



Samson

BIKER

ROYAL BASTARDS MC



USA Today Bestselling Author

NIKKI LANDIS

Santa BIKER



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Santa Biker is about the cleaner of the Royal Bastards MC Tonopah, Nevada Chapter, and includes dark and gritty content intended for mature readers only. Heed the content warning. To fully understand Diablo's story, it is highly recommended that *Praying for Thunder* by India R. Adams is read before *Santa Biker*.

Viciously Mine releases in February 2023 and continues Chrome and Rael's stories. Jigsaw gets his story with *Jigsaw's Blayde* in July 2023.

Be on the lookout for *Hell on Wheels*, Hound's story that kicks off the Las Vegas Chapter in October 2023. *Cold Fury* is a crossover book for both Tonopah and Las Vegas, part of the Mayhem Makers series releasing April 2023. And finally, *Justified* re-releases in early 2023, an expanded book crossing over the Tonopah and Las Vegas chapters of the RBMC and the Reaper's Vale MC.



There's much more to come for Grim and his Reapers.

ROYAL BASTARDS CODE



PROTECT: The club and your brothers come before anything else, and must be protected at all costs. **CLUB** is **FAMILY**.

RESPECT: Earn it & Give it. Respect club law. Respect the patch. Respect your brothers. Disrespect a member and there will be hell to pay.

HONOR: Being patched in is an honor, not a right. Your colors are sacred, not to be left alone, and **NEVER** let them touch the ground.

OL' LADIES: Never disrespect a member's or brother's Ol' Lady. **PERIOD.**

CHURCH is **MANDATORY.**

LOYALTY: Takes precedence over all, including well-being.

HONESTY: Never **LIE, CHEAT,** or **STEAL** from another member or the club.

TERRITORY: You are to respect your brother's property and follow their Chapter's club rules.

TRUST: Years to earn it...seconds to lose it.

NEVER RIDE OFF: Brothers do not abandon their family.

COMMON TERMS

R **BMC** Royal Bastards Motorcycle Club. One-percenter outlaw MC. Founded in Tonopah, NV 1985.

Reaper Demonic entity sharing the body of every Royal Bastard club member in the Tonopah chapter. A collector of souls at time of death.

Devil's Ride A deadly motorcycle ride into the Nevada desert and initiation into the club.

Pres President of the club. His word is law.

Crossroads Bar & clubhouse owned by the RBMC Tonopah, NC chapter.

One-percenter Outlaw biker/club

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.

Reaping Slang, killing those marked for death.

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.

Hog Motorcycle

Cage Vehicle

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

BSMC Bloody Scorpions MC, rival club.



PLAYLIST

Blood – Breaking Benjamin

I'm Not a Vampire – Falling In Reverse

All I Know So Far – P!nk

Down – Love and Death

Scars That I'm Hiding (feat. Anders Fridén) – From Ashes to New

Invincible (feat. Lindsey Stirling) – Escape the Fate

RAINING BLOOD (feat. ZillaKami) – Jeris Johnson

Brand New Numb – Motionless In White

Blood Runs Cold – Rain City Drive

No More – Mike's Dead & DempseyRollBoy

A Beautiful Life – Dorothy

Red Cold River – Breaking Benjamin

Out for Blood – Sum 41

Under Your Scars – Godsmack

Waiting on the Sky to Change (feat. Breaking Benjamin) – STARSET & Judge & Jury

Santa Baby – Eartha Kitt

Here Comes Santa Claus – Doris Day

'Zat you, Santa Claus? (feat. Louis Armstrong) – Edie Grady & the Commanders

You can listen here: [Santa Biker Playlist](#)



Royal Bastards MC
Tonopah, NV Chapter



Diablo:

I'm a savage and a killer.

A man with nothing to lose.

As the cleaner for the Royal Bastards, I do the dirty work for
the club.

When I'm called in, it's my job to ensure nothing is left
behind.

But it's the blood that speaks to me, revealing hidden secrets
and exposing the truth.

Blood contains all the agony of my past, and I can't escape it.

Years ago, I loved and lost a young woman and her son.

Two souls ripped away in a cruel twist of fate.

Evil wormed its way into Nevada, and now it's here again,
chasing more innocents.

My heart is dark, the pain buried far down where nothing can
reach it.

Until her.

Gina is a single mom with two sweet kids.

She's beautiful, strong, independent. And so fierce.
When her past comes looking for her, I swear my protection
but keep my heart guarded.
I don't expect a single tattoo in my shop and her blood to
reveal more secrets.
Now I've got three new souls who need a holiday miracle.
But opening myself up again means trusting fate won't ruin
me a second time.

**It's operation Santa Biker, and I intend to give Gina a
Christmas to remember.**

Gina:

I'm dreading the holidays this year.

I'm out of money, overworked, and stressed to the max.

All I want is to give my kids a wonderful Christmas.

Life has other plans.

Broken down for the third time in mere weeks, I'm in tears
and alone on the side of the road when a ghost from my past
shows up and threatens my life.

The sexy biker that rides in on his iron horse saves me from
harm and stirs an itch that I didn't realize I needed to be
scratched.

Diablo is rough, wild, tattooed, and untamed.

He's also the hottest man I've ever met.

A leather-wearing, dirty, delicious holiday treat I don't dare to
indulge.

When my house is broken into and trashed a couple of weeks
before Christmas, there's only one man who can help.

I need a miracle from St. Nick.

My secret Santa has a heavy wish list.

I just hope he can deliver.

Note: *Santa Biker* is a wild, insta-lust-to-love Christmas story between a sexy bad boy and a hardworking single mom. This book is a standalone but part of the Tonopah, NV Royal Bastards MC and contains an age-gap romance, steamy scenes, biker slang, cursing, violence, dark content, a paranormal REAPER twist, and, of course, an HEA.

Chapter 1 Diablo

“What you havin’ tonight, honey?” Becca asked, leaning over the edge of the bar while her tits pushed together, pressing the tanned skin nearly out of the V-neck of her top. I could see part of her nipple and knew it wasn’t an accident. The club girls tried to snag my dick almost every night of the week.

“Just a beer,” I replied with a hint of warning. Didn’t feel like dealing with bullshit. Not with the Crossroads so full tonight.

“You got it.” She gave me a wink and then passed the bottle into my hand. “Enjoy. Let me know when you want another.”

Dipping my chin briefly, I let her know that I would, turning to lean against the bar.

One arm draped the bar top while I took a few swallows, scanning the room. Rael gave me a chin left, smacking Mammoth on the back when the big fucker choked on something he’d just drank from a shot glass.

My guess? Rael spiked it with something potent. Probably done on purpose, knowing our SAA. Rael wasn’t happy unless he was in the middle of shit, stirring the pot and brewing trouble.

His brother, Chrome, our newest patch into the club, gave Rael a shove, laughing when Rael took the bait, wrapping an arm around his neck. He planted a loud kiss on Chrome’s cheek, twisting his nipple through his t-shirt, chuckling as Chrome punched him in the gut. The two ended up on the floor, wrestling.

Amused, I shook my head, facing the common room.

“You want another beer, Diablo?”

“Hell yeah,” I answered, switching out my bottles and watching Shadow as he wrapped an arm around Stefanie’s

waist, hugging her close against his body as they shared a leather couch with Toad and Laramie.

Toad's fingers slowly glided up and down Laramie's back while she sat on his lap. A look of contentment dominated her pretty face. Our prospects were now full members, and I couldn't help feeling proud of the young Reapers that joined our club.

Grim ticked his head in my direction and gestured to the two of them as he approached. "Fucking love those shits. Both of them."

"Me too," I admitted, unable to hide a grin.

"They're gonna be tough. Just what this club needs."

"We do alright. But yeah, I like knowing it isn't just all of us gettin' older and no younger members to come up underneath us."

"Exactly. We've got a rough road ahead. Razr isn't gonna stay in prison forever. There's shit we got to settle about Salazar and his shipments. And then those fucking Denali brothers. That betrayal still chafes my ass."

I didn't doubt it. "We'll handle it, pres," I promised, glancing around the room as he took the stool next to me.

"I know that shit, just talkin'," he muttered, slamming his empty beer bottle on the bar. "Another!" he roared as Becca placed one in front of him, quickly snatching the empty bottle before it crashed onto the floor when he nearly knocked it off, clumsily reaching for his Budweiser.

Grim never drank that shit. He swore it tasted like piss, but here he was, slinging down the contents like it was the best fucking thing he had ever tasted.

Yep. The pres was drunk.

Without Trish here to balance him, he'd gotten smashed. Fatherhood and the club took their toll, but Grim never fucking complained. No Royal Bastard bitched about shit like that. We weren't pussies.

Trish remained at home with Creed, who had a cold. I heard that she'd insisted Grim come to the clubhouse, letting her care for the little one because Grim was hovering too much and driving her crazy. Made me chuckle a little. No one could say he wasn't a devoted father, though.

Most of the ol' ladies were at the Crossroads tonight, making it feel warmer than it had in a long while. Grim liked to assemble these social gatherings as often as we could. Babies, women, a few kids, all the members, and more than a few familiar faces were scattered about, playing pool or catchin' up.

One face in particular never failed to catch my eye. Why I was so attracted to that little blonde friend of Sasha's, I would never know. She wasn't my usual type since I loved brunettes, but she did something wicked to my heart, and my Reaper craved Gina so intensely that I dreamed about her. A lot.

Like last night. And last week.

Fuck. Even last month.

Since that fateful February when I saw Gina for the first time.

It was fucking weird.

Grim followed my gaze, his lips curling into a knowing grin. "Better watch out for that one. She's trouble."

I knew that, but it didn't matter. I still wanted her, even if she had a shady past and two kids. I wasn't dumb enough to think that a woman that beautiful didn't have other men in her life. I just wanted to be the one she was currently fucking. If things worked out, we could talk about it. But I didn't walk into relationships fast when kids were involved.

Just too fucking painful when it didn't work out.

"I'll catch you later, pres."

He chuckled as I made my way to Gina, and she spotted me, smiling as I stood next to her. Maybe I'd grown observant, or perhaps it was just the fact that I'd been around her often,

but I could tell something was off. Her expression was somber, but the dullness in her eyes warned me to tread softly.

Long ago, I met a young Hispanic woman who couldn't escape the trouble that hunted her or the tragic hand of fate that robbed her of happiness. Now, all these years later, I could never turn away when that feeling of trepidation rose. Intuition? Maybe. I'd argue the Reaper inside me sensed things I couldn't. Through our bond, I felt things other men weren't aware of and combined with our abilities, my Reaper and I experienced heightened awareness. I'd even say we glimpsed the past and future but that was usually only when I touched blood.

I ticked my head toward the exit, hoping I was wrong and Gina's world wasn't tainted by darkness. "Need some fresh air?"

"Sure," she replied, too distracted to notice when my hand rested against her lower back, guiding her into the warm Nevada night air.

We walked out and stood under the stars, leaning against her car. "You seem a little distracted. You okay?" I ventured, knowing I couldn't let it go, even if she didn't like me prying into her business.

Her nod was too quick. "Of course."

"Hey, it's me—a friend. You can share shit, and I won't blab a word. Promise."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Because you belong to an outlaw motorcycle club, and I've got enough of that problem."

Her words made my stomach clench, and I stood up straight, staring down at her big blue eyes with concern. I'd once heard similar comments from someone as young and beautiful as the woman in front of me, and my heart did a funny stutter. There was evil in this world that not even Lucifer Morningstar, the devil himself, could control.

“Lay it out for me, honey.”

“I got this today. It was placed under the windshield wiper of my car.”

She pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of her pocket and handed it over, slapping it on my upturned palm. I opened the crinkled note and found a malicious message.

I'm coming for you bitch.

“What the fuck is that?” I asked, stepping closer. “Who’s threatening you?”

“My ex.”

“How do you know?”

She sighed, shrugging her shoulders. “He’s done this before.”

“Not anymore,” I swore, tugging her into my arms as I tilted her chin up, feeling that familiar surge of protectiveness rise within. I could blame it on my Reaper, but that was only part of it. “You’re under my protection now.”

She scoffed. “Diablo, stop. This isn’t serious. He did this to remind me that he’s out there. Like I could forget,” she muttered. A distant look entered her eyes, followed by a grimace. “I can handle it.”

“I don’t like it,” I grumbled, forcing my Reaper to stay calm.

“It’s nothing to worry about. Alright?”

“I disagree.” Tugging her tight against my chest, I lowered my head briefly. “You contact me if anything else happens. Promise me.”

“Bossy,” she joked, slapping my chest. “I’ll be fine.”

Flustered, I fought the idea of either kissing her or slapping her on the ass. She needed to take these threats seriously. I didn’t want anything to happen to her or her kids.

“Damn straight. Call or text if something happens. If not me, then Sasha. I’m serious. Do it.”

“Fine.” She lifted her hand, brushing her fingers on the scruff of my face, those soft tips grazing the underside of my jaw. “I’ll reach out if anything happens.”

“Gina,” I whispered, my voice husky. She brought out the beast, the untamed side of my nature, and I couldn’t help it as my chin dipped lower. My mouth hovered above hers, close enough to steal the kiss I craved. “You feel it,” I murmured as her tongue darted out, sliding across her pink lips.

“Diablo,” she admonished, fighting our attraction.

We could move at her pace. That didn’t bother me, so long as she knew I wasn’t going anywhere.

“You can’t fight it forever, Gina.” We’d been flirting for months.

Her lips tapped mine, the briefest of surrender before she pulled away. “I need to check on the kids. It’s getting late.”

I let her go, watching that sexy ass of hers swish with every step, but that didn’t mean I would give up.

There was something special about Gina and her kids. A reason I entered her life, and she brought warmth into mine. Maybe fate was a fickle bitch, but my Reaper knew we were brought together for a reason. Until I figured it out, I’d keep close and be the protector Gina needed.

Chapter 2 Diablo

“Just how much tinsel and shiny shit do we need to put up?” I asked, taking a long drag from my cigarette and watching the prospects as they hung up garland around the perimeter of the common room. “The Crossroads is gonna look like some shmuck puked up fucking Christmas cheer all over the place.”

“Next thing you know, we’re gonna have that damn smiling Elf everywhere too.”

Sending a smirk in Bodie’s direction, I had no idea what he was talking about. “The *fuck?*”

“That little red elf that people set up around the house during the holidays. He supposed to watch over the kids, and they know he’s keepin’ tabs on shit for Santa,” he explained.

“That’s fuckin’ genius,” Rael blurted. “I need one for Nylah. I want to catch her in the act, so when’s she naughty, I can punish her in bed.” A shiver ran through his body, and he adjusted his dick. The wickedest grin stretched across his mouth, and I could see the wheels turning in his head.

“Cut that shit out,” I ordered, wishing Bodie hadn’t brought it up. “Can’t fucking deal with your crazy. All this Christmas shit makes my Reaper edgy.”

Rael chortled like what I said was the funniest damn thing in the world. “You’re so cute when you’re riled up.”

Bodie and I both groaned.

Rael squared his shoulders back and ticked his head, wiggling his eyebrows up and down. “You need laid, Diablo. Want me to find you some pity pussy?”

“The *fuck?*” Bodie blurted, a loud ass guffaw filling the room as he tilted his head back and roared with laughter.

“I don’t need pity pussy, *Rael*. Fuck off.”

“Seriously, when’s the last time you got laid? There’re plenty of club girls that can take the edge off. I heard the

standards are pretty low—”

That was as far as he got before my fist connected with his jaw. Rael didn't move as I watched his Reaper rise to the surface, and that familiar, challenging look entered his eyes. Fucker loved to taunt his brothers and got off on being confrontational. It was his forte. Not that Rael was an asshole—okay, he *was*—but he loved causing a ruckus, and maybe the enforcer in him couldn't resist. He was our SAA now and had been for years, but his first love was protecting the club and enforcing the rules. He wasn't happy unless he could get dirty, use his fists, or torture some unlucky son of a bitch for crossing the club.

Point was I knew better. He loved to taunt.

I just wasn't in the mood to fucking deal with it today.

Rael swung next, and I ducked, barely dodging the blow. He snickered as I landed a hit in his gut, and then a loud whistle pierced the air. The sudden shrill sound made me wince as my gaze shot straight to Grim. His arms folded across his chest as he scowled at both of us.

“Rael, find something else to do to occupy your time, or you can help the prospects put up decorations for the next eight fuckin' hours. Diablo, my office, now.”

Ignoring Rael's chuckle, I flipped him off, following Grim down the hall and into his office. He kept the space separate from the chapel, which made sense. Club business was discussed in both places, but where all the members had a say and were required to be present during church, his private domain held a lot of secrets. It was an open door for every brother in the club. A safe space if there was such a thing for a bunch of 1%er outlaw bikers.

When the door shut behind us, my pres lit a smoke and began puffing away, gesturing for me to take a seat. Frowning, I tried not to focus on the fact that this wouldn't be a quick conversation. He had something on his mind, and when Grim was mulling shit over, it meant trouble was coming to the club. The kind of trouble that usually ended up with dead bodies. That was what I specialized in. Well, tidying up for the club

and then my other hobby—inking my fellow brothers with tattoos.

“How long you been my cleaner?” he asked, leaning against the edge of his massive desk. The dark wood gleamed in the sunshine streaming through the solitary window in the room and smelled faintly of lemon and oil.

“Nearly eighteen years, I’m guessin’,” I reminded him, sitting back against the soft leather and getting comfortable.

“Hell of a long time.”

I wasn’t sure where he was going with it. “Long enough to know I’m loyal and not nearly long enough to give it up.”

He smirked, flicking ash onto the tray on his desk. “Thought you’d say somethin’ like that. You’re dependable, Diablo. That’s why you’re privy to shit the club needs handling when someone’s poking their nose in our business. More importantly, I trust you when it comes to messes.”

Well, fuck. I hated being right about trouble hitting the club.

“What’s up, pres?”

“Got some intel that I’m not likin’. Gonna bring it to church soon, but I wanna run somethin’ by you first.”

“Give it to me straight.”

A sigh left his chest. “Remember that body we found with all those girls? Deep in that underground tomb?”

Shit. I sure did. Don’t think any of my brothers would ever forget. “The one in the abandoned factory? With all those trafficked girls?”

“That’s the one.”

“One of them was carved up, if I remember right. Left for us to find by those goddamn Russians,” I spat.

“Her name was Stefanie.” He waited, knowing I’d put those details together and end up at the same conclusion he’d obviously already reached.

My eyes widened as the truth dawned on me. “Aw shit. You sayin’ that’s related to Shadow’s ol’ lady? What the fuck, pres? This is fucked up.”

“Don’t I know it.” His expression was pained for a few blinks of an eye, and then his stoic mask slipped back into place. Pres had strong shoulders that held a heavy burden for every person at the Crossroads. That included the members, prospects, ol’ ladies and families, and even the club girls. He carried that burden close to his chest, but sometimes the mask slipped, especially when it came to Shadow. He had a soft spot for the kid. We all did.

Rael and Grim cared for him like he was kin. They found him starving and beaten, took him in, and never regretted it. Shadow was one of us.

“Tell me someone ain’t out to hurt Shadow further.”

Grim shook his head and lit another cigarette. “I’d be lyin’ if I said no.”

“Fuck!” I shouted, jumping up. “What you need me to do? I’ll find the fucker messin’ with this club. He won’t get away ___”

“Need you to keep a level head. If I wanted drama, I’d be talkin’ to Rael.”

I hated to admit he was right, but Grim had a point.

Going off half-cocked and full of venom wouldn’t help the club or Shadow. A low chuckle left my lips. “Understood. What’s Mammoth got to say?” Our V.P. should be here for this discussion.

“He knows where we’re at. Keepin’ an eye on the pup for now. Shadow has been sneaking off a lot lately.” Grim snuffed the cigarette out in his hand and began to pace the room. He often moved around as he thought through the shit in his head. Pres was one of those people who needed to stay active. Rael was like that too. Most members of the club were antsy motherfuckers, and that was just a byproduct of the world we lived in and the darkness we all shared. Our Reapers tuned into it like a frequency tailored especially for demons.

Always be ready. Life in the RBMC was dangerous and unpredictable.

“So why you need my expertise as a cleaner?” I asked, getting down to the nitty-gritty.

“I need your expertise, as you say, for something slightly more delicate.”

Delicate? I wouldn't exactly say that was a characteristic of mine. Or anyone else in the club. “Pres?”

“There's been two death threats that I'm takin' serious. One, Shadow is mixed up in some heavy shit, and I need to find out how deep he's in. Two, Gina and her kids are in danger. Bodie came to me about it this morning. Sasha's concerned.”

My blood turned to ice, and I froze at the mention of Sasha's best friend. Sasha was Bodie's ol' lady and the mother of their infant son Maverick, born on Halloween last year. Her closest friend Gina hung out around the clubhouse whenever we had family functions. She had two kids and a body that rocked my fuckin' world, not that it wasn't evident from the party last night when she told me about that note.

“Don't think I just missed your reaction,” Grim murmured, stopping to lean against his desk again. “You're not discreet about how you stare at Gina when she's around.”

My hand lifted to rub along the back of my neck. “Shit, pres. She's fucking hot. Ain't dumb enough to act on it.” So that was a half-truth. I wasn't lyin' exactly. I hadn't touched Gina yet.

My Reaper grew restless. He didn't like taking orders unless it was club business. Gina? That was personal.

“Bodie would kick your ass if you fuck with Gina, and that's after Sasha ripped you a new asshole first. She's made it clear that Gina is protected, and I agree. It's too damn complicated for any of the members to become involved with her. She's got a past I ain't wantin' to touch. Feel me?”

Motherfucker. What the hell did that mean anyway?
“Yeah, pres. I feel you.”

“Good. I need to know you can keep your fuckin’ hands to yourself because I need my cleaner on this.”

“I can,” I answered firmly, swallowing hard. Lust didn’t rule my dick when it came to the club. “What you need from me? Shit is sounding fucked up.”

“That’s because it is. After I asked Xenon to do some digging, I found out that Gina’s ex is the cousin of a Scorpion.”

“Well, fuck,” I blurted, shaking my head. “Who?”

“The guy ain’t an officer, just a member of the Scorpions MC who went nomad. He disappeared for several years, and now he’s suddenly shown up in the area. Threats have been left in Gina’s mailbox and on her front door.”

“She told me about the note on her windshield,” I confided.

“That’s not all.”

My fists clenched, awaiting his next words.

“Someone broke into her place when the kids were at school two days ago, and she was at the store. Half the place was tossed, and a bunch of shit was broken.”

“Fuck!” I shouted, tangling my hair as my fingers slid through the strands. She didn’t say shit about that last night. “You think her ex is trying to scare her?”

“Worse. He’s toying with her. I think he wants somethin’ that she’s not giving up. The kids are in danger. Sasha asked if I’d allow them to stay at the Crossroads.”

“You’re gonna say yes, right?”

