't move.

I stuck a hand through the bare window, pressing my fingers to her carotid artery—nothing... and then, *thump*, *thump*.

She was alive.

How the fuck would I get her out of there?

Yanking on the door, I managed to open it, reaching inside to see if I could pull her free. No luck. The metal had scrunched, pinning her body to the seat. Her right leg was fine. The left was stuck.

Something exploded inside the engine, and I winced, lowering my head inside the vehicle to see if there was a way to move her leg and wrestle it from the tight space.

Fuck no. Nothin' was ever that easy in my world.

Caw...caw.

"Unless you have two hands and the Jaws of Life, I suggest you stop yelling at me."

Amused, the crow tittered.

I didn't have time for this. The girl needed to be extricated. Fast.

I moved to the side, lifted my leg, and slammed my boot above her lap. The car creaked with the impact. Maybe I was fucking stupid because we could both die if I damaged the engine any further. I kicked at the dashboard again, cursing when a piece of it dislodged, flying across the driver's seat.

“Motherfucker!”

Two more kicks finally smashed the area above her legs. She was free!

I reached for the seatbelt, taking far too long to get it unbuckled. My hands slipped beneath her body as I felt the entire vehicle shudder. No!

I pulled the girl into my arms and spun, running as my feet pounded the ground, desperate to reach safety. We made it about ten feet before an explosion rocketed through us, the force propelling me forward. I soared through the air, landing hard as I rolled, the breath knocked from my lungs.

The poor girl flopped over my chest, her face inches from mine.

And the whole world stopped.

I didn't hear the mini-explosions that followed, the screeching metal, or the rumble of Harley engines. My mind never registered the flames that hissed not far from us or the heat that spurred my body to sweat.

Two pretty green eyes stared, framed by a beautiful heart-shaped face. Green eyes that seemed bottomless, swirling with a splash of marigold. Eyes that speared my soul, striking a bullseye I never wanted to escape.

“Hey, babygirl,” I whispered with a rasp. “You're safe.”

She blinked, almost breaking the intense connection between us, but locked eyes once more.

I couldn't help thinking about all the shit that led me to this moment, all the pain, anger, and loss ... that brought me to my destiny.

No matter what awaited me in the future, I hoped this wasn't the last time I stared into this angelic face.

Before today, I didn't believe in fate.

After this, I couldn't deny its potent power.

Chapter 2 – Bree

Five years ago—

F My hand gripped Bella's too tight. I could tell because she winced but didn't pull away, lowering her head to lean on my shoulder. I was the older sister, the mature one, and it was my job to protect and care for her, especially now that Gram was gone.

Gram.

Fresh tears slowly filled the reservoir of my eyes, keeping a constant, steady flow that slipped down my face, dripping off my chin, and landing with soft, silent plops on the grass beneath my feet. My black Jimmy Choo heels sank into the soft earth, anchoring me to the spot as I watched the casket slowly lower into the ground.

Oh, Gram.

The one person on this earth who had loved us, took us in, and raised two frightened little girls who had lost their parents. Gram was everything to Bella and me. She'd been a caretaker and loving guidance for as long as I could remember.

We'd only been six and nine when two police officers gave the horrible news of the crash. They knocked on Gram's door, solemn as they informed us that a drunk driver had hit my parents on the way home from their date. The car flipped three times, slamming the top side down and smashing the vehicle to pieces.

The good news they'd said was my parents probably died on impact. Like that mattered to us, they were still gone.

Luckily, Gram had been our babysitter our whole lives. We had a room there, and the transition occurred smoothly. Gram made it a game and let us pack everything we wanted to bring to her house. Everything else was sold, and the money was set aside in a college fund for Bella and me.

Our lives changed after that, and we learned to be strong, relying on one another to get through the hard times. Gram

didn't have much money but made up for it with love and desserts. She refused to touch the money that had grown interest in the bank, saving it up for our education.

I went to a university, getting my business degree.

Bella tried a few different trades, like beautician, but they didn't stick. Her love was jewelry, turquoise mined here in Nevada, and it became her passion. She used the rest of her money to start up her business.

Gram was proud of us both.

It didn't seem real that she wouldn't be there to greet us in the kitchen or wipe her hands off on her apron to give us a hug because she'd spent the day cooking and baking.

Gram was only sixty-eight. She'd been healthy other than diabetes, but she managed it well. Took her insulin every night before bed and watched her carbohydrate intake. Sure, she occasionally indulged in sweets, but the doc told her it was fine. She had a strong heart, and I expected her to be here for many years.

One night she'd complained of a headache and went to bed early.

She never woke up.

The autopsy revealed a slight bleed on her brain. She'd had a stroke in her sleep and stopped breathing, slipping away in the night.

Bella hiccupped, her shoulders caving as she cried harder, staring at the dirt that began to cover Gram's casket.

"C'mon, Bel. Let's go home."

She sniffled, nodded, and squeezed my hand before releasing it, walking back to the car ahead of me. It didn't surprise me that she wanted a few minutes alone. I needed the same solitude to deal with my grief too.

Later, we'd hug and cry together as we'd been doing the last few days.

I found a path through the rows of graves and followed it, winding up and over a hill to more plots and another funeral service being held for a loved one.

Oops. I probably should have turned away, but for some reason, my feet kept moving, walking beyond the group dressed in black under the glaring rays of Nevada sunshine. It was unbearably hot—a scorcher with little wind to help with the heat.

A lone figure stood close, leaning against the concrete façade of a crypt. An entire lane of them stretched ahead of us, all with elaborate stone guardians like gargoyles perched above the doors to protect the bones within. I didn't bother reading the last names etched to commemorate the family legacy. Nothing else could have stolen my attention away from the tall, familiar figure or the dark ink wrapping around his arms from wrists to biceps.

My rescuer. The biker who pulled me from Jason's mustang five years ago. I never learned his real name. I only knew him by the road name his brothers had given him.

RAVEN.

The patch on his leather vest read VP.

I'd forgotten the name of his motorcycle club but remembered it now, my gaze sliding over the logo on his back as he pushed off the crypt, heading away from my direction. Devil's Murder MC. He hadn't seen me yet.

But I knew the moment he sensed I was near because he stopped, lifting his head higher, and I swear he sniffed the air.

Raven slowly turned, a sad smile tugging on the full lips I remembered. A man with lips like that must have been one hell of a kisser.

“Green eyes,” he whispered, clearing his throat. “How are you, babygirl?”

That same deep rumbling voice from my dreams had found a way to set my heart fluttering again. I never forgot Raven or the fact that he saved my life. He didn't stick around once the

ambulance picked me up, rushing me to the hospital because of my injuries the day of the accident.

As a result, I never had a chance to thank him.

There was no way to look him up. I couldn't remember his club's name, and no one would appreciate a young girl asking a bunch of questions. The only thing I had to go on was his name and his physical description. The doc had told me the blood loss would mess with my memory from that day, and it had. I'd longed to find Raven, but we never crossed paths again despite living in the same city.

Until today.

"Hi, Raven. I'm good." I tried to hide the sorrow this awful day had brought, and he seemed to sense it.

"Your eyes tell a different story, sugar. What has you so sad?"

I intended to lie, to push the grief aside. I didn't want to appear weak to this man. The truth came tumbling out before I could stop it. "My Gram," I blubbered, embarrassed by the fresh tears spilling over and down my cheeks, "she's gone."

"Aw, babygirl. I'm sorry." He closed the few feet of distance that separated us, wrapping me in his soothing embrace. "It's always tough losing the ones you love."

The way he said it, how his voice seemed to crack, made me realize I wasn't the only one hurting.

"You lose someone too?"

He hesitated but finally answered. "Yes. My wife."

How odd that we would meet on the same day, five years apart, burying two people we'd both loved in the same cemetery. Fate was a strange, unpredictable creature.

"I'm sorry, Raven." I squeezed his torso, laying my head over his heart. "I'm sorry for us both now."

He rubbed my back with one hand, lost in his thoughts.

He had to be because he didn't reply for a long time. Minutes.

“You’re sad for me because I lost my wife?” He sounded off, and I looked up, catching the odd expression on his handsome face.

“Yes. Your heart is aching. No one should have to go through that.”

Something fierce flashed in his eyes, and he lifted his knuckles, brushing them lightly across my cheek. “If only you were a little older.”

“I’m twenty-one,” I replied with a slight attitude.

He chuckled, and it lightened the darkness in his blue eyes. “Not insulting you, precious. Just a fact.”

“I’m old enough to know myself and what I want in life.”

“Oh? Tell me.”

Maybe I shouldn’t have told the truth. It was risky and maybe silly, but I did it anyway. “The man from my dreams. My rescuer. *You*,” I clarified. “I tried to find you, to thank you, but you disappeared.”

His expression softened. “Damn, babygirl. You’re gonna make a man real happy one day.” He lowered his head, capturing my lips in a feather-soft kiss. “Wish I could be the one for you, beautiful, but I’m not. You deserve more than an old biker and the rough life I lead.”

I wanted to protest, to prove to him that I meant what I said, but he shook his head. His palm cradled my cheek.

Caw...caw.

A black crow landed on a branch of a nearby tree, staring right at us.

“I’m so glad I pulled you from that car, Brianna Hart.”

I gasped. He knew my name.

Wait. He knew? And he never tried to contact me? Why?

“You didn’t want to find me?”

He frowned. “Never said that.” A sigh escaped as he lifted his head, scanning the cemetery as if something caught his

attention and it wasn't good. "You've got to live your life, sweetheart. Find what makes that beautiful heart of yours soar and go after it." He tugged me against him, enveloping my body in an embrace I instantly knew was goodbye.

"Raven, please," I managed to beg before he released me, dropped a kiss on my head, and strode away, never looking back.

The crow followed him, inky wings spreading wide as he soared above Raven's head.

Tears fell for a different reason twice on the same day as I watched his powerful, lithe body move with grace and purpose, joining more men in the same leather vests. They didn't stick around, leaving in a big group as I rushed down the path after him, hoping for a glimpse of the man who stole my heart at sixteen and broke it five years later.

The rumble of Harleys alerted anyone within the vicinity that the Devil's Murder MC was nearby. The bikes sped away in rows of two, and at the front, leading them next to the president, was Raven. Sunglasses covered his eyes, but I still knew when he saw me. His head turned slightly in my direction before he lifted his chin, revved his engine, and rolled down the road out of sight.

I stood long after he was gone, wondering why my heart felt so torn. I'd only met him twice. My fingers lifted to my lips, touching where he'd given me that tender kiss.

"I'll never forget you, Raven."

Chapter 3 – Raven

T*hirteen days ago—*

“You need to tell him what Rook wanted.”

“I know,” I agreed, spinning the beer bottle in my hands, watching as the amber liquid splashed around inside.

Lou scratched along his neck, leaning back against the seat of the booth we’d taken in the corner of the room. Around us, packing the joint as far as the eye could see, were dozens of bikers. Brothers I shared a bond with, and so did Rook, our president. Men we’d fought beside, shed blood with, and shared beers and stories with over the years. Outlaws who had become family.

“Rook would be proud of this turnout. Even the Royal Bastards from Tonopah are here.”

He was right.

I spotted Grim, the RBMC pres, next to his V.P. Mammoth, the Sergeant at Arms Rael, and a few others.

They came as a show of respect for my best friend. The man who helped build this club into what it was today, and without his influence, it wouldn’t have grown or become the fucking fierce force of nature it was today.

Grim knew that. He’d seen it twenty years ago when he was a new member in the RBMC, and Rook became our pres, taking the reins from his father, Jackdaw. Our eyes met, and he dipped his chin before lifting his glass of whiskey.

Lou lifted his beer, and those around us did the same, toasting Rook as we filled the night with memories of the past, jokes, lewd stories, and every other fucking thing in celebration.

It might be a sad day since we buried one of our own, but the party proved we loved the gruff old crow and hoped Rook found peace in the afterlife, whatever awaited him.

My throat felt tight as my hand clutched my own beer, lifting it high as a few members of the club hollered at the top

of their lungs—*caw caw...caw caw*.

My head tilted back and a loud Kraa rumbled from my throat, adding to the chaos.

Lou belted out a laugh, damn near coughing up a lung before the shouts died down and music blared through the speakers in a playlist of Rook's favorite rock and metal tunes.

I couldn't help grinning at the old man across from me. Lucky Lou, as we all called him, was an Army veteran and one of Rook's closest friends and allies. Lou knew everyone in the Vegas area, and if he needed a favor, half the damn state would show up, no questions asked. He held a lot of clout with the locals but was also on a first-name basis with every prominent figure in the area, whether they wore a patch or not.

Most days he sat in his wheelchair or demanded one of the club girls to help him settle into one of the booths at The Roost's bar.

He didn't much care for growing old and often complained about having wasted his youth since he didn't fuck near enough women or party hard enough to have enough stories to tell. But Lucky Lou was a pillar of the biker community, and not a soul on this earth would disrespect him unless they wanted a beat down from the entire club.

"Not gonna lie, Raven," he drawled in his southern accent, made all the more apparent from his inebriated state. "Not likin' that Crow hasn't showed his face yet."

Yeah, I noticed that too. "I reckon he's got a lot of shit to settle in his mind and heart," I mused. "Crow will come. I don't doubt it."

"You think he's gonna take his daddy's place?" His voice slurred and he hiccupped. "That boy is a Holmes, and his ass belongs on the throne."

"You speak the truth, Lou."

"Don't I always?"

I couldn't help my smirk. "Usually comes out more when you're hammered."

He flipped me off. “I like it. Makes all the pain go numb.”

Shit. I didn’t like hearing that. The club should look into taking care of him, not that we didn’t already. Rook insisted we paid for his medical care and the part-time nurse that cleaned, cooked, and put up with his ornery ass. Jackie was a saint. She had to be storing up points in heaven. This old crow was a handful.

“Well, fuck, Lou. You need to go back to the doctor? More pain meds?”

He waved his hand in dismissal. “Don’t ya fuss over me. Ain’t shit you can do over me being ancient.”

I couldn’t help chuckling. “If you’re ancient, we’re both in trouble. I’m not far behind you.”

Lou snorted. “Ya got plenty of good years left. Trust me.”

I didn’t doubt it.

He finished his beer and scanned the bar. “Before you go, pick up a nice piece of ass and get yer dick wet. Life is too damn short for missed opportunities.”

Fuck. That hit me right in the chest, especially with Rook’s death. I thought of my Sarah and the years she’d been gone. The good ones died way too early in life. “I might,” I conceded.

“But you need to talk to Crow first.”

Crow. Rook’s only son.

A young man I loved like he was my own. Hell, I raised him. Me, Lou, and Rook had a hell of a time bringing up a wild, stubborn boy in the middle of a motorcycle club, but he took to it like the grease and wheels were born in his blood. Maybe they were. A third-generation Holmes groomed to lead this rowdy group of bikers.

Fate decided he needed to take the throne a little earlier than we anticipated. Wish it didn’t take Rook’s death to bring him back to The Roost. The falling out between father and son resulted in Crow’s absence. Hotheaded and ready to take on the world, Crow left to seek his independence. It hit Rook

hard. Not sure they ever got the chance to patch things up right before he died.

Hawk slid next to me, forcing me to scoot over in the booth. He didn't dare crowd Lou since he had his portable oxygen tank with him. Even now, he was hooked up, the nasal tube draped across his face and tucked around both ears. I'd bet my last dollar that Jackie hooked him up and made him promise not to take it off. Lou liked using it or he probably would have disobeyed her just for the drama it would cause.

Crazy old coot.

Hawk ticked his head at Lou. "Can I have some?"

Lou swatted his hands away as Hawk reached for the tubing. "Ain't too old to have me kick yer ass."

Hawk winked. "Bet you could do it too."

"Damn straight." Lou yawned, his eyes fluttering.

"You ready to leave this party?" I asked, stretching as I bumped Hawk's shoulder. "I got shit to do, and it's gettin' late."

"I see what yer doin'."

"What's that?" Sure, I didn't fool him with the innocent act, but he'd let me get away with it because he was tuckered out.

His chin dipped, and he snored, startling himself awake as Hawk grinned.

Yeah, time to get Lucky Lou into bed.

"Let's hit the road, Lou," I announced, shaking his shoulder.

His eyes popped open. He'd already fallen asleep again.

I lowered my voice since the music volume wasn't quite as loud as it had been earlier. "Text Jackie. Tell her we'll pay her double to stay with him tonight. Rook's funeral hit him hard."

Hawk nodded. "Yeah, I noticed. He never drinks that much anymore."

“Exactly.”

Hawk pulled out his phone, sliding from the booth to give Jackie a call. I helped Lou stand and led him through the crowd, patiently waiting for him to say goodbye to everyone who had traveled to celebrate Rook’s life.

That was Lou though. He liked to make sure everyone was greeted and didn’t like anyone feelin’ left out or ignored. He didn’t care if you were the pres or a prospect, an ol’ lady or a club girl. He treated them all with the same attention and respect. Said a lot about the man at my side.

I got him settled into the front seat of my truck and shut the door with a click, walking around the front before I paused outside the driver’s side door. The Henderson city lights lit up the sky and blocked the twinkle of the stars. I felt a twinge of sadness burrow down in my heart, thinking of Rook and how he loved to ride at night down Hwy 95 and through Las Vegas.

One star burned brighter than the others and blinked, going in and out much slower than the surrounding ones. I slapped a hand over my chest, watching that star for several minutes.

“Gonna miss you, brother. I’ll be sure to watch over your boy. He’s gonna need it.”

The star went out, nothing in the sky for at least several seconds until it returned, blazing so white it completely blocked out the ones surrounding it.

“Yeah, I’ll find all the fuckers responsible for your death and avenge you. Don’t you fucking worry about that. Crow and I will get it done.”

The star faded a little, and I nodded, reaching for the handle as I opened the door and slid behind the wheel. Lou snored next to me, his head resting against the window. I always wondered what happened to the crow once we passed on. Did it linger in this world? Become an ordinary bird without the bond it had forged with one of us?

The thought saddened me.

I preferred to believe the crow found freedom, twinkling up in that Nevada skyline, still protecting its owner’s body

even when nothing but dust and bones remained. An eternal flight where their wings spread wide and they floated on the wind, forever gliding with the stars to guide them.

I glanced at Lou, pulling out of the parking lot and heading toward the apartment he kept above Bull's Saloon. His father, Bull, had built the place nearly forty years ago, and Lou took it over when his old man passed on. The joint was open twenty-four hours a day, and it spoke volumes that it was closed tonight. Rook's death had shaken all of us, and I worried for the old man at my side.

I parked close to the door, waving at Jackie as she stood at the entrance. That woman was tough but a bighearted softie when it came to Lou. She didn't take his shit, but she spoiled him. He loved that about her and flirted to get his way often, not that it ever worked.

We got Lou inside and up the stairs located in the back behind the stockroom. Once he was settled in bed and his oxygen in place for the night, I walked with her back to the entrance.

"I sure do appreciate you staying with him tonight. He might wake up disoriented or upset, and I don't want him alone."

"You didn't have to ask. I planned on being here, but it's no problem. I love that cantankerous old man. He makes me smile."

"And throw shit," I chuckled.

She laughed. "Yeah, that too."

I reached inside my cut and pulled out my wallet, yanking out a few hundred dollar bills and handing them over.

Jackie shook her head. "No. I don't need that, Raven."

"Yeah, you do. Your boy is in college, and that shit's expensive. Besides, you're family to Lou. Hell, to all of us. We look out for our own."

She sighed but nodded, taking the cash and stuffing it into the front pocket of her scrubs. "Thanks. I appreciate it. All of

it.”

I squeezed her shoulder. “Don’t know what we’d do without you. Lou is a fucking terror.”

She snickered, shooing me out the door. “Get some sleep. I’ll text if he wakes.”

Flashing her a grin, I left the bar, hearing the locks click into place behind me. The alarm beeped, and I knew she set it, returning to the apartment to watch over Lou for the night.

As I drove back to The Roost, I finally let the sorrow that had tugged on me all day have a few minutes of control. My fingers gripped the steering wheel tight as my eyes burned with unshed tears. The emotion nearly overwhelmed me, but I was back in control when I returned home.

The party was still in full swing, but I didn’t feel up to it. I grabbed a bottle of Jack and headed to my room, tossing a shot back for Rook before finally closing my eyes.



THE NEXT MORNING, I held my phone in my hand, staring at the screen. After Rook’s funeral, I didn’t feel like dragging this shit out and hoped Crow answered my call. I swiped across the surface and found his name in my contacts, dialing his number. It rang twice before I heard his familiar baritone. The same voice as his father, and that rubbed a little too raw.

“Hey, Raven.”

“Crow.”

Silence followed, stretching until I heard him cough. “You bury Rook yesterday?”

“You know we did, kid.”

I almost called him son, but that didn’t seem right, given the context.

“I’m barely hanging on,” he managed to choke out.

“I get that,” I replied honestly, “but the club needs you. It’s time to come home.”

“I know.”

“We can mourn him together. You don’t have to do this alone, Crow.”

“Fuck, Raven. This fucking hurts.”

“I know, Austin. I *know*.”

“I should have been there for him. And now ...”

“Just get here. We’ll figure it out.” I fought back a sigh and decided to give it to him straight. “We can’t sit on this much longer, Austin. Your father deserves retribution, and the club wants blood. Our crows are restless.”

“As they should.”

“I had to put my best friend in the ground. Watch the whole fucking club mourn his loss. It’s hittin’ everyone hard. They need to see you to know this is gonna be handled, and a Holmes is still gonna lead them.”

“Raven.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m already on my way.”

Relief swept through me so hard that I felt a flash of heat sweep a fiery blast through my veins. “When will you arrive?”

“Within the next few days. Have them ready.”

“Alright.”

“And Raven?”

“Yeah, Crow?”

“You’ll address me as pres from now on.”

The strength I heard in his voice, the conviction, melted the last of the worry that had taken root since Rook’s murder.

“You got it, pres.”

He ended the call, but not before I heard him start up his Harley. The welcome rumble brought a smile to my face. With Crow's return, the club would finally have the justice they hungered for.

I slid the cell into the pocket of my cut, rising to my feet. Once I had some coffee in my system, I was calling for church. The last one where I'd use the gavel. I'd only been borrowing it anyhow. The real king was returning to take his place on the throne.

Chapter 4 – Bree

Ten days ago—

“You sure it’s safe to talk in here?” Callie asked, glancing around the break room. “What if there’s a listening device or recorder or something?”

If this wasn’t so serious, I might have laughed at the stricken expression on her face and the way she began opening all the cabinets and checking every inch to be sure we were truly alone. It seemed silly to worry about it, but we couldn’t be too careful.

“Yeah, it’s fine. Elliot doesn’t come in here since it’s a shared space. He keeps all his meetings private in his office.”