“Already did.” He frowned, taking a long drag from his smoke. “Gina declined. Same as before.”

“Shit.” This wasn’t okay. I’d drag her and the kids here if I needed. Things were escalating, and that meant a fuck ton of trouble.

“Need you to track this ex of hers down. It’s not just about Gina. The club is at risk too. We need to nail this fucker down

and find out what he's after.”

“And if he won't back down?”

“He goes to ground.”

Good. Grim was right. He needed my expertise on this. Not that I wouldn't have gotten involved as soon as I learned about this shit, regardless of his opinion on it.

“And the shit with Shadow?” I pressed, needing to know Grim's plan.

“Mammoth and I have it covered. Rael too.”

Nodding, I stood, cracking my neck. That left me to focus on Gina. I wasn't complaining.

“Report back to me as soon as you know anything.”

“You got it, pres.”

Chapter 3 Gina

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I exclaimed, staring at the dashboard with frustration while the gauges all seemed to have a mind of their own, and like a naughty child, none were obeying. The temperature needle climbed higher while the check engine light popped on, and as a result, my car shook as the engine sputtered a pathetic gasp. The speedometer began to lose momentum before I could do more than blink, and I slowed to a crawl.

Jerking the steering wheel, I managed to park on the shoulder of Hwy 95, cursing in low tones as I slammed a palm downward twice on the steering wheel of my ungrateful hunk of junk. “Big Betty, I’m not happy.”

Sure, it might be weird to name your car, especially when she wasn’t a pretty sports model, but I didn’t care. Big Betty had always been reliable until the last six months. Now, temperamental as fuck, she broke down every single chance she got.

I didn’t have the money or time to deal with it so close to Christmas. The holidays officially started already since this was the second week of December. How would I pay for another repair and finish shopping for Rev and Olivia?

This was the third time I’d broken down in the last month, and it always occurred at the most inconvenient times. The first, Rev had a dentist appointment, and we nearly missed it. The second time my car was full of groceries, including ice cream and milk. They almost spoiled. Now, it was eleven at night.

I’d gotten off my closing shift at the diner nearly fifteen minutes ago. Heaving a sigh, I stared out the window at the bright crescent moon hanging low in the Nevada skyline. Stars filled the entire expanse from one end to the other in a dazzling display of crystalline white. Not a cloud blocked their enchanting sparkle as Christmas music played over my speakers. Until the engine died, and the warbled words of Silent Night hung like a bad omen as they fizzled out.

Just three weeks until that fat, jolly old elf was supposed to drop down my nonexistent chimney and drop presents under the tree. Santa was going to be a little stingy this year. I'd be lucky to have four gifts each for the kids after I paid all the bills. The last thing I needed to deal with was another expensive auto repair.

"Shit," I exclaimed, ignoring the sting behind my lashes as tears misted my view. "Why do I always have the worst luck?"

The kids were home alone, and calling a tow truck would take every last dime I had in my account. There wasn't much choice other than calling my best friend Sasha and begging for her pity. She wouldn't care, but I hated depending on other people whenever life threw another curveball in my direction. Shouldn't I be able to handle a crisis alone?

Picking up my phone, I tapped her name in my contacts, let the phone dial, and listened for her voice. Three rings lapsed before she answered in breathless concern.

"Gina? What's up, babe?"

A distinct male groan followed her words, and I sank back against the seat, wishing I could have found someone else. My call interrupted Bodie and Sasha in the middle of one of their sexcapades. Again. Yeah, I'd had an emergency more than once when they were in bed.

Part of me wanted to giggle, another part was slightly envious of the orgasms she'd receive, and the rest of me just hated the fact that I was lonely as hell and sick of being single with few prospects other than my vibrator. A girl needed a real dick once in a while.

"I broke down," I exclaimed, sucking in a giant gulp of air. "Again."

"Aw, babe. Where are you?"

"Hwy 95 between Hawthorne and Tonopah."

"We're on our way."

"It's cold as hell out. Maybe one of the prospects won't mind bringing a truck. No need for you and Bodie to come to

rescue my ass a third time.”

Sasha chuckled at my choice of words. “We’ll have someone pick you up. Where are Liv and Rev?”

“Home. Should be in bed, but it’s Thursday night, so I bet they’re still up. They always push it before the weekend.”

“Bodie is already on the phone. Spook is comin’.”

“Thanks.”

Muffled voices mingled in the background, but I couldn’t distinguish the specific words discussed.

“Bodie says they’re sending one of their tow trucks to pick up your car and haul it to the shop. They’ll fix it over the weekend. You need a loaner?”

“I don’t have the money for more repairs,” I admitted, feeling embarrassed. “Just tell Bodie they can drop my car at my house. I’ll figure it out.”

“Gina.”

“What?” I asked, biting my lip. Tears pricked the back of my eyelids again. I was so tired of being broke and worried about money. The holidays were supposed to be happy and full of hot cocoa, Christmas movies, cookies, and warm memories. So far, all I had to show was a meager bank account, a used Christmas tree, last year’s ornaments, and a strand of lights around the living room. Luckily, I didn’t decorate until after some asshole broke inside and tore the place up. At least none of the furniture had been ruined.

“Hey, it’s going to be okay.”

She could always sense when I was in a mood. “No, it’s really not. I’ll survive, though. There’s not much choice.”

“I’m coming over tomorrow night, and we can hang out with the kids. I’ll bring pizza and fireball.”

I snorted. “What a combination.”

“Chin up, babe. I’m here for you.”

I knew that. It was one of the reasons I loved Sasha so much. “You know you’re my ride-or-die bitch.”

“Damn straight.”

She ended the call, and I shivered, rubbing my hands together for warmth. The temperature dropped fast once the sun set this evening. I had a feeling we were in for a harsh winter. Headlights appeared on the road, and then drove past my car, zooming down the infamous stretch of road toward Las Vegas.

It was nearly ten minutes later when I saw the next vehicle, and I opened the door as the truck slowed down, facing my direction as the high beams clicked on. Blinded, I squinted and turned my head, not the least bit amused.

“That’s not funny,” I shouted, wondering why Spook would do such a thing.

The engine revved as I gripped the door, and the truck inched forward, rocking along the deserted strip of road as it sped up, then slowed down, repeating the action several times.

Acutely aware of the fact that I was a woman alone on the side of the highway late at night, I swallowed down the fear that began to surface.

“Knock it off!” I ordered, slipping back into my car. The driver’s side door slammed shut as I reached for my sunglasses and slid them on, glaring at the truck still moving forward. The distance between us closed to only a car length or so, which ramped up my agitation.

Who the hell was messing with me? And how did they know that I was out here? Was I being followed?

This wasn’t Spook or any member of the Royal Bastards MC. I’d hung around the club members and the Crossroads enough to meet them all. They would never try to scare or intimidate me like this. I tried not to panic, hauling a couple of breaths into my lungs.

Turning the key, I hoped my ignition would start, but nothing happened. Reaching for my phone again, I was about to call Sasha back when I saw additional headlights

approaching. They were coming up fast on my location. Whoever was in the truck noticed too. The lights flashed off and on a few times like a warning.

I didn't have a hope of dodging if they surged ahead any further. The truck revved the engine one more time and then sped off, nearly clipping the front of my car as I screamed and threw up my hands, fending off thousands of pounds of metal with the silly gesture. I caught the black mask over the driver's face as the vehicle lurched past before the pickup was gone.

Tires screeched as a black SUV pulled beside me and then skidded to a halt. The driver's side door flung open, and I met the concerned, flustered stare of the one Royal Bastards biker who never failed to drench my panties and send my heart into palpitations. Diablo pulled me to my feet as I stood on shaky limbs. He snatched me by the shoulders and then into his embrace as my knees threatened to buckle.

"Fuck!" he growled in that low, rugged timbre I knew well. "You okay, Gina?"

"I-I think so," I stuttered, trembling from the mixture of cold and adrenaline. My teeth chattered as he tightened his hold.

"You're freezing."

"It's a little cold out," I mumbled, snuggling into his warmth. His thick leather jacket wrapped around my body as he tucked me into his side and led the way to the SUV.

"I'll blast the heater. Let's get you inside first."

I didn't say a word as he opened the passenger door and helped me in, buckling the seatbelt as if I were helpless. Maybe that was the vibe I gave off. All I did was blink when he shut the door with a loud clang. Every delicious, hard angle of his body was illuminated as he stomped around the front.

The man oozed danger and sin and strength. Not a single inch of his skin wasn't covered in ink from his neck to his ankles. I couldn't see them now since they were covered in tight denim and leather, but I'd memorized every single tattoo over the summer.

He'd starred in my dreams and playtime many nights since, and I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I was attracted to the bad boy and dangerous vibe he emitted.

Not that I would act on it.

Been there, done that. Lived the shattering, devastating result.

No thanks. The sex would undoubtedly be fantastic, but I had two kids to think of, and I didn't need more heartbreak.

Diablo opened the driver's side door and slid in, spinning the dial to increase the heat as promised. Still shivering, I chanced a glance in his direction as he watched me from those dark brown eyes, almost obsidian in the darkness and far too perceptive.

"You ever see that truck before?" he asked, judging my reaction.

"No. At least, I don't think so. The damn high beams were in my eyes. It was hard to tell."

He nodded, mulling that over. "What about the driver? Was he alone? Did you recognize anyone?"

"All I saw was a black mask over the driver's face as he sped off. I couldn't even make out the color of the truck. My eyes are still adjusting after that asshole blinded me." Blinking to prove the point, I suddenly remembered my kids were home alone and yanked out my phone, clicking on my son Rev's number.

"Mom! Where are you?" he asked as he answered, sounding a bit high-strung. "It's almost midnight!"

"I'm sorry, honey. My car broke down again. I'll be home soon. I promise. Where's Liv?"

"She's been asleep since 9:30."

"Aren't you tired?"

"Nah," he lied as he yawned.

"I should be there in less than thirty minutes," I promised as Diablo pulled onto the highway and began heading toward

Tonopah. “Love you.”

“Love you too, mom.”

I leaned back, suddenly exhausted, as the call ended, and Rev hung up. “Gina. There wasn’t a license plate on that truck. I can’t track it. You sure you’ve never seen it anywhere before?”

“No,” I admitted with a sigh.

“No one follow you around? Show up at your place of employment? Anything like that?”

“No,” I replied with a little attitude. “I’m sorry. I’m a little on edge.”

He nodded, gripping the steering wheel tighter. “I understand.”

Silence followed, the tension slowly easing.

My eyes fluttered as I gazed out into the darkness beyond the pane of glass. *So many stars tonight.*

“Gina.”

Diablo’s deep rumbling mention of my name jolted my mind back to awareness.

“We’re here.”

The SUV parked in my driveway as I blinked the sleep from my eyes. “Oh, wow. I slept the entire trip here.”

“You sure did,” he confirmed with a light laugh. “Snored the whole way too.”

“I don’t snore,” I contradicted haughtily. “You must be delusional.”

His dark eyes held a mixture of humor, concern, and undeniable attraction as they slid over my body and then returned to my face. “I’m lots of things, darlin’, but delusional ain’t one of them.” His words slid over me with all the warmth and rich, thick sweetness of honey.

“Diablo,” I whispered, caught up in the moment as we leaned closer. “You’re a Bastard.” I meant to lighten the mood

and prove a point at the same time. I wasn't one of his club girls, and he wasn't an average guy. We might mingle in the same circle, but we couldn't be more different.

A smile twitched the corners of those full, sensual lips as he contemplated my words. "You bet I am. Royal Bastard. Sneaky bastard. Ruthless bastard. Take your pick."

"I don't think it's a good idea to limit you to just one," I teased.

"No, better not," he agreed with a murmur, closing the distance between us. "Could be a lot of others if you wanted me to," he divulged, lifting his hand to brush his knuckles along the side of my face.

"Like?" Oh, this was such a bad idea. What the hell was I thinking?

"*Fucking* bastard. Protective bastard. Make-your-knees-shake-from-pleasure, bastard. The list goes on and on."

The groggy, disoriented part of my brain soaked up his words like a sponge and prevented the filter in my brain from stopping my next words as they dripped from my tongue.

"The replace-my-vibrator-because-he-can-do-it-better, bastard."

A wicked smile lifted his mouth into the most delicious grin. "Darlin', toys ain't got no place in your bed when I'm in it. No battery-operated dick will ever please you as good as I can."

That was all it took for my eyes to close and a small whimper to pass through my lips.

Shit. I definitely needed a man in my life. One that could scratch my itch when I had one. Who could leave my thighs shaking and my pussy sore. I wanted to get lost in passion and forget the cruelty of this world for one selfish moment in my life.

All of those feelings were squashed when I heard my son's voice call out. "Mom?"

My eyes snapped open in a panic, and Diablo leaned back, something close to regret in his eyes. “Thank you for the lift.”

“Any time.”

I opened the door and slid from the SUV, shutting the door without a glance in his direction as I ran toward my son. He wrapped his arms around my waist as I dropped a kiss on the top of his head and hugged him in return. Headlights were still facing our direction as the SUV sat idle.

I wasn't sure why Diablo waited until I was inside before he slowly backed out of the driveway until I noticed he'd parked across the street. Relief sent warmth through every muscle in my body, and I relaxed as I tucked both of my kids into bed. Once the house was locked up, I slid under the sheets but not before I checked a final time to ensure Diablo was still there.

He never moved. *Protective Bastard.*

Chapter 4 Diablo

Yawning, I pulled into the Crossroads parking lot, heading inside to catch a few hours of rest before I showed up at Gina's tonight. If she thought I was backing off after that incident with the truck, she was fucking wrong. Before I could rest, I needed to speak to my pres.

Grim didn't seem surprised when I knocked on his office door, shutting it behind me with a firm click. "What's on your mind?"

"Gina. Her kids. And that fucking prick who tried to hurt her last night."

"I got you on this. No one is going to hurt them," he assured me.

"I want this asshole," I snarled, marking my damn territory like Gina was mine, and I had the right. "I want him to fucking suffer before I reap his soul and hand him over to Lucifer in Hell."

The motherfucker who nearly hurt Gina was going down, and I didn't care what I had to do to ensure that happened. My Reaper was beyond consolation at this point. He'd latched onto Gina and staked a claim, and there would be hell to pay if anyone tried to keep me from protecting what was mine.

Fucking hell.

This was a mess. I didn't intend to get that close to her last night and say the things that I did. My Reaper took over like he'd done so many times in the past. My instincts followed. It was beyond my control, and I didn't give a shit.

Every intention I had to keep my distance flew out the goddamn window of the SUV and never came back. Zero fucks given.

"I don't care if it's her ex or some other asshole. He's dead after the shit he's pulled."

Grim leveled me with one of his intimidating stares. "What the fuck we talk about yesterday, huh?"

“About me staying away from Gina.”

“And why can’t you listen?”

“My Reaper wants her, pres. I know everything you’re gonna say. Ain’t my fucking fault. He’s not gonna back down.”

That was the issue when it came to the demon inside us. He didn’t back down, and when he wanted something, that was it. You could try to fight him, but it was a battle against yourself and a will so strong nothing could bend it. In essence, the symbiotic relationship between all Reapers and the members of the Tonopah chapter of the RBMC meant a merging of wills and minds, thoughts, desires, etc. The Reaper enjoyed fucking that up, to be honest. Rael was probably the only brother that fully embraced the union. The rest of us sort of found a way to live with the entity inside, some better than others.

“Christ.” Grim scrubbed a hand down his face and shot a weary look in my direction. “How did Gina react?”

“Like she wanted me just as much,” I replied with confidence. A hint of smugness seeped into my voice as my Reaper agreed. There was no denying Gina was aroused whenever she was near me, and the way her eyes glazed over when I talked about giving her pleasure, I was sure she wanted me to make good on that offer.

“You better talk to Bodie about this.”

“I will,” I promised.

“Let him speak to his ol’ lady. We’ll see what they both have to say.”

It wasn’t like I couldn’t fuck who I wanted, or Gina wasn’t an adult and able to do the same. Had a lot to do with respect. She was an ol’ lady’s best friend, and that fact demanded that I speak with my brother first. Gina was protected as an extension of Sasha. She was family.

To those on the outside looking in, this was a brotherhood challenging to explain. Our ways didn’t make sense unless you understood the loyalty and depth of friendship that we shared.

It was far beyond membership in a motorcycle club. Our lives, security, and safety depended on one another on a daily basis. Trust was earned and given but fuckin' fast to lose. That was why I was cautious and promised Grim I'd respect Bodie's wishes, whatever the result.

"Tell me about this guy in the truck again," Grim ordered gruffly, pulling out a pack of smokes and lighting up, lifting his boots on his desk.

"Didn't get much since the fucker was smart enough to remove his plates. Before I came to see you, I handed over the truck's description to Xenon. He's lookin' into it, but I didn't see the driver, just the ass end as the pickup sped away."

"Did Gina know him?"

"Said she didn't. He flashed his brights at her, and she couldn't see well. Plus, he wore a black mask. The asshole revved his engine and nearly hit her before I pulled up. Might have done it if I didn't arrive in time."

Pissed, I began to pace his office. My Reaper was agitated and didn't like the fact that Gina and her kids were vulnerable.

"We'll find this stupid fucker. There's got to be a connection to her ex."

"Or it was him, pres."

"Maybe. Won't be the last time that he tries to scare Gina. Guys like that don't give up. We'll be there when he comes around again."

"You mean I'll be the one stayin' close."

"Don't piss me off, Diablo."

I didn't see the problem. "I can switch off with the prospects but know I'm not going to stay away, not now. And I'm sure as fuck not leaving them alone."

"No. I want someone watchin' at all times." He scrubbed a hand down his face. "Tread carefully."

"I will. Gonna talk to Bodie now."

“Get some fucking sleep while you’re at it. You look like shit.”

“Sure, pres.”

Grim waved me off as I left his office and strode over to the common room with purpose. Bodie was shootin’ pool with his cousin Chaos, and they both looked up as I approached.

“What’s up, brother?” Chaos asked as we fist-bumped.

“Need a word with my man here,” I replied, ticking my head at Bodie.

By the amused expression on his face, I figured Bodie already knew what this was about. “Let’s go for a smoke.”

I followed him out front as we both leaned against the exterior of the clubhouse, lighting up our cancer sticks as the morning sun beat down from above, penetrating the cold and providing a slight reprieve from the chilly temperature. If this kept up, it would become too frigid to ride soon. I hated that shit. Nothin’ worse than being stuck in a cage.

“Damn chilly this year. It’s gonna fucking snow, and then we won’t be able to ride for a couple of months,” Bodie complained, staring at the clear sky like it was about to dump frozen flakes at any minute.

He read my mind. “Yeah, maybe, but then we get to keep our women warm between the sheets.” Always a good trade, in my opinion.

“No complaints with that,” Bodie chortled. “Sasha’s pussy is fuckin’ addicting. Can’t ever get enough.”

“There’s one I’d like to know,” I stated boldly.

He shook his head, humored by the admission. “Wondered when you were gonna get to that, brother. It means a lot that you’re comin’ to me first. Sasha and Gina are close. That chick has been through the wringer, know what I’m sayin’? Single mom. Two young kids. A rough past. It’s a lot to take on.”

“I’m not gonna hurt her,” I promised.

“You listenin’? Cause she ain’t some muffler bunny or broad from the streets. Things go bad between you, and she’s still comin’ here to see Sasha. You’re a brother in the club. Won’t be any way around bumping into one another, and that could be awkward.”

“I know, Bodie.”

“Two young kids. Rev just turned twelve. Olivia is only nine. They ain’t ever had a man consistently care for them as a father should. That’s a tall order, brother.”

“You tryin’ to talk me out of this?” I asked, surprised at his approach.

“Nope. Just tellin’ you that she’s vulnerable. Her kids are vulnerable too. They’re needin’ love and protection from the right man. Someone who’s gonna love them back and be the rock they need. Feel me?”

“I do.” Taking a long hit from my cigarette, I contemplated all he had to say and waited for any feelings of panic or uncertainty to surface. Only a sense of duty, loyalty, and affection for Gina and her children rose within, fiercely cradled by my Reaper. Of course, I also felt attraction, desire, and lust for the woman. Underneath all that was a need to protect, provide, and care for these three souls in a way I’d only known one other time before we met.

Anita and Thunder.

My chest tightened, and I wondered if I’d ever come to terms with Ani’s death. Some hurts dug deep and didn’t erode with time. My Reaper carefully guarded my heart, but with Gina, he was all in.

“I don’t know how I got here, Bodie, but I care about Gina *and* her kids. I’m not walkin’ into this blind.”

He gave me a curt nod and then smiled. “That’s all I wanted to know. Sasha is protective over her friend, but she’ll come around. If you want Gina, go after her, Diablo.”

“Plannin’ on it,” I replied with a grin, snuffing out my smoke with my boot after I flicked it to the ground. “Catch up with ya later, brother.”



THE SUV ROLLED TO A stop on Gina's driveway as I placed the vehicle in park. Not having my bike made me feel edgy, but I wanted to surprise Rev and Olivia later, which meant bringing a cage.

Rev opened the door after I knocked, staring at me with wide eyes. "Diablo? Why are you here?"

"Who's at the door?" I heard Gina shout, probably from the kitchen.

"Diablo!" he yelled, opening the door wider. "Guess you should come in since it's so damn cold out."

Amused that he cursed, I cracked a small smile. "Yeah, sounds good. Thought I'd bring dinner since I need to speak to your mom."

He nodded, letting me in as his gaze roamed over the bags and large square box in my hands from a local restaurant most everyone in Tonopah loved. "Do I smell hot wings and pepperoni pizza?"

The hopeful expression on his face was priceless.

"Yep."

"Good." He lowered his voice, ticking his head down the hall. "Mom's making spaghetti again. I don't want to hurt her feelings, but it's the third time in a week."

"Don't worry, my dude," I assured him. "I won't say a word."

Rev led me to the kitchen, where I found a frantic Gina rushing around to scrub countertops and the table, blushing when I arrived before she could complete the task.

"Hi, Diablo," she greeted me nervously, wiping her hands on a cute red and white checked apron. "You're just in time for

spaghetti—”

“I brought dinner, honey. Pizza and wings. Figured you could all use a treat tonight.”

A mixture of emotions flashed through her features, finally settling on acceptance. “Thank you. I’m sure the kids will love it.”

Someone tugged on my t-shirt, and I glanced down, finding Olivia as she shyly pointed to the pizza box I placed on the table. She was a petite little thing like her mother, with dark hair and the same greenish-brown eyes as her brother.

“Are there onions on the pizza?”

I shook my head. “Nope. I’m not a fan. You?”

She shook her head.

“I love pepperoni and extra cheese. Simple and delicious.”

She smiled, quickly glancing at her mom. “May I have three slices?”

“Olivia,” Gina admonished.

“No,” I answered, loving that I could make these kids happy with such a simple thing. “You can have six.”

Olivia’s eyes widened. “Wh-what? Really?”

“I’m having six, too,” Rev declared, opening the box as I chuckled.

“I had them cut the pizza into squares. Makes it easier to hold one in each hand.”

The kids rushed in, pulling their pieces from the box as I heard Gina sigh. “You’d think I didn’t feed them.”

“Eh, they’re growing. Hard to fill them up this young.”

I opened the box of wings, taking out the cups of ranch and blue cheese dressing for dipping. “There’re wings that are extra hot and barbecue ones that aren’t spicy. You can use the sauce to dip them if you like. Or there’s carrots and celery too.”

Rev gathered a half dozen hot wings on his plate, along with two cups of blue cheese. He grinned as he tore into a drumstick, smearing hot sauce across his chin.

Gina handed them both napkins, giving up on teaching any manners. “Goodness.”

Laughing, I didn’t mind. Rev and Olivia were adorable.

“Mr. Diablo?”

“Yeah, Olivia?”

“I want to try one barbecue wing and ranch.”

What a sweet little girl. Her quiet, reserved nature conjured a fiercely protective response. I’d kill anyone who tried to harm her, Rev, or her mother. I felt my Reaper deepen his conviction, determined to keep them safe at any cost.

“You have as much as you want.”

She shook her head. “You and mama need to eat.”

So thoughtful.

I patted my belly. “I already ate. It’s just your mom left.”

Gina lifted a dubious brow as I caught her intense stare. “I’m not hungry, baby. You eat all you want. You too, Rev.”

“Already on it,” he replied with a full mouth, chewing on a bite of cheese and pepperoni.

Gina opened the fridge and pulled out a gallon of milk, pouring each of the kids a glass, then returning the gallon to the fridge. She set the glasses on the table, and I noticed that Rev chugged almost half, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. Gina gave him a disapproving look before he reached for a napkin.

We watched them for a minute before she gestured for me to follow, walking away from the table.

We sat on the couch in her living room. The area was clean and spacious. Nice. But when I thought about it, there wasn’t near enough furniture. One old worn couch. An end table. An old TV on a wooden stand, stocked full of movies.

A piano caught my eye, placed in front of a big window that faced the front yard. Two big plants and an empty cat bed finished off the space.

I'd do something about this later. Maybe I could coax her into letting me see the whole house so I could make a list of everything they needed.

The past tried to rear its ugly head, but I didn't think of my childhood home or the sad memories accompanying it. *Life is for the living.* That was what my mother always said growing up. *Make the most of every moment.*

If only she'd been given longer.

"I suppose you want to talk about last night," Gina began, folding her hands in her lap as she took a seat on the couch, and I joined her.

Being obvious, I sat close, our knees touching. "I do."

"I don't know what you expect me to say," she began, avoiding my gaze.

"Hey," I called softly, reaching over to place my hand over hers. "I get this is your life. You're entitled to your privacy."

Her chin lifted as she searched my eyes. "Okay. I didn't think you'd agree to that."

"I wouldn't say I'm totally on board, but I get it."

She tilted her head slightly as if trying to figure me out. "You're different than I expected. When I see you at the Crossroads, I always envision a tough, wild, untamed outlaw."

"Because I'm a Royal Bastard?"

"No. Yes. I don't know." She sighed. "I've known a few bikers before you."

"Not many of the ones like my club, huh?"

"No."

"I see. Who's Rev and Olivia's father? A biker?"

Gina pulled her hand from under mine, nervously chewing on her lip before she answered. "You know when you learn

things you're not supposed to, things that can put bad men behind bars for a long time?"

Shit. That was nearly every day since I patched into the RBMC. But Gina experiencing that? And her kids? No fucking way. "Yeah."

"I've seen things. Done things." Her voice lowered. "Stuff I'm not proud of but couldn't avoid. Do you understand?"

"Your ex and his club," I correctly guessed.

She nodded.

"Did you run?" I asked, already figuring out the answer.

"Eight years ago, when Olivia was a baby. Rev was only four, but he'd already been subjected to so much." Her voice broke as she turned her head, but I wouldn't let her hide away. She didn't have to shoulder her secrets alone.

Gently grasping her chin, I turned her head. "Gina, you don't have to keep running. The club will protect you."

She sniffled.

"*I'll* protect you. All three of you."

Chapter 5 Gina

“I’ll protect you. All three of you.”

God. I wish I had met Diablo instead of Jack on my seventeenth birthday. Maybe my life would have turned out a lot differently. Better. If for no other reason than the health and safety of my children.

Diablo promised he could keep us safe. I wanted to believe him, but I couldn’t prevent my doubts. I’d run with the kids for four years, from state to state, before we rolled into Tonopah with the gas tank on empty and three hundred bucks in cash I’d earned from odd jobs.

I decided I wasn’t running anymore. If Jack wanted to keep hunting us, I couldn’t stop him.

Hope slowly crept into my heart after three years, and no sign of Jack. Tonopah was small enough to keep us hidden. Or so I thought.

I found a job filing patient charts and answering phones during the weekdays at a dentist’s office while the kids were in school. On the weekends and two nights a week, I worked at a diner to bring in extra money. We didn’t have much, but we were together and safe, which meant a lot more than a house full of expensive things.

And then the past caught up to us.

I knew Jack lingered in the background, watching the house, the kids, and me. He’d always been relentless, controlling, abusive. When he wanted something, he went after it. Viciously.

There wasn’t a thing I could do to stop him. File a restraining order? I did that once. He found and beat me so bad I spent three days in the hospital away from my kids, leaving them vulnerable. When I returned home, Olivia had a severe diaper rash and a cold. Rev arms and legs were covered in bruises. I never found out what happened, and Rev had been far too young to explain.

I knew I had to get out, and I planned my escape one night almost three months later. With a black eye, a car full of stuff for my kids, and two thousand dollars in cash I stole from Jack, I drove out of North Carolina and toward freedom.

“You’re quiet,” Diablo observed, his tongue playing with the tiny silver hoop on the right side of his upper lip. “I’m not messin’ around. I mean every word I’m sayin’.”

“I know you do,” I admitted, lifting my hand to touch the stubble on his jaw. Diablo. A devil. A man who looked every bit the dangerous outlaw and criminal but couldn’t be more opposite in personality. Was he tough? Ruthless? A killer?

I guess the answer would be yes to all three. but he didn’t use those qualities as a weapon.

His kindness, generosity, and protective nature warmed my heart. It didn’t hurt that he was the sexiest man I’d ever met, either. Handsome and charming, he was everything I fantasized about, especially that thick bulge in his jeans I caught on more than one occasion.

But life was more complicated than a quick fling in the sheets, no matter how much I wanted to experience carnal bliss with Diablo.

“Thank you for bringing dinner. The kids will talk about it all week.”

“Don’t do that,” he whispered, capturing my hand between his palms as I pulled away. “I know you’re scared, but we’ll get through this. All four of us together.”

He was wrong. I wasn’t scared. Not anymore.

Resigned, I knew eventually Jack would show up. That was why I bought a gun after someone broke into the house.

“I’m not afraid,” I promised. “I always knew this day would come—”

“Mom!” Rev yelled, interrupting our conversation. “Olivia spilled her milk. I’m helping clean up.”

Shit. My little Liv seemed to be going through an awkward phase. For the third time in a week, she knocked something

over and made a mess.

“I’m coming!”

Diablo followed me into the kitchen, not bothering to hide his frown. He dropped to his knees when he noticed the tears sliding down Olivia’s cheeks. “It’s an accident, sweetheart. You okay?”

She shook her head. “I keep spilling.”

His expression softened. “I used to trip over my feet when I was your age.” He stood, wobbling around the kitchen, bumping into the cabinets. “See? It still happens sometimes.”

Rev snorted.

Olivia giggled. “You’re funny, Mr. Diablo.”

“Just Diablo. Or you can use my real name if you want.”

Her eyes grew wide before she blinked. “You have more than one name?”

“Everyone has multiple names,” Rev mumbled.

I gave him a sharp warning with a quick shake of my head.

“Yep,” Diablo continued, not acknowledging Rev’s comment. “You can pick from three. Diablo, J.D., or Jesiah David Holmes.”

“Can I call you J.D.?”

“Sure. What about you, Rev?” Diablo asked, noticing Rev’s smirk.

“I’ll stick with Diablo.”

“Figured you would, my man.”

“Does that mean someday I’ll be less clumsy?” Olivia wondered.

Diablo gave her a bright smile. “You bet.”

My daughter jumped from her seat, crashing into the tall biker who showed kindness and bestowed hope. Her thin arms stretched around his waist in a fierce hug. “You’re the best, J.D.”

“I think you are too.”

I grabbed my chest.

This man. He made it hard to push him away. Whenever he was near, I found another reason to stop and take notice. Today he proved once again to be a man I could rely on. That my children could trust. Even if he belonged to an outlaw motorcycle club.

Appearances could be deceiving. Not all bikers were bad people. The Tonopah Royal Bastards proved it.

The way to my heart? Loving my kids before me.

“You know what? I think we need a special treat.”

Olivia’s chin lifted, staring up at Diablo. “What kind of treat?”

He turned to me, a devious grin twisting his lips. “Ice cream. If your mom agrees.”

Olivia jumped up and down. “Mama! Say yes!”

Even Rev appeared excited by the idea.

“Okay,” I relented. “Sure.”

Diablo gestured toward the door. “We can ride in my SUV.”

The kids bolted for the door as I laughed, shaking my head. “Sugar never fails to excite them.”

“As it should.” He captured my hand, clasping our palms together as he dragged me out of the kitchen.

“The dishes,” I began.

“Will be taken care of after we return home.”

No other reason to protest, I let him lead me outdoors.



TRUE TO HIS WORD, ONCE we arrived back home, Diablo headed into the kitchen, clearing the table. He ticked his head at Rev.

“Rev, my man, help me clean this kitchen up for your mom.”

“Sure,” my son replied enthusiastically, gathering trash and dirty dishes.

I marched over to him, placing my hand on his forehead. “You feeling alright?”

“Mom,” he exclaimed, rolling his eyes.

Diablo chuckled.

“Just making sure an alien didn’t swap out my son.”

Rev cracked a smile as I backed away, brewing a fresh pot of coffee for the evening. Diablo seemed to like it late in the day as well as morning, from what I noticed at the Crossroads, and I enjoyed a cup after dinner on occasion.

Rev chatted up Diablo until the kitchen was clean, then left to finish his homework in his room.

“Got quiet fast, didn’t it?”

I spun around, finding Diablo only a foot away. He closed in, hands resting on the countertop behind me. My body caged within his own, and he lowered his head, capturing my attention with those brown eyes that hypnotized me with their depth.

“Yeah. After dinner is when I finally get a few minutes of peace,” I joked, licking my lips.

His gaze focused on my mouth. “Not gonna lie, sweet mama. I want those lips.”

“Why?” I asked breathlessly, indulging the naughty desires forming in my head.

What kind of lover was Diablo? Generous? Passionate? Rough and wild?

“Because you make me weak, woman,” he growled while one arm snaked around my back.

With a sudden tug, I bumped into his chest. My hands gripped the belt around his waist, holding the rough, worn leather like an anchor that could halt the rapid spinning of my world on its axis. “You make me feel everything, Diablo.”

His dark brows lifted in surprise. “When I’m around you, I don’t stop feelin’ everything too.”

His mouth swooped down, closing over mine as he deepened the kiss, moving his lips against mine, merging desires and awakening a fire that burned deep within, until he lifted his head, both of us panting.

A flash of silver rippled across the dark depths of his eyes.

“There’s a darkness in you,” I whispered, noticing the odd sheen that lingered. “I can sense it, but it doesn’t scare me.”

Diablo didn’t answer, letting me draw my own conclusions.

As a member of the RBMC, there were things he couldn’t say or reveal. I knew this and accepted it. After all, I had my secrets too.

“I also see how genuine you are and how you take the time to care about others, not just your brothers.”

“I care about you and Rev and Olivia too.”

“I know.” To think any man could love us after Jack’s abuse sent hope fluttering in my heart. “I think it’s the reason I feel I can trust you. That you won’t hurt or betray us.”

“Never,” he agreed vehemently.

“We’ve known each other for over a year now,” I continued, “Closer to two years, if I’m being precise.”

“We have, babe.”

“The timing always felt off until now, didn’t it?”

“I didn’t want to move too fast,” he admitted. “The kids needed to feel comfortable around me, the rest of the club as

well.”

“True,” I conceded. “I don’t know that I’m ready now, Diablo.”

“We take one day at a time. That’s it, sweet mama. No pressure. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Chapter 6 Diablo

The next night I showed up at the door again with dinner. After knocking twice, the front door swung open, revealing Olivia wearing a red apron with tiny candy canes printed all over the material and dusted with white powder. Flour?

“Mama’s making snickerdoodles!”

“Is she now?” I stroked my chin with my free hand, pausing as Olivia watched. “I wonder if she’ll let me trade this lasagna and garlic bread for some cookies. What do you think?”

“Only if I can have both,” she giggled as I walked inside, spotting Rev on the couch.

He ticked his head my way. “Hey, Diablo.”

Olivia planted her hands on her little hips, glaring at her brother. “Rev wouldn’t answer the door because he’s playing called off dookie.”

Huh?

Rev rolled his eyes. “It’s Call of Duty or COD, Liv.”

“That’s what I said,” she replied haughtily, spinning on her heel to walk into the kitchen.

“She never says it right,” he complained, amusement twitching his lips. Perking up as he noticed the bags I carried, he jumped to his feet. “Is that dinner?”

“Yeah. Brought lasagna, garlic bread, and salad. Thought your mom might enjoy another night off from cooking.”

“She will! She’s baking cookies with Liv.” He shut off the Xbox, and I followed him into the kitchen, placing the bags on the table.

Olivia stood on a stool next to her mother while Gina’s head lowered, showing her how to roll the cookie dough into balls, then coat them in the cinnamon sugar mixture already

prepared in a separate bowl before placing the cookies on the sheets to bake.

The moment was bittersweet for me as memories of my mother and a Christmas like this one, many years ago, that I had chosen to forget. Gina wasn't the only one who hid away pain from the past. Maybe that was why we connected.

Soul magnets that found their match.

My attention focused on Gina's ass, enjoying every little wiggle and shake of that rounded bottom.

"I can feel you staring, Diablo," she laughed.

"Oh, I am," I replied, hoping I'd get a chance to squeeze those firm bubbly cheeks later. "Brought you all somethin' to eat."

"Yay!" Olivia screeched, knocking over the bowl of cinnamon sugar as it slid from the counter and crashed to the floor. Her little mouth popped open in surprise. I caught the devastation she couldn't hide as she stared up at me.

Blink. Blink. Her expression crumbled in an instant.

Immediate tears filled big blue eyes as Olivia wailed. "I'm so clumsyyyyyyy."

"Oh shit," Rev whispered, rushing to the closet, where he pulled out a broom and dustpan. "I've got it, mom."

The plastic bowl on the ground remained undamaged, but the mess scattered across most of the linoleum. Rev began sweeping as I picked up the bowl and placed it in the sink.

Gina spared her son a quick nod before pulling Olivia into her embrace. "Baby, we talked about this. It's okay. Accidents happen. I'm not upset with you."

Olivia was inconsolable, hiccupping as her chin wobbled. "It happens at school too."

Gina tilted her head up, concern dominating her delicate features as our eyes met. It wasn't a call for help exactly, but I wanted to let them both know I could shoulder any burden they encountered.

My foot lifted just as a gray ball of fur zipped underneath, startling me as I tripped over my boots, spun in a half circle, and slammed into the cabinets next to the girls. Well, fuck. That wasn't quite what I had in mind.

The damn cat—*invisible before tonight*—darted underneath the kitchen table out of sight.

I heard a snort and glanced at Olivia. Her lips quirked up at the corners before a snicker escaped. Rev joined her, coughing to hide a laugh. His chin dropped as he avoided my gaze, trying hard to keep it in. Olivia giggled, slapping a hand over her mouth.

I made a face, crossing my eyes as I stuck out my tongue.

That did it. Laughter burst from Olivia's chest as the tears stopped. A genuine smile graced her cute little face.

"You're almost as clumsy as me, J.D."

"I'm worse," I countered with a chuckle. "No doubt about it."

Gina's shoulders relaxed, losing their tension while she hugged her daughter to her side. "We should eat before the food gets cold."

I held out my hand, pulling Gina and Olivia up from the floor. My arm slid around Gina's waist as I lowered my head, whispering into her ear, "I'm here, babe."

"I know." She reached up, pushing a quick kiss to the underside of my jaw. "Thank you."

Those soft lips conjured wicked thoughts in my head, but this wasn't the time. The brief flash of lust cooled. With a broad smile, I helped Gina open all the containers, serving the kids before we filled our plates and took our seats.

My gaze perused the table, unable to hide the emotion the scene ripped open. I used to dream of this as a kid—a family meal without tears or yelling. The every day made special because someone cared enough to come around with a surprise. Swallowing hard, I took a bite of lasagna, ignoring the lump in my throat.

I thought of Anita. Of Thunder as a child. We had plenty of meals in the few years they graced my life with their love and light—meals with smiles, laughter, and good memories that replaced the ones from my childhood.

And then they were gone. Taken. Ripped from my grasp by cruel men who wore an MC patch like it awarded permission for every depraved act they could indulge in.

Even now, there was nothing I could do about it.

But my Reaper was patient. He could wait until the right moment. Unleashing his revenge would be sweet vindication.



ONCE THE KIDS WERE in bed, I joined Gina in the living room, sitting on her couch as she dropped next to me, a weary smile on her face. A dozen questions fought for space in my head, but I couldn't get into a serious discussion after she stifled a yawn.

“Want to watch a movie?” I asked, knowing she'd never finish it, but I didn't want to leave.

“Sure. Something holiday?”

“Christmas Vacation?” I asked since I loved it. My favorite, actually.

“Oh, that's a good one,” she agreed.

Gina didn't make it to the famous rant scene. Her head rested on my shoulder as she slept. Her deep, even breaths revealed far more than words.

Gina trusted me. To keep my promise. To protect her family.

After the horrible past that I knew she hid, that trust was a precious, tangible thing I cradled close to my chest, keeping it safe and nurtured.

The movie ended, and I sat as the credits rolled across the screen, not daring to move. Lights from her tiny three-foot Christmas tree blinked in a variety of colors in the dark room. I made a mental note to replace that tree with a full-size version soon. Maybe the kids would enjoy picking one out from the local tree lot. Personally, I enjoyed the real ones more than the fake even if they shed needles.

Silence stretched through the small house as Gina mumbled my name in her sleep, then quieted. I liked she dreamed of me. Seemed fitting after I dreamed of her so often.

Content for the first time in weeks, the moment shattered when I heard Rev cry out.

Immediately on my feet, I gently moved Gina aside, rushing toward his room.

“No!” he shouted, thrashing on the bed as I entered.

Fuck. Rev was stuck in a nightmare.

His body seized as he screamed, rolled to the side, and shoved his hands over his bottom.

“No. Stop, please.”

His whimpering sent a wave of agony across my chest.

“It hurts. Please.”

His breaths came fast as he panted, thrashing again.

A bloodcurdling scream launched from his lips as I rushed to his side, pulling him close.

“Rev,” I called out softly, hoping not to scare him with my presence.

His answering howl of pain shredded my heart. Butt cheeks clenched, and he held his hands in place, blinking as his chest rose and fell. Awareness slowly crept in, but he didn't pull his hands away. “Can't breathe.”

Shit!

Rev shook, his body caught in a fierce jolt, and then stilled. Eyes wide in panic, he didn't take a breath. His

muscles locked up, preventing his chest from moving.

“Diablo,” he barely managed to whisper, fingers bent at odd angles as he stared into my face.

“Breathe, my man. I’m here. You’re safe,” I promised.

“Can’t,” he choked.

“In through your nose and out of your mouth. Do it. Watch me.”

Inhale ... Exhale ...

Rev shook his head.

“With me. Inhale.” I pulled air into my lungs as Rev watched, his chest rattling with the effort. “Exhale.” I pushed the air out.

“I’ve got you, Rev. I swear it.”

His chest rattled with a cough, panicked eyes finding my face, desperate to drag air into his frightened lungs.

“Breathe for me, my man.”

A strangled moan left his mouth.

“Copy me. Do the same as my lungs.”

Inhale ... Exhale ...

Rev tried ... and *failed*. His lips turned blue.

“Feel my chest rise and fall? Air in. Air out. You can do it, Rev. You’re panicking. Focus on me.”

His chest finally let in air with a tiny rasp.

“Breathe.”

Inhale ... Exhale ...

On a night like this one, over a decade earlier, I held a trembling child in my arms. My boy. Thunder.

Our connection pulsed, and my Reaper sensed his melancholy.

Come back to me, I pleaded in my head. *Don’t stay away too long, son.*

Thunder had his reasons for remaining in the den of vipers.

Right now, I could only focus on where fate led me, or the Reaper, I should say. He always knew where I could make a difference, first with my Thunder. Now, with Rev.

The boy in my arms rocked, his frame somehow smaller and more vulnerable than in the light of day. I held him, offering my strength and support. Outward, I remained calm. Inside, I promised vindication.

His tormentor would suffer before I sent his soul to Lucifer in Hell.

Rev trembled, sweat clinging to his damp skin.

So cold. Evil was brittle, icy, painfully hard and unyielding, dark. The absence of warmth and light.

A frozen knife plunging through the heart.

I held Rev tighter, hoping my body heat seeped into his skin.

All those years ago, Thunder had been so hot, dreaming of a raging fire he couldn't prevent in the future. Rev was chilled to the touch. Freezing. His fingers gripped my hand, cold as cubes of ice.

Terror. Thunder had felt it. Rev lived in it now.

"I won't let go," I swore thickly, my heart breaking for both young men and the horrors they experienced. "Breathe."

Gina's pain-filled voice whispered into the dark room. "My Rev."

Her eyes held an anguish all too familiar. The same helplessness and agony I once saw in my mother's brown eyes, the exact shade of my own. How many times did I witness her tears, unable to do a damn thing to prevent them?

The past happened long ago, and right now, there was a boy I could help. He deserved my concentration and compassion. I'd give him whatever he needed.

"Breathe," I repeated.

Inhale ... Exhale ...

Another tremor shook his body as he cried, snot dripping from his nose. I didn't care about that—only his suffering.

Pissed, I wanted to ask who had hurt him, who dared to violate a young four-year-old boy, but I never got the chance.

Rev whimpered, a single name falling from his lips. "Daddy," he gasped, gulping air into his lungs. "Why?"

Gutted.

That was how I felt. Entirely and utterly destroyed by those words. How could a father do that to his son?

Memories of my stepfather and his harsh discipline surfaced. Some men weren't meant to be fathers. Some flat-out didn't deserve the honor. Others should have their fucking genitals ripped off for thinking of harming a child in such a perverse way.