She scoffed at that. “Yeah, I know.” Her lower lip trembled, and I reached out a hand, squeezing hers as she took a seat next to me. “If he knew my connection to Sadie, he’d figure out why I applied for this job.”

Callie was a receptionist like me, one of a handful of pretty young women working in the mayor’s office and his staff.

Some people wouldn’t think anything of it, but if you were observant, you’d notice how men held all the positions of power and how the women only occupied secretarial jobs. We were meant to serve, and that was why I had started collecting evidence of the sexist work environment to pass along to H.R.

“He’s not going to find out, Callie. I promise.”

She blew out a shaky breath, clenching my hand hard before releasing it. “What do we know about his date tonight?”

“You mean the business dinner?” I asked, rolling my eyes.

“Right,” she replied sarcastically. “Is he using the same escort service again?”

“Yeah, and he’s sloppy about it. Doesn’t even hide the information from me. He had me call them and double-check his favorite girl was ready for tonight.” I sighed. “He sent her the same package as Sadie.”

Callie swallowed hard. “Two dozen red roses tied with a black ribbon, a black cocktail dress, and instructions.”

“Yes,” I confirmed. “I saw the receipts today. He didn’t bother hiding them.”

“He thinks he’s untouchable,” she spat.

The night Sadie disappeared, Mayor Elliot Goodman requested her services from one of the more discreet escort companies in the Las Vegas area. The DOLL Agency offered companions to wealthy, high-profile clients.

Nevada was the only U.S. state where prostitution was legally permitted in some form. Prostitution itself was legal in ten of Nevada’s seventeen counties, but that wasn’t what the escort service offered, meaning soliciting Sadie for her company wouldn’t have been illegal ... unless Elliot wanted to exchange money for sex.

A prominent figure like the mayor would cause a scandal if the public learned of his indiscretions and involvement in the disappearance of young women.

As disgusted as I was with his choice to use taxpayer dollars to fund such an extravagant lifestyle, it was the disappearances that worried me. Sadie was the fifth young woman to make the news in the last three months.

When Callie interviewed for the job, I sensed she had an underlying agenda when applying for a city government position, given that it was only for a part-time secretary. She was overqualified with her business degree and experience.

The mayor hired her immediately and never hid his attraction. His gaze lingered too long on Callie the entire interview. That was four months ago, and she’d confided in me after only a few weeks that she was here to find out information on her sister and the mayor’s connection to the disappearance.

“What’s the plan?” she asked, fidgeting in her seat. “It’s taking too long to find Sadie. I’m worried.”

“I know you are, hon. Wait until he’s left the office. I’ll need you to keep an eye out while I search his computer.”

Her eyes widened. “You know his passwords?”

“Of course. He’s sloppy. It wasn’t hard.”

“Or he’s testing us to see if we’ll spy on him.”

“I don’t think so. He’s far too arrogant for that.”

She snorted. “Yeah. You’re right.”

That had been four hours ago.

Typing away on my keyboard and entering data, I anxiously scanned the spacious office, my gaze flicking between the security camera placed high in the corner, facing the entrance, the closed door to my left, and the hallway leading to more offices where I glimpsed employees working through the clean panes of glass. I had six more documents to type up and complete, all of them illegal or dishonest practices dictated to me earlier that morning by Mayor Elliot Goodman.

Goodman. With a name like that, you’d think he had to be a great, kind, and hardworking man.

He wasn’t. To the public, he appeared kind. A patient man concerned about their safety, prosperity, and future. But I knew better.

My experiences with Elliot proved he was cold and calculating, consumed with greed, and a fake.

There wasn’t a single thing he did that came from a place of genuine compassion or selflessness. I’d never met anyone more self-centered. He fit nearly every unpleasant stereotype for a politician I’d ever heard of, and he seemed to enjoy that fact.

Why work for a man like him? I didn’t know it when I hired on. Only after a year of employment did I begin to have access to specific files and documents, revealing his shady business dealings and partnerships with local thugs.

That was when I decided he needed to be exposed for the filthy criminal he’d become. No actual plan formed until Callie came along. A few weeks ago, an FBI agent contacted her after he learned about her sister. It seemed Agent Phillips was handling the missing girls’ cases and building a file on the

unsub or unknown subject. Whoever took these girls worked in a consistent area that included Henderson and Las Vegas. He was a profiler and hoped we could help provide the intel he needed for a breakthrough in the case.

Fast forward to today, and here I was, waiting for the mayor to leave early so I could have an excuse to be in his office in case I got interrupted.

Sighing, I glanced at my phone, nibbling on my bottom lip. Only an hour left until Elliot planned to leave for a business dinner. I'd cleared his schedule per his request and hoped he would decide to vacate the building ahead of time.

I was so engrossed in my thoughts that I didn't hear the soft voice calling my name from the open doorway.

I spent most of my time behind the mahogany receptionist's desk or next door in the copy room and rarely had visitors unless they were one of the mayor's scheduled appointments.

My head lifted in surprise when I noticed my partner in crime and her anxious expression. "Hi, Callie."

"Hey, Bree." She glanced at the closed door where the mayor was currently handling last-minute preparations before she approached my desk. Her voice lowered as she spoke. "Is he leaving yet?"

"Yes. His business dinner is scheduled for five p.m., but he plans to make a stop with his chauffeur before arriving at the restaurant." I only knew that information because I overheard Elliot on the phone discussing the flowers he planned to purchase for his business associate. Never mind the fact that she was loaned from an escort service. The city would pick up the bill for tonight's lavish entertainment.

He'd left the door ajar, and I heard his conversation while I typed up the emails he asked me to send, along with a few other documents detailing his notes on a recent meeting regarding gun control in Nevada.

"Text me when you're ready."

"I will."

She darted from the receptionist area as the mayor's door began to open, disappearing down the hall.

“Brianna, would you be so kind as to show Mr. Baker to the elevators?”

“Sure, Mayor Goodman.”

“Excellent.” He turned to Mr. Baker, extending his hand. “Thank you for meeting with me today. I'll have my secretary type up the documents you requested and contact you early next week to finalize our agreement.”

Mr. Baker shook Elliot's hand and released it. “Perfect. Good afternoon, Mayor.”

Elliot turned and shut the door, probably to change and freshen up for his dinner engagement.

I smiled at Mr. Baker, walking around the desk to the door. “If you'll follow me, I can show you to the elevators.”

“I know where they're located,” he grumbled, catching me off guard with his surly expression. “He likes to think I'm an imbecile. Asshole.”

I had to hide my snicker, keeping my expression neutral. “Anything else I can do for you?”

“No,” he sighed. “Have a good evening.”

“You as well, Mr. Baker.”

I returned to my desk, finishing the rest of the tasks Elliot had dictated when he opened the door, flashing a smile in one of his expensive tailored suits.

“You should come out with us some time for cocktails, Miss Hart. We always have an enjoyable time.”

Ha. No way. “Thanks for the invite, but I usually have things waiting for me at home. Is there anything else you require this evening, Mayor?”

He gave me a funny look, like he didn't expect me to turn him down. “No. Feel free to head on out once you're caught up. Enjoy a nice soak in the tub and a glass of wine.”

He didn't know a thing about me; he just assumed I liked those things.

"I will. Goodnight, Mayor."

"I keep telling you it's fine to call me by my first name. Everyone else in the office does."

Nope. I didn't want to be on a first-name basis with a man like him. "Okay. Good night."

"Goodnight, Brianna."

He said that intentionally, watching my reaction.

I gave him a small smile and returned to my work on the computer, noting with relief that he didn't continue, walking toward the elevators.

Pulling out my phone, I texted Callie. "He just left. Make sure he gets in the car with his driver before you return."

She replied right away. "Will do."

Five minutes later, she entered the office, closing the door with a soft click. He's gone."

"Okay. Let's do this."

Callie took my place at the desk, trying to appear busy as she shuffled papers. "I'll text you if anyone comes in."

"Thanks." I jiggled Elliot's doorknob, not surprised to find it locked. Reaching for my ring of keys, I found the one I'd duplicated last week. He never noticed I'd taken it to make a copy during one of his luncheons, returning it before he arrived back in his office. The key slid in, and I turned it, popping the lock.

Just in case, I turned the lock again, hoping that would deter anyone who tried to walk in.

His office was dark, and I left the lights off, crossing the room to his desk and pulling out his seat. I sat down, turning on the computer, almost flinching when the monitor lit up. He never changed his password unless prompted, so I logged in easily. Since I knew most of the folders Elliot kept his files in, I noticed the ones that seemed named oddly.

I began clicking on the contents and gasped at the shit he kept on a computer that anyone could access. I inserted the flash drive and began uploading, not worrying about separating what I put on it. I could do that later. For now, I just needed to get this information and get the hell out of his office. Being in here gave me the creeps.

I heard Callie's voice greet someone outside.

Shit!

Files were still being copied. I couldn't pull the flash drive out yet. It would corrupt the data, and I didn't know when I'd get another chance to do this.

I clicked off the monitor, plunging the room into darkness. Ducking down, I slid beneath his desk, pulling the chair in as I hid.

My heart began pumping faster as I tried to breathe quietly, listening as the door unlocked and swung open.

"Thank you, Callie. I won't be long."

How the hell was the mayor back here so soon?

The light flipped on, and I froze, hoping he didn't need anything from his desk. The door shut, and I heard footsteps as Elliot crossed the room, stopping in front of the picture that hung over his bookcase. I could tell from the placement of his shoes from the gap at the bottom of the desk.

He stood in place. I heard something creak and then what sounded like a dial spinning, similar to a combination lock. There was a light popping sound and then crinkling paper.

How odd.

Something made a sucking sound and then another click, followed by the picture smacking into the wall.

Holy shit. Elliot had a private safe behind the framed photo of the U.S. Constitution—a copy, of course, not the original.

What did he hide in there?

The mayor walked briskly to the door and flipped the switch. He left, closing the door and locking it behind him.

I blew out a breath, waiting for a couple of minutes to be sure he was gone. Holy shit that had been close.

I stood, turning his monitor back on, relieved to see that everything I had copied was finished. I covered my tracks, returning all the folders and files to how I had found them, logging off his computer.

I had the flash drive in the pocket of my dress pants when I stopped, staring at the picture on the mayor's wall.

Would he have locked his safe? Surely.

I decided to check anyway, carefully moving the picture away from the wall and reaching for the dial. The door popped open, swinging on a hinge. He'd left in such a hurry he didn't push it shut all the way.

Wads of cash, stacks of documents, and several file folders were stuffed inside. This was probably stupid, but I pulled out the file folders and documents, scanning through the sheets that included identification records for some of his employees, receipts for several different Casinos, and photos.

Blackmail photos.

I instantly recognized the emblem on the leather vests in the pictures—Devil's Murder MC. Flipping through the stack, I stopped when I found the face of the V.P.

Raven. Still as handsome as ever with those brutally raw blue eyes and a jaw chiseled from stone. He looked savage in this photograph like something had really pissed him off.

Why was the mayor keeping tabs on their club?

More photos showed the mayor with his arm around each of the missing girls, including Sadie, Callie's sister. Shit. This could be evidence.

I pulled out my phone and started taking snapshots, cataloging all that information for later use. Maybe I could figure out how the missing girls, the bikers, and the Casinos all fit together. There had to be something.

When I finally opened the door, Callie crashed into me, practically sobbing.

“Oh, my God! I thought something had happened to you. You were in there for so long,” she wailed, swiping at the tears on her cheeks. “I’m not sure Mayor Goodman believed I was covering for you while you used the ladies’ room.”

“It was a good cover. I’m fine.” I sat down on one of the couches, pulling out my phone. I showed Callie what I’d found, handing over my cell so she could look at Sadie’s picture.

“She’s in trouble, Bree. I know it. They took her, and I’m never going to see her again!”

“Hey, calm down. We don’t know anything yet, but it’s enough to share with Agent Phillips and maybe get a search warrant.”

“You think?”

“Yes. We need to log off for the night and get out of this office. It’s getting late.”

“Shit,” she cursed. “You’re right. Let’s go.”

My fingers reached into my pocket, clutching the USB drive in my hand. Whatever data was on here was dangerous. I didn’t like the fact that I didn’t have time to go through it. The sooner I handed it over to the FBI, the better I’d feel.

Chapter 5 – Raven

Present time—

“You think he told the truth?” I asked, washing the blood from my hands as Crow backed away from the sink.

He ripped a few paper towels from the roll on the counter and dried off, tossing them into the trash can when finished. “We don’t have much choice but to believe him.”

“Boris has no loyalty to us,” I pointed out.

“I don’t think he’s lyin’, Raven. He said he was done with the torture and questions. Fuckin’ took his own life in front of us. I think he died with a clear conscience.”

Snorting, I didn’t reply to that.

“Maybe he took secrets with him, but at least he told the truth about the girls. I got the impression that he never wanted to hurt them to begin with and was only acting on orders.”

“That doesn’t mean he didn’t deserve to die.”

“Yeah, I agree with you. Just making sense of his suicide.”

We’d taken a hired thug blackmailing Bella and brought him back to The Roost, interrogating Boris in the basement for any information about Brianna and the kidnapping. He finally gave up the location and provided an address after enduring hours of torture and the Iron Maiden. Ended up impaling his body on the spikes inside the chamber and bled to death in front of us, chomping down on a cyanide pill he had kept hidden in his mouth the whole time. Fucking crazy that he didn’t do it sooner.

“I’m calling church. We’ve got shit to discuss and plan for Brianna’s rescue tonight. As soon as it’s dark, we’re gonna head out.”

Good. “Got your back, pres.”

He stomped his way upstairs, hollering for everyone to move their asses. Five minutes later, he banged the gavel down

and filled the club in on what we learned downstairs, tossing an envelope on the table as he finished.

“We sure this isn’t a trap?” Hawk asked. As S.A.A., it was his job to be suspicious of damn near everything. His quick wit, critical thinking skills, and focus protected this club on a daily basis.

“Could be,” Crow mused, “but it doesn’t change the fact that Bella’s sister is in trouble.”

A few heads nodded in agreement.

“What’s the next move, pres?” I asked, staring at the man I knew as not only my new pres but the beating heart of the Devil’s Murder MC. Felt right to see him at the head of the table. Like Lucky Lou had mentioned, only a Holmes should lead the DMMC. It was in his blood.

And that was what Rook wanted.

“We rescue Brianna and protect Bella.”

Bella. His newest obsession.

I didn’t mind the sweet talkin’, sassy, smokin’ hot bartender my pres couldn’t seem to get enough of since he arrived back in town. My issues arose from the danger the entire club faced because of Bella and her sister Brianna. We didn’t need to lose any more members when we were still recovering from the shock of losing Rook.

Hours earlier, we learned Brianna had been kidnapped, and the assholes who took her were trying to fuck around with our club. They forced Bella to pick up a package from the post office and demanded she drop it off at The Roost.

To her credit, she wasn’t stupid and confessed everything to Crow before placing the padded envelope in his office. Now, we sat around the table for church, staring at that fucking envelope as Crow sighed, ripping it open.

No fucking hesitation.

Gotta admit he wasn’t a pussy. Not much scared him, just like his old man.

We didn't know what the fuck was in that envelope, but it didn't take a genius to figure out this meant more trouble.

We had enough shit to deal with since Rook's death. Our president had been murdered, gunned down in the middle of the fucking afternoon, and we still hadn't found all the fuckers responsible yet. Losing our pres had cut deep, and with Crow's return to Henderson, we finally managed to start the healing process.

Pulling out one of my Cuban cigars, I lit the end, puffing until the cherry burned and the spicy, almost sweet flavor hit my tongue. This particular brand was a favorite because of the earthy, woody, and sharp aroma that came from a strong blend of Ligerero leaves. Add in the slower burning rate that enabled each cigar to last longer, and I couldn't ask for a better smoke.

I savored the taste, looking to my pres as he pulled out a bunch of large photographs.

Blackmail.

The old-school way.

With all the technology available, it wasn't often anyone went through the trouble of printing pictures out. Amazing how these shifty motherfuckers thought they could control us with such tactics. It would take a hell of a lot more to intimidate the Devil's Murder.

Crow snorted. "What a bunch of bullshit. These don't prove a goddamn thing other than we're being watched." He tossed the stack across the table for the rest of us to peruse.

I didn't bother picking them up since I could see everything I needed to know from where I sat. "All our legit businesses, including the strip clubs and pawn shops, are being canvassed. Even the towing and repair service jobs that have been faked." Making a noise of disgust, I spit a piece of tobacco leaf from my mouth. "Fucking amateurs. They don't know shit."

"I agree," Hawk added.

"Just a ploy to annoy us," Claw added.

“I don’t know,” Cuckoo mused, chewing on a long stick of red licorice after he snapped off a piece with his teeth. “It could be a way to throw us off the trail if we got too close to the truth.”

Crow ticked his chin at Carrion. “What do you think?”

Carrion. The quiet one. The deadliest among us but also the only crow with a sixth sense. He knew things the rest of us didn’t. His skills, including his ability to tap into the recent past, were downright scary. Visions? I couldn’t say for sure. But I knew to listen when he spoke up.

“Flip them over.”

Crow gathered up the photos, placing each of them face down. Something was drawn on the back of them, lines of some kind that formed boxes or grids.

“Well, shit. I don’t know what the fuck this means.”

I leaned forward, staring as I realized they formed a pattern. “I think it’s a puzzle of some kind.”

“It is,” Carrion agreed. “Try shuffling them around until they fit.”

Crow began moving and spinning each photograph until the lines connected. Puzzle complete, he cursed. “It’s a map.”

“What the hell?” Claw shook his head. “What’s the X? Buried fucking treasure?”

Hawk snorted. “Doubt it. Is this supposed to be a map of Henderson?”

“The kindergarten version,” Talon mumbled. “How the hell do we know where to start? There’re no landmarks or anything else to go on.”

“There’s enough,” Carrion contradicted. “Pres knows.”

All eyes turned to Crow.

“Fuck.” He frowned, dousing the room in silence as he tried to make sense of the bullshit fragment of a map. “Wait. This looks like ... motherfucker!”

I tensed, wondering what upset him.

“This is the neighborhood I grew up in. My fucking house with the goddamn X on it. I recognize the way the streets connect and the grouping of houses.”

“I don’t like this,” I growled, snuffing out my cigar. I’d finish it later. “Something ain’t adding up here.”

“No shit,” Hawk agreed.

“Pres?”

Crow shook his head. “Carrion, can this wait until tomorrow? I don’t know if Brianna has another night. She might not make it past the dawn.”

Carrion closed his eyes, swaying slightly in his chair.

When they opened, solid white greeted us as he tapped into the power of his crow—the only bird among us who didn’t have onyx feathers. Carrion’s crow was white as bone.

“Don’t wait on the girl.” He stood, dismissing himself from church. “I’ll meet you there.”

As the door shut behind him, Talon blew out a breath. “It’s so fucking freaky when he does that shit.”

Falcon had been silent most of the meeting so far, but he flicked his cigarette, dropping ash into a tray on the table. “He’s not been the same since his resurrection. You all know that. He was dead for nearly twenty minutes.”

Falcon brought him back, but Carrion had changed from the experience. Not that he’d ever been what anyone would call normal.

“I trust him and know better than to interfere.” Crow’s words silenced us on the subject. He turned to me. “V.P.? What you thinkin’?”

I’d held my opinion to myself before now.

My club brothers thought I was easy to read. That I was focused and straightforward, and when I said I wanted to seek revenge for Rook, nothin’ would stand in my way. They

weren't wrong. I did crave justice. More than that, I wanted to scar, maim, and spill blood.

But that didn't mean I was some one-dimensional guy who lived at surface level, and there wasn't shit more to it than that. That was where they were wrong. I had layers, like a fucking onion, and peeling them back took time and effort. Only those closest to me fucking cared enough to do it, especially after I lost Sarah. Didn't change the fact that I had thoughts, feelings, and desires, and I kept to myself most of the time.

Everyone thought they understood me. Maybe they did. If others knew how much I held back, they'd lose their fucking minds at the chaos that churned within me, just waiting for the chance to break free.

I suppose we all felt that way since Rook was murdered. Crow, most of all.

"I won't rest easy until this is settled," I finally replied, locking eyes with my pres. "The only thing I can think about is hunting the bastards down who're responsible. I want blood for blood—an eye for an eye. Goddamn vengeance and suffering," I growled, slamming a fist on the table.

Crow's hand landed firmly on my shoulder. I never noticed that he had moved. "I understand, and you're not alone. We'll get our revenge. Ain't nobody letting that shit go, including me, Raven."

Nodding, I cracked my knuckles, tapping the table as he dropped his hand and moved into the chair at the head of the table, taking his place again. "But I won't let innocents suffer either. We rescue Brianna first, then focus on this map and visit your childhood home. There're still too many questions and not enough answers."

"Agreed. I don't want to sit on this, so we move fast."

"What do you want, pres?"

He poured a glass of whiskey from the bottle he'd brought with him and took a long sip. "Club business first. Financials. Claw?"

Claw stood, clutching a sheet of paper in his hand. He hated staring at a computer screen for too long and preferred to do the books the old-fashioned way. Still, he entered the info into the club's private accounts on the laptop kept in Crow's office that was password protected, and a bunch of other high-tech shit Eagle Eye figured out for us since most of the brothers weren't as savvy with computers.

"The towing and repo business is booming. Never has been an issue being so close to Las Vegas. We're bringing in consistent income and could afford to buy a couple of new trucks and replace some of the equipment."

"That's fine. Run the numbers for me, Claw. I need to see that shit on paper."

"You got it, pres. The pawn shops do well, but the guns-for-hire business is our cash cow. That's where we make the real money. And we need to be vetting our clients well before agreeing to take them on."

A few of the others agreed. We couldn't be too careful right now.

"The only issue I've seen is the one we discussed, pres. The robberies at the pawn shops and the vandalism on our repo trucks. Can't shake the feelin' it's connected."

"And the losses?"

"Not much. Yet. But it could be a problem in the future."

Crow finished his drink, pushing the glass aside. "Yeah. I hear you. One of the reasons we're bringing it up in church."

As V.P., I managed the towing and repo business for the club. It was my job to ensure shit went smoothly and the books were clean before they were scrutinized by Claw and the numbers crunched. Since that was what the tax man saw as our primary source of income, I made sure everything was by the book.

Our club earned with multiple ventures, though, because that was the smartest way to ensure we never got pinned down with too much cash in one spot. Hawk, our Sergeant at Arms, managed the pawn shops.

The other business that generated cash for the club and the one Claw referred to as “guns for hire” was our security business, Jackdaw Security. The books showed legit jobs and a modest intake of funds. That was for show. A legitimate way to clarify how we ended up with extra cash that couldn’t be explained away by the pawn shops or towing company.

The truth was, our club had been hired many times to take down undesirables in the Henderson and Las Vegas area, mostly Clark, Lincoln, and Nye counties. Nearly all of us held a Nevada Security and Private Investigator License thanks to Rook and his agreement to help the club fund the start-up over fifteen years earlier.