I couldn't prevent the tragedy I witnessed at ten or what happened to Rev when he was a small child. But I could bring vindication to his mother and his traumatized soul.

Gina wept into her hands. "Diablo. I tried so hard to help us all forget."

Such chilling words.

A horrible truth.

"The only person at fault is Jack. You aren't to blame."

Whether Gina tried to stop it or not, the past affected the kids deeply and manifested in unintended ways. Olivia's clumsiness and her extreme emotional reactions. Rev's nightmares and the fear he hid behind a wall, showing only a mask of indifference. Sure, he smiled, but it never quite reached his eyes. I never understood why my Reaper felt such fury and protectiveness whenever Rev was nearby.

Now I knew.

His father had sexually abused him as a boy.

Seething with anger, I had to force myself to breathe along with Rev. My Reaper swore vengeance. We'd find Jack, and he'd suffer. That was a given.

There were a few unanswered questions, like which club Jack belonged to, where he lived, and what kind of shit his club dealt in. What mc allowed atrocities like these? My Reaper knew Rev wasn't the only victim. He sensed more.

All I could do at this moment was provide the support and protection Gina and her children needed. That meant taking on a role I hadn't since Thunder's childhood.

These kids needed a father in their lives. A man who could teach them things and help them grow in ways Gina lacked. Not that she wasn't a great mother. She was fantastic. Her fierce protective nature matched my own. A lioness raising her cubs.

Tiger.

Shit. I knew another woman once that loved and protected her child with the same commitment and selflessness. Anita and Thunder blew into my life in a blaze of fire and left it cold and empty when they left. My heart ached with remembrance.

And ached for the pain that lingered in this house.

I reached out my hand, knowing Gina would accept it. She didn't hesitate. Crawling over to us, she wrapped an arm around her son and rested her head on my shoulder.

We didn't need words to cement the bond already growing between us. It happened without effort.

Gina, Rev, and Olivia were meant to be mine. The Reaper brought us together, revealing secrets and exposing lies. He knew where I needed to be, just as he knew the sacrifices Thunder made every day to save innocents like the ones in my arms.

I held Gina and Rev, alert and tuned in to the world around us. Their nightmare was ending. I'd be sure to reap the soul of the monster that dared to terrorize them and ensure his club never harmed another soul.

Chapter 7 Gina

“So, you and Diablo, huh?” Sasha asked, sipping an iced tea as I sank next to her on one of the black leather couches not far from where Diablo played pool with Bodie and Chaos.

Rev and Olivia were in one of the rooms with Trish, Grim’s ol’ lady and a few others, watching holiday movies with the kids.

My shoulders lifted in a shrug before I sat back, ignoring the beer on the coffee table in front of us. Next to the bottle, a baby monitor sat, turned on low in case Maverick woke up from his nap. Hence the reason Sasha didn’t have an alcoholic beverage in her hand.

Only at the Crossroads could you find a bar full of rough bikers, women, children, and a mix of alcohol, rock music, toddler toys, and diaper bags.

“I like him,” I answered honestly. “He’s a good man, Sasha.”

“I know he is, babe. You’re not going to get any shit from me.” She gathered her dark hair and twisted it into a ponytail, tying the long strands off with a black band. “To be honest, I wondered why it took so long.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been flirting and giving each other bedroom eyes for months. Girl, I see the way he looks at you.”

Biting my bottom lip, I didn’t deny anything. “Looks at me how?”

“Like he wants to gobble you up. Fuck you hard. Take you into his bed and show you what you’re missing.”

“Oh geez,” I gasped, smacking her lightly on the arm. “Stop.”

“Nope. You don’t get to deny it. Has he kissed you yet?”

A light blush stained my cheeks.

She sat up, clearly excited. “He sure did. How was it?”

“Passionate, hungry, and so damn sexy.” A small smile formed on my lips, thinking of that kiss. “I want to kiss him again.”

“Well, honey, there’s a mile-long line behind you.” She ticked her head toward the pool table where a couple of the club girls were crowding Diablo.

“He gets a lot of attention,” I grumbled.

“Because he’s single and unclaimed. That’s how it works.”

“Maybe.”

“You want it to stop? Go show them he belongs to you,” she advised.

“I don’t know. He might not like that.”

Sasha gave an unladylike snort. “All men like their woman to mark her territory. I’d cut a bitch for messing with Bodie, and he knows it. Makes him smile so damn big and cheesy it’s ridiculous.”

“So true,” I laughed as Bodie caught her eye, winking as he grabbed his crotch, ticking his head her way.

“All yours, my goddess.”

Damn. “Now that’s hot,” I admitted with a giggle.

She shook her tits. “Right back at ya, babe.”

The two of them were adorable and totally shameless.

Diablo punched Bodie’s shoulder, nearly knocking him over. “You whip out your dick, and I’ll kick your ass.”

Bodie laughed, pursing his lips for a kiss. “You beat me; you please me. Now give me some sugar.”

“Fuck off, Bodie.”

Rael slapped Bodie on the ass, running up from behind to smack a loud kiss on his cheek. “That’s for flirting when I wasn’t looking. You know you’re mine, Bodie.”

Bodie's middle finger lifted, flipping off Rael. "Shut the fuck up with that shit."

Chrome smacked Rael on the back of the head. "I can't take you anywhere."

Rael pulled him close, slipping his arm around his shoulders. Stuck in a headlock, Chrome squirmed as Rael rubbed his knuckles over his head.

"Never any peace around here," Chaos mumbled, shaking his head.

Amused, I turned away from the chaos, catching Diablo's stare. "He makes me feel weak and strong at the same time."

Sasha thought that over before replying. "Strong like he'd protect you from the entire world and die to do it. Weak like his cock and his heart are both claiming you, and nothing sounds sexier or more fulfilling than giving in. Right?"

"Wow. Is that how Bodie makes you feel?"

"Hell yeah, babe."

"It's the same with Diablo," I admitted. "He's so good with Rev and Olivia, too, even with all their problems."

She already knew of Olivia's clumsiness and Rev's nightmares. "Because he's not just an outlaw. He's a protector."

"Exactly. That alone turns me on, but he's also the sexiest man I've ever met."

Sasha fanned her face with her hand. "Babe. You got to lay a claim on that biker. He's not stopped staring at you for the last hour. The whole damn club knows how much he wants you."

"They do?" That was news to me.

"Yeah. These men are more than members of a club who love motorcycles. They're brothers. Family. That means they've been there for one another when shit happens."

"You're saying Diablo has a rough past, aren't you?"

“Most of these bikers do, Gina.”

“It’s no different than me and you,” I pointed out.

“Nope,” she agreed.

“Then I guess it’s time I let him know I’m serious.”

“Go get your man, honey. Don’t let leave him hanging.”

“Oh, I won’t,” I assured her, smiling as I meant that in more ways than one.

“I’ve got the kids. Go on!”



“HEY, DIABLO.”

His gaze followed me from the second I stood up from the couch, watching as I headed in his direction. The pool stick in his hand clattered to the table, forgotten as I reached him, stopping only a foot away.

“Hey, darlin’.”

“I was just thinking about what I wanted for Christmas.”

“Oh?” He tilted his head to the side, studying me. “What’s on your wishlist?”

“You,” I declared boldly.

A slow wide smile stretched his sensual lips while his eyes darkened a shade. Sasha was right. Diablo liked being claimed.

“I already have what I want, Gina,” he whispered seductively, reaching out to tug my body closer. One hand cupped the back of my neck as his head lowered. The other gripped my ass. “You been a good girl this year?”

Heat spiked in my veins. Arousal sent flashes of desire throughout every inch of my skin. “Oh yes, but there’s something you should know.”

“What’s that, sweet mama?”

“I want to be naughty tonight. You think Santa can deliver?”

“Fuck yeah.”

Diablo’s lips slammed down, capturing my mouth in a hungry, possessive claiming I was more than ready to receive. Nothing about that kiss or the way he bit and licked at my lips was gentle. I surrendered to his touch, completely lost as he picked me up and my legs wrapped around his waist.

Anywhere else, and I might have been embarrassed but not at the Crossroads. Everyone here understood how powerful lust could become when two people denied their desires for so long.

“About damn time,” Grim shouted amid laughter.

A few whistles pierced the air, rising above the rock music playing in the background.

“I have something to confess,” I whispered.

“What is it?”

“I’m jealous of all those women wanting to touch what’s mine.”

He stared at me for a few seconds, then looked out at the bar and all the familiar faces. “Gina is mine, and I’m her man,” he declared, loud enough for everyone to hear.

A few club brothers lifted drinks in the air, acknowledging his words. Others pounded fists on the tables or bar.

“Damn straight,” I agreed.

“You notice that I didn’t touch any of those club girls?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s your answer. None compare. There’s no other woman I’m wanting. Just you, Gina.”

“You’re all I want too, Diablo.”

He didn’t waste time, heading out into the hall to the rooms the members occupied when they were at the

clubhouse. The Crossroads was home to all, but a few had homes they returned to at night instead of staying here. I'd seen many of them pass out after a night of wild partying but leave to sleep it off the following morning.

Diablo unlocked the door to his room and led us inside, shutting it with a firm click and flipping the lock. His dark, predatory gaze locked on my body. "Need you naked, sweetheart. Right now."

I slipped from his grasp, shedding clothing as I backed away, slowly taking steps toward the big bed in the center of the room. I couldn't describe the décor because I didn't care. Needs were about to be met that hadn't been for many years.

My heart and my body were on the same page, and all they wanted was for this handsome, caring, rugged biker to give me the loving I needed.

No, it wasn't making love. I knew that. No unreal expectations. But that didn't mean we didn't share an understanding as well as attraction. And then the craving for more, it grew like a tangible monster we couldn't control.

"Me and you," he began, kicking off his boots.

"Yes?" I asked, falling onto my ass on the mattress, licking my lips as he slid off his cut, draping it over a nearby chair, followed by his shirt. My god, he was sinfully beautiful with all those muscles and dark ink spanning his entire upper body.

One tattoo stood out among the others. A lightning bolt flashing across the inner portion of his right bicep. Underneath it, the word *Thunder* was scrolled across in black ink. I wondered what it meant.

"This is more than one night, my sweet mama. It might be lust ruling us now, but we know there's more between us."

So thoughtful. He cared for my feelings before my body.

"I know."

"Say you're mine. I want to hear the words, Gina," he growled, unzipping his pants.

"I'm yours, Diablo. All yours."

“I’m all fucking yours, Gina.”

He shoved down his jeans, stepping out of the dark denim. His black underwear followed. Powerful toned thighs snagged my attention before the massive erection bobbing in the air as I stared.

My eyes widened. His long, thick cock stole my focus. I’d never seen one that impressive unless it was in a porn video. “Wow.”

A seductive chuckle rumbled from his chest. “Keep stroking my ego like that, and I’ll be sure to give your pussy extra attention, darlin’.”

Feeling bold and beautiful from how his eyes devoured my naked flesh, I lay back, opening my legs. This moment meant so much more than any words being said. Trust was exchanged. To allow my vulnerability after Jack’s abuse was terrifying, but Diablo would never harm me. Sensing he carried secrets of his own, I knew he opened his heart to me too.

In time, we’d confide in one another.

Tonight was something deeper, more intimate.

Diablo leaned down, placing his hands on the mattress. “I’m here, Gina. That’s not changing after I fuck you.”

My eyes searched his, noticing how they’d changed to a hazel color instead of the usual brown. “I know.”

“You’re so damn sexy, my Gina. Open those thighs wider. I want to see your pussy.”

Obedying, I slid my legs apart as he slipped down, using his fingers to spread me open.

“So fucking wet and pretty. I need to taste you,” he murmured.

I jolted with the first swipe of his tongue, a moan passing through my lips as he slid a finger inside me, curling it upward as he began to glide in and out. That talented tongue with the piercing flicked at my clit, sending waves of carnal pleasure across my body.

I didn't last long. My orgasm rocketed through my body, far sweeter and more relentless than I anticipated.

“Diablo.”

“Not tonight. Say my real name,” he ordered gruffly.

“Jesiah,” I breathed out, preferring his first name over J.D.

“Next time you come, I want to hear it.”

One large hand slid over his erection, pumping up and down the shaft a few times as he groaned.

“Ready?”

Again, so thoughtful. He never did anything without permission. Such a contradiction to Jack and my past.

“Yes. Take me, Diablo. Take me hard and don't stop.”

His eyes flashed silver and I caught his fierce, hungry expression. Settling into the cradle of my thighs, he surged forward, rocking his way inside me, thrusting home as I gasped, feeling the piercing on the end of his dick. And oh, how delicious it teased me.

Diablo, wicked biker, rugged outlaw, and the man who demolished every rotten memory I ever had of sex, made good on his promise. I came five times through the night. Twice on his tongue. Three times on his talented cock.

As I collapsed on his chest after screaming his name the fifth time, I breathed a sigh of combined exhaustion and happiness. His cock slipped free as he rolled us to the side, cradling the side of my face.

“Best night I've had in many years,” he confessed after a deep, probing kiss.

“The best night I've *ever* had,” I choked, feeling emotional.

“Hey, Gina, baby. You okay?”

I could say yes and meant it. All because of Diablo. “Yes. I needed this more than you know.”

“Sweet mama, this is only the first night. We’ve got lots of fucking in our future.”

With a laugh, I pressed my lips to his, the fluttering of my heart a reminder that some people were worth the risk.

Chapter 8 Diablo

As the cleaner for my club, I learned long ago to be ready at a moment's notice and drop everything when Grim called. That necessity required a staff of skilled artists I trusted to provide quality work and great customer service and keep my shop running smoothly without my presence. In the early days, I only had one part-time employee. Gil Hanes.

He's still the shop manager when I'm not around. Five years ago, I added Brett Rocker as a second manager. Now I had eight staff, brilliant artists of varying skill sets providing a wide range of visual styles for any tattoo job, and the reputations and client base to keep my shop busy.

Revelations Ink earned the top spot on the west coast for quality tattoos and body art. Best ink within California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Idaho, and Oregon. Six fucking states.

Hell yeah, I was proud as fuck.

I'd been featured in newspapers, magazines, radio, and television.

Social media gave us an additional boost to our website. Customers drove for miles to meet with my artists, and we booked out months in advance. Repeat customers proved we provided the value and quality they desired.

I walked into the shop early on Monday morning, coffee in hand, greeting everyone before I entered my office. Stacks of papers and invoices covered the desk as I dropped into my chair with a groan. Hours of work loomed ahead, but I knew Gina would be working while the kids attended school. Prospects watched over Tonopah Elementary and the Middle & High School, leaving me the freedom to get a few things done.

Seven hours later, I stood, stretching as I keyed in the last of the invoices and expenditures, finished balancing the books, and entered payroll.

My cell began vibrating inside my cut, and I reached into the pocket, glancing at the screen as I pulled it free.

Spook.

“What you got, prospect?”

“Sasha just picked up Olivia from school. Rev is with her.”

Huh. Why was Sasha getting the kids? Did something happen?

“Where’s Gina?”

We texted a few times, but she didn’t say anything about the kids.

“Don’t know, Diablo, sir. New prospect is watchin’ her.”

Shit.

Brett Rocker’s son voted in smoothly a few months ago. I’d vouched for him, becoming his sponsor. Theodore Rocker, Teddy, currently had eyes on my woman. Why the fuck hadn’t he checked in?

A call came through, and I hung up on Spook when I saw Teddy’s name on the screen.

“Where the fuck is Gina?” I roared as I answered, ready to lose my shit if her fucking ex showed up and I wasn’t around.

“Damn, Diablo. She’s right in front of me. Gettin’ in her car as we speak.”

“Follow her,” I ordered. “Inform me as soon as she arrives where she’s goin’.”

“Yes, sir. On it.”

Fucking hell. Teddy was nothin’ but a pup. Zane too. Wraith’s son was seventeen. Teddy, eighteen.

That youth equaled stress. Shaking my head, I tugged a pack of smokes from my cut and lit one, sucking nicotine into my lungs. Teddy better be on Gina’s ass, or else.

My phone vibrated as I finished my cigarette, smashing the butt into the ashtray on my desk.

“Yeah?” I barked into the phone, worried about Gina.

“She’s there.”

“Where?”

The bell above the front door of the shop dinged. I’d left my office door ajar earlier so I could keep tabs on the shop. I liked to jump in and ink some of the customers when I had time.

“Revelations Ink, boss.”

Hanging up on the kid, I didn’t give a shit if he wondered what to do next. Let the new pup figure it out. If he wanted the Reaper, he’d have to learn to think through shit critically and act in the club’s best interest without being told.

Gina stood in front of the brick accent wall covered in framed tattoo art as I left my office. All my own creations. The brown leather couch below was empty but would soon fill with more customers as the afternoon wore on.

The bell announced another arrival, and I glanced to the door, waving to a returning customer. Faith walked in, holding the hand of her six-year-old son Tyler. He rushed in our direction, finding the basket of toys I kept and the blue bean bag in the corner. He plopped down, revving a fire truck engine that once belonged to Thunder.

Blinking, I fought to clear the sudden lump in my throat. Fuck. I missed my boy.

“Hey, Tyler. How’s it goin’, little dude?”

“Hi, Diablo, sir.”

Faith walked to us, smiling at her son. “He loves coming here. It’s one of the few places he can play, and I don’t have to worry. It’s so wonderful that you think of parents and their children.”

“I love kids.”

“Yeah, it’s badass, Diablo.”

She turned as Brett joined us. “Ready for the rest of your mural?”

“Oh, yes!” Faith turned to Tyler. “Don’t leave the shop.”

“I won’t, Mama.”

She kissed him on the top of the head before following Brett into one of the rooms reserved for the tattoo artists and their equipment.

Hannah, my receptionist, waved at Faith as she called out. "I've got Tyler."

"Thank you."

I caught Gina's stare as I lifted my gaze from Tyler.

"What do I owe the pleasure, darlin'?"

Since that night at the Crossroads, we'd talked or seen one another every day. Felt damn good to see her smile.

Gina chewed on her bottom lip. "I want a tattoo."

Brows lifting, I tilted my head to the side. "You sure?"

"Yes. I want my babies inked on my skin close to my heart. Forever."

Damn. That was sexy as fuck. Nothin' more gorgeous than a tattoo inked with love.

"Come here." I led her to the glass front counter and a few books on the top filled with sample art.

"Show me what you like."

She flipped the pages for several minutes, finally placing her finger down. "This one."

Gaze dropping, I nodded. Perfect.

"You can do it now?"

"Yep." I ticked my head toward my personal tattoo station. "Take a seat over there while I get things ready."

Gina sat on the chair, taking in the walls covered in original artwork and photos of completed projects. Some of them were extensive murals, full sleeves or back pieces, and other intricate designs I'd been enthusiastic about sketching, and I was proud of the final result. "These are beautiful, Diablo. You really have an eye for detail."

"Thanks. I believe so. Definitely worked hard enough to get to that point."

Gina closed her eyes briefly, opening them as she exhaled. I held up the gun, pulling my stool close. “Ready?”
“Yes. Let’s do it.”



THE GUN PRESSED TO Gina’s skin as the first drops of blood appeared, slowly beading on the smooth, flawless surface. I’d worn gloves as I always did, careful not to come in direct contact. I only touched the crimson fluid when absolutely necessary, trying my best not to trigger my unpredictable gift.

My thoughts began to swirl, a sudden muddy conversion of my past and present, building into a vortex that jolted my consciousness. The Reaper. He sensed something sinister in Gina’s memories.

Focusing on the ink beginning to form on Gina’s skin, my hand steadied, and I felt my Reaper pushing forward. In the past, when these incidents occurred, I’d been too young to understand their importance. Now, after many years of developing my abilities and bonding with the Reaper, I knew when to let him lead.

He saw things I didn’t. Could discern truths I’d never know without his connection. He tied threads to invisible links like the golden one forged long ago with Thunder. And now, he weaved intricate webs, collecting more souls that needed our protection. We’d ensure the evil that dared to enter Nevada and attempted to harm innocents met the Reaper’s blade.

The Reaper might be a beast born from darkness, but he forever yearned for the light to wash his sins free and gain peace for the brutal acts he committed.

My eyelids fluttered, and the shadows emerged from the walls, creeping closer until I no longer felt my fingers on the tattoo gun. My Reaper had taken over, leaving me in a

peaceful dreamlike state that would last until he finished his masterpiece.

Anita was the first to receive ink from my Reaper, but not the last. Each of my brothers had tattoos that proudly displayed our club emblem with the skull and crown. I'd applied the Reaper's skill on numerous occasions, and most of the ink my brothers wore exclusively originated from Revelations Ink.

I liked to think my Reaper got a kick out of the name.

My eyes grew heavy, and my head bobbed, slipping away as I fought a wave of fatigue. Right before everything went dark, I noticed my fingers pressing to Gina's skin without a glove.

Something sinister ...

Flashes of Gina at different ages zoomed through my mind. A child in blonde pigtails. Several years later, as she danced in a studio with other girls her age, a bright smile on her lips. A developing young woman, laughing with friends at school. And then a beautiful sixteen on her birthday. Time continued, and an image of her softly cooing to a dark-haired baby caused a smile to appear on my face. Rev.

More images. More moments. None caught my Reaper's attention until a house appeared engulfed in fog.

The Reaper rushed us inside.

Gina lay on the floor on her side, clutching her belly. One hand cradled her swollen stomach as she attempted to crawl across the carpeted floor. Blood coated her inner thighs as she groaned, panting through harsh breaths as her body seized in a wave of agony.

"Not now," she pleaded out loud to the empty room, "please."

"Gina! Where the fuck are you?"

She jolted, her face betraying the reason for her reaction. One eye swelled half shut, and her bottom lip trembled. A child's cry echoed from a room down the hall.

“Can’t you make him shut up!?”

“Please,” she whispered. Her mouth opened in a silent cry when a man stomped toward her, shouting for her to move.

He kicked her stomach as she screamed. “We don’t need another mouth to feed, you worthless whore.”

A biker cut hung from his shoulders, too blurry to make out the name as the vision began to fade.

Noooooooooo!

I wanted to run into the past, protecting her and the kids from the monster that harmed them. There was nothing I could do. The past happened long before I met Gina.

She didn’t have a third child, and I could only guess she’d become pregnant soon after Olivia’s birth. The beating stole that child from her womb. Sorrow filled my chest. I couldn’t imagine the loss and pain she suffered.

I’d find this biker.

The Reaper promised vengeance.

Head snapping up, I blinked, taking in the quiet room. No noise from the tattoo gun. No one else in the shop. Brett would have closed up, knowing I worked a private session. How many hours did the Reaper pull me away?

Swallowing hard, I knew this newest artwork would be a doozy. My chin lowered, gaze devouring the sexy slope of Gina’s ass, rising higher to her left shoulder. She rested on her stomach, breathing peacefully. Asleep. Just like I’d been.

My jaw popped open as I saw Rev and Olivia as small children, etched into her skin in a stunning black and white portrait. Every nuance of their faces, their dimples, chubby cheeks, and innocent smiles, captured forever.

Revon and *Olivia* scrolled across the bottom of each child’s image in a dark script. Before tonight, I didn’t know Rev’s full name. After this, I’d never forget it.

Despite the horrors they experienced, the two kids were beautiful souls full of light and love. They’d get their happy

ending because I would accept nothing else.

The Reaper knew. He brought me to this moment.

My eyes slid shut, and memories I'd rather forget rushed to the surface, sucking my soul into the past.

"Fuck," I blurted, hand bracing against the wall to remain upright as my knees threatened to buckle.

The Reaper didn't allow me to linger.

Some truths shouldn't remain hidden. Blood reveals all secrets.

Chapter 9 Diablo

T*wenty-five years ago—*

“Zoom!” I shouted, revving my fire truck along the threadbare carpet.

“Jesiah, not so loud. You’ll wake Harold.”

My little nose scrunched up. I didn’t like Harold. He was mean and yelled at my mama.

Abandoning the fire truck to the living room, I picked up the sketch pad I kept in a little box beside the couch. A pack of crayons lay unused on the bottom as I reached for a pencil.

“You want some milk?”

“Yes, mama.”

“Good boy. Have a seat in your hideout, and I’ll grab a couple of cookies for you.”

My eyes widened. “Cookies!”

She giggled, plating the cookies after she poured milk.

I ate my snack at the kitchen table, then retreated into my hideout. The lower cabinet next to the sink remained empty for my use. For some reason, I loved to crawl in there and hide. Sometimes I left the doors ajar so I could draw or closed them and played with my trucks in the dark.

The doors propped open as I sat down, humming while I sketched with my pencil. Pictures filled my head, and I had to draw them. My fingers itched if I didn’t use my pencil.

“Look, mama.”

She bent down, staring at the image I’d drawn. Her eyes filled with tears as she gave me a wobbly smile. “That’s beautiful, baby. Is that me and your daddy?”

I nodded, drawing a heart around them. “He comes to my dreams and tells me how much he loves you.”

My mama grabbed her chest. “He does?”

“Uh-huh. How come he doesn’t visit?”

“He can’t, baby. I’m sorry.”

“Penny!” Harold roared, slamming the bedroom door before he entered the kitchen. “Where the hell are you?”

Mama slowly closed the doors, straightening with her wooden spoon. I didn’t say a word as the darkness closed around me.

Harold’s heavy footsteps shook the floor before he reached mama. I heard her make a funny sound. “Where’s my dinner?”

“Almost,” she choked, “finished. There’s a half-hour left in the oven.”

Smack!

“Why do you always make me wait?”

“I-I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Harold always hurt mama when he wanted something, and she didn’t move fast enough. I hated his mean fists and angry heart. Prepared to fight for my mama, I shoved open the doors and launched myself toward Harold.

“Baby, no!” Mama shouted.

Too late.

The door scratched Harold’s leg, and a smear of his blood brushed across my arm as we collided. His fist rose, slamming down on my back as I flew across the tiled floor, landing in a puddle of bruised muscles and bones.

My eyelids fluttered, images racing across my eyes as I pictured Harold beating multiple women, not just my mama. He hit kids too. Boys like me.

“You’re bad,” I whispered to him as the darkness took over, pulling me away from mama.

Her scream was the last thing I heard.



FIVE YEARS LATER—

My fingers gripped the pencil in my hand tightly, the images in my head so intense I couldn't get them down fast enough. Furiously sketching, I filled the paper, moving to a blank page in the book to keep going.

“Jesiah?” My mama poked her head into my room. “Did you finish your homework?”

I nodded, too focused to look up.

“You hungry? I’m making meatloaf for dinner. It’s almost finished.”

“Sure, mama.”

She clucked her tongue. “Always sketching, my talented son.”

“I like to draw.”

“You’re the most gifted artist I’ve ever seen. Never let anyone tell you differently.”

I looked up, catching the smile on her face. Mama’s eyes seemed sad, but she didn’t ever let that bring her down. She always said rainbows chased the clouds and rain away.

“You’re my rainbow,” she told me once when I was little. “Full of life, color, and endless joy.”

“Am I still your rainbow?” I asked, daring to say the words without Harold around. He’d complain I was too old to share secrets like that with mama.

“Always,” she replied fiercely. “I love you, Jesiah.”

A bright grin spread across my face. “Love you too.”

Harold didn’t come home for dinner. We enjoyed the break and even ate apple pie my mama made special for dessert. The

evening wore on without his arrival, and mama pretended she didn't know where he went.

We knew—the bar in town.

Mama sat in front of the Christmas tree after she cleaned the kitchen, sewing gifts for friends and family. Mittens, hats, and scarves to keep people warm. She liked to use that recliner so she could prop up her feet, but Harold always sat there when he was home. I liked she got to use it tonight. Mama deserved to be spoiled.

I went to bed with a full tummy and a happy heart.

I woke to a nightmare.

My mother's screams slashed through my dreams, awakening me to the horror occurring outside my room. I threw the covers aside, running to the door. My hand yanked on the knob, swinging it open, shocked to find my mama and Harold locked in a vicious battle on the floor.

Mama's back was on the carpet; her nightgown scrunched up around her waist, legs spread wide open as she fought him, scratching and swinging her fists with every ounce of effort she possessed.

Harold rocked his lower body into my mama, laughing as he caught her wrists. One hand smacked her across the face as she cried for him to stop. He slammed his body into hers, and I couldn't figure out how he was hurting her, but I knew he did.

Tears poured down mama's face as her head turned, eyes widening with fear as she saw me. "No," she wailed.

Harold didn't stop. He held her down, trapping her body beneath his, still pushing his big body into hers. Scratches marred his face and neck.

Something inside me snapped. Broke. Shattered.

I saw the black cast iron skillet my mama loved to use in the oven. It gleamed in the low light, beckoning me to pick it up. Without Harold noticing, I crept closer, snatching it up with two hands.

Mama's eyes met mine, and she looked away, already knowing what I had to do.

A shrill cry launched from my throat two seconds before I brought the heavy skillet down on the back of Harold's head. His body shook before he yelled my name, rolling off my mama.

Blood. On the inside of her thighs. On Harold's private parts.

Blood. Covering mama's hands. Soaking into Harold's clothes, matting the hair on his head.

All I saw was the crimson stain of blood.

The skillet hit his face as he reached for me. I couldn't let him hurt mama anymore. The cast iron swung, hitting his nose with a *crunch*. I kept bringing the skillet down on Harold's head until he stopped moving. Tossing it aside, I crawled over to my mama, exhausted and out of breath.

"My sweet boy," she mumbled, pain etched into her face. "I'm so sorry."

"Mama," I cried, my eyes closing outside of my will, unable to stop the pictures that rushed through my mind. So many images. Too many memories. Mama. Harold. Mine.

"I love you, Jesiah. Remember that when I'm gone. I love you," she choked through pain. "I love you, baby. I always will, even when I'm not here to tell you."

I didn't know it at the time, but Harold had come home from the bar drunk and beaten mama, forcing her to the living room floor. He punched her in the head to subdue her and caused a bleed on her brain. She wouldn't recover from it.

"I love you, mama. You're my rainbow," I blubbered, laying my head on her shoulder.

Sirens outside the house alerted me that rescue had come far too late. Mama's cold hand rested in mine.

I would never hear her voice again.



PRESENT TIME—

The Reaper skipped the funeral. I didn't have to relive that horrid day, and I felt relief that he spared me the pain.

Ten years were all I had with my mother. The most traumatizing of my life and yet the happiest at the same time. My past consisted of a twisted, fucked up wreck.

My mama did the best she could. She raised me on her own for a long while before she met Harold. Lonely, struggling to make ends meet, she thought marrying him would make her life easier. She didn't know his true nature that he hid until too late.

I killed a man the night my mother died—the first but not the last. I wouldn't take another life for many years, but when I did, the Reaper showed me he deserved the death I gave him. Another rapist like Harold.

I couldn't say if the Reaper had always been with me, helping to guide my hand and my art. Maybe.

But blood was a constant in my life from the time I was old enough to skin my knees. And in the present, nothing had changed.

Because of my mother, I pursued my art. She was the reason I had the business, talent, skill, and passion. She made it happen. Even when Harold said I was a piece of shit kid who would never succeed, I didn't listen.

Now, all these years later, I knew I'd made the right decision.

I could have let that asshole stepfather of mine dictate my path in life. I could have pushed aside my love of drawing and art, discarding that talent because of the cruelty of a man who

enjoyed inflicting pain and sorrow, who received pleasure from watching others linger in misery.

But I did the exact opposite.

I cultivated my love of art, practiced, took classes, and enhanced my skill until my love of it became a job. The job grew into a career. I bought my first building and remodeled it into a tattoo shop at only eighteen. That business became my future. My stability.

And it's how I met the most important people who would ever walk into my life.

Grim. The Royal Bastards MC. Ani and Thunder.

Blood always brought me home.

Chapter 10 Gina

“**W**h-what did you just say?”

Diablo turned, the faraway look in his eyes receding. He blinked. Twice. “Sorry, darlin’. I don’t remember.”

“You said Jack is in a motorcycle club, but you couldn’t see which one.”

What did he mean?

He scrubbed a hand down his face, over the light scruff on his jaw, and then approached, sitting on his stool next to me.

“I can see things,” he began.

“Like what?” I asked, not understanding.

“The past. Things that have happened.” He shrugged. “I don’t control it.”

Staring at him, I suddenly realized that I always knew something about Diablo was different. “Have you seen mine?”

His tongue darted out, playing with the small silver hoop in his lip. “Yeah, Gina. I have.”

I didn’t want to believe him. “Tell me.”

Diablo’s brown eyes slowly changed color. A hazel mix drowned out the brown, followed by a flash of silver.

“I saw Jack.”

Swallowing hard, I still didn’t believe this was possible. “And?”

“Other memories. The day Rev was born in your arms. So happy.”

A smile teased the corners of my lips.

“And then later.” He paused, blowing out a breath. “You had a black eye and busted lip,” he whispered, clenching his fists. “You were crawling on the floor, cradling your stomach.”

All the blood in my head rushed south, and I felt dizzy, flopping back against the chair. How could he know about that day? That awful, heartbreaking moment when I lost my baby?

“I’m sorry, Gina.” His eyes held sorrow I didn’t expect. How did he see that?

Tears filled my eyes, and I blinked a few times, trying not to let them fall. “It was a long time ago.” I sat up, rising to my feet as I refused to indulge in the horrible things Jack did to me.

“What was the name of his club?”

“Hell, something.” Tigers? No. Something that began with a T. “I can’t remember the second part.”

Diablo sighed. “If you remember, I need to know. Okay?”

“Sure.” Skittish, I slowly began to move to the exit.

He approached me as I backed toward the door, glancing at the dark shop. “The ink took longer than I realized. You want to see your tattoo?”

I shouldn’t have let Diablo switch the conversation so quickly. There were details that he needed to know to help protect the kids and me, but I couldn’t make myself return to the past or any suffering I hoped to forget.

I chickened out.

Latching onto his question, I quickly answered, “yes.”

“Let me grab you a mirror.” He picked up a large hand mirror, handing it over as he led me to the massive mirror hanging on the wall outside his office.

“Turn around. I hope you like it.”

Curious, I stared into the reflection, noting the image on my shoulder, which was far different than what I expected. I’d given Diablo a picture of my kids. Two different photos. He’d merged them into one for the tattoo but slightly altered the images. Light sparkled in their eyes. Innocence.

Dimples. Rounded toddler faces with puffy cheeks and small chins. He’d captured them so beautifully.

The tears returned, spilling down my face.

“Shit,” he cursed. “You hate it.”

“No. It’s perfect. You see them, Diablo. The detail. Wow.”

His lips widened into a proud grin. “I fucking love that tat. No lie. It’s badass.”

“It is,” I agreed, wiping my cheeks. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”



Diablo

MY PHONE VIBRATED INSIDE my cut, and I reached inside, checking the screen.

Rev.

Swiping across, I answered fast, worried about the kids. “Hey, my man. What’s goin’ on?”

“Someone was outside, Diablo. Saw the fucker hop the fence after I caught him trying to look inside the kitchen window.”

Shit!

Wait. Did he just say fucker?

“You both safe?” I asked, dismissing my humor at his choice of words.

“Yeah, we’re inside. I locked all the doors and windows.”

“No, you didn’t!” I heard Olivia yell in the background. “I helped, J.D.”

I bet she did.

“Are either of you hurt?”

“No.”

“He’s got a cut on his hand,” Olivia contradicted.

“I’m on my way. You both stay in the house.”

Chaos erupted on the other end of the line. I couldn’t tell if someone slammed the door into the wall, glass broke, or both.

“Rev! Olivia!”

The line went dead.

Motherfucker!

Heads turned as I ran outdoors, heading straight for my bike. I barely had the kickstand up before rolling forward and pulling back on the throttle. If anyone harmed either one of the kids, I’d fuckin’ let the Reaper out to play.

I barely noticed the two motorcycles on the road behind me, lending support in case shit went down. Bodie and Rael appeared in my mirrors as they flanked my bike. I rolled onto Gina’s driveway, hollering for Rev and Olivia as the front door opened. I had the engine off, running up the steps as my gaze slid over her, checking for injuries.

Olivia stood in the doorway, hands on her little hips. “Rev went outside and attacked someone with his bat. He thinks he’s a superhero.” She pointed somewhere inside the house. “He got hurt.” Despite trying to be brave, her chin quivered.

I picked up my little princess, hugging her against my side as I searched for Rev. He had an icepack against his cheek. A thunderous frown dominated his features.

“Asshole came back and hopped the fence,” he explained, lifting his bat with his free hand. “Got a few hits in with my bat before he hit me.”

“You went after an adult with a bat?” Bodie asked, impressed.

Rev nodded.

“Fuck yeah,” Rael exclaimed, fist-bumping Rev after he dropped the bat.

“First, that was some real brave shit, my man.”

Rev smiled, wincing as the skin around his tender cheek pulled.

“Second, you do somethin’ that stupid alone again, and I’ll have your ass. You feel me?”

He sighed. “Yeah?”

Rael chuckled. “Give him a break. He kept his sister and the house safe.”

Bodie shook his head. “I’m with Diablo. Damn stupid. What if something worse happened, and that asshole went after your sister? Were you in a position to protect her?”

Rev’s expression was crestfallen. “No. You’re right. I just got so pissed.”

Rael ruffled the hair on his head. “But you got to think through the moment and the shit afterward. Base your decisions on more than rage or vengeance.”

Bodie snorted. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

Rael flashed him a devious grin. “I didn’t say I follow that advice all the time.”

I groaned. “How the fuck is that helpful?”

Olivia tapped my shoulder. “J.D., you’re squeezing me too tight.”

Shit. I relaxed my hold. “Sorry, honey.”

She hugged me. “There. You can put me down now.”

I popped a kiss on top of her head and let her feet touch the ground before I released her. She grabbed my hand, staring up at me.

“Will you check around the house and make sure there are no more bad guys?”

Rael spoke up. “I’ll go.”

“And I’ll help.” Bodie shot a fierce glance my way. He didn’t have to speak about the blatant question lingering in our minds.

Where the fuck was the prospect I sent to watch over Gina’s house while she was at work?

Teddy should have been there. If he blew this off, he was fuckin’ done. If he got laid out by the fucker who tried to get to the kids, we needed to know. Either way, this was bullshit.

Someone was gonna pay for messing with Gina and the kids. I sure hoped that motherfucker Jack showed up. My Reaper wanted to get better acquainted, starting with his fists.

“Olivia, honey, will you grab the Tylenol and a glass of water for Rev? He’s going to need it.”

“Sure!”

She rushed off, and I turned to Rev. “Tell me what happened.”

“I spotted some dude outside, staring through the front window, and went outside after him. I had Olivia lock up all the doors and windows and grabbed my bat.”

He sucked in a breath, clearly upset and trying to hide it.

“Go on,” I urged.

“He hopped the fence and took off, so I came back inside and called you. That’s when that fucker threw a rock at the window and shattered the glass. It got all over the kitchen floor, and I made Olivia stand off to the side while I went after him.”

“I see.”

“I chased him down, scared he’d try to hurt Liv. Got off a couple of good hits, too, before he punched me. Asshole,” he mumbled.

“That was brave as shit, my man. Really. Just don’t leave your sister alone again. That might have been his goal.”

Rev paled. “Oh shit. I didn’t think of that.”

“It’s okay. I’m not pissed at you. I’m proud of you,” I declared, gripping his shoulder as I stared into his eyes. “So fucking proud. You’re badass, Rev.”

He swallowed hard and nodded, then lifted his hand to squeeze mine. “Thanks, Diablo.”

I should have been more cautious. As I pulled my hand away and straightened, I caught the smear of blood on my skin. Olivia said Rev cut his hand.

Shit!

He must have sliced himself picking up the glass when he returned to the house. There wasn’t a mess on the floor. Rev cleaned it up.

My vision tunneled, darkening as I backed away, afraid I’d pass out again. The Reaper snarled in my head, and I knew what he saw must have been evil.

My hands clenched at my sides as I shook my head. *Noooooo*.

“Diablo?” Rev asked, sounding afraid.

The vision that swam in my head was too disturbing to describe. To see this beautiful boy at the mercy of a man, being violated and harmed by someone who should have loved and protected him, sent my Reaper to the surface.

I couldn’t stop what happened next.

My body half-collapsed while my hands braced against my knees. I struggled for every breath in and out of my lungs. My muscles shook under the intense rage I struggled to control. Veins bulged in my arms and neck. I could feel them pulsing with blood and fury.

Inhale ... Exhale ...

Loudly, air moved in and out through my nose. My eyes closed. Tightly.

“Diablo?” Rev asked again, concerned.

“Careful around me right now, alright?”

Inhale ... Exhale ...

Rev moved closer, falling to his knees in front of me. I sensed his presence. Correction, my Reaper did.

Rev's hand touched my arm, and he gasped, pulling it back. "Wow. You're hot."

"I didn't hurt you, though, right?"

Inhale ... Exhale ...

"No, of course not. You wouldn't ever hurt me, Olivia, or mom. We all know that."

"I would never want to."

"Are you okay, Diablo?"

Inhale ... Exhale ... "No, my man. I'm not."

"Because of me and what I did?"

"Never," I replied firmly. "I'm trying to convince myself that I shouldn't leave you now to murder the man that hurt you."

Rev gasped. "Jack?"

Inhale ... Exhale ... "Yes."

"How did you know?"

I finally stared into his eyes as mine snapped open. "Your nightmare, first. But touching your blood confirmed it." His eyes grew wide. "You understand my club is different? That I'm different?"

"I do." He lifted his fist, bumping mine as we created a silent pact. "I won't tell."

"I'm here for you. You feel me? Every. Fucking. Day."

Rev blinked back tears. "Yeah." He rushed into my arms, wrapping them around me in a quick embrace. Before anyone could see it, he backed away, brushing any trace of his tears aside. "Don't ever leave."

"I won't," I promised. "I'm here for your mama, you, and Olivia. We're gonna be a family."

Rev's shoulders relaxed as he blew out a breath. "Okay."

"Do me a favor, Rev."

"Yeah?"

"Stop cussin' all the damn time. Your mama is gonna kick my ass."

He barked a laugh. "Yeah, okay. I'll try."

Chapter 11 Gina

Flinging the door open, I rushed inside my house, hardly able to concentrate on a damn thing until I saw my kids.

Olivia rushed me first, practically tackling me to the ground as her thin arms circled my waist. “Mama!”

“I’m here, baby. You okay?”

“Yeah, I was super brave. Ask J.D.”

My chin lifted, and I caught his tight, apologetic smile. “I’m sorry I didn’t arrive sooner.”

“It’s okay. I don’t blame you for a thing,” I assured him. Diablo dropped everything to come to my children’s rescue. How was he at fault?

No, that blame belonged entirely to the man who had terrorized me since I met him at seventeen. Jack Downs.

“Rev? How’s your cheek?”

“I’m fine, mom. Just a small bruise.”

He didn’t want me to worry. “I’m sorry.”

“Stop. You didn’t hit me. Some jerk did.”

Diablo gave him a chin lift as if in approval. Rev grinned.

I didn’t know what passed between them and decided it must be a boy thing. “You take any Tylenol?”

“Yep. Right after I told him not to leave Olivia alone again,” Diablo answered. “They’re both okay, Gina. Promise.”

Relieved, I hugged my daughter, noticing Rael and Bodie.

“Hi. Thanks for being here.”

Their presence meant the club watched out for my family. I might have thought Diablo was the reason, but since Sasha became Bodie’s ol’ lady, I’d become an extension of her, and the circle of protection grew.

Bodie nodded, lifting his head as he paused texting on his phone. “Just letting Sasha know you’re all okay. She’s pissed,”

he added. “Not that you didn’t know already.”

I did.

She blew up my phone while I was at work. The kids hadn’t been home more than an hour before the incident happened.

“Yeah,” I sighed. “I know.”

Rael smirked. “Well, there’s no reason to dwell on it. If you don’t come to the Crossroads until this shit is sorted, Diablo will just drag you here caveman style.”

I rolled my eyes. “That shit works with Nylah. Your ol’ lady enjoys your brand of crazy.”

Bodie laughed, texting again. “Sasha’s gonna love that.”

Rael flipped him off.

Diablo snaked his arm around my waist, tugging me against his side. “I don’t need to convince Gina. She knows it’s not safe to remain here, right?”

Oh, he played dirty. The kids stood there, staring at me for confirmation. I didn’t want to be forced from my home again. Jack stole the choice and power away from me too many times in the past.

“Yes, I agree it’s not as safe as I’d like.”

Diablo seemed relieved.

“Rev, go with Olivia. She might need help finishing her project for English class.”

My son nodded, understanding I needed to talk to the Royal Bastards alone.

“Mama, are we going to leave?” Olivia’s worry increased my anxiety. “We’re going to be safe, baby. Don’t you worry.”

“Okay.”

Rev reached for his sister’s hand, leading her from the kitchen to give us privacy.

I inhaled a deep breath and released it, taking the time to look each of the outlaw bikers in my home in the eyes. “I’m

not leaving this house.”

All three began to protest, and I held up a hand. “You need to understand. Jack has chased me for the last eight years. I’ve had to move six times. Six,” I emphasized. “I’m not running anymore from him. I have to take a stand for myself and the kids. He doesn’t get to dictate our lives anymore.”

Rael, surprisingly, agreed first. “I get it. No more argument from me.”

Bodie shook his head, mumbling under his breath that Rael was all up in his feelings since Nylah found out she was pregnant with identical twin boys.