All the paperwork was legit. The clients and their needs? Not even fucking close to being legal on a good day.

Crow’s elbows came down hard on the table when he leaned forward. “We need to talk about the fuckers trying to hurt this club, starting with the murdering bastards who killed Rook.”

The room went quiet as an uncomfortable silence spun out, no one daring to speak until our pres made a decision and put it up for a vote.

His jaw locked, and the struggle to remain in control and not lose his shit was obvious to us all. When he finally spoke, his tone was calm, measured, and carried a conviction not a soul in this room doubted.

“This club became a target. I don’t know how or why yet, but I’m going to find out. This envelope proves our enemies are closing in after my father’s death. I don’t know how it’s all connected, but I do know Bella and her sister Brianna are part of this too.”

He took a deep breath, pushing it out as he stared at each of us around the table.

“The women are innocent, and I won’t let them suffer for shit that ain’t their fault. That’s not how this club is gonna run. Rook didn’t allow it. I won’t either. So if anyone disagrees

with it, there's the fuckin' door. Show your way out and leave your cut on the seat before you do."

No one moved. I didn't think they would.

"Good. Now let's get down to business and figure out the plan for tonight."



TWO HOURS LATER, I rode out of The Roost next to my pres, followed by Hawk, Claw, Cuckoo, Talon, and Carrion. Falcon, Eagle Eye, Jay, Swift, and the prospects remained at The Roost with Bella. No way pres was letting his new woman place herself in danger.

We arrived at the address Boris had given us, stashing our bikes far enough away that they didn't betray our presence.

"Time to go quiet," Crow ordered. "That means you, Cuckoo."

"Shit, pres. Why you always bustin' my balls?"

Crow didn't bother to answer him, not that Cuckoo was lookin' for an actual reply.

As we approached the building ahead, I crouched outside the fence, tapping into my crow and his sight. Each of us could use the crow to see through his eyes and often did so to scout the area around us.

Above, higher than anyone would catch from below, I rode on the current of the wind, catching Crow's bird flying a little higher than mine. My wings spread out, gliding over the grounds below, and the motorcycles gathered in a long row. A dozen lined up outside the house, and they weren't friends.

The logo painted on one of the tanks proved we weren't the first to arrive and that our enemy was inside. A loud caw escaped, warning the others. Flapping wings joined my own as

I swooped down, landing on a bike and dropping a little present on the chrome.

“Motherfucker,” Crow cursed, opening his eyes as I smirked. “Dirty Death MC.”

“Fuckin’ knew it,” Hawk spat, cracking his neck.

“We’re ready,” Talon added, slipping on his brass knuckles.

I had my Glock and the two blades I always carried strapped to my back in their leather scabbards. Guns were too easy, too quick. Swords and knives required skill and finesse, weapons created for warriors.

Cuckoo tilted his head back, belting out a melodic “Kraaaa!”

Crow shot him a look like he was an idiot because it wasn’t quiet and could have alerted someone of our presence.

“That’s why the pres already warned you,” Hawk chastised, elbowing Cuckoo.

I might have laughed if not for Cuckoo’s ridiculous outfit. Rainbow hair stuck out in all directions from his head, the wig he wore unruly and full of tangled curls. Clown makeup added to the demented vibe when combined with the fake vampire teeth in his mouth and the red bulbous nose.

Claw lifted his hand and squeezed it hard, eliciting a yelp from Cuckoo.

“I swear to fuck,” Crow threatened, “I will fucking scratch both of your eyes out. Pay attention.”

Droplets of blood had been splattered onto Cuckoo’s face like he had just walked off the set of a slasher film. When he grinned in response, it was undeniably sinister but also ridiculous. Beneath his cut, he wore a tie-dyed t-shirt with more blood splatter and little rainbows all over it.

Fucking hell.

“I’m not going to comment anymore about you,” Crow growled as Cuckoo laughed with glee, holding up a machete.

“I can’t wait to see their expressions when I run in.”

Sick fucker.

Hawk slapped him on the back hard. “You’re a goddamn sexy clown like Pennywise.”

Cuckoo sniffled. “Don’t make me emotional, man.”

“Focus,” Crow ordered, pleased when the smiles faded and they grew serious.

I heard a faint scream, and my body tensed. We needed to move. A woman was in trouble, and we were wasting time.

“I heard someone crying when my crow flew over the compound. I’m bettin’ it’s Brianna. She’s in the corner on the northern side, east of our position.”

Not far from our position. Good.

“We move in fast, and if you encounter any Dirty Death members, we’re taking them back to The Roost. We need to know their plans, how they’re involved with this kidnapping, and the envelope we received.”

“What about anyone else?” I asked to clarify.

“Kill anyone who tries to stop you. The kidnapper is mine.”

“You got it, pres.”

The fence didn’t hinder us as we hopped over it, landing together as a group in the dusty dirt not far from the DDMC bikes covered in bird shit. We needed a distraction.

Crow ticked his head at Hawk. “Burn ’em up.”

Hawk flashed a grin, moving through the shadows, keeping hidden before he reached the first motorcycle. The Harley parked in front belonged to Undertaker, the pres of the Dirty Death MC. That club had been a rival with ours for over a decade thanks to the feud over territory and Undertaker’s infamous temper, not to mention Rook’s refusal to back down.

Hawk pulled out a cheap bottle of whiskey, taking a couple of quick swallows before pouring the liquor over the row of

bikes. When it was empty, he opened one more, ensuring there was enough liquid to accomplish destruction.

He ran back to the shadows, dropping next to Crow's side as he panted. "Too fucking hot for this shit, pres."

"It's about to get a lot hotter," Crow replied, ticking his head toward the Harleys.

Cuckoo clicked his vampire teeth together. "I've got the starter, brothers."

Crow stood, pulling out his gun, pausing to ensure no one had spotted us yet. "Stay sharp. Raven, Hawk, Carrion, you're with me. Talon, Claw, Cuckoo, I want this place lit up like a goddamn fourth of July celebration."

"Fuck yeah," Claw exclaimed.

"I'm gonna enjoy this," Cuckoo added, pulling out a lighter and touching it to an alcohol-soaked cloth partially stuffed into an empty bottle. He threw the Molotov at the row of bikes. Glass shattered, breaking into sharp shards as sparks scattered over the whiskey-soaked ground. Fire erupted along the trail, the hungry flames climbing up the rubber and chrome of the motorcycles with eager flickers.

A few shouts could be heard as DDMC members rushed outside, hollering at one another to contain the flames.

Crow didn't stick around for what happened next, rushing up the steps that led to a door on the northern end of the building. I rushed after him, drawing my own weapon and aiming at anyone who dared to cross our path. Kicking down the door, Crow entered. The first guy to pop his head around the corner got a bullet in his brain—no cut, so no one useful.

Somewhere close, a woman screamed.

"Shit!" Crow cursed, running through the lower portion of the compound until he located the stairs. Bullets exploded from our guns. We hit several more men, none with distinguishing marks, cuts, or tattoos. Where was the rest of the DDMC?

At the top of the stairs, Crow turned left. I stayed tight on his six, watching for trouble. We didn't hesitate to kick down the door, standing back as multiple weapons opened fire in our direction. Crow dropped low, his eyes fading to white as he used his crow's enhanced hunting senses to pinpoint Brianna's exact location. He found it, calling the crows to join in the upcoming mobbing.

There was only one window at the back of the room, facing the east. The exhilarating feel of my crow's freedom and his ruthless hunger for a fresh kill pushed through our bond. Several crows joined in, cawing out their excitement as we raced toward the window.

Slam!

The glass cracked, splintering as more crows pressed against the pane and clawed at the surface, shattering the barrier within seconds.

Black birds swarmed inside, attacking the men in the room surrounding a young woman on a bed. Brianna. It had to be. I didn't get a good look at her face. It was too dark. She screeched, swinging her arms and kicking her legs as I noticed the two motherfuckers holding her down.

Torn clothing hung from her body as she lashed out. She'd been beaten. Bruises, scratches, blood—they stood out on her pale skin, marring the surface. I couldn't tell if we interrupted an assault or if this was only a repeat of continued acts of violence. Either way, they wouldn't survive.

Heart thundering in my chest, I saw her tear-stained face as she met my gaze, shoving her long hair out of eyes.

And everything around me faded for several heartbeats.

Thump, thump ... thump, thump.

Green eyes. A heart-shaped face. *Babygirl.*

A burst of happiness lit me up inside ... until I realized what finding her here meant.

I never put it together. I didn't see the connection before now.

Crow never said Bella's last name and I never thought to ask. There'd been too much distraction and chaos over the last few days. Brianna Hart. Bella ... Hart.

Noooooooooooooo!

My crow burst free from my body, flying off in a bloodthirsty rage.

I. Lost. My. Shit.

A *Kraaaa* exploded from my mouth that shook the walls as I rushed forward, shoving my gun in my holster and ripping the two blades from behind my back, pulling them free of their sheaths and gripping the handles in my fists. I preferred hand-to-hand combat over guns and viciously attacked the two men who held her down, my fury consuming me as a red haze fell over my vision.

The first was pulled from Brianna's side; his throat slashed open swiftly as I flicked my wrist, slicing the blade in a wide arc. Satisfied he wouldn't survive, I shoved his body to the side, watching as he slid several feet in a crimson trail. I vaguely realized he twitched, grasping his neck as he bled out.

The second I kicked to the ground, dropping onto his chest, ripping apart the guy's chest and abdomen with my blades before backing away and letting the crows feast on his flesh. His screams filled the room as the crows grew bold, almost drunk on the feeding frenzy, pecking away at his eyes and vulnerable organs.

The third man in the room tried to run out, and we caught him, noticing the Dirty Death MC cut he wore. The two men who had held down Brianna also wore the same cuts. Their club would answer for this. The basement would run red with their blood before the night was over.

Brianna trembled, rocking on the bed, covering her ears as she wept. My chest grew tight at the thought that I had traumatized her further. Her fear tainted the air, and my crow hated it. Returning my blades to their sheaths, I approached the bed with my hands in the air. She didn't notice.

I scooped her up, snarling at anyone who ventured close, even my mc brothers. I couldn't explain my reaction. The need to protect her was so fierce I would have fought any man in my way, friend or foe.

My chest ached, my lungs burning as I struggled to pull oxygen in, desperate to breathe as I clutched Brianna tighter against me.

Mine. MINE!

"We need to move!" Crow shouted, spurring me into action.

I ran out of the house, clutching the young woman I'd had the fortune to meet three times in my life. She appeared dazed, confused, and incoherent. I worried she could mentally break down. I had no way of knowing what she'd endured before our rescue. It tore me up.

As I joined my brothers, I noticed Cuckoo's wig was askew, and his makeup was half wiped off, probably from sweat. It was still hot as fuck outside, even for summer.

"All clear?" Crow asked, exiting the house.

"Yeah, pres," Talon answered. "Got us a couple of prisoners to interrogate. They're already on their way back to The Roost. Claw and Hawk just left."

Cuckoo opened his mouth wide. "Caw!"

Poor timing. Cuckoo thrived on that shit.

Carrion pushed off the nearest wall, emerging from the shadows. "Got a problem, pres."

That was the first time I heard him speak since we arrived.

"Talk to me."

"Found this." He shoved a piece of parchment into Crow's hand. The words were smeared like the paper had gotten wet, and the surface crinkled. "It was in the trash. Same room with the girl."

Nodding, he read over the words, his brows drawing together in a frown.

“The numbers are coordinates.”

“To where?” Crow asked, his voice gruff.

“The kidnapper? Or the DDMC hideout? Don’t fucking know,” Carrion answered.

“Okay.”

His dark gaze held Crow in place. “It’s important. Check it out right away.”

“I’ll take care of it as soon as we’re back at The Roost.”

Carrion gave a brief chin lift and left, returning to the shadows before I heard his bike rumbling down the road. He would be in the basement when we returned.

Carrion loved his toys.

“Let’s roll out. Brianna needs to see Falcon.”

He read my mind. “I’m right behind you.”

Chapter 6 – Bree

I met my hero when I was sweet sixteen, just one week after my birthday.

Raven probably never considered the impression he made the day he saved a young girl who nearly died in a ravenous fire. Maybe he didn't know that fate had sent him into my life on numerous occasions, always when I needed him the most.

At sixteen, he pulled me from the burning wreck of a vehicle when the car my boyfriend had been driving swerved off the road and crashed at an intersection, slammed into a pole, and tossed his body onto the road in the middle of a dust storm. The black mustang was totaled. Jason didn't survive.

Meeting Raven that day changed my life forever, but I wouldn't figure that out until we met again five years later.

At twenty-two, he provided comfort on one of the worst days of my life. I lost my Gram, and the shock left me reeling, unable to cope as I tried to be a pillar of support for my sister.

Once again, he was there—a solid shoulder to cry on.

The rock I needed to give me strength.

My hero always knew when I needed him. Always.

He rescued me from a burning vehicle right before it exploded. He found me on the day my Gram died, a different rescue but one I needed.

So when he stormed the house where I was held prisoner, I wasn't shocked. No, I knew he'd come for me. I couldn't explain *how* I knew, but I did.

Like a vengeful god, he pulled those Dirty Death MC members away from me, dealing justice the only way thugs like that understood. Bloodshed. Violence. Brutality.

He killed to save me.

The shock of it hit hard, and when added to all I had experienced in the last week, I checked out. My mind blanked. The trauma completely overwhelmed me.

I didn't realize what was happening until I saw my sister and heard her cry my name.

“Bree!”

Her arms wrapped around me two seconds later as she sobbed, hugging me tight as I remained cradled in the strength of Raven's hold.

“I love you. We're going to get through this, Bree. I promise. I'm right by your side, and I'm not leaving.” Her fingers gripped mine as the tears streaked her face.

“Bell.”

Everything felt surreal.

My head felt foggy, and I blinked, catching the panicked look on Raven's face before everything went black.

I couldn't say how long ago that happened. Hours? Days?

My body felt tired and weak, bruised and cold. So cold.

I pulled the blankets tighter around me, shivering.

Where was I? What happened to Bree and Raven?

My gaze swept the unfamiliar room, glad I hadn't returned to my apartment yet. Everything felt off, and I didn't want to wonder if anything would ever feel normal again. Having my sister around helped. Just knowing she was near helped reduce my anxiety.

I felt numb like the full scope of everything that happened to me had yet to sink in. The darkest hours of my life were supposed to be over now. I was rescued, brought to a safe location, and protected by Raven and his club. A bunch of rowdy bikers I had never met until Raven brought me here. The shock of seeing my sister with a motorcycle club president named Crow when I arrived had worn off, and now it made sense.

Bella was always the wild, rebellious daughter. I was the smart, shy, quiet, book-loving one. We couldn't be more opposite. That didn't change the fact that I loved and adored my sibling. Was she a part of their world now?

My thoughts were a little too scattered.

I rubbed my temples, sinking into the mattress.

Sleep. That was what I needed. I could face everything else once I felt rested. Exhausted, I closed my eyes again.



RAVEN

SHE DIDN'T REMEMBER me.

There was no recognition in the dull green of Brianna's eyes.

What did I expect? That she thought of me every moment over the last five years? Or dreamed of me every night, hoping for our paths to cross again?

Stupid. Immature. Unrealistic.

And yet ... secret desires I never spoke aloud, not daring to give them life whispered in my head.

We met only twice before last night, the second time on one of the worst days of my life. Arguably, it had to be the same for her.

I buried a wife. She buried her grandmother.

The same cemetery, yet two different and unrelated funerals.

Fate sure liked to laugh at my expense.

The memory of the day returned ...

....



"I'M SORRY, RAVEN."

Rook gripped my shoulder, his voice lowering to avoid being overheard.

"I wish there was something I could say to take away the pain you feel, brother. Seeing you like this fucking kills me."

"I know, Rook." I sighed, staring at the casket that held Sarah's body. We'd hardly known one another the last few years. I felt guilty that her death didn't hurt my heart as much as it should. "I'm going for a walk. Need to clear my head."

He didn't argue that I should stick around to watch her lower into the ground. I didn't want to see it. That was a memory I didn't need haunting me in the future.

A path winded away from the casket and mourners, and I followed it, walking until I found a long lane of crypts. How macabre.

My shoulder leaned against the side as my thoughts consumed me. Another loss I wasn't prepared to handle.

First, my son. Now, my wife.

It was fucked up that Sarah committed suicide. Depression had stolen her away from everyone. She isolated herself. Grew despondent. I should have tried harder to make her listen when I suggested she get help.

She kept pushing me away, and I eventually stopped trying to make things right. Fuck.

I pulled out a smoke and lit the end, barely inhaling as it burned down, flicking the butt to the ground as I stomped on it with my boot.

Fuck. I didn't want to be here. My hand rose to my chest, pushing against my cut over my heart.

I pushed off the wall, feeling like the world was closing in on me. Maybe I just needed to get on my bike and ride. Leave this all behind me.

I hadn't walked more than a few yards when I felt a shift in the air, and my head lifted, catching the sweet, delicate scent I'd only encountered one other time in my life.

No fuckin' way.

I slowly turned, facing the young woman I rescued five years earlier when I pulled her from that burning mustang.

"Green eyes," I whispered, my voice hoarse as I cleared my throat. "How are you, babygirl?"

Fuck, she was beautiful. As gorgeous as I remembered, with the same sultry curves and killer smile.

"Hi, Raven. I'm good." Her smile felt forced, but it was her pain-filled, tearful eyes that gripped my heart with a vicious tug.

If someone hurt her, they'd pay.

"Your eyes tell a different story, sugar. What has you so sad?"

"My Gram," she blubbered, fresh tears spilling over and down her cheeks, "she's gone."

"Aw, babygirl. I'm sorry." I closed the few feet of distance that separated us, wrapping my arms around her, suddenly consumed with how perfectly she fit against me. "It's always tough losing the ones you love."

My voice cracked, betraying my own sorrow.

"You lose someone too?"

I hesitated, not wanting to put another burden on her that she didn't need. "Yes. My wife."

If she was surprised to learn I'd been married, she didn't show it.

"I'm sorry, Raven." Her cheek rested over my heart. "I'm sorry for us both now."

My hand rubbed her back, hoping to soothe her as I thought over what she said.

“You’re sad for me because I lost my wife?”

“Yes. Your heart is aching. No one should have to go through that.”

Fuck. I wanted this girl. Fierce possessiveness and need flashed through my body. She was too young. Half my fucking age. Nothing good would come from bringing her into my world. I lifted my knuckles, brushing them lightly across her cheek. “If only you were a little older.”

“I’m twenty-one,” she replied with a slight attitude.

I couldn’t help laughing—such a little spitfire. “Not insulting you, precious. Just a fact.”

“I’m old enough to know myself and what I want in life.”

“Oh? Tell me.” Maybe I shouldn’t have asked, but I couldn’t resist.

“The man from my dreams. My rescuer. You,” I clarified. “I tried to find you, to thank you, but you disappeared.”

Yeah, I did. I left once the ambulance arrived, letting the professionals help her. I had a club waiting on me.

This angel didn’t need to ride with a devil. I’d only bring heartbreak. My relationship with Sarah was proof enough. I could never forgive myself if I hurt Brianna, and it was inevitable with my life as an outlaw.

“Damn, babygirl. You’re gonna make a man real happy one day.” Maybe this was insanity, but I had to taste her lips just once. I lowered my head, capturing her mouth in a feather-soft kiss. “Wish I could be the one for you, beautiful, but I’m not. You deserve more than an old biker and the rough life I lead.”

My palm cradled her face, staring into eyes that held such promise, such innocence.

Caw...caw.

The crow landed on a branch of a nearby tree, staring right at us. He didn't agree with my choice to push her away.

"I'm so glad I pulled you from that car, Brianna Hart."

She gasped. Yeah, I knew her name. I made a point to find out after I rescued her. Why? I couldn't say other than I needed to know she was in this world, breathing, alive.

"You didn't want to find me?"

I frowned. "Never said that." A sigh escaped as I lifted my head, scanning the cemetery. Crow and the club were ready to leave. I didn't have much time. "You've got to live your life, sweetheart. Find what makes that beautiful heart of yours soar and go after it." I tugged her against me, memorizing how she felt because this was goodbye.

"Raven, please," she begged.

I didn't answer, dropping a kiss on her head. Walking away from her was one of the hardest things I'd ever done, and it didn't make sense. We barely knew one another, but our souls had connected, and I wouldn't forget that.

The crow followed, soaring above my head. He squawked his displeasure, and I ignored him.

I joined my brothers and fired up my bike.

She followed me. I could feel it.

Sunglasses in place, I gave no indication that I caught her presence on my right, rushing toward the parking lot. My head turned slightly in her direction before I lifted my chin, pulled back on the throttle, and rolled down the road out of sight.

I couldn't help feeling I left a little piece of my heart behind.



FIVE YEARS. THAT WAS how long I'd survived without seeing her again. The woman in my arms hadn't changed much since we last met. The differences were so minor I would have missed them if I wasn't holding her so close. Slightly curvier and more rounded than the last time we met, her body had redistributed the weight into her ass and breasts. Not that I was complaining. The change was sexy as fuck.

She still had that ability to draw me in and spark my interest. She aroused me, and not just my cock.

So young. So fucking innocent. So achingly beautiful.

The same sweetness I remembered coated her skin in that irresistible blend of silken rose petals, clean spring rain, and a hint of spice.

She'd been through hell and back. That much was clear. Dirty, traumatized, and taken from her home against her will, it was no wonder she passed out. Red fingerprints glared from her skin like someone had held her down for a long time.

My lip lifted in a snarl, rage blinding me for several seconds as I sucked air into my lungs.

Brianna didn't deserve any of this. Yet here she lay, vulnerable and beaten, assaulted, bruised, and once again placed in my path.

Why? Why did fate bring her this close and dangle her within my reach? How many times would I be forced to watch her suffer?

My crow seethed with anger, his fury boiling under my skin as I contemplated all the ways I would torture those who harmed her. And then ... the guilt settled in.

Should I have done something different the last time we met? Was I a fool who left her unprotected and vulnerable? Could I have prevented her kidnapping?

Would it have mattered if I'd asked for her number and kept in contact? I'd never know the answer to that question, which would probably haunt me forever.

I took her to one of the guest rooms, yelling for everyone to get the fuck out. She needed rest. Protection. I could give her that.

Hours faded, and I didn't move from her side. All I kept thinking about was that day at the cemetery. It fucking haunted me in so many ways, and not just because of Sarah's death. I should never have walked away from Brianna.

I let the age difference and my life in the MC become a reason for convincing myself she was better off without me.

But I'd been so fucking wrong, tragically, horribly wrong.

The door opened, and Bella slipped inside, quietly shutting it behind her. Her gaze swept over me, noting the chair pulled close to the bed. I sat on Brianna's right, watching her sleep, a personally appointed protector.

"How is she?"

"Still out. Not stirred at all since I tucked her in."

"You were the one who saved Bree, weren't you?"

Saved? That remained to be seen.

My chest tightened when I glanced over the bruises and various wounds on Brianna's body. The healing process would take time. "It was a club effort."

"What happened when you found her?"

"That's not my business to say," I replied carefully, not wanting to upset Bella further. She didn't need to hear the horrible details.

"Raven, I need to know. She'll tell me everything when she's ready, but I need to know what happened when you found her. Was she alone?"

I shook my head. "No."

"And?"

Suddenly furious with the reminder, I shoved to my feet, moving away from the bed. "Two men were holding her down.

I don't know how much happened before I arrived, but she wasn't undressed completely."

Conflicting emotions waged war before her expression crumbled. "Shit. Tell me."

"They had her pinned against the mattress. She fought off two men. Fucking brave if you want the truth."

She nodded, clearly wanting to hear it all.

"You sure? It's not pretty."

"Yes," she answered firmly.

Okay, I wasn't going to hold back then.

"I slit the first motherfucker's throat, and it felt too quick. I was fucking pissed they hurt Brianna, and I attacked the other one, slicing him up before the crows ate him alive."

Her eyes widened, and she swallowed, making an odd sound in her throat. "Holy shit." She paused, thinking over my words. "Crows?"

Scowling, I didn't want to reveal club secrets. That was up to my pres.

"You need to talk to Crow about this. Not my place. You should know the assholes who did this fucking suffered. Not enough, but they didn't die easily."

"Thank you." She stared at me a moment and then nodded.

I turned toward Brianna, staring at the young woman who once again entered my life when I least expected it. "She's special."

"Yes," Bella agreed.

"I'm glad I was there."

"Me too, Raven."

I didn't want to leave Brianna, but I had to check in with Crow and get my turn on the Dirty Death assholes downstairs. "I'll return in a few hours to check in on you both. Red will be outside. He'll grab anything you need. Just let him know."

"I appreciate it."



LEAVING THE ROOM, I entered the hall, heading toward the basement with purpose. My boots pounded the stairs as I rushed down, finding Carrion, Hawk, Crow, and Cuckoo bloodied and fired up.

I cracked my knuckles. “I’m ready, pres.”

“Have at it,” he snarled, gesturing to the two dumb fuckers strung up by their wrists and dangling from the ceiling.

My rage unleashed.

I’d kept in control until now, but the images in my head of Brianna’s injuries surfaced, and I let the old crow have his way. Blind fury spilled from my fists as I began to beat the two Dirty Death MC members without mercy.

I never even asked a question. It wasn’t possible. All I wanted was for these motherfuckers to get what they deserved.

They attacked my woman.

Wait. Mine?

Fuck it. It was true.

The ruthless brutality continued so long that Crow finally pulled me away, slamming my body against the wall with Hawk’s help.

“Killing them won’t give us what we need.”

“I don’t care,” I snarled. “They fucking tried to rape her, pres.”

He scrubbed a hand down his face. “Fuck. I know.”

Hawk glared at our prisoner. “He ain’t gonna tell us no more right now, pres. Give it a few hours, and we’ll come back down.”

These motherfuckers weren't as easy to flip as Crow hoped. The first was too weak, and he died before we could learn anything new. The second guy hung from the beams in the ceiling, and his limp body wasn't giving anything else away for at least a few hours. His battered frame needed a break before we began round two. Crow didn't like it. Hell, I was furious, but we needed to listen to Hawk.

Crow sighed. "I'm gonna go check on Bella. Let me know if anything changes."

"Will do, pres."

I watched Crow climb the stairs, knowing he was finally ready to claim Bella. I could see it. His crow was taking charge, and that little woman had no idea how fiercely Crow cared for her already, even though it had only been days since they met.

When fate sent the right woman into your life, you didn't waste the chance. When the crow said she was the one, you mated. It was that simple.

Until it wasn't.

I closed my eyes, thinking of Sarah and her loss, and then feeling guilty because I didn't have the same sadness inside that used to consume me.

A different woman had taken residence in my head, working her way into my heart, and a part of me fought it because it shouldn't be possible.

Crows mated for life.

So why the hell did I ache for Brianna when I had already met my mate?

Scrubbing a hand down my face in sudden exhaustion, I trudged up the stairs, moving down the hall and toward the guest room. Red stood guard outside the door.

"Crow in there?"

"Yeah."

"Stay put until your pres says otherwise."

“No problem, Raven.”

I turned the knob slowly, hoping I didn't disturb Brianna inside. I sensed she rested deeply and needed it.

Bella lifted her head from the bed where she'd been asleep, watching over her sister, looking up at Crow. “I have no idea how long I've been out.”

“Probably a couple of hours,” I answered, shutting the door behind me. “Figured it was time I gave you a break, Bella. Pres wants some time with you. If Brianna wakes up, you'll be the first to know.”

“Thanks, Raven.”

“Anytime, honey.”

Crow reached for Bella's hand and held it firmly, leading her from the room. Our gaze locked briefly, and he ticked his head in thanks before leaving me alone with Brianna.

Vigilant, I watched over her again, willing to do whatever was necessary to ensure her recovery.

Chapter 7 – Raven

““**W**hat the fuck are you sayin’, Eagle Eye?”
“These coordinates show the hidden location of Undertaker’s main residence.”

Crow frowned. “Why the fuck would it be written down on a piece of scrap paper in the trash? In the same fucking room that we found Brianna in?”

“I can’t answer that for you, pres.”

“I don’t like this,” I growled.

“It’s fucking suspicious,” Hawk agreed.

“A trap,” Claw added.

Crow began pacing the room, mulling over this newest information.

“I don’t know what to make of this, but I don’t doubt Undertaker is settin’ us up somehow. That’s why I haven’t gone back to my house yet.”

Carrion pushed off the wall in the corner as his giant frame moved silently forward. “You need to send someone to check it out. Told you not to wait too long.”

Crow sighed. “Fine. Claw, ride out with Jay, and check into this.” He pulled out a ring of keys, slipping one off. “Here’s the house key. Keep a low profile. Wait until it’s dark, and let me know what you find. Be thorough.”

“On it, pres.”

“Church is dismissed.” He picked up the gavel, slammed it down, and left the room.

I hadn’t seen him this agitated since he returned.

It was hours before I saw him again.

Crow poked his head inside the room, gesturing for me to join him out into the hall.

“Eagle Eye found a bunch of shit on that flash drive.”

“I knew he would,” I confided.

“Yeah, I hear you. The mayor is dirty as fuck, and he’s in deep with the Dirty Death MC. He owes them a chunk of change, and they’ve been using him for their dirty work and to avoid the feds. Buyin’ and sellin’ properties for cheap and then raisin’ the prices, selling them to adjoining property owners who don’t want to lose their businesses because of the economy, charging high rents.”

“The mayor? What the fuck?”

“Yeah. Brianna worked as one of his staff.”

“So she saw things she wasn’t supposed to, huh?”

“Yeah, she did.”

That explained why Undertaker kidnapped her. She got in his way.

“Brianna found a bunch of emails, documents, and bills of sale, and she gathered up all the evidence. She was plannin’ to take it to a guy she knew in the FBI.”

Fuck, babygirl. Why did you risk your safety like that?

“They must have gotten to her before she could hand the intel over.”

“Yep. They kidnapped her from her apartment and threatened and beat her. Eagle Eye said there’s access to video feeds used at the capitol building downtown. The lower levels lead to tunnels underground, including a room they use for sick shit like this.”

“Fucking hell,” I cursed.

“It gets worse.” He clenched his fists, rolling his shoulders back in agitation. “They were going to kill Brianna and Bella, Raven. They’re on a hit list. Brianna knew too fucking much, and when Bella got involved, they decided the girls needed to be silenced.”

“Fuck!” I roared, slamming my fist into the nearest wall. “Are they coming to The Roost?”

“Eagle Eye thinks it’s a possibility. We need to get the girls into hiding. Undertaker wants Brianna. He’s willing to do anything to get his hands on her. He almost did when we rescued her. Brianna would have been gone if we delayed another few hours.”

Goddamn, that was close.

“Did he learn all that from the fucking USB drive?”

“Eagle Eye said he did. Brianna was crazy to hold onto it. If they found it, they would have killed her.”

“Maybe she knew that, and it bought her the time she needed so we could rescue her.”

“Maybe.” He cracked his neck, fighting against his crow. Knowing Bella was in danger didn’t sit well with him. “I’m going to call Grim. We’re leaving within the hour.”

“The Tonopah Reapers. Good call, pres.”

The Royal Bastards MC were among the most ruthless motherfuckers in Nevada. Grim and his club were brothers we could count on when shit went down, and I was glad Rook kept up that connection over the years. And in a pinch, they knew we had their back too.

Rook met Grim over a decade earlier on a run and needed a place to lay low. He’d heard of the Tonopah RBMC and their strange abilities. A perfect match for our crows. They formed a bond over whiskey, pussy, and a dedication to their way of life. The rest was history.

Brianna didn’t wake up before we left, and we decided to transport her in a cage. I volunteered to ride with her, determined to ensure she arrived safely at the RBMC clubhouse, the Crossroads.

Dozens of bikes revved their engines, sending a chill down my spine. I’d been an axel addict for as long as I could remember. Even as a kid, I’d put up pictures I’d torn from magazines and stick them up on my bedroom walls. Just from the sound, I could identify every brand of bike that roared to life in my vicinity, but Harley Davidson owned my dark soul.

There was just something about a Harley.

Crow stood beside me, glancing inside the SUV where Brianna was resting on the seat. “Seems strange she won’t wake up.”

“Maybe it’s all she’s been through. Can’t blame her for needing a break from reality.”

“Yeah, I suppose so.” He rubbed the back of his neck, casting a worried look at Bella. She was tucking a blanket around Bree, making sure she was comfortable and warm.

“We ride straight to Tonopah. No stops. Right?”

“Yeah,” Crow confirmed. “And if shit goes south, take her to that safehouse out in Goldfield. Only a handful of people know about it. Me, you, Hawk, and Eagle Eye. I’ll meet you there.”

“I remember the location.”

“Good.”

Twenty minutes later, we left the parking lot of The Roost, riding in dark SUVs with tinted windows and followed by an entourage of Devil’s Murder MC members on iron beasts that rumbled in warning. We traveled from Henderson to Tonopah—nearly three and a half hours on the open road and vulnerable to attack.

None came.

When we reached the gate outside the Crossroads, I relaxed, knowing we had plenty of brothers to watch our back. Brianna would be safe.

A prospect opened up and led us in, closing the gate as RBMC members shouted greetings, setting up a perimeter and taking posts inside the towers recently erected around the property. They were new since our last visit. Our club wasn’t the only one to face trouble.

Grim greeted us, slapping my back and Crow’s, ushering us inside. Everyone filed in, but I lagged behind, anxious to ensure Brianna was taken care of first.

Grim said we could use a guest room on the second floor, and I followed, taking a few minutes to look the place over and settle her on the bed with Bella's guidance. I didn't let a single soul into the room after that and didn't give a fuck when I caught members of both clubs staring in curiosity.

The long night ahead began, and I sat down, wanting a smoke but unwilling to light up around Bree. I fidgeted. Paced. Waited for a decision from Crow and Grim's meeting, knowing they called church right after we arrived.

Bella fell asleep hours ago next to her sister. She held her sister's hand, and I swallowed hard, hoping Bree woke soon.

The door opened, and Crow entered. "We're heading out."

I nodded. "I'm stayin'."

He sighed. "If that's what you want."

"It is."

Tension flowed between us.

"What does she mean to you, Raven? I've known you a long ass time, and you've never been like this, not even with Sarah."

"I know," I admitted. "I think, I *know*, she's my mate, Crow."

His eyes widened. "I thought Sarah," he began.

"No. Not like this. I was fucking wrong about a lot of things."

He stared at me, blinked, then walked forward to grip my shoulder, giving it a hard squeeze. "I see. Do what you must because you're still my V.P. This club needs you."

"I ain't goin' nowhere, pres."

"That's all I need to hear."



BRIANNA STIRRED, TURNING on her side as she yawned, blinking her eyes.

“Hey there, babygirl.”

She startled, sitting up and glancing around the room. “Where am I?” Her voice sounded anxious.

“The Crossroads. Biker friends. You’re safe.”

She nodded, exhaling a shaky breath.

“You’ve been asleep a long while, but I suppose you needed it.”

“Yeah, I guess I did.” Her hands twisted in the blanket.

“No need to worry. Bella is out with Crow, but she’ll return soon. Until then, you can rest or whatever you want.”

She tried to smile, but it didn’t quite happen. “I think I’ve slept enough.”

“Okay. Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

“Both.”

“Let me figure that out for you. I’ll be right back.”

“Sure.”

Why was I so fucking nervous? I sounded like a fucking boy who couldn’t figure out how to speak to a girl.

The Crossroads was quiet. Most of the members had left with Crow and Grim, leaving behind enough to protect the compound. I found a couple of club girls in the kitchen when I walked in.

“Hey, I need some soup and water for Bree.”

A chick with red hair smiled at me. “I’m Snooki. I can have a tray ready for you in a few minutes if you don’t mind

waiting.”

“Sounds good, Snooki.”

She prepared a big bowl of homemade chicken noodle soup, a couple of grilled cheese sandwiches cut into halves, water bottles, applesauce, a package of crackers, and two mugs. Sugar packets and cups of nondairy creamer were added.

“I’ll follow you up with the coffee and tea.”

Nodding, I grabbed the tray once she covered it and made my way back upstairs. Snooki opened the door, helping settle the tray over Bree’s lap, and poured us both coffee and hot tea. Didn’t take a genius to figure out the tray was for both of us.

After she left, I picked up the mug, drinking my coffee black.

Bree began to eat, taking tiny spoonfuls of the soup and nibbling on her grilled cheese.

“What you want to do? Watch something on TV?”

The grateful look she sent my way smacked right into my heart. “Sure. Any comedies?”

“I’ll find one.”

And that was what we did.

No deep conversation. No uncomfortable silence.

Just two people laughing over episodes of Friends.

It was perfect.

Neither of us was ready to get into anything too complicated, and that was fine for now. Someday that would change, but I wasn’t in a rush.

When Crow returned, I could sense something was off. Bella seemed upset and agitated, rushing into the room.

“Bree! You’re up!”

“I am.” She glanced my way, blushing as I winked.

“How are you feeling?” Bella sat on the edge of the bed as the girls hugged.

“I’m tired, but that’s to be expected.”

“I can’t imagine, Bree.”

My heart skipped a beat as Brianna caught my gaze, placing her hand over her heart. “Thank you.”

“Always.”

Crow gestured for me to follow him, leaning against the doorjamb as I followed him. “How is she?”

“Messed up,” I admitted in a low voice. “It’s gonna take some time.”

“Yeah, I figured. We found Chronos. He described what he did to her in detail.”

Fuck. Reality slammed into my face. My fists clenched, and I snarled, pushing Crow out the door and shutting it behind us. “I don’t want to know. Not tonight. I’ll hunt down every Dirty Death MC member if you say another word and watch them suffer one by one.”

“Not until I have Undertaker. He ordered the hit on Rook.”

I spun around, slamming my fists against the wall before my mouth opened in an agonized Kraaa.

Fuck!

Crow thumped his chest, understanding my rage and anguish.

“I killed Chronos,” he announced. “The crows ripped him apart and feasted on his organs. That motherfucker suffered in the end.”

I wanted to feel happy about that, but I couldn’t. I felt cheated instead. “I should have been there.”

“It’s done.”

Not to me.

“This isn’t over, Raven. We settle the girls, and then we go after Undertaker and the Dirty Death MC. We take them out,

beginning with Sheriff Hobbs and his debt to their club. That's how we get to Mayor Goodman too."

"Agreed."

"I'm fucking serious."

I sighed. "I know."

A shitstorm was headed toward The Roost and the Devil's Murder MC, and Brianna was now vulnerable because of it. By association, Bella was too.

"We'll protect both women. Nothing is gonna happen to Bree or Bella. They're part of us now."

"We're returning to The Roost. Undertaker lost his V.P. and quite a few club members. He suffered significant losses. With the Royal Bastards working with us, we can handle whatever Undertaker plans next."

"Not gonna cower or hide from enemies, pres."

"Hell no."

"Then there ain't much left to say."

"Nope. Time to hit the road."

Chapter 8 – Bree

For a solid week, I didn't leave the guest room I occupied at The Roost until I couldn't stand it any longer. I wasn't sure if it was because I was avoiding the rest of the world, or I just didn't feel like talking to anyone, or what was wrong with me.

The only exceptions were my sister and Raven.

They both spent a lot of time with me. Sometimes that was good, keeping my mind off the kidnapping and all the shit that happened. And sometimes, it was hard to breathe with either of them near me, forcing myself to remain calm when I really wanted to scream or cry.

After a long hot shower, I pulled on black leggings and an oversized t-shirt, a long sweater, and comfy socks. Even with the summer heat blazing down in Nevada, I couldn't get warm. The clubhouse temperature usually remained around seventy, so it wasn't the building; it was me.

With a sigh, I left my room, hoping to make a cup of hot tea.

Alone.

"Hey!" Bella exclaimed, tilting a bottle of amber liquor into a glass pitcher as I entered the kitchen. She finished pouring tequila into the blender and squeezed fresh lime juice inside. "You hungry? Need anything?"

No. I came in here for tea and to escape the walls that felt like they were closing in on me. The time of day never occurred to me, and I didn't pay attention. It was late, already dark outside, as the stars twinkled brightly in the sky.

The Roost was packed with members. This was a terrible idea.

"Nah. I just wanted some tea."

Music thumped through the walls and the closest door, alerting me to the ruckus going on in the common room and bar.

“I’ll make you a cup. I just stopped in here to whip up a pitcher of margaritas.”

Margaritas. Having drinks with friends seemed so strange to me now. Silly.

“Thanks.” I sank onto an empty wooden chair, leaning back as I wrapped my arms around my middle, clutching the thick sweater tighter against my body. My fingers and toes were chilled. Sometimes, like now, I would tremble, and my hands would shake.

A result of the trauma? Probably.

The door to the kitchen blew open, and a biker stumbled in. I didn’t know his name. He pulled a woman in with him, pushing her up against the wall and shoving up her skirt as she reached for his belt.

Bella cleared her throat. “Uh, hello.”

“Fuck, Bella. Sorry.”

He grabbed the woman’s hand and rushed out, probably to find a room.

I wondered how many of these club members were already fucking a woman out in the bar. Did they have sex in front of everyone? Blow jobs?

It was possible.

“I think I’ll take the tea to my room,” I announced as she handed over the mug, brimming with dark liquid. Steam rose from the cup.

“Yeah, good idea. The guys seem a little rowdy tonight.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “They need to, I guess. Crow says they can’t be on high alert all the time and that they have to remember why they fight so hard for this life they love. The freedom of it, I think.”

It did make sense, sort of. “Okay.”

Bella pressed a quick kiss to my cheek and lifted the pitcher. “You need anything? I can hang out with you tonight.”

Nice. I’m the charity case now.

“No, Bel. I’m fine.”

She walked out, and I followed, turning right to avoid the bar. She went left, laughing as I saw her join a few other women.

I made it halfway back to my room when I saw the same biker from a few minutes ago and his woman. His hips were rocking into her, slamming her back into the wall.

Wow. I guess they never reached a room.

I bit my lip, wondering if I could walk around them without drawing attention.

She kept crying out his name. “Hawk. Faster. Yes!”

Whatever.

His hand wrapped around her throat, squeezing as her eyes rolled back into her head. Pleasure burst across her expression as he pumped hard, groaning into her mouth as he kissed her. Then he moved, covering her mouth.

My rational mind knew this was consensual.

I didn’t mean to react the way I did. But the ugly terror of what happened to me chose that moment to sink its teeth in with a vengeance.

A horrified, anguished scream tore free from my throat.

“Take it, bitch. Take all of my dick.”

I shook my head, backing into the wall.

A hand covered my mouth and nose, blocking my ability to breathe.

“You’ll breathe when I say you can.”

My body hit the ground as I covered my ears, desperate to block out his voice.

“Look how your pussy grips my dick. Told you I’d fucking ruin you.”

Rocking back and forth, I tried to ignore his words. His hot breath. His body pinning mine down.

“No one will want you after this.”

No!

“Brianna?”

Somewhere in that dark place, I heard Raven’s voice.

“Babygirl. Come back to me. Please.”

My eyes snapped open. A crowd had gathered in the hallway, staring at me like the sideshow freak in a carnival, fascinated and disgusted at the same time.

“Raven,” I wailed, breaking down. “He-help me.”

I would never forget the expression on his face—the fierce, agonized, overwhelming concern he couldn’t hide.

“I got you, sweetheart. I swear it. You’re safe.”

He slipped his arms around me and lifted, carrying me away from prying eyes and into a room I’d never been in before, up a long staircase. It wasn’t hard to figure out it was his room.

He set me down, kicking off his boots and shrugging off his cut. If it had been any other man, I would have freaked out further, but not Raven.

The bed dipped as he lay down, pulling me into his chest. His hands began to rub my back as he whispered soft, sweet words.

“You’re safe, and nothing will harm you. I’m here, babygirl. Try to relax. I won’t leave you.”

“Promise?” I asked like a silly girl afraid of monsters under the bed. I wish mine were imaginary.

“I swear it.”

We fell into silence as I gripped his t-shirt, terrified I would fall asleep and return to the nightmares that never

stopped, even when I was awake.



SLEEP WAS THE ONE THING I couldn't control. The only time I failed to guard my thoughts and all the horrible shit I experienced, those frightening, painful memories I wanted to forget forced their way into my mind and stalked me like the vicious brute who tormented me for eight devastating days.

The nightmares would come. Nothing stopped them. Falling asleep became its own special torment and produced anxiety every minute I fought fatigue, dreading the moment I wouldn't be able to keep fighting my need for rest.

My head would bob, and I'd jerk awake, terrified the next time I'd awaken would be back on that soiled mattress, feeling the suffocating weight of my attacker as he pinned me to the surface.

Most nights, I woke up with a scream on my lips. Cold sweat would dampen my skin, and I'd shiver, slowly emerging from the horror of my captivity. But the exit was only temporary. Every night without fail, I would return, subjected all over again to the numerous assaults that haunted every hour of my day. They hid in the shadows, watching, waiting, eager to force me into that old brick building and the room with the red door, pushing me into a hell I wasn't sure I could ever escape.

Red. The color of the paint. The splashes that coated the walls. The droplets that fell from my face during the beatings.

Red. A stain that lingered on my skin. The handprint on my inner thigh. Proof of the trauma my body endured.