Rael slapped him hard on the back, sneering in his face. “Don’t piss me off right now.”

Bodie pocketed his phone. “We’ll discuss this outside like mature adults.”

Rael followed him out the door, the first to throw a punch.

I ignored them, watching a quiet Diablo. “What is it?”

“I hate that I can’t convince you to leave, but I understand your reasons for wanting to stay.” He tilted my chin up, staring intensely into my eyes. For a few heartbeats, he didn’t say a word. “You clawed your way inside here,” he paused, pointing at his chest with his free hand, “and dug deep. You. Rev and Olivia. I can’t stand the thought of any of you suffering. It hurts.” He pounded his chest. “So fucking bad.”

“Jesiah,” I whispered, lifting my head to press my lips to his, igniting that familiar fire only he could conjure. “You’ve become my rock. My fortress. I can’t do this without you.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he promised.

“The trauma I have from Jack’s abuse is real. I thought I left it behind when I moved to Tonopah, but I realize I didn’t. You showed me that I could handle this. I can fight for what I want. I don’t want to be scared or weak anymore,” I confessed.

“Hey,” he chided softly. “You’ve never been weak. Don’t you see that? It took so much fucking courage to leave him after what he did. You survived. You took your kids, and you

ran. Hell, Gina, baby, you brought them here and gave them a wonderful life full of love. No kid could ask for more. Trust me. It means everything.”

“I hope so.” Swallowing hard, I opened up a little more about Jack. “His last name is Downs. Find him, and you’ll find his Hell MC.”

Diablo nodded, staring across the room at Rael and Bodie. Rael ticked his chin, leaving with the information I’d given. I guessed he went to share it with Grim.

Bodie held his jaw. “Fucking Rael. I’ll be outside if you need me. Called Spook too.”

“Good,” Diablo replied.

“I think Jack is pissed about more than leaving with his kids.”

“Yeah, darlin’, I already figured that out.”

“I stole two thousand dollars from his stash and one of the cars he stole, swapping the tags with another vehicle at a gas station a few hours into the trip.”

“Damn, woman.”

“That’s not all,” I added quietly.

“Oh?”

“The first time he hit me, I didn’t think he would ever do it again. I lied to myself, thinking it must be my fault. When he allowed one of his mc brothers to take me into a bedroom for one night in exchange for his drug habit, I knew I had to leave.”

Diablo snarled, his lip curling upward as his eyes darkened with rage. “That motherfucker!”

“I got my revenge—at least a little. On the way out the door, I found a huge brick of cocaine he had stashed inside one of the diaper bags. A diaper bag,” I repeated, shaking my head. “I flushed it down a toilet in a gas station, a little at a time, until nothing remained.”

Diablo's eyes widened. "He wants the drugs or the money it's worth."

"Probably." Shrugging, I didn't care. "He'll never get it, though. He can fuck off."

"Woah, sweet mama. You're a little hellcat when you wanna be, huh?"

"I'm not letting Jack or anyone else have that power over me again. Staying here, taking a stand, that's what I need to do, Diablo."

He gave a crisp nod. "Then that's what we're doin'."

"No argument?" I asked, a little surprised.

"No."

"Why?"

"What pleases you, eases me."

My heart. It nearly leaped from my chest.

"You're my happily ever after, Jesiah. The one I always dreamed of as a girl."

He sucked in a breath, flashing a carnal grin before his lips crashed down on mine.

If I had to face Jack, I couldn't think of a better man to stand at my side.



"DAMN, BABY, WHY DO you feel so good?" Diablo grunted, thrusting his hips. "Every single stroke."

"So good," I agreed, digging my heels into his ass.

His biceps bulged as he planted his hands on the mattress, driving deeper into me. Every plunge was perfect. Every glide of his cock reached a part of me I never knew existed.

He healed the broken, beaten young woman who was almost destroyed by violence and abuse. The tiny spark that believed I wasn't good enough to love. That I must be incapable of attracting a decent man. Funny how I ended up falling for a biker. Again.

Only this biker was nothing like Jack.

How could I not fall for Diablo?

Caring. Sensual. Charming. Fierce. Protective. Handsome.

Every quality I could want in a man. The icing on the cake? He cared about my kids and became their rock as much as mine. What woman didn't want that?

"I want more," he confessed with a gruff tone. "Roll over. I need deeper inside you."

Diablo pulled out, slapping my ass once as I giggled, crawling on my hands and knees after I rolled to the side.

"Spread wide," he ordered. "Need that pussy, my sweet mama."

His sexy deep voice alone did wicked things to my body. Calling the shots in bed? That nearly brought me to orgasm.

"Jesiah," I moaned as he pushed inside me, gripping my hips for traction.

"You're gonna come for me, Gina." Thrust. "I want to feel that tight pussy squeezing my cock." Thrust. "Give it all to me. Flood my dick." Another thrust.

"Shit," I gasped as he reached between my legs, pressing down on the bundle of nerves as my thighs shook. My body jolted. Once. Twice.

Diablo's name tumbled from my lips in a wail, dragging out as I soaked the two of us and my sheets. I'd never been a woman who did that, but it didn't matter with my talented biker. He knew how to play and bring my body to completion.

"Fuck," he exhaled, moving against me, his breath ragged. "I can't get enough of you." His hips rocked harder, pushing

deeper. “I don’t want to come,” he admitted with a laugh. “Just need more.”

“More,” I agreed, still trembling through that orgasm while another began to build.

This man. He touched my heart, my needs, and my soul. I was never left unsatisfied.

“Give me something,” I asked, hissing as he gripped my waist.

“Anything,” he groaned, slamming into me.

“I want to see your face.”

He slipped free, rolling onto his back as he lowered to the mattress. “Talk to me.”

I settled over his hips, making a sound of pure rapture as I slid down his length. “Give me something I’m missing.”

“Gina, I’d give you whatever you want or need. Even my heart.”

I pressed my body to his chest, walking my fingers upward to caress the line of his jaw. “That’s what I want,” I confessed. “A heart that loves me as much as I love in return.”

He blinked, his features softening. Silver sparkled in his eyes for a few seconds. “I think we can have that.”

“So do I,” I confessed as I began to roll my hips. “Touch me. Deep. I need to feel you, Jesiah.” Emotional, I felt the tears sting my eyes.

“My Gina,” he whispered. “You own me more every single day. I’m never letting you go.”

The sex grew wild and frenzied, Diablo lifting me up and down on his swollen erection, tilting his hips to drive as hard as we both needed. Coming at the same time, we held onto one another, panting through the aftershocks as sweat clung to our bodies.

“Damn, Gina. You wore me out,” he teased, sitting up in bed as he pulled me into his arms. My head rested over his

heart, listening to the frantic beats as they slowed to a normal rhythm.

“In the best way.”

“Hell yeah. Best ever.”

We were silent for so long that I thought he might have fallen asleep.

“What’s on your mind, darlin’?”

Always so intuitive.

I asked the question that had been on my mind for some time.

“Have you ever had an ol’ lady?”



Diablo

“HAVE YOU EVER HAD AN ol’ lady?”

I should have anticipated her question, but it still caused my body to jolt like I’d been electrocuted. The pain, the sorrow, the emptiness, they never fully receded.

“Once. It didn’t last long,” I admitted.

A tiny part of me felt asking another woman to be my ol’ lady was a betrayal to Anita. I’d loved her so wholly and recklessly that it shattered my world when I lost her and Thunder.

To know she died? That she suffered before the end?

How could I ever forgive myself for leaving them both alone and vulnerable?

“Diablo?”

“This isn’t easy to talk about,” I disclosed, swallowing hard before I continued, “but I think you need to know about my Thunder and his Ani. How they meant everything to me.”

Telling her this story would open wounds I covered long ago.

“You loved them both. I can tell.” Her palm rested against the side of my face, fingers lightly scratching the scruff. “I think it’s important. Mostly because I want to understand you, Diablo. All the parts of you.”

Damn. What a woman. She brought out the protective beast in me—no doubt about it. But also the carnal, wild, lust-driven Reaper who wanted to claim her in every way.

So dangerous. Utterly addicting.

“I met Anita and Thunder when she came into my tattoo shop. Little guy was only four at the time. The sweetest, wisest kid I’d ever met. An old soul in a young body.”

“He sounds amazing.”

“He is,” I agreed. “This story isn’t an easy one.”

“None are when it comes to life warriors.” Gina shrugged. “We live through trauma and learn to make peace in the aftermath. It’s the life we choose that makes all the difference.”

Such wise words.

“So right, honey. You understand without me having the whole story. Fucking love that about you.”

She smiled. “Then tell me the rest. Tell me about your Thunder, Diablo.”

Chapter 12 Diablo

E *leven years ago—*
Redemption. Miami.

The two words the Reaper latched onto after I touched Thunder's blood. The mystery of my little dude's biological father was solved with that piece of information. Thunder's parents met in Miami.

I took Thunder outside for a walk alone, leaving Anita to rest. She was locked in the grieving process after losing her friend. I knew she needed time, and I didn't interfere.

In front of him, I knelt. "Thunder."

Leaving him tore me apart. I couldn't figure out why it made me so nervous, but it did.

Anxious, I stared down at my hands before finally lifting my head to peer into his eyes. "You're my boy. You know that, right?"

Tears rushed to his eyes. "Yes, sir."

Seeing that, I couldn't hold back my own. "And always will be." I tapped my chest. "Right, little guy. But ..." My chest struggled to drag in a breath. "If I had the chance to know my dad was a good person, I'd give almost anything." I reached out, grabbing his shoulder in an affectionate squeeze. "So, I gotta find this out for you. Understand?"

The tears choked my throat. I barely got the words out.

Thunder bawled. "Yes, sir."

I had to make sure he didn't doubt what he meant to me. "None of this means you ain't mine. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come here."

I brought him into my embrace, pushing all the love I felt for him into that hug. As I stood, I felt how critical this meeting would become for the future. Thunder's future. If I

could make things right for him and give him all he needed, it was worth any heartache I endured.

Anita woke as I brought Thunder into the bedroom we shared. I gave him a snack and juice box, putting a movie on that he loved.

“Gotta go, Tiger. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

She reached out, grasping my hand. “Return to me.”

“I will,” I promised, picking up the saddlebags I had already packed for the trip, located on a table to the right.

“The necklace, Dio. It’s the link that’ll help him believe. Rosa always said how much it meant to her.”

“I’ve got it.”

Her eyes closed, sorrow drifting into them. “I’m so tired.”

“I know.” I leaned down, placing a kiss on her forehead. “Rest. Moolah is coming over soon.”

“Okay.”

I turned to Thunder. “Stay with your Ani.”

“Yes, sir.”

His eyes remained on the television as he chewed on the granola bar I’d given him.

Armed with the silver necklace from Ani, I left the apartment above my tattoo shop, walking into the bright Nevada sunshine. The trip to Georgia would take forty hours by car, but I could reach it faster on my bike. I only needed to stop at a hotel for one night to sleep off the hours on the road.

My fingers gripped the silver chain necklace as I pulled it free from my saddlebags, staring at the shiny metal. Blood, for once, wasn’t my first clue about the identity of Thunder’s biological father. The back of the necklace was engraved.

Redemption Ryders.

The Reaper prodded me to get on the road. I tucked the necklace inside and began the long trip to the Atlanta area. I

didn't run into a single snag and arrived less than a day and a half after leaving Nevada.

My boots were dusty. My throat dry. I needed food and a bed, but that didn't matter compared to Thunder. He remained my focus.

On the outskirts of a small country town, I passed a Gas & Chic, noting I'd have to fill up before I left. Down a long dirt road where nothing but trees and more land, I rolled up to a barbed wire fence.

My Reaper prodded. *Enter.*

Off in the distance, to the left, a big building made of concrete stood ominous and imposing. No windows. Every inch of the property fenced in. On the roof of the building were two lookout posts, one in each corner.

They knew I arrived long before I'd ever had a chance to surprise them. These Ryders took their security seriously.

The gate opened, allowing entry.

I rolled onto the lot, nothing the big ass metal door that served as the entrance to the Redemption Ryders clubhouse. I parked my bike and stood, patting my pocket where the necklace safely hid within.

Ryders looked up as I entered the building, immediately noting my cut and the Royal Bastards emblem. They watched me closely, not hostile, but not friendly either.

Until they knew I wasn't a threat, I doubted their reactions would change.

I walked to a room where someone was playing the guitar. Upon entering, I found the man I needed to see. No need to worry that I'd be clueless. The Reaper pointed him out.

So this man was Thunder's biological father. Damn.

I had to give him respect. He played that guitar with ease, but I got the message. He wasn't threatened. I entered his turf.

Depp set blue eyes roamed over my cut. "Diablo. What do I owe the pleasure?"

His big rough hands kept playing while he waited for me to answer.

I rubbed the back of my neck, glancing at the two men that flanked him. The one on the right seemed a little on edge, playing with a link of chains. His dark, sharp eyes followed my movements. I noted the black mohawk and chain tattoos on each side of his head's bare skin.

He reminded me of Rael.

The other guy I didn't worry about. He seemed less threatening.

"You might think I'm a bit crazy," I began, "but I've been looking for you."

"Is that so?"

I read the patches on his cut. Diesel. President.

"I have something that once belonged to you. A gift that should be returned."

He frowned slightly. "Show me."

I pulled the necklace from my pocket, approaching his desk, where I placed it on the surface. Backing up, I took a seat in one of the empty chairs.

He kept his reaction hidden. I knew it meant more than he revealed, but I understood the need for discretion.

Diesel's long fingers picked up the jewelry, flipping it over to read the back. He stared at it for a long minute before lifting his gaze to mine. "Where did you get this?"

"Given to me by my woman. She knew Rosa."

"Knew?"

I nodded. "As close as sisters."

He understood the meaning behind my arrival without having to exchange a bunch of words that didn't matter.

"Rosa gave it to Anita before she died."

"Rosa's gone?" Diesel blinked. His fingers curled around the necklace in his hand, closing it inside his fist.

If I didn't have my Reaper, I probably would have missed the sorrow that punched him in the gut. His eyes hardened. The stiffness in his shoulders increased. When his jaw locked, grinding a couple of times before he gave a curt nod, I sensed the pain of his loss.

"How long?"

"From what Ani told me, she died giving birth to Thunder."

He didn't move. Just sat there, clutching that necklace. His fist shook once, then lowered to his knee. I didn't have to hear his words to know her death hurt his soul. My Reaper recognized his sorrow, not as deep as what I felt for my mother, but shared, nonetheless.

There was no point in calling him out on it. Each of us grieved our own way and in our time. Diesel would do the same.

His chin lifted, grateful when I left his wound alone, returning to Thunder.

"She had a son."

"A son? Named Thunder?"

"Yes." I pointed to the necklace. "She gave it to Anita for safekeeping. For her child."

Diesel didn't seem happy. "You sayin' this boy is mine?"

"Yes."

"I don't," he began, rising to his feet. "Shit. You're sure?"

"Anita was there when Rosa gave birth. There's no question. You're his father."

The truth took a few seconds to sink in.

Diesel's shoulders squared back, and he faced me. "Where is he?"

"In Nevada. I own a tattoo shop. Anita and Thunder live with me above it."

"Is he safe?"

“Yes—”

“You don’t understand,” he blurted in a rush. “Someone is gonna take him. Someone could—”

My Reaper sensed pain related to another son.

“He’s safe,” I promised. “Left him with his mother less than two nights ago.”

He opened his mouth to ask another question when I beat him to it.

“My club, Royal Bastards Tonopah chapter, we watch out for him and Anita.”

That little bit of information made sense, and his body lost some of the tension. Diesel grabbed his chest, nodding as he sank into his chair. “Good.”

“Thunder. He’s special,” I began, unsure how to explain my wonderful boy, how extraordinary he was in every way.

Diesel lifted a brow. “Special?”

“He’s an amazing kid. Smart. Loving. Generous. Obedient. All that you could ask for in a child. You need to meet him.”

Diesel stared, the only movement a small muscle that ticked a couple of times in his jaw.

“My boy—Thunder—he deserves to know who his father is. To find out that the man who helped bring him into this world isn’t a bad man.”

“Your boy?” Diesel asked like the phrase bothered him.

“Yes,” I emphasized, “but there’s enough room in his heart for the two of us. No doubt about that.”

I hated to say those words, to speak them into the air because admitting Thunder could accept us both meant I may not always be the only man Thunder looked up to and admired. Selfish. But I couldn’t help the desire to be number one in his life. I loved him that deeply, that completely. Thunder was my son, whether he had my blood in his veins or not.

To share him meant putting aside my bullshit and understanding that a boy needed strong men to help him grow into the adult he'd become.

“You love him.”

“Yes, I do.”

Diesel blew out a breath. “That’s good. He should have that.”

“He needs you too.” Fuck. That was hard to say. “You need to meet him. Come to Nevada. My pres Grim extends the invitation to bunk at the Crossroads.”

“Crossroads?”

“Our clubhouse.”

The one with the chain tattoos gripped his pres’s shoulder as if he agreed.

Diesel gave him a quick chin lift. “He’s in a happy home, right?”

“The best.”

“Then I don’t want to uproot him. He’s in good hands. I can see that.”

“I appreciate that,” I acknowledged.

“Alright. Let’s do this. I’ll come to him.”

“Thunder.”

“Thunder,” Diesel repeated, a bit dazed.

Yeah, I’d feel that way, too, if I just found out I had a son I never knew about.

The president of the Redemption Ryders held out his hand. I stood, gripping his arm, exchanging a mutual understanding.

The Reaper liked him. He sensed a tough but wise man—someone I could trust.

“See you in Tonopah, Diesel.”

Chapter 13 Diablo

*E*leven years ago—

I couldn't wait to get back to Ani and Thunder. I rode hard, reaching Tonopah in a little over a day. Tired as fuck, I just wanted to see the two people I loved and missed over the last three days. Physically exhausted but mentally recharged, I rushed up the stairs, pushing through the front door.

“Hey! Where are you guys? My dude, I have great news.”

Anita left our bedroom. “Shhh. He just fell back to sleep. Late night.”

Aw. They must have missed me just as much.

“Tiger,” I whispered, probably too loud, “Don't be mad at me, but I did something for the little guy.” My saddlebags dropped on the dining room table as I moved in her direction.

Frowning, I noticed the salty streaks staining her cheeks. “What the—You've been crying?” I rushed to her side, but she held up her hands.

“Oh, just torturing us with some Joe Young.”

The movie they both adored with a few sad moments.

I grabbed my chest. “Ah, fuck. You okay?”

“Yes. I'm sorry.”

My head lowered, resting over hers as I held her tight.

She pulled away, wiping under her eyes. I should have thought the moment through, but I had such happy news to share. It blocked my usually observant senses. “Hey, uh, can I ask you to get us milk? I ran out last night.”

“Babe, I did it. I found him,” I exclaimed, elated.

“Who—”

“His father.”

She covered her mouth in shock. “Wait—”

“Can you believe it? And he’s good, Tiger. Just what every boy needs.”

Ani’s arms slid over my shoulders. She stole my attention with words I had ached to hear for months from her. Powerful words.

“I love you.”

My mouth parted. “Babe.”

Tears glistened in her eyes. “I always will.”

My world felt whole and complete. I sucked in air, finally asking the question I’d been holding back. I knew how she’d answer now. “Will you be my ol’ lady?”

She cried through a smile. “Yes.”

My mouth slammed down on hers, sealing the commitment with a kiss.

One taste. One touch of heaven ... before hell.

My head throbbed as my eyes slowly opened, taking in the quiet apartment. Too quiet. Wincing, I touched the back of my head, feeling the sizeable sore bump.

The fuck?

Slowly, I dragged myself to my knees, struggling to focus. My vision blurred, and I panted out a series of unsteady breaths. A couple of minutes ticked by before I could find the strength to stand.

With one hand on the nearest wall, I managed to rise to my feet, scanning the apartment. Clean, as usual, except for the box of cereal on the counter and a gallon of milk. Thunder loved cereal.

A smile tugged on my lips as I made my way into the kitchen, noticing the gallon was warm. Strange. Usually, Ani followed behind Thunder, checking on him to see if he had put things away. Little guy hardly ever forgot.

I tossed the useless gallon in the trash and stashed the cereal, calling out for Ani. No answer.

“Thunder?”

My Reaper became edgy. He clawed at my composure, desperate to break free. Close to panic, I ran through the entire apartment, noting the unmade bed and signs of a struggle. My Ani wouldn't leave a mess. She always kept things picked up and ready.

My chest moved faster with every breath. Something was wrong. I pulled out my phone, calling every fucking person in contact with my ol' lady. No one had seen or spoken to Ani. Not in over a day.

I already knew from my Reaper what had happened, but I didn't want to believe it. She said she loved me. Ani agreed to be my ol' lady. We finally had our moment.

Closing my eyes, I remembered how she looked, the sadness in her eyes as we kissed. The tears that she said came from the movie. The way she asked me to wait.

And—*fuck*—the milk!

The milk on the counter. Her clue that danger lurked in the apartment, and I missed it.

Noooooooooo!

My Ani and Thunder taken right after the asshole hit me over the head. Why didn't I pay attention? How could I let her past catch up to us and snatch her away?

My lips parted, and a cry of anguish left my chest. How did I find them?

Yanking my cell from the pocket of my cut, I dialed Grim's number. “Pres,” I yelled into the phone, my voice so haunted, I knew he would be concerned.

“Diablo. What happened?”

I couldn't speak. Couldn't say the words out loud that made it true.

“Fuck. Where are you?”

“Revelations Ink,” I finally managed to say.

Grim hung up. He found me five minutes later, my head in my hands as I sat on the couch. Agony punched me in the chest with every fucking breath. When he stormed into the open door of the apartment with half the club on his heels, I couldn't hold back the sorrow. My lungs wanted to collapse. My eyes filled with tears I rapidly blinked back.

“Diablo, talk to me.”

“They're gone,” I choked out. “Ani and Thunder.”

His expression revealed the pain he knew I felt. “I'm sorry, brother.”

I shook my head, standing as my hands clenched into fists. “No, pres. She didn't leave me. Not willingly. Ani agreed to be my ol' lady. She said she loved me. Never would have separated like this, not after that.”

“Fuck,” he cursed. “Your Reaper?”

“Pissed. He knows they were taken.”

That was all I had to say for the club to have my back, ready to do whatever it took to bring them back, no matter what we had to face.

I reached out to the connection I shared with Thunder. The special link created between us. A golden tie that connected my darkness to his light. I felt his fear, sorrow, and anxiety. He didn't want me to worry and sent his apologies.

No. Fuck that.

I could sense whoever took them kept switching vehicles, moving across the country to confuse the path. Didn't matter. My Reaper could follow as long as Thunder didn't sever the tie that bound us together.

“You must be Grim,” A deep voice announced.