When darkness took root, closing in around me, the cycle of trauma was renewed. That familiar sensation of dread settled over me, coupled with the knowledge that I had no

ability to change the past. I relived it every time my eyes slid closed.

The definition of true horror?

Being forced to repeat the same violation over and over again, aware enough to understand it would never end and there was no way to break free.

Hell was real ... and sometimes it took residence in your mind.

The plain gray walls of my prison appeared, crumbling portions of the paint chipping away as time eroded the evidence of its once freshly applied coat. Four wooden chairs, two with the middle spindles of the backrest snapped. A thick heavy table with deep gouges on the surface.

And the metal bed frame in the middle of the room cold and unforgiving as it rested on the floor beneath the stained mattress. Dark red splotches and the ever-present scent of iron proved the layers of blood soaked into the material.

The pungent odor of urine accompanied it, followed by the musk and sweat of numerous males. A volatile cocktail of fluids that also included semen constantly reminded me of the reason I remained on this bed.

My stomach churned, and my senses overwhelmed.

Two pairs of handcuffs kept my wrists restrained. The slatted headboard enabled the cuffs to slide up and down the metal bars but prevented any hope of escape. My legs remained free as I sat as close to the edge as possible, tucking my legs beneath me as my heart began beating faster, the realization of what awaited in the upcoming hours conjuring a fear so powerful that I gagged, sucking in air to prevent emptying my stomach.

Not that it mattered. I wasn't given much to fill my belly—only enough water and scraps to remain alive.

Panic surged as I heard the voice of my tormentor. Desperate to get away, I began to struggle, yanking on the metal handcuffs and crying out in terror when I was no longer alone. My entire body trembled as my chin was grasped and

lifted until my eyes landed on the man who had violated me for the last week. Terror stole my breath. I couldn't do a thing except stare at the face partially silhouetted in the darkness. Revulsion roiled within me.

My eyes slid shut without permission, and I knew he'd be angry. I wasn't allowed to close my eyes. He said that numerous times. More than anything, I wanted to escape, to shut out the pain that would come.

The slap stung as it cracked across my cheek, stunning me into submission as my eyes snapped open, widening when I saw his lips twist into a sadistic smile. His face lowered, and his breath, a sour mixture of liquor and cigarettes, washed over my face.

“You're gonna be a good girl and take my cock in your ass again.”

I didn't respond, terrified he'd rip me apart as he'd done yesterday. My bottom still hurt whenever I moved.

“Tell me you want it.”

Never.

He watched me, delighted when I remained silent.

“Tell me to fuck your ass.”

My eyes filled with tears, and I held my tongue, knowing he'd only hurt me more for my defiance. Even so, I couldn't say those words. The tiny bit of my humanity and spirit that remained rebelled against such atrocity.

“Have it your way, bitch. I'll make you scream before this is over.”

He moved so fast I didn't realize he'd flipped me over until my chest slammed into the edge of the mattress. I tried to kick out as my arms twisted, the position tugging on my upper arms and muscles, painfully pressing the metal cuffs into the skin of my wrists. Contorted, I wondered if both my shoulders would dislocate from the strain.

His body weight pinned me down as he kicked my legs apart, settling between them. His hands remained on my waist

as he laughed. I felt his fingers probe my puckered hole. “Damn. You’re still bleeding. Guess I won’t have to go in dry this time.”

Every cell in my body was screaming for release, for escape, to fight against the monster who held me down. I heard his zipper lower. Two fingers speared inside me, violating me in a different way first.

“Fuck. This pussy is so tight. I don’t know which I enjoy most. It’s a tie between your virgin ass and that cunt. Well,” he chuckled, “I guess your ass is no longer virgin. Gonna leave you stretched out from my thick cock after this.”

When he withdrew his fingers, I panted out a breath, tensing as I tried to think of something else, to be anywhere else other than what was happening.

He wouldn’t let me forget.

One hand wrapped around my throat as he shoved his way inside my body.

I struggled to breathe, choking as he tightened his grip. A desperate scream clawed its way up my throat but would never release, trapped by his meaty hand around my neck.

“No!” I tried to protest. Nothing but gurgling sounds made it out from between my lips.

“Say my name when I drop my hand. Do it, and I’ll fuck your pussy instead of your ass.”

A bargain so foul I felt a little part of me die.

He must have sensed my agreement. His hand pulled away, and he gripped my hips, plunging a couple of times until I screamed.

“Say it,” he roared, his voice tainted with excitement.

“Chronos!”

He pulled out, thrusting back in as promised, pounding into me, slamming my body into the mattress with his heavy frame. “Don’t stop!”

And I didn’t.

I screamed his name. For the bargain. For my battered body. Because I no longer had the ability to keep fighting against the pain and horror and inhuman violation that never stopped.

I screamed until I lost my voice, blacking out before he finished.

Chapter 9 – Raven

“You shouldn’t be here,” I whispered to myself, lowering my forehead to the wall outside Bree’s room. “Too fucking old for this shit.”

Brianna isn’t Sarah.

“But I can help her,” I insisted, warring with the bitter, vengeful, heartbroken man inside. My crow didn’t like getting close to women, not after losing Sarah. Rescuing Brianna put me in close contact with the only woman to reach my dead heart since Sarah’s death. In truth, since I lost my son.

You can’t save her.

“I already did,” I contradicted vehemently. “She needs me.”

Sarah needed you, and you failed her.

Fuck. The reminder was a knife in the gut.

“It’s different this time,” I insisted, pushing away from the wall as I lifted a hand and knocked on the door.

The soft, timid voice of Bella’s sister answered. “Come in.”

Blowing out a breath, I straightened, greeting Brianna as I entered. “Good morning, babygirl.”

“Raven.” The sweet twitch of her lips as she tried to smile warmed my heart. After everything this brave young woman went through, she didn’t have a lot of reasons to smile, but the fact that she wanted to for me was goddamn intoxicating.

“Is there anything I can do for you? Anything you need?”

She bit her lip, small white teeth tugging the plump, smooth surface. “Would you stay with me for a bit? Unless you’re busy,” she hastily added. “I don’t want to be alone.”

Too busy for her? Fuck no. Shit ran smoothly in this club because everyone did their job. Prospects handled the rest. I delegated when necessary and brought issues to the pres. Today I didn’t have a single fucking thing going on more

important than taking a seat next to Brianna and offering my company.

“How are the nightmares?” I asked, remembering what Sarah had once said to me. *The nightmares can scar worse than the trauma. It’s reliving it over and over again that breaks you down.*

She blinked. “I can’t sleep. Every time I close my eyes, he’s there.” She shuddered. Dark circles marred the creamy skin of her flawless complexion. So beautiful. In her eyes, though, I saw how haunted she was by the motherfucker who harmed her. He couldn’t die enough times to make this right. If I could keep him in the basement and torment him for a hundred years, it wouldn’t be enough.

I hated that Crow got a portion of the justice he craved, and I wasn’t there to avenge Brianna.

“Do you want to talk about it? Sometimes releasing the burden helps.”

“How?” she asked bitterly, her voice pained. “It’s already got roots deep in my soul.”

I stood up, sitting on the edge of her bed.

Don’t do it. You can’t take it away.

“May I touch you? Your hand,” I clarified, reaching in her direction.

Brianna slowly moved her hand, sliding it across the white blanket covering her bed. When we touched, she winced but didn’t pull away. “I’m afraid.”

“Of?” I asked, rubbing tiny circles into the surface. My ability to calm, soothe, and manipulate emotion was limited to the strength or weakness of the mind, meaning those who were weak were easy, and the strong ones were difficult. Rarely had I met someone who was impossible to influence and could reject my touch.

I had to fight to breach the barrier Brianna erected. Her will was one of the strongest I had ever encountered and yet

combined with an innocence and sweetness that I found irresistible.

She's too similar to Sarah.

I hated the old crow knew me so well, but that went both ways. We were comfortable with one another and could expose the demons within—something I never allowed anyone else to do.

“What if I never feel normal again, Raven?”

“Who cares about normal?” I asked, enclosing her hand in mine. Soothing waves of warmth flowed into her as she stiffened, fighting the comfort I wanted to give. “Normal is bullshit. It doesn't exist. Feeling like yourself? Accepting and loving every part, even the dark parts, that's all that fucking matters.”

Her fingers twitched, and I could feel her beginning to relax. “I don't know if that's possible.”

“Which part?”

“Moving on enough to accept the dark parts.”

“Then you ask for help. You fight because you can't let the demons win.”

Her fingers squeezed mine. “I've fought most of my life, Raven. I'm tired.” Her voice wavered, and my heart nearly stuttered, hating the vulnerability and agony contained inside and entirely too visible in the glassy-eyed stare she didn't bother to hide.

“Then I'll help you, Brianna. I don't think you need me, though. You're fucking strong, babygirl. You can do this.”

“You don't know me.”

She was wrong. I did. My crow did, too, even if he wouldn't voice it.

Every encounter we had in the past led us to this moment in the future.

“I know enough. I can see people. Maybe I'm just old and full of shit.” Shrugging, I tried to lighten the heaviness in the

room. “But I’ve lived a lot of years on this earth, and I can tell you, the fight is worth it.”

She gave me an incredulous look. “You’re not like anyone I’ve ever met before.”

“Not sure if that’s good or bad,” I admitted with a chuckle. “I’m set in my ways and have seen a lot of shit.”

“But you’re real, Raven. I appreciate that.” Her eyes fluttered, and her chin dropped for a few seconds before she jerked awake. “I’m so sleepy.”

“I’ll stay with you. If you have a nightmare, you won’t be alone.”

“Why would you do that?”

“You remind me of someone I knew long ago.” Someone else who couldn’t fight the pain, who battled with the same sadness and fear, and whose beauty stole my very breath from my chest.

She’s not Sarah.

No, my mate died, and I wasn’t able to stop it. I’d never forgive myself for allowing it to happen. I should have done so many things differently.

Never again. Not another innocent would suffer when I could prevent it. I would help Brianna, and maybe the dark parts of me would hate less.

Brianna yawned, her head turning my way. “Promise you won’t leave me alone?”

“I promise. You sleep, babygirl. If those dragons pop up, I’ll be there to slay them.”



A HEARTWRENCHING, TERROR-filled scream echoed inside The Roost, traveling through the nearly empty halls and

filling the clubhouse with the wails of a broken soul.

I hadn't left her side as promised.

As soon as I realized she was having a nightmare, I began to gently brush my fingertips across her face, hoping to coax her back into reality without scaring her further. I held one of her soft, small hands, lightly rubbing across the surface of her skin. I pushed every soothing emotion I could into her.

Her eyes blinked open in an instant, no longer fighting off the monsters from her dream. Dark circles smudged beneath the brilliant green, dulled by suffering and pain.

"You're still here," she whispered, her voice wavering.

"Yes. I had to slay a few dragons," I reminded her, hoping my touch didn't spook her.

She withdrew her hand from mine, tucking it beneath the blanket as I backed up, returning to the chair beside her bed.

She seemed lost in the foggy haze between dreaming and waking. A frown drew her brows together.

"One day, those bad dreams are gonna stop, babygirl."

Her chin wobbled as her eyes grew glassy with unshed tears. "I don't know if I believe that."

"How about I believe for you?"

She blinked, and a lonely tear slid down her cheek, falling with a soundless drip from her chin. "I don't know how to survive this, Raven."

My breath seized at the thought that she didn't want to go on. Just like Sarah ...

"You keep going. You breathe one minute to the next. Put one foot in front of the other until each step is less painful than the last."

I didn't say those words out of some philosophical bullshit spouted by some fucker who never actually experienced trauma or loss. No, I knew what she felt—had known the same gut-twisting, painful horror. I wasn't a fucking hypocrite. Maybe I didn't have the right to speak in such a way to her,

but I couldn't stand to see her suffering. It tore me up, wrung out my insides, and blazed a searing iron into my soul.

"I don't know."

"You live for that day, sweetheart. Every single fucking minute. You push back, and you keep breathing."

"Raven, I don't think I can." Her chest heaved as she panted, grasping the blanket in her hands and bunching the material.

"You can. You *will*," I promised.

"How can you be so confident?"

I wanted to scream that the crow led me to her, that we were destined to find one another. A part of me wanted to confess that I didn't know shit except seeing her; being near her enabled me to breathe a little easier too.

"Because fate didn't bring us together only to watch us fall apart."

Her fingers dropped the material, her gaze snapping to mine as her chin lifted. "My heart says that's true, but my head argues that it's silly to trust in something so uncertain."

I moved closer, wanting to erase the horrors she experienced, so she didn't have to fight so hard. "Let me help you."

"How?"

"When it gets too hard, tell me. I'll be your rock, sweetheart. Lean on me when you feel your strength is gone. I'll give you mine."

"Okay."

Her eyes were so haunted.

It hit me hard, and I fought for breath, catching a mirror image of the pain I'd been wrestling with for years. We were more alike than either of us would admit, suffering through situations that weren't fair and struggling to come to terms with it.

Knowing how she felt to some degree, I fought the idea that I wasn't the right person to help her through the healing process. Her sister Bella was the right choice. Not a rough old biker who could mess things up and probably say all the wrong things.

A timid smile lifted her lips.

My dick twitched, just like it often did whenever I thought about her, proving I was a sick fuck to want her after all she'd been through. And it didn't matter anyway. She was too young and sweet, and I was too old and set in my ways.

I didn't do relationships or seek out women for more than a night's pleasure. I wasn't about to change all that for a set of pretty green eyes and a warm smile that did something funny to my cold, dead heart.

And yet, here I was, seeking her out, overwhelmed by the pain so blatant in those mesmerizing eyes and yearning for another second in her presence.

I wanted to steal her suffering and agony and all those fucking nightmares and rip them apart, set them on fire, and watch them burn until nothing remained but ash. I wanted to see a real smile grace those pretty, pouty lips that begged to be kissed, but only once she was ready.

Until then, I'd remain the black raven in the shadows. Watching. Waiting. A silent protector hiding until needed.

Chapter 10 – Bree

It happened again.

I lost time. Slipped into the living nightmare.

Every day seemed to be a new struggle.

My arms wrapped around my middle, my anxiety spiked, and I worried I'd never return to the young woman I'd once been.

He kept showing up. I couldn't fight him or prevent it.

The words spoken to me repeated in my head, a constant reminder of the used goods I'd become, just as Chronos predicted.

"You'll never be able to escape me."

Wincing, I pressed against my temples, rubbing away the ache that throbbed as proof of my lack of sleep.

"No man will ever want you after me. You're ruined."

"No," I whispered, hating how those words took root in my heart and tainted everything and everyone around me.

"Everyone will always know. They'll sense what happened to you, and they'll think you're a whore."

"No!" I shouted, rushing to my feet, panic clawing its way out.

"Bree?"

My sister's strained voice ripped away the voice of my rapist.

I turned to her, wishing I knew what to say to alleviate the concern and worry she couldn't hide. "I'm okay."

"No, Bree," she contradicted, her voice breaking. "You're not."

I didn't argue the truth.

When I didn't reply, she frowned, the crease between her eyes deepening as we stood in silence.

“I don’t know how to help you,” she finally confided, rushing forward to hug me.

It should have been simple. Hugs were miraculous things.

But not now. Not after Chronos and being taken and every part of me tainted, violated, shattered.

I held up my hands, taking a few steps backward.

“Bree.” The hurt that action caused punched me in the gut, watching her flinch.

“I can’t. I want to, Bell, but it’s not possible.”

She dragged a breath into her lungs, nodding. “Okay. We’ll work up to it. Alright?”

I didn’t have the heart to admit I didn’t think it would ever happen. “Okay.”

Sighing, I felt fatigued all the way down to my bones.

“Want a cup of tea?”

“Sure.” Tea. How fucking insignificant and boring my life had become. Nothing quite as disarming as realizing my rescue only brought more disappointment, and the freedom I thought I finally achieved was, in fact, more chains weighing me down.

Bella gave me a wobbly smile and headed toward the back door leading to the common room and kitchen. As soon as her back was turned, I sank onto the chair facing the miles of desert beyond the gates. Palm trees swayed in the hot Nevada wind. Life continued on as if I had never been kidnapped, cheerily sinking from one minute to the next, always moving forward in endless time as if it had reason to steadily tick each second on the clock.

Would I always feel like this? As if I was slowly being strangled? Was this a new normal for me now?

If so, I didn’t think I could endure it.

“Sun’s perfect today. Don’t ya think?”

The deep rumble of Raven's voice shook away the cobwebs, bringing warmth and light back to my dreary, dark soul.

My head lifted, catching the smile that turned up the corners of his lips and popped the dimple in his left cheek. I'd always found him attractive, even more so now, with his wide shoulders taking up most of the space in front of me. His cut draped over a pristine white t-shirt that stretched thin over his biceps and hugged his torso like it longed to caress the planes of sculpted muscle beneath the layer.

His whiskered jaw held just enough scruff to be appealing yet still boasted a carefree albeit indulgent pride in his appearance. Sunglasses hid his striking pale blue eyes, one of his best features. His bald head was kissed by the sun, the same as his arms that rippled with more smooth muscle.

He was built like a tank, solid, and yet nothing about him intimidated me. Odd. You'd think I would be terrified of men after my capture, but nothing about Raven threatened me.

Just the opposite.

He made me feel safe when not a damn thing else in this world had that capability.

"The sun is nice," I agreed.

A deep chuckle left his lips. "You don't have to agree, sweetheart. Hate that fucking sun if you want."

I blinked.

He ticked his chin at me. "You soak up all the rays you desire. Or you can flip off the goddamn world. Scream at the sky or pound your chest like an ape. Whatever you got twisting you up inside, let it loose, babygirl. Ain't gonna do you no good growing weeds inside ya."

I stood on shaky legs, taking the first piece of advice anyone had given me that actually made sense.

He gestured outward with his arm, stepping to the side as I tilted my head back ... and screamed.

The full-bodied cry of rage and pain and sorrow left my lips so fast I stumbled. A strong hand gently met my back, holding me upright as I felt another scream rising, climbing up my gut, and clawing its way out. I let it explode from my mouth, shaking with adrenaline and something close to euphoria, hating it and enjoying it at the same time. And when two more rose, exploding from my body with a force I could barely contain, I tilted my head back and let the sun's rays bathe me in golden release.

"I feel it now," I whispered, reaching out, unsure why, until I felt his hand close around mine.

"What you feel?"

"My soul ... healing."

His free hand slapped his chest over his heart as I turned, gazing through the sunglasses, sensing a lost soul as tormented as my own.

"Gonna take some time, babygirl."

"I know but I'm not afraid of it anymore."

I didn't realize until now that I'd avoided all of this because I didn't want to hurt anymore, and I was scared to let myself feel the full weight of my pain and suffering. But to heal, I had to face all of it, and while that was terrifying, it was also liberating.

His hand squeezed once before interlocking our fingers. "You see as wisely and vast as the crow."

"Or as shrewdly and unrestricted as a raven."

Something dark and predatory flashed across his face, drawing me in. A grin appeared, popping that dimple even bigger. "Damn, babygirl. You're fucking fierce."



I'D NEVER BEEN A GIRL swayed by tight leather and a wild ride on a Harley. Bad boys had never been my thing—the exact opposite of Bella. My sister drooled over bikers like Crow, with dark hair and plenty of ink, attitudes, and outlaws with alpha male personalities and plenty of bad habits. Men who lived and rode hard took what they wanted from this world and lived by their own rules.

So when I couldn't stop staring at Raven, admiring the black ink wrapping around his shoulders, biceps, and forearms, I felt embarrassed but also attracted to the powerful man who stood with confidence and authority around his mc brothers, pressing a cigar to his lips and inhaling the spicy smoke. As the V.P. of the Devil's Murder, he held a position as important as Crow. The men listened when he spoke, treating him with respect. This hierarchy within the mc was new and confusing, but I was learning.

Unlike my sister, I never had an interest in bars or booze. I was never much of a drinker, either. She did all the partying for us both. I was the good girl, the student with straight A's. I did everything right, and all that was expected of me. I made it my mission to please my Gram, hoping to make her proud. I always imagined my parents looking down from heaven, and I didn't want to disappoint them. I earned two degrees—one in hospitality management and the other in business.

It occurred to me as I sat alone in the corner of the billiards room, perched on one of the dark brown leather couches, that I never did much of anything that I truly wanted to do. I made my decisions on what I thought I was *supposed* to do, but that wasn't the same.

Did I regret my choices? No.

But looking around the room at the men and women who didn't allow society to dictate their lives, I grew a little jealous. What would it be like to approach life in such a carefree manner? Was that the secret to happiness? Flipping off the world and its judgment while embracing what your heart truly desired, even if it went against what society dictated?

Maybe. I didn't have the experience to decide. Not yet.

I scooted back against the seat, forcing myself to relax even if every muscle in my body wanted to stiffen and stay on alert. My pulse raced in my veins, but I tried to remain calm. My breathing slowly stabilized.

Lifting my head, I locked eyes with Raven.

I couldn't be sure how long he'd been watching me. From the moment I sat on the couch? Or when I entered the room?

He made no secret of it, sipping from a beer while a couple of his MC brothers stood around him, discussing something I was too far away to hear. His blue gaze softened as neither of us looked away. I'd read plenty of romance novels and watched far too many movies to believe that two people could ever connect and fall in love at first sight. It was fiction.

The left side of his mouth twitched, popping out his dimple.

A smile that could drop panties and melt hearts lifted the corners of his lips. A smile intended for one person only.

Me. The kidnapped, broken, dirty girl ruined by a monster.

For reasons I didn't think I would ever fathom, I felt the warmth of that smile deep inside, settling over the cold, barren wasteland of my heart and coaxing it to beat again, to hunger for life, and desire a man that embodied sex and sin and naughty nights between the sheets.

Maybe I wouldn't be ready to partake in them for a long time, but appreciating that he could be the one to help me, blossomed a fierce affection for the tattooed, older biker.

"One day," I whispered, returning his smile. "I want it to be you."

Like he heard me, his blue eyes darkened, and a look of feral need swept across his face.

One hand lifted, tapping over his heart.

I returned the gesture, feeling shy but warm. Truly warm.

And it was because of Raven.

Chapter 11 – Raven

“I need to know exactly what happened to Brianna.”
Crow stared me down, his eyes narrowing before he shook his head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, brother.”

“I ain’t asking,” I snarled. I shouldn’t have been so invested in his response, but I was, and I didn’t care how it looked.

“Fuck.” He scrubbed a hand down his face. “Why? Chronos is dead. He fucking suffered. The crows pecked out his eyes and tore him apart until nothing was left.”

My chest heaved as I dragged a breath into my lungs. “Did he rape her?”

I knew he fucking did, but I needed to hear it.

“You want the details? Why now?”

“Because I need to fucking know,” I growled. For my fucking sanity. To stop dreading what made Brianna shake in her sleep and wake up screaming. How could I help if I didn’t know?

“Chronos raped and sodomized her for eight fucking days. He beat her, held her down, and kept her handcuffed to a bed. That what you want to hear?”

Agony.

It spread into every cell in my body. Every muscle. It sank in deep with vicious, bloodthirsty claws. When it reached my lungs, they seized, and I couldn’t draw a breath. My eyes stung with tears I’d never let fall as my throat closed up, a sudden lump preventing me from swallowing.

My hands slowly curled into fists, and my head fell back, a torturous Kraa erupting from deep within as I struggled to contain the resulting rage pulsing through my body. The crow inside me staggered, his fury so violent I trembled with the force of keeping it inside.

“I’m not gonna pretend I know what’s happening with you right now, but I can see it’s intense.”

I turned to my pres, lowering my head as I fought hard to maintain control. “I want to know everything. Who touched her. Who threatened her. All of it.”

“Then we need to talk to Brianna. She’s the only one who can answer that.”

No. She wouldn’t like being bombarded with questions.

“They’re things I need to ask her, and I can’t wait much longer, Raven.”

“I know, but she’s not ready.”

Crow sighed. “I don’t think she’ll ever be ready, but it’s got to be done. We need to know who else she saw and what she heard. It’s fucking important.”

I knew that.

The link between her kidnapping and the blackmail on the club was connected. But I didn’t fucking care, not if it traumatized Bree all over again. “No.”

“I didn’t say today,” he reminded me.

“No,” I growled, turning away from his probing gaze and staring at the long line of bikes parked outside The Roost. The paint and chrome gleamed in the sunshine as I blinked, fighting the urge to slam my fists into the wall, anything to erase the fury simmering inside, threatening to burst free in a bloodbath of violence and vengeance.

“Raven,” Crow admonished gruffly. “It’s beyond your control.”

“The fuck it is,” I shouted, spinning around and facing a beautiful broken angel in the doorway.

Fucking hell. She heard us.

“I’ll do it.”

Hell no!

I shook my head, walking briskly in her direction until I reached her, lifting my hands and letting them hang in the air because I didn't want to touch her without permission, and yet I also couldn't fucking stand the torment lingering in her green eyes, dulled by the thought of remembering all that happened.

"I don't want to trigger any memories. Don't want nothin' keepin' you from getting better. You're fighting hard, babygirl. I ain't gonna be the one to mess it up."

Her expression softened. "It means a lot that you want to protect me, Raven."

Good. She saw the error in rushing into this.

"But I'd like to help if I can."

Fuck.

"Will you stay with me?"

Defeat. My crow bowed his head, and I had no choice but to follow his lead, knowing I'd do anything to make her happy.

I dropped my hands, squaring back my shoulders like I could take the brunt of the pain and horror that would follow. "Yes."

Crow ticked his head toward the picnic benches and outdoor chairs spread out around us under the awning. Ashtrays overflowed with cigarette butts, while the trash bins held empty beer bottles and cans. Not the prettiest place to have this discussion.

I shook my head, gesturing to the shade and following Bree to an empty table. She sat, tucking her legs beneath while I joined her, sinking to her right.

Crow sat across from us, elbows on the table as he lit a smoke. "I take it you know what I'm gonna ask."

"I think so," she replied, scrunching up her nose. "A few men came and went from the brick building they kept me prisoner in. At first, I only saw the two guys who showed up at my apartment. They stayed with me the first day."

“What happened at your apartment?” Crow asked, his brows bunching together in a frown.

“I can’t be sure, but I think Mayor Elliot Goodman sent them. Both men referred to me as a troublemaker, and I can’t think of anything I could have done to warrant that comment unless they meant the evidence I collected about the mayor’s indiscretions and criminal connections. He stole from his constituents. People who trusted him.” Her green eyes flashed emerald fire. “I couldn’t let him get away with that.”

“No,” I agreed, impressed with her tenacity and candor, “but you risked your own safety.”

She sighed. “Yes, but at the time, I didn’t realize how far his depravity ran.”

“What do you mean?” Crow held her gaze, drawing smoke into his lungs before slowly exhaling.

“He used an escort service. I looked it up.” She swallowed, turning her face away from us. “Those women didn’t become his dates willingly. He was involved in a trafficking ring that exploited young women, some stolen off the streets. Others were prostitutes picked up and never returned.”

“Fuck,” Crow cursed.

“That fucking piece of shit.”

Brianna’s shoulders caved as she wrapped her arms around herself. “I found out exactly what those women suffered.” Her whispered words sliced into my soul. “Because they sent their number one guy to teach me a lesson.”

“Chronos,” Crow spat.

Brianna froze, and I knew he’d tormented her as Crow had said, hurting this fiery, beautiful, intelligent creature next to me, breaking her in the worst way possible.

“I’m so sorry.” The words tumbled from my lips before I could catch them.

She faced me, her expression crumbling when she saw the disgust I tried to hide. It wasn’t aimed at her but at the cocksucking rapist. I wished Chronos was still alive so I could

take him to the basement and show him what true pain felt like.

“What happened after the first day?” Crow finally asked as the silence stretched between us.

“He came.”

Chronos. I understood why she didn't want to say his name.

“And the other two men?”

“I never saw them again.”

“Did you ever see anyone else? Did they say the reason for kidnapping you?”

“Not until their boss came for a visit.”

She closed her eyes, taking several slow breaths, her chest rising and falling with every inhale and exhale.

“He liked to beat the answers out of me.”

I shot to my feet with a growl, shoving away from the table as I began to pace. My hands clenched and unclenched. My jaw locked as my teeth ground together.

Fuck!

I couldn't do this. I couldn't fucking hear this shit and not want to hunt these motherfuckers down.

Four men traumatized and hurt her, and only one had been caught and paid for his crimes. That wasn't enough.

“What was his name?” I hardly recognized my voice. The tone was sharp and full of grit and far too agitated to be reasonable.

She met my harsh gaze. “I only heard the others call him boss except for one time. One of the kidnapers slipped up and called him Grudge.”

Well, fuck. This just got more complicated. Proof that Undertaker and the Dirty Death MC had been involved from the beginning. We already knew there was a connection but not to this extent.

“Sonofabitch!” Crow shouted. “Undertaker’s fucking S.A.A.”

“What the fuck does he have to do with the mayor?” I wondered, finally putting the pieces of this puzzle in place. “Did any of those men wear leather vests like ours? Did you see any patches?”

She shook her head. “No, but the other two didn’t hide their names. Crank and Grinder. Didn’t sound like normal names to me.”

“They aren’t.” Crow flicked his cigarette to the ground, lowering his head into his hands with a groan. “What the fuck does this have to do with my pops? What the hell did they have against Rook and our club?”

I didn’t care about that, not at this moment. I needed to know what Crank and Grinder did to her first, followed by Grudge. “What happened the first day?”

She startled, like my voice had been too loud and full of venom, and it probably was because this entire situation really pissed me off.

“They blindfolded me and brought me to a building in Vegas. I could hear slot machines sometimes.” She bit her lip, and I knew she wasn’t telling us everything.

“Listen,” I began, softening my tone as much as I could. “I know this is hard, and if you don’t want to say more, I won’t make you, but any details you give us could help.”

She sighed.

“Because I’m going to make those motherfuckers wish they never touched you,” I growled.

“Raven.” Crow lifted his head, giving me a stern look.

Fuck that.

“No, pres. I mean it. They’re going to fucking suffer for touching her, fucking with the club, and killing my best friend.”

“Yeah, okay. I feel you, brother.”

Yeah, he fucking did.

Turning back to Brianna, I cracked my neck. “What. Did. They. Do.”

She blinked. “Crank and Grinder were rough, but they never punched or hurt me, unlike the others.”

“They still hurt you,” I argued.

“Yes, a little, but compared to what followed, it was nothing.”

Not to me.

“And Grudge?”

She lowered her head, dragging in a breath.

I sat down, tilting her chin up so I could stare into her eyes. “Tell me. Everything. I swear I’ll make them pay for every mark, scratch, and bruise.”

“Smacking, hitting, kicking, pulling my hair, throwing water on me. He thought it was funny to degrade me.”

A hiss escaped my lips.

“He’s the one that ordered my clothes stripped away. If I hadn’t been naked,” she choked, pushing away, “I might have avoided what happened next.”

Chronos and his brutal assaults.

“Did he ... ?” I let the question hang in the air, needing her to confirm it.

“Yes.” The word was whispered so low I barely caught it.

Shit. Fuck. I didn’t know what to say and stared down at my hands as they shook with my fury.

“Raven?”

I lifted my head, staring into green eyes that shimmered like pools of emerald glass; unshed tears blinked back as her hand rested over mine. “Yeah, sweetheart?”

“I don’t need you to hunt them down. My FBI contact has all the information I gave your club. He’ll go after them, and

then you won't have to get mixed up in this mess."

She didn't get it. "You don't understand, babygirl. You're mine to protect and mine to vindicate. I'm already involved, and that's not gonna change."

A tiny gasp left her lips. "I don't understand."

"You don't?" I asked, lifting my hand to touch her face lightly. "I thought you understood when I pulled you from the wreckage and fire."

Her eyes widened. "You remembered."

"Always," I replied firmly.

Over ten years later, I could still close my eyes and see the flames, smell the smoke, and feel her arms wrapped around my neck as her warm breath tickled the sensitive skin. I knew then, same as now, that fate had brought us into each other's lives for a reason.

Crow stared at us like he didn't know what the fuck was happening, and I didn't blame him. I hadn't touched a woman like this since Sarah died. Sex? Sure, I'd gotten off but showing affection or preference? Hell no.

"This is all too much." She sniffled, hopped up from the table, and ran toward the clubhouse, rushing inside as she nearly ran into the prospect Red.

"Well, shit," I muttered, wondering if I fucked up.

"Yeah, you crazy fucker. We didn't get a chance to explain that she won't be leaving The Roost until this is sorted. Neither is Bella."

No, not with all the violence and uncertainty. We knew shit was about to fucking go down, and Undertaker, the fucking mayor of Henderson, and the rest of our enemies were coming for us soon.

All I cared about was protecting the young woman I couldn't stop thinking about. "Have Bella talk to her sister."

"Yeah, I'll do that," he smirked.

I pulled out my cigar, lit the end, and planned my revenge, all while savoring the smoke of my favorite addiction.

Scratch that.

I had a new favorite. Her name was Brianna.

Chapter 12 – Bree

Pity. That was the look Raven gave me when I admitted what Chronos had done. Raven's jaw locked, and the anger he felt was evident. I could handle rage. Sympathy. Compassion.

But pity? Never.

Revulsion and self-loathing rose hard and fast, threatening to overwhelm and suffocate me, dragging me back down into the pit I recently clawed out of, busting through that barrier I finally managed to erect between me and those awful nightmares.

No man would want me now, not after knowing what had been done to me. *Used goods*. How those words sliced into my soul. Seeing Raven's pity made it all worse somehow.

Raven rescued me when I thought my whole world was shattered. He interrupted the assault that almost led to another violation by those disgusting Dirty Death MC members.

I nearly lost all hope of being found until he burst into the room. A savage dark angel who avenged me with bloodthirsty violence. He soaked the room in their blood and carried me away from the carnage.

And then those words he whispered in my ear, promising everyone who harmed me would pay, muttering all the ways he intended to watch them suffer until they died for their crimes.

Would he always think of me that way? The ruined girl he found on the bed, two vicious bikers trying to strip her down and take what they wanted without her consent? Or the shattered, trembling woman he held in his arms, her blood soaking into his t-shirt from the wounds she'd gotten as she fought off her attackers?

Would he stare at me with that pity, unable to separate who I was from the victim that had been so cruelly traumatized?

Thinking about all of it brought the memories flooding back. I refused to cry anymore. I'd done that for a solid week already, and tears solved nothing. I wasn't stupid. The recovery process would take time, and I understood it wouldn't be easy. I just didn't expect to have such a wide range of emotions to sort through at any given moment.

It was too much.

And the pity on top of it? No, that was the one thing I couldn't stand.

I needed something to do to occupy my time and stop wallowing in all the bad shit done to me. Maybe if I didn't act like a victim, I could stop believing I was one.

For the next half hour, I wandered the bare bones of The Roost, noting the clubhouse was primarily empty. I only saw a handful of bikers, and several wore patches labeled PROSPECT on their leather vests. A few nodded or smiled, but no one avoided my direct gaze. Did they know what I suffered? That I was Bella's sister?

I finally ended up in a massive industrial-sized kitchen with stainless steel appliances, dark wooden cabinets, and granite countertops with plenty of space to work. No one was around. Someone must have cleaned up recently because I didn't see any dishes in the double sink or drying on a rack. No pots or pans. Only small appliances sat visible.

When my Gram was still alive, one of the things I enjoyed most was baking in her kitchen. We'd create all kinds of desserts and homemade loaves of bread. Thinking of Gram conjured the first genuine smile I'd had since being rescued.

She used to rub her nose with mine and say, "Baking is easy. All it takes is a cup of patience, an ounce of love, and a sprinkle of goodwill."

Yes. That was what I needed—a bake-off.

Getting to work, I began pulling out mixing bowls and supplies. Within minutes, I had the oven pre-heated, and the first batch of cookies was chilling in the fridge before I started dropping it onto the sheets for baking.

“Who are *you*, girlie?” A gruff old voice called out, startling me to the point that I dropped the sugar in my hand, and the bag landed with a thump on the countertop.

With a gasp, I spun around, staring at the older adult rolling up to me in a wheelchair.

He gave me a once over and cursed, rubbing the back of his neck. “Sorry. You must be Bella’s sister. I remember seeing the picture she put up at the bar of the two of you.”

Blinking, I took a couple of seconds to process his identity, and then it clicked. Her employer at Bull’s Saloon. “Lucky Lou.”

He dipped his chin. “Nice to meet ya.”

My shoulders relaxed as I realized he wasn’t a threat, not that I thought he was to begin with, but I spooked easily since the kidnapping. “I’m happy I finally got to see you.”

He chuckled. “Bella been talkin’ me up good?”

“Of course!”

“She’s too good to me.” His eyes twinkled, and I could tell he thought highly of my sister.

I should have met him before now. The invitation had been extended plenty of times, but I wasn’t interested in the wild party or biker scene, so I always declined. Bella had worked - at Bull’s Saloon part-time for nearly a year. To think I could have gone to The Roost and seen Raven all this time upset me.

Would things have turned out differently if we’d met sooner?

I didn’t have the answer to that and never would.

“Do you like sweets?”

He chuckled. “Now you’re talkin’ my love language.”

I couldn’t help a giggle. “Then I’m putting you to work.”

“About time someone used my talents.”

I spent the whole afternoon with Lou, and it was one of the best days I’d had in years, including the months leading up to

my kidnapping.

Chapter 13 – Raven

I caught her staring at me.

For some reason, that seriously fucking pampered my ego.

I didn't look away, hoping she'd do it again.

And she did, smiling at me in a way that puffed my chest and made me want to preen like my crow, and I had the sudden desire to rush to her side, gathering her up in a hug.

What a silly notion.

But then it was followed by a daydream of her resting back against the dark sheets in my bed, lifting her arms, and offering that same come-fuck-me grin she wore now.

Fuck. Everything she did was either sexy or adorable, sometimes a combination of both at the same time, and I had a hard time keeping my thoughts in check.

And then she did that thing where she nibbled on her bottom lip. My dick decided that was exciting and grew hard fast, trying to punch a hole through the denim of my jeans.

I envisioned myself sliding between her open thighs and mounting her, getting lost in her and the passion that followed. I imagined how tight and wet her pussy would be, and that was it. I almost lost control, jizzing in my pants like a goddamn lovesick teenager discovering his cock and how much he could come.

What. The. Fuck.

Since when did I have daydreams? Being fascinated and protective over her was conjuring all kinds of weird reactions, including possessive thoughts of me claiming her in my bed.

I scrubbed a hand down my face. This was getting out of hand. I knew why.

It had been far too long since I'd gotten my dick wet. That had to be why I reacted like this, my dick stiffening at the sight of a girl who probably couldn't stand the idea of sex, not

that I blamed her. I tried to remember the last chick who bounced on my dick, searched through my head for what she looked like, and I couldn't. Unremarkable was what she'd been. Her pussy had been like every other sweet butt I'd been with, every pole-hugging dancer who caught a few minutes of my interest.

Funny, I didn't give a shit about any of that right now. My dick needed sucked, and I craved the release, but not from any of the cut sluts here. They didn't do anything for me. Been in one, you fucked them all. Sad, but true.

At my age, I didn't want a woman several of my brothers had fucked in the last few days. Not my style anymore and hadn't been for a long while.

No, I wanted the sweetness of my babygirl, her soft sighs of pleasure, and her cheeks flushed because I was doing all the dirty things I imagined in my head.

Lucky Lou chose that moment to roll up to me, oxygen tank in hand, giving me a stupid I-know-what-you're-thinking grin.

"Just spent the day with Bree," he announced. "Sweet girl."

"Yep." I wasn't sayin' more.

"Pretty too. Fucking adorable."

"Yeah," I agreed, jaw clenching tight.

Lou saw right through me. He laughed, chortling in his chair as Bree left The Roost and began placing snacks on the outdoor tables, including brownies, cookies, and homemade cinnamon rolls.

Damn. She was fucking perfect.

My gaze slid over her, appreciating her from every angle. All the luscious curves. That spankable ass.

"You watch her," Lou observed.

Fuck. He caught me.

“I don’t want anything bad to happen to her again. Makes me feel anxious.”

“No. It’s more than that,” he contradicted, stroking the scruff on his jaw.

“I feel responsible for Bree since her rescue. Nothin’ wrong with that.”

“No, if that’s your only goal. Keepin’ her safe,” he clarified.

Old coot didn’t know when to keep his beak out of other people’s business.

“I care about her,” I finally admitted.

“Good. She needs a protector, but keep her outta your bed.”

What the fuck?

“You got somethin’ to say, old man?”

“Fuck yeah,” he snapped, poking me with the end of the cane he kept with him, just in case he planned to walk.

He never fucking did long enough to use it.

“She’s special. Don’t want none of you fuckers messin’ her up more than she is. Needs time to heal. Her sweet soul is broken.”

Fuck.

My chin dipped, ripping my gaze away from my sunshine.

Lou wasn’t wrong. Brianna was snaking her way right into my heart, planting deep roots, and staking a claim. And damn, I sure didn’t want that feeling to end.

“I’m lookin’ out for more than her safety, Lou,” I finally replied in a low voice, “I’m hopin’ to repair her heart.”

He stared at me, tilted his head, then nodded. “Okay then.”

I didn’t have a chance to say more because he scooted off toward the table, snatching up what he could before the rest of my brothers ate all the goodies.



“HEY, SUGAR.”

Bree looked up from the book in her hand. “Hi, Raven.”

“I thought it would be—”

My words cut off when the terracotta plant on the table next to her head exploded. Dirt, the cactus, and bits of the pot flew in all directions.

I dove for Bree, knocking her to the ground as I tumbled over the folding chair, landing hard on the pavement. My body covered hers as I began shouting, calling out to my brothers.

“Stay down!” Crow ordered as I held the back of Brianna’s head in my palm.

“Fuck!” I cursed. “You okay?”

A dazed, glassy-eyed look was all that greeted me.

“Motherfucker!”

Hawk and Cuckoo were yelling back and forth, running around buildings as I turned my head, catching Carrion in the shadows. He ran toward us, leaping over our bodies and whipping one of his knives toward the fence.

A gurgling scream followed, then a thud.

“Cocksucker,” he mumbled. “They’re gone.”

Crow shot him a doubtful look. “You sure?”

“Yeah. This was a warning. They didn’t stick around for our reply.”

“Oh, they’ll fucking get one,” I promised.

“No fucking doubt,” Claw agreed, holding his right arm. “Where the fuck is Falcon? I need this bullet out.”

Bullets ... Bree!

I pushed up, searching every inch of Brianna's body. She had a few scratches and a streak of blood on her arm, but nothing serious.

"Fuck, babygirl. Tell me you're okay."

She blinked. "I think so, but you're bleeding, Raven."

I stared down at my body, noting my left shoulder. I'd been clipped. Not a big deal. It would heal fast with Falcon's help.

"It's nothing. Just got grazed."

I pulled her up with me when I stood, surprised when her arms circled my waist. "It's okay, sweetheart. We're gonna be fine."

"You saved me again," she gushed. "Oh, God, Raven."

"Hey." I tilted her chin up, fighting the desire to brush my lips over hers. "Don't worry. I'm gonna take care of this."

"I know."

Trust. A simple but vital thing. She trusted me without hesitation. It nearly brought me to my knees.

I wrapped an arm around her, trying not to wince like a pussy. My shoulder stung, and the pain was beginning to throb throughout that half of my body.

"Need Falcon," I grunted.

"I'm here!" Falcon had two fingers pressed against Claw's skin. "Give me a minute and lay the fuck down before you lose too much blood."

I stumbled to the picnic table, laying down on it while Bree pressed her hands to the wound. I didn't think I'd bled that much, but her shirt was soaked.

"Sorry, sugar."

"For bleeding?" She pursed her lips, shaking her head. "Shut up."

Crow laughed. "She's right. You're an idiot."

"An idiot in love," I mumbled, half out of it.

I thought I heard Bree gasp.

Reaching for her, I pulled her closer, not noticing how I smeared blood on her skin. "I'm so happy you didn't burn."

She sighed. "Me too, Raven."

Something wet dropped on my face. "Bree?"

"I'm here. Try not to move."

White-hot pain seared my shoulder, and my jaw locked.
Fuck!

A hard pinch followed. A stabbing pain. Then only blissful release.

"The bullet's out. Rest, Raven. I'll be back to check on you."

Falcon. Such a good healer.

Bree's face appeared above mine.

"Stay, babygirl."

"I will," she promised.

I didn't respond, fading into the darkness.



MY EYES SHOT OPEN AS I came to, nearly hopping up when two hands pressed against my chest. Two soft hands that belonged to the woman I was going to claim as mine.

"Babygirl?"

"Right here," she responded. "It's late. Almost everyone who isn't outside watching for trouble is asleep. You've been out for about six hours."

Well, damn.

"You okay? Not hurt?"

“No, just a little tired.” She yawned.

“Climb in this bed with me. I need to feel you close.”

Falcon must have moved me while I slept. I vaguely remembered him digging that bullet out of my shoulder.

Bree sat next to me, holding my hand. “I think I need to leave.”

“What?”

“It’s not safe for anyone here while I’m around. They want me dead, Raven. I don’t want anyone hurt because of me.”

Slowly, I tried to breathe and not get pissed at her.

“Okay. What if I take you somewhere safe? Where no one can find you?”

“Is that possible?”

“Every heard of a safehouse?”

“Uh, I think so.”

“We’ve got a few of them. I’ll take you whenever you want to go.”