My head snapped to the doorway, spotting Diesel and several of his Redemption Ryders. Intelligent and observant, he immediately noticed shit wasn't right.

“Where's Thunder?”

In the chaos, I'd forgotten Diesel had left Georgia and rode here to meet him. He hadn't been far behind. No more than half a day. Probably the amount of time I spent on the fucking floor unconscious.

Stumbling, I took a couple of steps in his direction. "Ani. Thunder." Swallowing hard, I didn't hide my pain or worry. "They've been taken."

The look on his face—I'd never forget it.

Agony that rivaled my own. Sorrow. A brief flash of fear. Then anger. The rage that followed matched my own.

"We find them. Now."

"We're leavin'," Grim announced, ticking his head at Diesel.

One strong, mighty pres to another, they exchanged a look that said far more than words. Each club would protect the other, would support and ride this through to the end.

Three days. Three fucking days we searched. Rode hard. Spread out across neighboring states to find Thunder and Ani.

Pausing at a hotel outside of Nashville, Tennessee, I knew we were following the right path. I could feel us growing closer, bridging the gap. Cigarette in hand, I smoked in the cool breeze, hoping to hear more from the Reaper. Exhaustion tried to press in, but I wouldn't give in. Not until I found my ol' lady and my son.

Closing my eyes, I felt the Reaper reaching out, extending a hand as we waited for Thunder.

"Dio?"

Darkness closed in, and I felt my body hit the ground. Grim's voice. Diesel yelling. Everything faded ...

Thunder. He was here. My Reaper brought us together. Mind. Spirit. We connected.

Relief blew through my body. My boy was alive.

"I got you, little guy. I got you."

“Dio,” he sobbed. “Rape! He’s hurting her.”

No! My Reaper roared, his agony so real I shook with it. I took deep breaths, desperate to fill my lungs. I felt his terror and pain, knowing he’d been physically struck. My boy!

I wrapped my protection and love around him, pushing it through our link.

Inhale ... Exhale ...

We breathed together like we did the night he dreamed of a fire. The same fire that happened only a short time later destroyed a building and several lives. A prophetic dream.

Heat began to rise inside me, filling us both up, increasing in temperature without burning, growing bigger and brighter until it glowed with a golden aura. That light surrounded us.

Despite the horror of Thunder and Ani’s capture and the unknown, we both eased.

Much calmer, sensing his general location. I knew I’d find my boy. Not long now. *“Pleasing you, eases me.”*

“Hello, Diablo.”

Not Dio. He knew the difference between the Reaper and me. Such a smart kid.

My Reaper answered, *“Thunder,”* in a deep rumble. In his hand, connecting us all together, a golden rope glowed. Extending from his wrist like a vein, it pulsed with promise. *“Remember the shower.”* A pause. *“Remember how we took breaths together.”*

Inhale ... Exhale ...

Thunder remembered. *“Yes.”*

The light between us flickered.

“In the blood,” Thunder whispered, knowing how I made the connection to Diesel and other memories of the past.

The Reaper held out the rope. *“Take it, Thunder. Hold it tight.”*

The link we needed to reach him.

“*Tell Dio I love him.*” Thunder reached out and grasped the rope ...

My body jolted as my eyes opened, staring into the faces of my brothers. Diesel stood next to Grim, his expression guarded.

“I know where Thunder is,” I exclaimed, rising on unsteady feet. “We need to leave! Now!”

Diesel didn’t understand. Not yet. “What do you mean, you know where he is? The *fuck?*”

“The Reaper connected to Thunder,” I replied, letting him rise to the surface of my skin.

Grim mumbled a low curse. “Shit.”

Every brother in the Tonopah chapter allowed their Reapers to surface. Not enough to reap souls. No, this was different—a merging of man and demon, of soulless Reaper to dark human soul. The faces of the Reapers, skeletal and wicked, dominated our features.

Diesel’s hand slapped his chest. “Fuck.”

“This is what we are,” Grim announced. “Reapers. You know our secret now.”

Diesel nodded, swallowing hard. “And I’ll keep it.”

Grim reached out, extending his hand in friendship and trust. Diesel immediately clasped arms, reciprocating.

“You’ll find Thunder?”

“Yes,” I promised fiercely. My Reaper’s deep voice had taken over. “And I’ll reap the souls of those who harm him.”

“I believe you will,” Diesel answered, trusting in Grim, me, and the club.

The following hours on the road moved us closer to Ani and Thunder. With every mile, I grew more anxious. I had to believe I would make it in time and stay focused, keeping the link with my Reaper open.

We nearly reached North Carolina when I felt a sudden punch to the gut, swerving my bike and almost crashing. I had to pull over and stop, clutching at my stomach.

“No,” I cried out, shocked to feel the sudden loss. The emptiness that proved my ol’ lady was gone. Dead. Murdered. “Nooooooooo!” I shouted, dragging out the word as I slid off the seat of my bike, tugging at my hair. “Fuck!”

A wild, terrible cry launched from my chest.

A small, terrified, heartbroken voice filled my head. “I love you, Dio.”

And then that beautiful, strong, everlasting tie that bound me and Thunder and the Reaper ... it snapped.

Severed. Gone forever.

My heart threatened to explode. My fist lifted as I hit my chest. Fuck! It hurt. It hurt so fucking much!

A howl of agony pierced the night, breaking the final link, the only connection I had to find Thunder.

My boy. Lost to me.

“My Thunder.”

The rage. The sorrow. The unyielding pain. They filled my head until I couldn’t breathe.

My Reaper, on the side of the highway, unleashed.

Dark shadows pressed in, stealing my conscious thought. Maybe the Reaper knew I couldn’t handle this loss. It was too fucking much. He took over, blinding me to the horror of the truth I didn’t want to face.

I tuned out the fucking world and passed into oblivion.



PRESENT TIME—

“Diablo.”

I turned to Grim, giving him a chin lift. “Yeah, pres?”

“You heard from Teddy?”

“No,” I growled, frustrated. “I don’t think the guy who showed up at Gina’s house and attacked Rev even saw him. The kid took off.”

“That’s what my Reaper feels too.”

Well, shit.

“What do you wanna do, pres?”

“Ain’t shit to do. He left. He’s out.”

“Fuck.” I scrubbed a hand down my face. “Sorry, pres.”

“Not your fault, Diablo. You believed in the kid. He’s the one who screwed up.”

“I better let Brett know. Maybe he knows why Teddy turned his back on us.”

“Call him.”

I swiped across the screen on my phone, dialing Brett’s number. No answer. Went to voicemail, but I couldn’t leave a message because his inbox was full.

“He’s not picking up. Can’t leave a message.”

Grim frowned. “Not liking this.”

“Me either,” I agreed.

Grim dialed Teddy’s number. “Disconnected. Little shit thinks he’s smart.” Grim cracked his neck. “You hear from Brett or Teddy, I need to know right away.”

“No problem, pres.”

“Come with me. I want to follow up with Xenon.”

We walked down the hall, entering Xenon’s private space. My brother knew everything possible about computers, tech, and hacking. He built an entire system that could access almost any database, even government.

“What ya need, pres?”

“You find the info we needed on Jack Downs?”

“Yeah. He’s got a record that’s fucking crazy. Got busted for almost every crime you can think of. Nasty guy. Rape. Murder. B & E. Assault.” Xenon shook his head. “No significant personal assets. No wealth. Not much that I could find beyond that. He’s a mean fucker, though. That’s for sure.”

No surprise there.

“Anything else?”

Xenon’s expression hardened. “He got pinched for trafficking and solicitation of a minor. Found medical records accusing him of raping a few boys. Suck fuck.”

And he’d hurt Rev.

My Reaper snarled, wanting to track him down this minute.

“Address? Cell number? Any contact info?”

“That’s the weird thing. No. It’s like it’s all been erased.”

“Shit!” I cursed, not happy to find another dead end.

Grim sighed. “Brett or Teddy Rocker?”

“Printed all that I could find.” Xenon handed over a thin stack of papers. “My guess? They owed someone money and skipped town. Maybe drugs. Can’t say for sure.”

“Good work, Xenon,” Grim praised. “If you come across anything else, reach out. Don’t matter what time of day or night. Feel me?”

“Yeah, pres. You got it.”

Chapter 14 Diablo

T*wo years and four months earlier—*

“Nine fucking years, Diesel. It’s been nine motherfucking years,” I spat, pacing my apartment.

“I didn’t come here to rile you up.” He shook his head, taking a breath. “I had an idea.”

I stopped, lifting my head to stare into his eyes. That blue could be cold as ice when Diesel got pissed. Right now, they were calm as a steady sea. “What you thinkin’?”

“A biker rally.”

“What kind of rally?”

“Somethin’ big, Diablo. So fucking huge that every club in the country will be represented.”

Immediately, my Reaper sensed the connection. “Big enough to ensure the men who took Thunder will be there.”

Over the last nine years, we’d made inquiries and figured out more details. We knew the man who took Ani and Thunder was a biker because of Ani’s fear. She almost didn’t become my woman because I was a member of an mc. Combined with other information we’d learned and my Reaper’s connection to Thunder before he severed it, I knew he wasn’t far. I was almost positive he had to be somewhere in the Carolinas. The Reaper sensed North Carolina but couldn’t confirm it.

“You got it. We’re gonna find him,” Diesel replied firmly.

“We will,” I agreed. “We need to make this huge. Go all out. Vendors. Food. Leatherworkers. As many clubs as we can find. Tell everyone this is *the* event of the century. If you’re a club, you have to be there.”

“That’s my thought. Draw them in and wait for this club to show up with Thunder. If they got him, they’d bring him.”

“Has to be, Diesel,” I choked, fighting emotion. “We’re out of options. This is the last chance we got to find him.”

“I know.”

We exchanged nods. “Let’s get to work.”

A month later, Diesel showed up at the Crossroads and didn’t come alone. Lynx, the Steel Stallions MC president, and his ol’ lady Elle followed Diesel, Chains, and Scorch into the clubhouse.

Shouts and greetings erupted around the bar as we welcomed our brothers. Different clubs, but the same goal united us all.

Diesel accepted the beer thrust into his hand, sitting down at a table with me, Grim, Lynx, Elle, Rael, and Chains. “Got a list of clubs here that have given their R.S.V.P. There’s some I don’t recognize. Figured you all could help us with those.”

“Show me.” Grim reached for the list, scanning the names. “Fuck. Not a single club I don’t already know.”

“Fuck. I was afraid of that,” Diesel admitted.

Grim shoved the list toward Rael and me. No new names to us either.

“Shit.” I sighed, tossing back a shot of whiskey. I’d brought the bottle to the table. Feeling old and worn like a stripped tire on my bike, I fought fatigue and hopelessness.

“Hey,” Diesel rumbled.

I met his steady gaze. “We’re gonna find our boy. You feel me?”

Nodding, I let my body reply, but I didn’t believe it. Nine years stood in the way.

As the days brought us closer to the event, I grew angrier and more easily riled. My Reaper fought agitation, frustration, and the emptiness of Thunder and Ani’s loss. It aged me.

We rode for Georgia a week later. Most of the club decided to attend this event, and we left only a bare-bones crew at the Crossroads. We needed to make a big show of attending this event in case Thunder’s abductors showed up. No one would be turned away.

Less than three days before the festivities began, we found a new name registered on the attendance log. Hell Titans.

“You ever heard of them?” Diesel asked.

“Nope,” Grim confirmed.

“Anyone else?”

Not a soul could say yes.

“Justice,” Diesel called out, “Need you to dig into this club. Tell me what you find.”

“I’m on it,” she confirmed, retreating to her computer.

Diesel pulled me aside. “I know you’re hurtin’, brother. Can’t say I don’t know your pain. I’ve lived it.”

Blinking at him with weary, bloodshot eyes, I appreciated his honesty. “Artist.”

“Yeah.”

I knew some of the story since we’d met with the Ryders on occasion over the years, forming a friendship that forged from necessity and respect. “He’s been through some shit, huh?”

“More than I could say.” Diesel didn’t show emotion much, but when he did, it proved the trust we had formed. “He was taken like Thunder. Abused.” His voice broke. “Can’t stand the thought of another son going through that shit. Fuckin’ killin’ me, Diablo.”

I gripped his shoulder as he gripped mine. “We’re gonna get through this, Diesel. We’ll be strong for our boys.”

“You think he’s gonna be here?”

My eyes closed briefly, and I felt the Reaper tell me the truth. “He’ll be here. That new club, the Hell Titans. They know the truth.”

“Then we finalize our plans.”

The day of the rally dawned bright and warm. The sun rose with a golden promise that filled my heart with hope for the

first time in years. I could sense Thunder coming closer, his battle-weary soul in need of love and comfort.

As the man who would give anything to be his father, I rose early and prepared for the day, triple-checking that everything was ready. Diesel chuckled as I made sure that every member of the R.B.M.C., Stallions, and Ryders understood the plan. Nothing was fucking this up.

As much as I hated the idea, I remained in one of the enormous tents erected at the rally, set aside for the Redemption Ryders.

Beside this tent, Steel Stallions, and across from them, the Royal Bastards had similar tents erected. My face could be recognized, which was a risk, but not as risky as Thunder seeing me before the right time.

It took every ounce of willpower I possessed not to leave that tent when I heard confirmation that the Hell Titans had arrived. Grim rode in with the rest of the Tonopah chapter, pulling into our space with heads high. He joined me, gripping my shoulder before he pulled me into his chest.

“Gonna be a day to remember, Diablo. We’re all here for you.”

Choked up, I could only nod.

Elle, Lynx’s ol’ lady, approached as I cracked my neck, fighting the need to run outside and grab Thunder, shooting my way through the Hell Titans if necessary.

“It’s all set. My girl will come through for us. She’ll lead Thunder here.”

I blew out a breath. “Thank you.”

Her kind eyes met mine. “He’s so loved, your Thunder. That boy will come. Don’t doubt it.”

“I don’t,” I answered confidently. “I just don’t know if I can let go once I see him.”

Her expression read sympathy and understanding. “No shame in a hug that’s long overdue.”

I watched Elle walk away, musing over her words.

The time moved far too slowly. Agitated, I began to pace the tent. Until I heard his voice.

My Thunder.

I ran. The tent whipped open as I stared into my boy's eyes.

He'd grown. So tall. A young man with striking blue eyes and broad shoulders, pain etched into his features.

"My boy."

"Dio."

I didn't know who moved first. Our bodies met in the middle and crashed into each other. My arms wrapped around him. So tight.

I broke when his voice cried, "Dio."

No shame. I sobbed, tucking my head over his, unable to get enough of my Thunder. The embrace wasn't close enough. I doubted any length of time that day could have sufficed. "My boy." My arms tightened their hold, giving comfort, strength, and the love I freely bestowed.

He bawled, "Dio."

Unashamed, I rocked this beautiful young man that I spent nine years searching the earth to find. "Shhh. I got ya. I got ya."

He wept, unleashing the pain he could no longer hold. I'd carry it for him, slash it to pieces, and slay the demons that separated us.

"She's dead. She's dead."

Ani. I knew. Had mourned for nine years.

Not letting go, I kissed his head and wept with him. "I know, little man. I know."



INSIDE THE TENT, BODIES gently nudged us to separate since we refused to let each other go. Battery-operated lanterns flickered low beams of light to keep everyone from colliding.

Thunder cried to me, “I’m so sorry.”

I sobbed my response, pent up after so long. “I *failed* her. Not you.”

“It was so bad. He was so mean. I was helpless.”

Holding him so tight, I felt the weight of that burden.

“Rya.”

“What?” I only half-listened, giving out instructions. “I don’t want to take any chances. Especially with two extra bodies.” Thunder had his best friends Roam and Chubbs with him. “Let’s go.”

“But ... she’s in danger.”

The voices around us drowned out his words. “Yeah, their loyalty is thick ... We have transportation waiting ... Blacked out windows ... Need to move soon.”

“Dio, I can’t go with you.”

“I got you, Thunder.” I turned to Grim. “Who knows how long we have until Onus clears his mind of Tequila?”

Thunder pushed against my stomach. “Dio, can you hear me?”

He held my face, a small smile appearing. “Of course, I can hear you, little man.” I kissed his forehead. “Missed you fucking bad, kid.” I yanked him closer, feeling the pressure to get him out before something terrible happened. “Yeah, pronto.”

“Diablo, hear me.”

My body jolted as heat increased, calling to the Reaper.

“I can’t leave her.”

Confused, I pushed him gently to a mattress on the floor.
“Sit. Drink some water. You’re not making much sense.”

“Thank you.” Shaking, he sloshed water from the bottle I gave him as he brought it to his lips.

I knelt down. “We don’t have much time, my dude.” I pushed his hair aside, drenched in tears and sweat.

“I know, so please listen.”

Impatient, I nodded.

“Her name is Rya—”

Justice dropped next to us. “Is she one of the girls they’re selling?”

He blinked. “Wh-what?”

“Thunder, this is Justice, Stallions’ road captain.”

“I have intel Titans are trafficking. What do you know?” A little intense, she needed to back off Thunder.

“Can you please give me a minute?”

She shook her head full of black hair. “Jesus. I’m so sorry. Kids in danger—” She shook her head again. “Makes me a little—” She exhaled. “Them hurting is a weak spot for me.” She tapped Thunder’s knee. “And now you’re safe. So, I need to not get ahead of myself.”

Thunder swallowed hard. “No, kids being safe is important to me, too.”

The tent quieted down.

Thunder stared up at me. “You knew I was with the Hell Titans?”

“No, little man. I would’ve come for you. They were a last-minute sign-up for the rally, so Justice did some digging.”

“Last-minute?” His shoulders sagged. “He had this event planned for months.”

Guilt. That was why the Hell Titans didn't reveal themselves sooner.

“Dio, the fire.”

Not the fire he dreamed of as a kid and later came to pass. No, a new fire. One that raged and stole a young boy from his father. Who snagged his innocence and raised him with lies.

I blinked, swaying on my knees.

“Dio.”

I fell into him.

Grim steadied me. “He's just in shock. That's all.”

When I started to tremble, Thunder wrapped his arms around me. “Diablo, breathe with me.”

“That's right,” Grim agreed. “You have him now.” He turned to everyone in the tent. “We should give them a minute.”

“The fire?” I asked. “Was it real?”

Thunder nodded. “What does it mean?”

I rubbed a hand down my face. “I don't know.”

“I heard a voice. It told me to listen. A connection as powerful as the one we share. And it hasn't spoken to me again until now. Five years, Dio.”

“Listen to what?”

“Whatever the memory meant.”

Grim appeared at my side. “Something isn't right. My Reaper is on edge.”

I stood in a rush. “Tell me something I don't know, like what the fuck happened to my boy.”

Grim clasped his hands behind his head and pulled. “Ah, shit. His nightmare—back at your apartment—the fire—”

I got in his face. “What about it?”

Grim grabbed my cut and shook. “It was a fucking message, and you know it.”

Pain lanced my body, and I began panting. “No, you’re wrong.”

“Brother, you pulled him from that nightmare, just like you will again.”

“I already have. Tonight.”

Not letting go, Grim stared into Thunder’s eyes. “What’s that voice saying now, kid?”

Thunder stood, his face pinched in pain. “That tonight’s not the night.”

Seething with anger, I shoved Grim away. “I don’t care.” Losing my shit, I felt the Reaper pressing in, ready to break free. “I don’t care what any message says.”

“May you forgive me someday, Diablo.” My pres, looking almost ill, called out beyond the tent walls. “I need help in here.”

Men rushed in while Grim wrapped his thick arms around me, preventing me from moving mine. “I’m so sorry, brother.”

Thunder stared at me. “Thank you so much for not giving up on me.”

I ignored the men helping to restrain me. My jaw locked. “If you, for one fucking minute, think your ass ain’t coming with me—”

“I figured you’d given up and moved on with your life.”

I could feel the rage, the heat warming my skin. “Never. Including now—”

“Knowing you’re in this world, waiting for me, fills the void right here.” Thunder patted his heaving chest. “Do you understand?”

Fuck no! “You are to stay with me!”

“I need you to let me go,” he replied calmly.

I don’t think the words that left my mouth next made sense as I was tackled to the ground, fighting them all.

Thunder lowered to his hands and knees, his face at ground level with my own. “There are innocents out there, Dio. I have to stand in the fire with them. You’ll pull me free again—”

No! I wouldn’t allow it. I went ballistic, forcing more men to climb on top of the pile.

Thunder reached for my balled fist, grabbing it. “Dio ...”

Noooooooooo.

“Dad.”

The pile went still.

Thunder squeezed my fist. “I am so proud to have you in my life.”

My fist opened, snatching his hand. My heart thumped painfully in my chest.

He called me Dad. Could I contain the happiness that followed? It threatened to break free or consume me on the spot.

“You may doubt who you are at times, but don’t. You are the gift that brings balance.” His stare held so much emotion. “Don’t ask me to not be who *you* taught me to be.”

Gutted. Chastised. So grateful. What a conflicting swirl of feelings building inside me. “Thunder.”

“Let me honor who you are to me.”

Defeat. How could I argue with his truth?

Tears trickling down his cheeks, he spoke one more devastating truth. “I’m strong ... because of you and my Ani.”

My chest heaved, followed by a sob. “My boy.”

“Your boy. I swear it, Dio.”

The tent flap opened, ushering in another wave of pain I had yet to overcome. Diesel had arrived.



THUNDER ROSE FROM THE floor, pointing at me. “I’m his.”

Pride and love filled my chest as I slowly stood.

Diesel smirked. “How about *you* stop pretendin’ your heart ain’t big enough for another man in your life, and *I* won’t pretend to have any intentions of ever trying to replace that man right there. Comprende-*o*?”

Damn. I had mad respect for Diesel, ticking my chin at him. We’d get through this and figure it out. I didn’t doubt it.

“I’d like to know what you’re thinkin’,” Diesel announced.

“That I don’t like him in pain.” He thumbed in my direction.

“That’s what dads do. They hurt for their boys,” I choked out.

Thunder turned to Diesel. “Yeah. And just like you want a choice, he does, too.”

Thunder blinked, turning to me. “I took that from you when I decided to go back.”

I fought tears. “It’s okay, little man.”

“My heart says I have to go back.”

A heavy, weighted breath blew out of my mouth. Resignation. “I know.”

Hours later, I pulled my stool up to a chair in the tent, preparing to ink my boy for the first time. A moment I would never forget. Of all the people I’d inked, he meant the most to me—even more than Ani.

“Today belongs to Thunder,” I announced, giving Diesel a grin.

Significant life moment. Right there.

I turned the tattoo gun on ...then touched it to Thunder's skin. Beginning with a set of blue eyes known well to Thunder and me. One on each of his pecs, Ani could watch over him. Then, disguised behind wings I once tattooed on her skin, I started the design.

What a profound moment.

Handing over the gun, I placed it in Diesel's hand. Another artist? Yes, nothing happened by chance.

He finished the wings, letting them stretch over Thunder's chest and shoulders.