“Tonight,” she replied adamantly.

“Sugar.”

“Now. Whenever you feel up to it. I just have to get out of here, Raven.”

Her voice sounded panicky.

“Okay, sweetheart. We’ll go. Let me get dressed.”

I sat up, rolling my shoulder. No pain.

Falcon did good.

“How’s your shoulder?”

“Fine. Don’t feel a thing now. Falcon is a miracle worker.”

“Wow, I guess he is.”

“C’mere. Give me a minute.”

She settled close to me, resting her head on my shoulder. “You make me feel safe, Raven. When you hold me like this, when my head rests on your shoulder, and your arms wrap around me, I’m not afraid.”

“Then you have my permission to do it whenever you need to, just lay your head on me and let me take that burden for a bit.”

I’d take it all from her if I could, anything to ease the heartache that nearly split her in two every minute of the day.

I never expected to feel this strongly for Bree. There was a reason I didn’t do relationships. After everything fell apart with Sarah, I didn’t want to go through that shit again. So I fucked when my dick needed to get wet, and I kept my heart guarded.

So fucking dumb. I never stood a chance. No other woman mattered because I’d already found the one that I wanted.

Brianna bulldozed her way into my heart the second I glimpsed those dazzling green eyes and pulled her from the wreckage, gazing into the face that would haunt my dreams afterward and never fade, even in the years we spent apart.

And now that I had her with me, I wasn’t letting her go.

Chapter 14 – Bree

A day later, I sat on the sofa in the living room of the safehouse, staring at Raven. We left The Roost in the middle of the night, and I texted my sister once we were already on our way. I didn't need her talking me out of it.

This was my way of protecting her, and I knew Crow would watch over her. It made it much harder to hunt us down if we both weren't staying at the clubhouse.

Raven stood in front of me, arms crossed over his chest. "I know what you need."

Shit. I had no idea what he was going to say. "Oh, what's that?"

"Music."

"Really?"

"Yep. *Real* music. None of that modern shit that raps or talks through the songs instead of singing."

Ok-ay. Not what I thought he'd say. "What's real music?"

"C'mere. Close your eyes and listen."

I stood from the couch, walking in front of him as he asked.

"Don't focus on anything but the music. Feel it. Let it roll through your body, and if you want, if it makes you feel something, do what feels natural."

"This sounds suspiciously like a wacky therapy session."

His head tilted back, and he laughed. One of those full-bodied, deeply seductive male sounds that turned me into mush. "Do it anyway. If you hate it, I won't ever ask again."

Narrowing my eyes, I doubted that. Still, Raven had never lied or failed me before now. "Okay."

"Close your eyes," he repeated.

"Fine." I obeyed, focusing on the breath coming in and slowly leaving my lungs, repeating several more times.

Rock music slowly began filtering through the speakers, a steady drum beat and an electric guitar ... and then a male voice.

“Here we stand. Worlds apart, hearts broken in two, two, two. Sleepless nights. Losing ground, I’m reaching for you, you, you.”

My heart hammered at the beautiful, haunting lyrics and the crooning tenor voice. It touched a place deep inside me that I thought could never be reached again.

“Someday, love will find you. Break those chains that bind you. One night will remind you how we touched and went our separate ways. If he ever hurts you, true love won’t desert you.”

I gasped, hardly noticing the tears that leaked from my eyes as I began to sway to the music.

“Troubled times. Caught between confusion and pain, pain, pain. Distant eyes. Promises were made in vain, vain, vain. If you must go, I wish you love. You’ll never walk alone.”

My body moved to the music, caught up in the beat as I spun and moved my hips, finding something to soothe the aching places inside. Maybe it was silly, but I felt those lyrics in my heart and soul. *Breaking chains ...*

When the song ended, my eyes slowly opened, taking in the room, the tattooed biker and his hypnotic gaze, and the pounding thrum of my heart. My chest rose and fell as I stared into blue eyes that understood I needed to feel again.

“Again,” I whispered.

He nodded, replaying the song.

This next time, I couldn’t stop my body from reacting to the instruments and their melody. I never took dance classes and wondered if this is what dancers felt like, when every muscle responded to the notes, and your body reacted with its own set of independent movements.

When it ended a second time, I rushed to Raven, who seemed amused, in a playful way, by my reaction. “Who was

that?”

He seemed a little surprised that I didn't know. “Journey. The lead singer is Steve Perry, one of the best male vocalists ever born.”

“What's the name of the song?”

“Separate Ways, Worlds Apart.”

“Wow,” I whispered, tucking my hands in close to my heart. “He must have loved that woman so much.”

“I believe so. He wrote the song with another band member when he was on the road and going through a painful divorce. Too much temptation with life and fame.”

“That's sad.”

“It is,” he agreed. “You've never listened to Journey before?”

I shook my head. “No. Is that bad?”

“Not at all. I get the pleasure of introducing you to one of the most influential and talented artists in his genre.” He flashed a lopsided grin, his dimple appearing in his cheek.

“Play another Journey song for me.”

Excitement brightened his blue eyes. “This next one is fun. It's called Don't Stop Believin'.”

Nodding, I closed my eyes again, waiting for the music to start. The song began differently this time, but no less hypnotic, pulling me in as I smiled at the lyrics.

“Just a small-town girl livin' in a lonely world. She took the midnight train going anywhere. Just a city boy born and raised in South Detroit. He took the midnight train going anywhere.”

The music picked up tempo, swirling in the air as I felt swept up in the current.

“Strangers waitin' up and down the boulevard. Their shadows searchin' in the night. Streetlights, people livin' just to find emotion. Hidin', somewhere in the night.”

Dancing. I was dancing. My body moved, finding a few stolen moments of freedom. I spun in circles, lifted my arms, and let the music pulse through me.

“Don’t stop believin’. Hold on to that feelin’.”

And I did. I embraced it, hugged it, and allowed my soul to let a little bit of light and happiness in.

The result was profound.

I laughed. I cried. I laughed and cried at the same time, belting out the chorus of Don’t Stop Believin’. When the song ended, I threw my arms around Raven’s waist, embracing the unhindered emotion that flowed through my chest.

His arms wrapped around me, and we swayed as another song began to play. The slower music drifted through our bodies. He intertwined our fingers with one hand, and the other gripped my waist.

I lifted my head, surprised he wanted to dance with me.

He arched a brow, asking for permission.

Nodding, I didn’t verbally reply, not wanting to break the spell between us. He began to lead me around the room, pausing to spin me out and back in, grinning when I laughed.

“Being apart ain’t easy on this love affair. Two strangers learn to fall in love again. I get the joy of rediscovering you.”

Oh, wow. Those lyrics.

“Oh, girl, you stand by me. I’m forever yours. Faithfully.”

Who knew a silver-bearded, muscled, tattooed biker twice my age could be so romantic?

My heart could hardly contain all the emotion lingering within the withered, half-dead chambers, the whisperings and echoes of a love I’d never known but secretly desired since I was a young girl of sixteen, staring into the bluest eyes I’d ever seen.

“That was called Faithfully. I’ve got a playlist of my favorites. You want to keep listening?”

“Yes,” I replied without hesitation, perhaps too eager.

My answer pleased him. I swear I saw a twinkle of sapphires gleaming in his eyes.

After that, I stopped paying attention, letting the music guide us. We circled the room as Raven occasionally sang lyrics, as lost in the moment as I had become.

It took at least half a minute for me to realize we’d stopped. His hand pressed against my lower back, tucking me in closer to his body. His head dipped, bringing our faces closer together.

For some reason, the movie Dirty Dancing flashed through my mind, specifically the scene where Baby visits Johnny in his room, and they dance together, leading to a night of awakening for them both, blossoming a love that would defy social class and income division.

“How you feeling, babygirl?”

The truth? What did I have to lose?

“Like my heart is learning to beat again.”



RAVEN

BEAUTIFUL. FREE. HAPPY.

Those were the words that stuck out in my mind, watching this gorgeous creature spin around the room, her entire heart visible on the pretty face men found alluring and wanted to exploit for their gratification, pushing the darkness away.

When I held her in my arms, every memory of Sarah faded. I didn’t see a replacement for someone I lost. And I

didn't see a broken girl.

I stared into the emerald gaze of a young woman with the courage to fight for her recovery—a survivor. I saw an intelligent, caring woman whose beauty was more than skin deep. Everything I learned about her only increased my curiosity and desire to be in her presence. She experienced the world so differently than I did. Brianna intrigued me for more reasons than my cock, and for an old biker like me, that was serious.

Somewhere along this train of thought, I'd stopped moving, clutching her body against mine as desire and attraction warred with logic and the need for patience. I'd never felt anything like I did for this woman. An overwhelming urge to maim and kill those who harmed her and stole her peace. To make any man who ruined her smile pay with hours of suffering.

My head lowered as I wondered what her lips would taste like, how they would feel when I pressed my mouth to hers. Soft and sweet? Exotic and intoxicating?

Would she moan? Kiss me back? Or was I a fool to misread the attraction she couldn't hide?

Take this slow. She needs more than one night.

“How you feel, babygirl?”

“Like my heart is learning to beat again.”

My breath stuttered, and I honestly couldn't say how many beats my heart skipped, but it was at least one.

You're too old for her. She'll never want a relationship with a biker. You'll just remind her of bad memories.

All the reasons we were a bad idea floated around in my head.

“So, I have a serious question.”

Fuck. She was talking, and I let my thoughts wander again. “Okay. Go for it.”

“You're a biker,” she began.

“That’s not a question, sugar. That’s a fact.”

She snorted. “Aren’t you supposed to listen to hard rock and metal and thrash your head?”

“I don’t have any hair,” I deadpanned. “For the thrashing.”

She stared at me, her jaw popping open a little like she couldn’t make sense of this conversation. Maybe she was embarrassed since her cheeks turned a little pink. Looked fucking cute, and I couldn’t help a chuckle. This was too easy.

“You’ve got to learn to laugh at yourself, babygirl. It’s one of the secrets to lifelong happiness.”

Her lips turned upward. “You’re teasing me.”

“A little,” I admitted, “but it’s sexy as fuck that you can handle it.”

Why. The. Fuck. Did I just say that?

No goddamn filter at all. When I was around Bree, sometimes I lost complete track of what I was thinkin’, and my mind drifted, making me act like a total ass.

“You’re so bad,” she laughed.

Good. I earned a laugh.

“Maybe I’m just too old to know better,” I joked.

“Or just the opposite.”

“Hell, sugar, you got me figured out fast.”

She smiled, a genuine smile that transformed her features from pretty to beautiful, stunning me into silence. That wasn’t an easy feat and didn’t happen often. I had to swallow down the lump in my throat and force myself to respond before I spooked her because I couldn’t stop staring at her mouth.

I was so fucked.

Silence spun out between us, and I cleared my throat, changing the subject to something I could handle. “You hungry?” My voice sounded rough and scratchy, and I almost tripped over the words. What the fuck?

“Sure, Raven.”

Raven. My road name. I'd always loved it.

Today, I sort of hated it. I wanted to hear Bree call me by my real name—the one my mama loved, surprising everyone in the family when she chose it.

When the moment felt right, I'd ask her to say it.

“I've got a local lady I hired to do the cleaning once a week and stock this place up with groceries and necessities. Gave her a text before we arrived. The fridge and cabinets are stocked. We could have anything you want.”

She gave me a timid smile. “Breakfast?”

“Pancakes? Sausage or bacon? Eggs?”

A sweet smile lit up her face. She looked almost ... happy. Damn. That landed right in my chest, all the feels. I could get used to seeing her like this.

That was the precise moment I realized Bree's happiness meant as much as my own. That I couldn't fathom the idea of not being around her every single fucking day. I wanted to share every part of my life with her, at least the parts I could. MC life would never be shit she needed to know or worry about, especially after all she'd suffered.

“All of it.”

“You got it, babygirl.”

When I said her nickname, it was the first time I noticed how it rolled off my tongue like a caress.

Fucked. That's what I was, in every way possible.

Somehow, I'd fallen hard for this fragile beauty, and it didn't stop there. I kept falling, digging in deeper, building a fucking mote around us that would protect her from the outside world. I wanted to be her knight in shining armor. The kind of man she'd be proud to have by her side.

I wanted to be her old man. The guy she fucked, went through life with, and grew old next to because I wasn't getting any younger. The age difference would always be

there. I could use it as a crutch or stop worrying about it. If it wasn't an issue for her, then it wouldn't be for me.

That only left one barrier to us moving to the next level, and it was up to Brianna if and when that veil between us would be ripped away. Did I want her? Hell yeah. Would I ever force the issue or make her uncomfortable? Never.

But I sure hoped she found a way to fight and beat those demons holding her down for good because my heart was invested, and there was no going back now.

Chapter 15 – Raven

I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, so to speak. Bree was always polite and caring, but it wasn't healthy. She needed to embrace her negative emotions, not just the positive ones.

For real growth and recovery, she needed to vent.

So, after a week of cheesy, happy days, I helped her deal with reality.

“Why did you really want to come here, babygirl?”

She stared at me over pancakes, blinking. “What do you mean?”

“I didn't stutter, sugar. Why did you really want to leave The Roost?”

She seemed surprised and confused. “Because it wasn't safe.”

“For who?”

“Me and Bella.”

“But you didn't ask her to leave or come with us. You didn't tell her to go away with Crow and sneak off like we did. So tell me, babygirl, what are you runnin' from?”

“Stop. That's not what happened.”

“Isn't it? Aren't you runnin' from the Dirty Death MC? The memories? Your fucking rapist?”

“Raven.”

“Fucking tell me the truth. Do it, Bree.”

She picked up her plate and stomped toward the sink.

“How long are you gonna run from Chronos and what he did to you? How long will you give him that power?”

She lifted her plate and slammed it down, releasing the dish as it crashed to the tile, shattering at her feet. “I'm not!”

Her cheeks grew dark pink, and she stared daggers at me.

She was pissed.

Good. I'd been waiting for this moment.

She'd been numb. Terrified. Broken and melancholy.
Tearful.

But angry? Not until now.

She needed to fully embrace the rage and process it to recover from her ordeal.

“What about you? When are you going to tell me why your marriage with Sarah didn't work? Or why you like to fuck so many women but can't commit to any of them?”

Where the fuck did that come from?

Shit. *Stay focused.*

“You wanna push? Well, I push back, sweetheart. You ain't got a man in front of you that backs down to any woman or man for that matter. You wanna go toe to toe with me? Be prepared to meet the beast.”

She scoffed. “Big talk from a big man.”

I'd show her big when she finally wanted to see my dick. Hell, just sparring with her like this was making my cock stiffen.

“I am. You're gonna love it too.”

She narrowed her eyes, huffing a breath. “This isn't about sex.”

“Isn't it?” I contradicted, enjoying the pout on her face that followed. I closed the distance between us, lifting her from the floor and to the side, away from the ceramic pieces on the floor.

“Get your hands off me!” she screeched.

Oh, it was like that, huh?

I reached around and swatted her on the bottom.

Shocked, she lifted her hand to strike me when I caught it, bringing her into my embrace. My mouth hovered above hers, our lips nearly touching.

Fuck. It would be so easy to kiss her. I fucking wanted to do it for so damn long.

She sneered at me. “Don’t you dare!”

“Don’t worry, little spitfire. I won’t be doing it yet.”

She glared at me, fucking *glared*. So goddamn cute.

“I’ll wait until you’re begging me to touch you. Until your clit is throbbing and you’re thighs are clenching together with need. When the slightest friction begins to coax an orgasm from your body, and you soak those pretty panties covering your sweet pussy.”

She gasped, her eyes glazing over.

Fuck yeah. This wasn’t gonna take near as long as I first believed.

“I want you so dizzy with desire that you can’t wait to have my thick cock inside you.”

Her pupils dilated in response.

“And then I’m going to rip those panties away and feast on your cunt, licking and devouring you until I taste your release on my tongue.”

Fuck me. Saying this to her gave me a raging hard-on.

“I can’t stop thinking about how you’ll taste.” My hand slid around the back of her neck, tugging her closer as I lowered my head, whispering in her ear. “I can almost feel how slick you’ll be when my tongue gently slides inside you or when I start to fuck you with it, plunging in and out, pulling a moan from that sexy mouth of yours. How will it feel for you, I wonder? Rough, erotic?”

Her chest rose and fell faster, and I hoped she was imagining what I described.

“Your hips will start to move, rubbing against my face and beard because you won’t be able to stop yourself. You won’t want that moment to end.”

“Raven,” she groaned, and I knew I had her now.

“You ever had a man between your legs who knows what he’s doin’?”

She didn’t answer, almost squirming as she leaned against me.

“You know what adds to the experience?”

She didn’t say a word, but I knew she was curious.

“The beard. Something about that friction on your inner thighs while two of my thick fingers enter your pussy, fucking you while I lick and suck your swollen clit. But there’s one more thing that tops all of it.”

I pulled back, watching as her head lolled until she stared up at me, blinking, unable to hide the lust and want and need building inside her.

“The fucking connection we have, my little vixen. You and me, we’re the real deal. Tragic circumstances brought us together more than once, and attraction built a foundation on top of it, but now we’re here because this is where we were always supposed to end up.”

Tears filled her eyes until they resembled pools of emerald glass.

“You don’t have to cry, babygirl. For you, I’d wait a fucking lifetime.” My fingertips lightly stroked her jawline. “Hell, I already have. Every moment brought me here so I could be the man you need. You can pretend to fight or resist it, deny it, or even try to walk away, but the truth is, sugar, I’m your forever, and you already know it.”

“Raven.” She said it with such longing that I knew I had to walk away now, or I’d take from her what I wanted, and that was something I could never forgive myself for. Too many men had forced sex and intimacy. I didn’t want her to associate anything we did with her past.

Her sexual pleasure and awakening would come when she finally decided to let the trauma stop controlling her life and wanted me more than she needed to hide or run.

“I’m gonna walk away now, sweetheart, but you need to know it’s not because I’m impatient, frustrated, or angry. It’s because I’m fucking turned on so much that I need to take care of this erection.”

She glanced down, no doubt seeing how my dick tented my jeans, pushing against the zipper.

“I’m gonna go in my room, stroke my cock, and fantasize about what it’s gonna feel like when I finally sink my cock in your pussy.”

Her gaze snapped to mine, her lips parting, and *fuck me* if she didn’t lick them like the thought of dragging out my cock and wrapping her lips around the girth wasn’t the exact thing she pictured in her head.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

The second I got my hand around my dick, I’d be pumping hard and fast, and I knew I’d come all over my lap with how much this conversation had turned into foreplay for me.

I couldn’t resist dropping a brief kiss on her forehead and hoped she would forgive me for not asking permission first. From here on out, I would always get her consent.

She watched me as I walked away, her face scrunched as she processed all I’d said to her.

Everything inside me wanted to spin around, pick her up, slap her juicy, perfect ass again, and take her to my bed. No woman had ever gotten to me the way Brianna did, not even Sarah.

Mate, the crow whispered.

I knew. I’d known for so fucking long.

To be honest, since the night I rescued her from that burning car. Sarah wasn’t a true mate. She’d been a companion, a lover, but never my heart’s true desire.

No, that woman stood before me, slowly putting the broken pieces of herself back together. I knew I’d do anything for Brianna, anything to keep her with me, everything I could to protect her, even if it meant my life.



MY BEDROOM DOOR SWUNG open. Silhouetted in the meager wisps of moonlight sifting through the window stood the most gorgeous female I'd ever had the pleasure to meet.

My Brianna.

She approached the bed, walking with purpose even when I knew it must have terrified her to come to me like this.

I wouldn't let the effort be wasted.

"I'm afraid," she admitted, sitting beside me on the mattress.

I only had a sheet draped across my naked hips after I'd showered. Taking matters into hand, I'd come three times as the hot water sluiced over my body, her name on my lips.

Staying silent, I sensed she needed to take this process slow.

"Well, I'm actually terrified," she corrected, "but I don't want what happened to dictate the rest of my life. I don't want to miss out on wonderful experiences."

Nodding, I understood.

"I want to come for the first time since he touched me. Since he," she faltered, and I sat up, almost reaching out for her, "since Chronos raped me."

Wow. She said it.

Fuck. I was so proud of her. What a breakthrough.

My crow fought inside me, wanting to unleash, hating that we didn't stop this from happening. His rage would have to wait. Once it was safe, I'd take Bree back to the club, and I'd hunt down the rest of her kidnappers.

They would bleed for their crimes, and then the crows would rip them to pieces.

“How can I help?” I asked, swallowing hard. Watching her fall apart because she orgasmed? Sign me up!

“Can, we uh,” she paused, clearing her throat. “Can we start with a kiss?”

Stolen. That’s what happened to my heart. It no longer beat for me but thrummed and ticked for her alone.

“Absolutely,” I finally replied, my voice strained.

She climbed onto the bed, crawling over my lap as I settled against the headboard, my back resting against the slatted boards. I had the foresight to keep the sheet covering my hips and groin, exposing only my upper body.

Brianna faced me, gently lowering her ass on my thighs. Her fingertips pressed to my stomach, slowly gliding over the dark ink. She paused at the grim reaper and the graveyard; the multiple ravens settled over the headstones and the name on the largest one in the center of my abdomen.

Asmon Patrick Carter. 7/8/18.

She gasped, tearing her gaze away to stare at me, horror lingering on her face. Aw, she figured it out.

“Oh, Raven. I’m so sorry.”

“My son never had the chance to be born. He died in the womb,” I faltered, clearing the lump in my throat that followed those words, “but I loved him, and every day I still miss him, wondering what it would have been like to watch him grow up.”

“Of course. That’s only natural.”

“I heard his heartbeat, Bree. I saw him moving on the computer screen. His little arms and legs and,” my voice broke, and I couldn’t hold the pain inside. My body shuddered.

Her arms wrapped around my neck, and she hugged me so fucking tight, and that agony that I’d been carrying for ten years didn’t feel like it would tear me apart anymore.

Neither of us moved for a solid minute.

Brianna finally leaned back, lifting her hands to my face. Her fingers slid over my beard as a soft smile hovered on her lips. She leaned down, lightly pressing her mouth to mine, letting us feel the warmth of one another. Soft, sweet lips molded to mine, increasing our connection. A tiny moan rose in her throat as she pushed through the seam of my mouth, sliding her tongue inside and tasting me, sweeping, tangling our tongues in a tether before she pulled back to nibble on my bottom lip with her teeth.

I thought the kiss was over, but it was like she couldn't get enough, swooping back in to lightly bite, tease, and taste my lips like they were the sweetest candy she had to devour.

My hands fisted the sheets, desperate to touch her and fighting the wicked lust burning in my brain.

And just when I thought she had enough, she rolled her hips, rubbing her scantily clad pussy against my rock-hard dick. My balls felt heavy and full, and I wanted nothing more than to fill her up with every drop of my cum.

Fuck. Me.

I had never experienced anything as erotic as this young woman taking what she needed and wanted from me, moaning into my mouth, and sliding the pads of her fingers across my chest, shoulders, and biceps to caress every inch within her reach.

I'd been with a lot of women in my years on this earth. Hell, before I met Sarah, I fucked a new chick at least five nights a week.

As a new patch into the Devil's Murder, I took advantage of what those muffler bunnies offered, and I'd had every single one of them in my bed often.

The point was that I never felt like *this*, so fucking aroused, so caught up and driven with the need to claim a female as I did with Brianna. At my age, it was fucking insane.

“Raven, touch me.”

“Where, baby? You got to be specific.”

“My, my pussy,” she stuttered.

“Goddamn, sweetheart, you’re making me so fucking hard.” I finally lifted my hands, placing one on her hip, watching her reaction.

A brief nod followed.

My other hand lifted the edge of the t-shirt she’d worn to bed. “Can I get rid of this?”

She grabbed the hem, pulled it over her head, and tossed it aside.

Blown. Away.

I’d seen a lot of tits as a biker and gone to dozens of strip clubs. Women had strutted and wrapped their bodies around poles in front of me like pros. Naked breasts were nothing new.

But hers? Motherfucking perfection.

My mouth watered as I forced my gaze upward, licking my lips. “Those are the most perfect tits I’ve ever had the pleasure of viewing.”

She laughed, bouncing them.

“Sugar, I need to touch you *everyfuckingwhere*. You okay with that?”

A flash of hesitation, and then she nodded.

Shit. I would take this slow.

My hands settled on her hips as I flicked out my tongue, rolling it over and around one of her nipples. The flesh puckered, and I groaned, sucking it into my mouth, laving the bud until it hardened. I switched to the other breast, giving the same attention as her fingers slowly slid over my head.

“I love that you’re bald.”

A laugh burst free from my chest. “Okay. That’s good.”

“No, really. It’s sexy and combined with that salt and pepper beard of yours, all that dark ink, and the hard muscles

of your body,” she shrugged, pausing, “you’re beautiful, Raven.”

It was the first time a woman ever said that to me.

I blinked, laying her back against the sheets, and followed, laying in the cradle of her body.

Mate. The crow cawed in my head—only *my mate*.

MINE.

A vicious, possessive, hungry growl rumbled through my chest.

“I will be whatever wish. Take from me, touch me, show me what you desire. I only want to please you.”

She hooked her thumbs in her underwear and yanked them down, kicking the material from her legs as I leaned back, devouring the sight of shapely limbs and toned thighs. Legs a mile fucking long that would wrap around my waist and hold on tight when I fucked her.

Woah. I was losing this fight. My mind and my body were taking control.

She spread her legs wide, pushing down on my shoulders. “Show me what you meant, Raven.”

I flattened my stomach to the mattress, tugging her to me as I leaned in and inhaled, her natural musk and clean feminine scent driving me wild. So pink and ripe and glistening. A little cherry I wanted to savor. “Tell me, sweet girl, anyone ever devour your pretty little cunt?”

Chapter 16 – Bree

Panting, I placed my elbows on the bed so I could see Raven better. I'd never met a man who talked so dirty. Were all bikers like this? He seemed hungry enough to gobble me up.

Wow. What a turn on.

“Tell me, sweet girl, anyone ever devour your pretty little cunt?”

“Uh, not with this much enthusiasm.”

He laughed, hard. “Oh, babygirl. You've been missing out.”

He didn't give me a chance to let those words sink in. His face buried between my thighs, and he began to lick, suck, and nibble on my clit all while sinking two of his fingers inside me.

If I was worried that my nightmares would surface, stealing away the passion, they didn't have a chance of competing with Raven. He ate me as fiercely as he promised.

My hips rocked and I grabbed at his hair, falling apart a few minutes later, gasping for breath.

He watched me, grinning the entire time. “I really want to fuck you, baby. Not just fucking, either. I want it slow, fast, hard, soft, and every which way that I can have it with you but I gotta know you're ready. There's no room for ghosts between us.”

He was right.

“I want this, Raven. I want you.”

“You're sure?”

“Yes.”

His big, strong body rose, covering mine. “I don't want to use a rubber. Hate them. Just so you know, I always have in the past. But you're endgame, my sweet. I don't need to wrap my dick with you.”

“Then don’t.”

Was this reckless? Maybe.

I didn’t want to follow all the rules anymore. I wanted to be free to choose how and when and with who. Raven was all I needed. Every thick inch of him.

“You ready?”

I nodded.

He lined up, coating his cock in the wetness around my opening. I was so turned on and he knew it.

Raven could have gone slow, eased his way in, and I wouldn’t have cared but that wasn’t the type of man that he was. No, he was the kind that bulldozed into your heart, and it wasn’t much different with sex.

His hips plunged and his cock slammed inside me with a firm thrust, sinking deep as I gasped.

“Eyes on me, my Bree. I want us linked the entire time.”

He began to move, his powerful body riding out every stroke as he watched my face. I felt alive. Aroused. My pussy gripped his dick tight, loving how completely he filled me.

“Fuck,” he cursed. “I need your lips.”

His mouth captured mine and he fucked me with both his tongue and his cock. The most erotic, amazing sexual experience I’d ever had.

He knew exactly how to move and how to coax pleasure from my body. All thoughts of the past vanished. All I knew, all I could focus on was the connection I shared with Raven.

I came so hard I bucked my hips, almost pushing him out.

He roared my name, thrusting faster, and filled me, pumping several times before he collapsed, pulling me to his chest as he rolled to the side.

Oh, wow.

Dark ink, some of the most beautiful tattoos I’d ever seen, including a raven tattoo that stretched from his bicep down to

his wrist snagged my attention. I traced the ink as my eyes fluttered.

I awakened later, rising from the bed as my stomach churned.

“Oh, shit,” I blurted, running to the toilet.

I heard Raven slide from the bed and join me, his voice concerned.

“You okay, sugar?”

“No,” I groaned, puking my guts out in front of him and unable to stop it.

“Fuck. Are you sick?”

“I didn’t think so,” I replied after rinsing my mouth out.

A weird expression crossed his face.

“Are your periods regular?”

Why would he ... oh, no. No. No. No.

I shook my head, backing away from him.

“No!” I wailed, running out of the bathroom and spinning around, mentally counting the weeks since my kidnapping. I hadn’t had a period. Not yet.

My boobs had been tender but that happened sometimes for me during that time of the month.

But this ... getting sick.

“Raven.” My voice sounded strange. Hollow.

“Bree, baby, are you pregnant?”

“I-I think so.”

Shocked, horrified, devastated. I didn’t know how to process this.

“I haven’t been with anyone, not for a long time. This isn’t happening.” I began to freak out. Spots danced in front of my eyes.

“Brianna!”

I looked at Raven, dreading his reaction.

He didn't look angry. Or upset. He seemed ... almost happy.

What. The. Fuck.

"I'll help you," he blurted, clearing his throat. "I want to help you raise this kid."

Was he insane? Who the hell offered to raise the baby conceived from such horror?

"What?" I managed to spit out.

"You shouldn't have to do this on your own."

Maybe not. "That doesn't mean you have to volunteer."

He frowned. "Maybe I want to volunteer."

"This is ridiculous."

"Talk to me. Tell me why we can't do this together."

What?

"We don't know each other well enough."

"We do," he argued.

Fine. We could talk this out and he would run.

"What do I mean to you, huh? I'm just some girl you rescued. Life threw us together a few times. That doesn't mean you owe me a damn thing, Raven."

Those words were a lie, spit from my mouth because I was terrified, shattered by this news, and I had no idea how to react let alone what I was going to do about it.

Raven wasn't just any man. He never had been, even when our interaction was brief. I was slowly coming to the conclusion that he did mean something to me. More than a rescuer or protector. More than a biker and girl half his age.

We shared a connection.

I felt it whenever he was near and denying it pulsed a wave of pain through my heart.

Did he deserve this? Shackled to me because of his protective nature? Didn't he understand what he offered to me?

It was a lifetime. Forever. A bond that would last this child's entire existence from birth to our deaths.

"You're talking about being a father to a kid that isn't yours."

"I understand that, sugar. I'm not walking into this blind."

How could he be sure he wouldn't regret this later when it was too late to walk away?

"You rescued me and saved my life. I'll always be grateful but that doesn't mean you have to do this."

I'd heard of something called a trauma bond. Therapists referred to the term as a psychological response to abuse. It occurred when an abused person formed an unhealthy bond with the person who abused them. That didn't make sense to me because Raven never hurt me. I never formed a bond with my attackers.

Still, I looked it up on my phone and found four ways to break a trauma bond. The first was focus on the present, acknowledge what happened and the impact that it had by reflecting on what occurred. I'd done that dozens of times through my nightmares alone. The second, focus on the evidence. Yeah, I did that plenty enough to make myself sick.

Third, practice positive self-talk. Admittedly, I struggled with this one. My self-esteem took a massive hit and the thought of being intimate still scared me. I fought negative self-talk daily, but I forced myself to think of something positive to counter it. Sometimes every minute was a struggle.

And fourth, practice self-care. I used to be a girl that cared about my nails, hair, makeup, and clothes. It didn't seem that important now. I didn't want to attract male attention. Funny enough, this didn't apply to Raven. Maybe my mind rationalized that he'd never harmed me and deemed him safe.

Experts suggested journaling, meditation, exercise, hobbies, prayer, or talking to trusted friends as ways to begin

the self-care process. I'd never been particularly religious, and I wasn't much of a writer. Meditation seemed awkward. The one thing that made sense besides finding someone I trusted that I could have private conversations with was exercise. I'd enjoyed the gym in the past.

The thought of being around a bunch of sweaty guys repulsed me now and I didn't think I could relax in that environment. What the hell would I do for hobbies now?

It didn't matter.

The question remained, how did I move on? How did I accept what Raven offered without becoming dependent on the comfort he provided?

Trauma bond. Yeah, maybe I did see a little of that in how I needed Raven now. He made me feel safe and protected.

Did that mean any relationship we had together would be co-dependent and toxic?

Shit. I didn't know what to think.

"Hey, babygirl. You disappeared on me," he murmured, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear. "I don't read minds so I'd appreciate it if you gave it to me straight."

"I don't think this will work." As soon as the words left my mouth, I hated them and disagreed, but I wouldn't shackle Raven to me because of the shit hand life decided to deal me.

"Brianna," he replied sternly.

Biting my lip, I avoided his direct gaze. Pulling away, I crossed the room, needing to put space between us. "You'll see this is the right choice when you aren't reacting from emotion."

He snorted. "Fuck, babygirl, that was insulting." He shook his head. Anger didn't drive him, determination did. I could see the resolute grind of his jaw.

"Doesn't mean I'm wrong," I pointed out.

"You were put in my path on three separate occasions, Brianna. We didn't meet by accident." He closed the distance

between us, grasping my chin so I couldn't turn away. "The first time, after I pulled you from that burning car, I left because I wasn't free. I was *married*."

I knew that. He told me about his wife at the funeral five years ago. She took her own life, but he never told me what drove her to do it. What happened between them? How did they fall apart?

Would we be destined to share the same fate?

"The second time, I was so fucking devastated. I lost the woman I believed to be my mate. The one woman fated to be mine. She died because I wasn't enough for her. I never had been." He sucked air into his lungs, breathing hard. "I'll always love her, but I let Sarah go a long time ago."

What the hell did this have to do with anything?

"Raven, I—"

"No," he growled. "You need to hear this."

"Okay," I sighed.

"I wasn't ready, but I should have been. My biggest regret is letting you slip away a second time. I should have confessed that I never stopped thinking of you. You've been in here," he tapped his head and then his heart, "for so damn long, sweetheart. I should have had the courage to say it long before now."

"But what does this mean?"

His hand lifted, caressing the side of my jaw. "It means I'm yours. Every fucking part of me."

His hand lifted, caressing the side of my jaw. "It means I'm yours. Every fucking part of me."

By now, we'd both pulled on clothes and argued our way into the living room. We should have paid more attention.

It proved to be a costly mistake.



THE CONVERSATION WAS interrupted when we heard glass breaking and Raven's body was flung backward. Bright red appeared on his stomach, dripping from a hole in his abdomen.

Oh no! He'd been shot. Again!

"You're bleeding!" I screeched, pressing my hands against his hard abs Raven grunted.

"It's not deep, just a flesh wound."

Bullshit! "I can see the damn bullet hole. It's not a flesh wound!"

"Babygirl, you're gonna have to calm down. It's not good for our baby."

Of all the things he could have said, that was the one I never thought to hear from his lips. "What?"

My ears began to ring, and my heart pounded in my chest. Did I hear that right? He said *our baby*. Ours.

"I-I," I stuttered, unable to form a clear response. "Oh, Raven."

"Asmon, sugar. When we're alone, you don't have to call me by my road name. That's just for the club."

"Asmon," I began, not saying another word because he pressed his lips to mine, rolling us so that his body blocked me from the bullets pummeling the exterior of the house, shattering windows, and lodging into the walls above our heads.

"We're gonna make it, babygirl. I swear it."

I nodded, staring into his eyes. "I believe you."

“Good. Now I’m gonna kick some ass and freak you the fuck out because my crew is fucking pissed. Remember what I said. It’s you and me and that little life growing inside you. I’ll protect us with my dying breath.”

Half of what he said was lost in the eruption of gunfire.

“Asmon,” I whimpered, suddenly catapulted back to the night he rushed inside and rescued me from the two Dirty Death MC members who trying to rip off my clothes.

We were outgunned and about to meet the man responsible for everything that happened from the beginning.

The Undertaker.

Thank you for reading!



Raven and Bree's story isn't over. Watch for more in 2023.

If you enjoyed the book, please leave a review.

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Member – Cuckoo

Member – Falcon

Prospect – Goose

Prospect – Robin

Sneak Peek



R.J. laughed as he pulled me from the clubhouse, swinging his fist into my side, and we wrestled like we did when we were kids, knocking each other into walls on the way out. Out of breath and grinning like fools, both of us straddled our hogs. Seconds later, the loud heavy roar of our bikes filled the air as we headed to our favorite bar Crazy Eights.

You'd think it was a hardcore biker bar, but it wasn't. That was why we liked it.

The front doors were made of heavy wood and scraped the rough, uneven floor when you entered. Loud music and the familiar buzz of dozens of voices greeted you instantly as well as the smell, like a mixture of licorice and fried food. The main focal point was a large rectangular carved bar wrapped around the room and shaped like the number eight. Bartenders stood in the two circles, passing out drinks and taking orders.

A large kitchen sat at the northern end, serving appetizer-type foods like fries and chicken wings. Eight pool tables were scattered around the outskirts of the room while wooden tables and chairs hovered in the center. Everything was in multiples of eight. Interesting concept.

No live band played tonight, but the jukebox loudly blared out tunes. A modest-sized stage was set up on the far end. Entertainment was usually only Thursday through Saturday nights.

A dance area, nothing more than a tiled square floor occupied the space in front of the stage, and off to the right was equipment set up for a D.J.

Strobe lights dangled from above the dance floor, where it would light up as the gyrating bodies pressed close together to the beat of the music. I could see how this place appealed to both the average and biker crowd.

People were milling about all over the room, shooting pool, drinking beers, smoking cigarettes, and hanging around the jukebox making selections.

I ushered my guys toward the only open pool table that had suddenly cleared for our use. We never had to ask. A pool table would always open up when we walked in the door. Yeah, it was part of the biker persona and the culture of fear that kept the locals at a distance, but I didn't give a fuck.

We weren't here to make trouble. The owner was a brother, and we promised not to start shit in his bar. I picked up the chalk and decided to break, taking the first game with R.J.

About two hours in, we'd drank enough liquor and beer to kill a person with alcohol poisoning, but I knew my limit and my brothers'. Leaning against the wall, I tilted my long neck bottle back and gulped a few swigs. I had a nice buzz going, almost enough to make me forget about the shit from earlier tonight.

I wish things hadn't gone to hell about twenty seconds later, but life was like that.

I had the worst fuckin' luck imaginable.

My eyes flicked about the room, taking in the scene. I was always on alert. It was a hard habit to break. I'd saved my ass more than a few times by keeping a close eye on my surroundings.

The front doors swung open with force, the heavy wood banging against the solid walls and cracking with a finality that seemed like some rabid harbinger of death.

I immediately recognized the guys who entered. Their cuts bore Satan's Outlaw's emblem on the leather.

"Edge," R.J. whispered, ticking his head in their direction so slightly I might have missed it if I wasn't already clued in.

"Chill, let them make the first move."

Ghost was next to me on my right only a few seconds later. R.J. stayed on my left, but his hand hovered over his shirt, ready to lift and grab his gun at the first sign of trouble.

Valan and Jake kept to their game of pool. G.Q. stayed just slightly to my six, his arms around two hot blondes, one of which had been fondling his junk all night. I swear that fucker got laid ten times more than any of the rest of us, but I saw him stiffen slightly, so I knew he had seen the Outlaws too. In all outward appearance, you'd never know we were ready to rumble, but that was how that shit was supposed to look.

The following five minutes would be forever ingrained in my memory.

The seven members of the Outlaws strode forward with purpose in our direction at the exact moment the front doors of the bar opened again. Blinking, I was sure I must be imagining things because what I saw next defied logic. My beer halfway to my lips, I froze. In total disbelief and shock, I didn't move a muscle.

Are you shitting me? How is this happening? Where did she come from?

What the fuck was she doing here!?

My girl, my lost love, and most profound regret stood next to a group of girlfriends, totally oblivious to my presence or reaction and in undeniable danger.

I hadn't seen her in two years.

"Fuck," I whispered, the beer slipping through my fingers and falling to the floor with a shatter.

R.J. saw her; next, his jaw dropping open and gaping like a fish out of water. "Rae."

I couldn't tear my eyes away from her; that was my first mistake, but it wouldn't be my last.

Had I been watching, I would have seen the knife that withdrew from my nemesis's hand and his quickened steps. Since middle school, I'd been at odds with Bryce 'Killer' Hutchinson (he had a stupid name *and* nickname). We hated each other, but the roots of that hatred had much more to do with how bad we fucked with each other more than anything else.

He was a dick.

I was shoved to the side as Ghost blocked Bryce's intentional attempt to gut me with his knife. The blade sliced into Ghost's forearm but wasn't deep enough to make him pause. Without hesitating, his elbow met Bryce's chin as I snapped into action. Before I could think it through, the five of us ended up in a brawl with the seven of them.

I always liked low odds. Maybe I was just the underdog, but I liked proving people wrong, and I enjoyed shocking them when they found out how strong and fast I was, like in the ring. Boxing had lots of perks. Not many fucked with me once they saw I could kick some serious ass, even less when they found out I was a member of the RRMC. Toss in the fact that I was intelligent and educated; I was lethal.

Right in the thick of things, throwing kicks and punches, I noticed Bryce recognize Rae, and a devilish smile curved his lips. Following his gaze, I met her startled brown irises, wide with shock.

Baby.

With that one look, so intense and heated, I knew I still owned her heart.

Tonight, she'd know she still owned mine too.

Bryce broke free of Jake's hold and ran in her direction. I wasn't sure how I made it to her before he did, but my only thought was that I had to reach her first. I moved so fast I hardly registered the motion.

There was something odd about the way my body jolted forward, but I didn't pay much attention to it.

In a split-second decision, I tackled Bryce to the floor, raising my fist and punching him as hard as I could, hoping to knock him out.

While we grappled on the floor, the entire bar erupted in chaos.

Fights were breaking out among the patrons as my brothers tried not to involve any citizens, but it was near impossible.

The Outlaws were brutal, using more than fists and heavily booted feet in their attacks.

Sharp blades gleamed silver in the darkened bar as they caught the dim lighting. I heard a grunt and then a scream and lifted my head as one of the Outlaws grabbed Rae. A blade pressed against her slender throat.

I couldn't say what happened next.

I think I roared like a wild fucking animal and shoved through nearby bodies, using every ounce of strength I possessed to reach her, charging like a goddamn bull. Her frightened whimper increased my rage, and the feral beast inside me thirsted for fuckin' blood.

I saw red.

Nobody was going to hurt my ol' lady.

The next thing I knew, I was on the ground, the stupid fucker beneath me as I let loose. Rae was huddled with her friends, crying and calling my name, but I couldn't stop.

“Pete!”

Fuck. She was the only one that called me by my real name anymore.

It nearly brought me back from the ... *edge*, but screw this shit. She was the most important person in my life.

I had to save her. I had to make sure this fucker didn't go after her again. I had to—

“Edge!”

Jake and R.J. yanked me off the guy as I dripped his blood from my knuckles and heaved, my chest tight with the lack of oxygen. It was a wonder I didn't have a fuckin' heart attack. Pumped full of adrenaline and seething anger, I was a ticking time bomb. I fought them off, cursing and shouting, trying to run for Rae. Her doe-like brown eyes were frightened ... of *me*.

Fuck!

The front doors burst open, and cops filed into the bar, guns drawn. Someone must have called. No doubt the presence of two rival MCs amped shit up a bit.

I was shoved to the ground with the rest of my brothers and the SOMC members, as well as several rowdy citizens. Cuffed and trying to crane my head around to find my girl, I nearly panicked.

I couldn't find her.

Where the fuck was Rae?

It wasn't until I was shoved roughly into the back of a squad car that I caught a glimpse of her. Rae's slim frame was illuminated in the dark, misty night by blue and red flashing lights. The rain had soaked her to the bone, and she was wrapped in a blanket near a few of her friends, crying and trembling, shaking her head at an officer as he indicated she should get in the waiting ambulance.

Our eyes met for a few brief seconds, and all I saw was her face pinched in pain.

My heart nearly stopped.

The words *I love you* died on my tongue as I whispered her name, and she turned away, the tears glistening on her pale cheeks. I knew at that moment that nothing I could say or do would change the way she thought of me. Her gaze spoke the words even if she never voiced them aloud.

Monster.

She was right.

I *was* a fuckin' monster. A demon, a broken man with nothing left to lose. And now I knew I was every bit the haunted and dangerous criminal I had become.

Edge.

My name and my fate.

That was where I lived and played, where I was dumped and broken, where I'd continue to stay until this life finally claimed me, and only then would I be free.



To read **Sins of the Father** click here: [Sins of the Father](#)

About the Author



Nikki Landis is the USA Today Bestselling & Multi-Award-Winning Author of wickedly fierce romance. Her books feature dirty talkin' bikers, deadly reapers, dark alpha heroes, protective shifters, and seductive vampires, along with the feisty, independent women they love. There's heart-throbbing action on every page.

Within her books, you can find suspense, fated mates, instalove, and soul bonds deep enough to fulfill every desire. Like your books on the darker side with plenty of spice? Look no further!

She lives in Ohio with her husband, boys, and a little Yorkie who really runs the whole house.

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