Once the tattoo was finished, the three of us made secret promises to see this ordeal through to the end, then come back together. Forever intertwined, our stories would merge, separate, and merge again. Such were the rivers of life.

Letting Thunder walk away afterward proved to be one of the most challenging moments of my life. I never wanted to alter the plan. Hell, I didn't foresee Thunder wanting to stay. Unprepared for that, I didn't have a backup plan. I didn't want to leave empty-handed. Seemed so wrong.

I figured all parents must feel that way at some point, giving up control to let their kids thrive and grow.

Hard as fuck, but I could proudly say I did it.

Chapter 15 Diablo

It took several nights to share all of those memories with Gina. She sat through every tear and confession, every bit of pain and sorrow. In exchange, I listened to her sorrows and triumphs, holding her when some of them were too heavy to carry alone.

For the first time since leaving Thunder behind at the rally, I felt unburdened and free. I'd grieved Anita too. Ready to move on, the only woman in my life that mattered called me when I left church, blowing up my phone as I entered the bar.

"Hey, darlin'," I answered, "What's up?"

"It's Jack."

My Reaper immediately snarled. "What about him?" I growled.

"An unknown number called my phone. I didn't answer, but it wouldn't stop until I finally picked it up."

She sounded pissed.

"What did he say?"

"That he's comin' soon, Diablo."

A scare tactic. Stupid fucker didn't know how badly he screwed up.

"Good. About time I got to kick his ass."

Gina snorted. "I want my hits too."

"Whatever you want, my fierce mama."

"I'll be there when you get home from work. Got a couple of things to finish up."

"Okay."

"Hey, babe."

"Yeah?"

"Hold on to my heart. I want it back when I see you."

Cheesy? Fuck yeah. Sweet? As delectable as cherry cordials on Christmas mornin’.

“Oh, Diablo. You’ve got mine too.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

Gina ended the call, finishing her shift at work while I stomped toward Grim’s office. Knocking once, I entered as he hollered for me to open the damn door and not keep him waiting.

Something bugged him. I could see the annoyance on his face.

I didn’t have time for it.

“I want to move Gina and her family into the Crossroads,” I announced, not caring about his frustration.

Grim didn’t answer at first. He took a few long drags on his smoke and then nodded. “Maybe you’ll have better luck than Sasha did. Be persuasive, but if she says no, it’s no. Feel me?”

Like I wasn’t familiar with the concept. Never forced myself on a woman about anything in the past and wouldn’t think of doing it now. “She won’t.”

“She ain’t an ol’ lady or blood relative. We can only protect her so much without cooperation.”

Scoffing, I didn’t bother to dignify his words with a response. Semantics. She’d be my ol’ lady before long. We all knew it.

“I’m gonna pick the kids up from school a few minutes early so they can pack a bag. We’ll do a family night tonight since it’s Friday anyway, and all the kids can watch movies and have a pizza party.”

Grim shook his head. “Gonna pretend I didn’t hear what you’re plannin’. Get them to the Crossroads because I need you to find this prick. He’s a loose cannon, and I got a bad feelin’ he’s makin’ plans with the Scorpions to move against us.”

I told him about the call.

“Well, fuck. Guess we’re gonna be ready then.”

“Yep,” I agreed, leaving his office to find Snooki.

She stood in the kitchen, wearing a striped red and white apron and a pair of heels, sashaying her ass as she baked cookies.

“Hey, Snooki.”

“What can I do for you, Diablo?”

“Need you to set up a room for Gina and the kids. Just in case.” I preferred keeping them with me but didn’t want to assume anything.

“No problem. Any preference?”

“The big one Wraith and Tawni don’t use.”

“I’m on it,” she promised.

“You’re the best! Thanks.”

“Don’t I know it,” she answered with a wink.



“HEY, DIABLO,” REV SHOUTED, his little face lighting up as I stood in the office of the school, offering up my fist for a bump.

“Hey, Rev. Got a little surprise for you and your sister. Mind if I’m picking you up today a little early?”

“No way!” He rushed forward and bumped my fist with his own, excitement widening his smile.

“Where’s Liv?”

“She’s not here yet.”

He adjusted his backpack and the straps and then plopped down on one of the vacant plastic seats. “She walks slow.

We're gonna be a lot of minutes."

"A lot?"

"Like fifty."

My lips twitched with humor. "I suppose I better sit too, then."

He nodded before I took the empty seat on his right. "I got an A on my math test. Wanna see?"

"Sure."

He slid off the backpack and unzipped it, papers and folders a wild mess inside as he rummaged around the interior. A triumphant look entered his eyes when he yanked a sheet out and handed it over. "I only missed one."

"Wow. That's awesome. Kickass job, Rev."

A throat cleared as I glanced up and found the secretary flashing me an unimpressed and disapproving look.

"You can't say bad words in the office. They'll catch you," he whispered behind his hand, finger pointing to the main desk.

"Well, shit," I cursed, ticking my head in his direction. "Good thing I don't come here often."

A loud laugh rumbled through his chest. "You'd have a lot of detentions."

"Oh yeah," I agreed, rising to my feet. "I'm gonna see if your sister is coming yet."

Rev shrugged and remained seated like it was a wasted effort.

He was right. As I peeked out the door to both the left and right, there was no sign of Olivia.

"Where's her class?" I asked, looking over my shoulder at Rev.

"The second-grade classes are in the yellow hall."

"Wanna help me find it?"

The secretary began to say something about it not being policy, but I ignored her, and Rev giggled again as he slid from his seat. I followed him down the hall and through a fuckin' maze of colors before we found yellow.

Olivia was sitting on the ground with her backpack next to her side, propped against the wall. Little arms wrapped around her knees as she rested her head on top.

“Liv?” Rev asked, rushing forward. “You okay?”

Her head lifted, and she hiccupped as streaks from her tears stained her pink cheeks and glistened in the light. “I lost Mr. Jumbles.”

Rev’s shoulders relaxed. “He was the best monkey ever.”

She nodded, sniffing. “He is. He’s the bestest. I get super soft snuggles from him, Rev.”

“I know you do.” Rev glanced up at me and shifted from foot to foot. “Diablo is picking us up.”

“Not without Mr. Jumbles.”

Rev nodded like he was expecting that answer. “Where did you have him last?”

“I don’t know,” she wailed. “I think he was in my lap after last recess.”

“What did you do after that?” I asked, hoping to help.

“We went to the library.”

Rev and I both perked up. Bet she left it there.

He held out his hand. “We’ll go look. Come on.”

Olivia wiped her face and stood, sliding on her backpack. Her fingers gripped Rev’s as they walked down the hall, and I trailed behind, marveling at how Rev took care of Olivia.

The library was also in the yellow section, and we located it without an issue. A quick search turned up nothing.

Olivia’s shoulders caved in as her lower lip trembled. I swear my fucking heart stuttered at the sight. Spinning on my

heel, I approached the lady behind the main counter with a stiff smile.

“The little girl lost her stuffed monkey. You find one?”

The librarian blinked and then nodded, pulling out a big box of miscellaneous clothing and toys. Located on top was a brown monkey with black eyes. I snatched him up and mumbled my thanks, heading back to the kids.

“Is this Mr. Jumbles?” I asked, handing him over.

Olivia squealed and reached for the monkey, holding him close to her chest. A few tears spilled down her cheeks before she rushed into my arms. “You found him. Thank you, J.D.”

“Like magic,” Rev added, relieved for his sister.

Awkwardly, I patted her back until she released me. Her little hand latched onto one of my own as she clutched Mr. Jumbles to her chest. “You’re the bestest too.”

What a little sweetie. I led the way out of the library and then followed Rev’s lead. He walked beside us and kept stealing glances my way, smirking at Liv’s hand as it held mine. I didn’t notice all the incredulous looks we’d been receiving until we were almost to the front door, and Rev pointed it out.

“They’re all staring at you.”

Shrugging, I didn’t give a fuck.

So what if I was six-foot-three and covered in ink, wearing a leather cut with my MC patches? The coup de grâce? I’d forgotten I was also wearing my red and black face paint.

The same shit Rael liked to use, only he was always walking around in black and white with a skeletal theme. I was decidedly more devilish in appearance.

Fuck, if that wasn’t funny as shit right now.

Chapter 16 Gina

“There’s a snowstorm coming in,” my boss announced as we watched the forecast appear on the television screen anchored above our heads. “We should close up. You need to get the kids before the roads are shit.”

“The roads are already shit,” I observed, laughing as I noticed the fat flakes sticking to the ground. The desert didn’t handle snow well. It was like sacrilege. Icy, slippery conditions would dominate Hwy 95 and all over Nevada. People would scramble for groceries and drive like idiots.

Penny shook her head in amusement. “Seriously. Get out of here.”

“Alright. You sure you don’t want help closing up?”

“Nope. Take care of your babies.”

“I will.”

“I’ll see you Tuesday. Take an extra day since you came in on short notice for me on your day off.”

“Thanks, Penny.” I waved goodbye and then headed toward the back of the restaurant to grab my purse. My hand brushed the key fob for the loaner I was borrowing until my car was fixed. The midnight blue Lexus was fully loaded and beautiful. I hit the remote starter and giggled at the thought that I’d have a warm seat and interior once I slid behind the wheel—such luxury.

I was spoiled.

Someone guessed precisely what car I’d enjoy, and I didn’t doubt that Sasha hooked me up. A genuine smile spread across my face when I opened the door and felt the cozy heat within. This beauty was waiting for me this morning when I got up and brewed a fresh pot of coffee. The prospect Toad was hunkered down in an old Chevy pickup when I glanced outside. The Royal Bastards MC looked after their own, and I felt humbled and grateful that I was among such loyal friends.

It was a bit early to pick up the kids from school, so I stopped by the house to change out of my work clothes and into something more comfortable. I was toasty warm as I parked and then headed inside, giddy with the knowledge that I had the rest of the day off from both jobs. In fact, I had the whole weekend. No dental office patients and no running ragged waitressing for the dinner rush.

Holiday music filled my thoughts as I hummed the lyrics to one of my favorites. *Santa Baby*. Or Santa Biker. Yum. Diablo sure filled that little fantasy.

Shrugging out of my coat, I draped it over a nearby chair along with my gloves and knit hat. The house felt cool inside as I shivered, wondering if the heat had gone out again. I'd had a lot of trouble recently with it.

My boot crunched something underneath as I began flipping on the lights. A gasp left my mouth as I stood in my living room, stunned by the destruction spread out in all directions.

The Christmas tree was on its side, toppled over cascading pine needles and shattered ornaments. Mangled garland was twisted in sparkling mounds and strewn across the living room floor. Presents were demolished. Brightly wrapped packages were shredded into pieces, along with ripped portions of cardboard. The few gifts I'd placed under the tree for the kids were utterly destroyed.

Every holiday decoration I'd scraped the money together to purchase lay in shambles. The stuffed Grinch that Olivia loved was ripped and torn apart, sliced open with the stuffing yanked out. Snowflakes and angels, handmade by the kids, were crumpled and discarded on the floor. Several were unsalvageable. Everything that represented Christmas for my children was mangled and broken.

Bits and pieces of their stockings that once hung with holiday cheer were now in strips on my hardwood floors. Tears pricked the back of my eyelids as I shook my head, unable to fathom this level of indescribable shock and sadness.

Who would do such a thing?

Sinking to my knees, I let out a wail of sorrow. How was I ever going to replace all that we'd lost? My paychecks would never cover all we'd lost in time for Christmas morning. Just thinking of the disappointment on my kids' faces was enough to wipe out every single ounce of holiday cheer I had left.

“You think I wouldn't find you?”

The cold, gruff voice slashed through my thoughts with a bitter strike. I turned my head, making eye contact with Jack as I stood slowly to my feet. My ex was dangerous, and I should have been far more cautious, considering the truck that almost ran me off the road on Hwy 95 a couple of weeks ago. I knew now that it was a warning. Jack returned, and he wasn't going to make this easy. No merry holiday for me.

“What do you want?” I didn't bother to ask why he destroyed the Christmas his children were supposed to enjoy. That was far too simple.

Jack was methodical and calculating. He did nothing without reason, and I knew anguish was only part of his plan. I didn't need his words to confirm he wanted my suffering.

“Saw that biker. You were awfully cozy in his truck the other night.”

Shit. “We're friends. Nothing else.” Not that it was any of his business. We weren't married. Never had been. When we were together, I made one good choice—declining Jack's proposal when he found out I was three months pregnant with Rev.

“Thought I made it clear a long time ago, Gina.”

Backing away, I took a few steps toward the door. He watched me with hawk-like awareness, curling his fists in a familiar show of dominance. “I don't want trouble, Jack.”

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I was tempted to answer. Maybe it was Sasha or Diablo. I could use a rescue right about now. Part of me wanted to defy Jack, but if I took my eyes off him for a single second, he would pounce.

“Don't do anything stupid, girl.”

My spine stiffened as I heard Jack's best friend, Spyder, and a fellow MC member, enter the living room. Spyder must have come in through the back door. He'd been so silent I never heard a sound until he was already inside. Spyder was vicious and cruel. He'd taken Jack under his wing many years ago, and I foolishly thought I'd managed to run far enough that they couldn't find me.

Remembering their club's name now with their cuts in front of me, I sighed. Hell Titans.

The Hell Titans didn't have many chapters. They were nothing like the Royal Bastards. Where Grim and his club favored loyalty, brotherhood, respect, and family, the Titans indulged in lawlessness and brutality. Violence. Cruelty.

They trafficked humans. Bought and sold people like they didn't matter. Beat them. Raped them. I saw enough to scar me for life.

And I'd experienced Jack's wrath on numerous occasions before I finally left him. Years of abuse had endured until I snuck away and moved across the U.S. to Nevada shortly after Olivia was born.

I left everyone and everything I knew to protect my children from a monster. Years had elapsed. I thought I'd outrun Jack for good.

It was reckless to let my guard down. Who knew how long he'd been waiting and watching, keeping tabs on every aspect of my life?

A jolt of terror wracked my body with a shiver.

Where were the kids? Did he have Rev and Olivia?

"I think she understands how this is gonna go down," Spyder announced, casually leaning against the wall that faced my front door. "Saves us a lot of bullshit."

Jack snickered. "Always was a little too smart for her own good. Changed their last names, but she couldn't hide forever."

"Nope," Spyder agreed, "and we get to have a little fun."

“I like the sound of that, Spyder.”

Panic slowly clawed its way to the surface as I sucked in a ragged breath, desperate to breathe through the sudden urge to vomit. I bolted toward the door as terror took over, and my brain ceased coherent function.

Strong arms wrapped around my waist and hauled my body upward as I kicked my legs and fought like hell to break Spyder’s hold. Both men outweighed me by at least fifty pounds. There wasn’t a hope or a prayer that I could stop them from whatever they planned. Bile rose in my throat, and I swallowed it down as Spyder chortled at my futile efforts.

Jack faced me as I spun in his direction and slammed to the ground on my knees. Pain sliced upward through my thighs, and I knew it was only the beginning of what I would endure.

Jack reached for his belt with a wicked smile that promised torment in ways I couldn’t fathom. “Take off your clothes, bitch.”

Spyder laughed. “I want her ass. You can fuck her pussy. We can take her at the same time.”

Jack snickered. “Like that night I let you have her? Not get enough.”

Spyder grabbed his crotch. “No. I’d like to take her back to my room for a while. Maybe keep her a few weeks.”

“Damn. She got to you, huh?”

“Bet her daughter will grow up with the same sweet pussy.”

Outraged, I let my fists fly, hitting both men as I struggled to my feet. I got my knee into Jack’s groin, feeling triumphant until Spyder hit me over the back of his head with something hard.

My body sprawled to the floor as I felt him tearing my clothes off. Cold air swept across my bottom as I got shoved to my stomach. My thighs were kicked apart as I screamed, clawing at the floor to escape.

“If you value your dick, don’t move a fucking muscle.”

Diablo’s voice was so deep and deadly quiet that I hardly registered the words as he spoke. Hope blossomed in my chest as I lifted my chin and caught his fierce expression.

“Back away with your hands up,” he ordered, booting the door wide open. “You touch her, you die.”

Chapter 17 Diablo

“**B**ack away with your hands up,” I ordered, kicking the front door of Gina’s place wide open, livid as I saw her on the ground, almost violated by two fucking Hell Titans. “You touch her, you die.”

My gaze slid to Gina, letting her know everything would be fine.

“You fucked with the wrong Bastard, assholes.”

My Reaper was pissed off and wanted blood. I knew something was off when I picked up the kids and dropped them off at the Crossroads, but I hadn’t been able to get ahold of Gina. Her cell kept ringing even after Rev called her twice with no answer. There was no way she’d ignore her son.

Behind me, spreading around the exterior of the house, were my brothers. Patriot, Rael, Bodie, Chaos, and Wraith had the place surrounded. Neither of these Titan fuckers was getting away, especially not after what they intended to do to Gina.

I arrived in time to hear what they planned and reacted so fast I hardly realized my Reaper had risen to the surface. He was ready to act, and nothing but a bloodbath would follow.

My lip lifted in a snarl when the one called Spyder decided to lunge in my direction. Wraith chuckled from across the room as he entered through the kitchen and bounded forward to intercept. Spyder never saw him coming. I strode forward with purpose, not bothering to give two shits about Spyder’s fate or the reaping that would follow.

Gina’s ex Jack reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her out of reach. A knife appeared as he yanked the blade free from his jacket and held it up below her chin against the soft, unblemished skin. “Move a single fucking step, and I’ll slit her throat.”

His threat enraged my Reaper with his smug look of satisfaction and his audacity. My body trembled with fury as I felt the last of my control slip. Until this moment, I kept my

ability a secret from the outside world, but that was no longer an option. Jack's twisted, cruel soul was ripe for reaping, and Lucifer had already marked him with the taint only a Reaper could know. My head tilted back, and I roared a heavy, rage-fueled cry.

Jack's eyes widened as my transformation from human to Reaper took place in his direct line of vision. I didn't have to look in the mirror to know the demonic entity within was now hovering over the surface of my skin like a devilish Halloween mask. His invincibility was now mine. I couldn't be harmed, and that meant I no longer cared about my own limitations.

All that mattered was Gina and getting her away from the monster who tormented her and the kids. The fucker who raped his son.

The fear that had been in her eyes a moment ago morphed into a combination of awe and disbelief. My Reaper flashed her a grin and then winked with an arrogant, albeit charming attempt to flirt.

"Your eyes," she gasped. "Red."

She blinked and then gasped as Jack's hand slipped, and the blade began to slice into the vulnerable flesh beneath her jaw. Her eyes clouded over as blood seeped from the wound and began trickling down the smooth column of her throat. The next few seconds were a blur. Chaos ensued as I yelled for Patriot and tackled Jack to the ground.

Gina collapsed as Patriot dived in her direction. If it weren't for our Reapers' quick reflexes and enhanced abilities, she would have hit the ground hard. Gina landed in Patriot's arms as he pressed a hand to her neck to stop the bleeding and then shouted at Bodie for help. Pulling my gaze from the woman I longed to make mine, I focused on my enemy.

Rael appeared next to me as I held Jack down with my weight. He fought and punched wildly at the air, hoping to inflict any injury that he was able, but he didn't stand a chance.

Snarling, I stared into his eyes and then focused on the internal function of his organs. His beating heart. Inflating and deflating lungs. Blood circulation. My Reaper latched onto his brain, specifically the cerebellum. I knew his movements and balance were controlled in that small portion. A wicked laugh tumbled from my lips as Jack began to groan, his facial features pinched in pain. A light sheen of sweat appeared on his forehead and upper lip. He jolted a few times but couldn't fight off the Reaper's control.

The longer I stared into his eyes, the more intense the reaction. His body began to convulse as his head thrashed from side to side. Spit bubbles formed at his lips as he opened his mouth, and a scream of pure agony ripped from the depths of his soul. He seized again, his fingers digging into the flesh of his legs as we held him down.

“The agony you feel is nothing. Eternal torment awaits you.”

Tired of playing with this dark, tainted soul, I stood as Rael released Jack. The supernatural scythe, always at my beck and call, appeared in my right hand. Disgust for this human and his numerous crimes left no room for pity. Swiping through the air, I slashed at his body as he cried out in a wail that would induce chills for most men who heard it.

No blood covered the ground. No flesh. All that remained were sooty, filmy fragments that hung with an oppressive, heavy aura in the air.

The ground rumbled beneath our feet and then cracked open, hot steam rising in uneven bursts of heat-filled clouds. Flames flickered from below and cast shadows on the walls around us. The sky outside darkened in response as I chanced a glance in Gina's direction.

“She's unconscious, but her injuries are minor. I think she's a bit shocked by recent events,” Patriot surmised. “I'll do a thorough inspection of her cut once we're back at the Crossroads.” He wrapped her lower body, covering the exposed areas.

Thankful, I nodded.

My Reaper, however, was a bit disappointed she missed all the fun.

Rael shrugged. “Easier to explain. All she saw was your Reaper before Jack went down.”

He was probably right, but it didn't decrease my concern for Gina. A popping sound followed by an eerie moaning pulled our attention back to the fissure growing in Gina's living room floor. A gust of wind billowed the spiritual residue of Jack's soul, gathering up the pieces as they spun. Faster and faster, they picked up speed and dropped lower to the ground. A loud clap of thunder cracked outside overhead before the dark filaments were sucked inside the gaping hole below like liquid draining through a funnel.

A few seconds later, there was a loud *pop*, and then the fissure snapped closed. All that remained was the humidity in the air and the slowly declining temperature. There was no sign of Spyder, and I realized he'd been reaped along with Jack. A fitting ending for both.

Rael snickered. “This shit never gets old.”

Bodie shook his head. “You always sat that.”

“Cause it's true,” Rael defended.

“We all get off reaping souls,” I added. “It's who we are. Lucifer chose us well.”

“Ain't that the fucking truth,” Patriot agreed.

“We need to return to the Crossroads. I want to be sure Gina is okay.”

Patriot nodded as I reached for the single mother who'd wiggled her way into my heart along with her two children, my Reaper staring down at her with a possessive, determined growl.

Gina may not fully realize it yet, but she would become my ol' lady. She already had my heart, and I intended for her to keep it.



“GINA,” I WHISPERED, squeezing her hand as her eyes fluttered. “Wake up, beautiful.”

We arrived at the Crossroads nearly half an hour ago.

I’d already checked on Rev and Liv, relieved to find Sasha babysitting as she rocked Maverick and watched over the precious lives in the room. The kids were unaware of the attack on their mother, and I didn’t want to worry them. Pizza boxes, soda cans, and popcorn were strewn all over the tables and chairs while they watched a marathon of holiday movies.

“Diablo?” Gina asked, blinking as she tried to sit up. “Where am I?”

“The Crossroads. Take it easy. You lost a little blood, and I brought you here to clean up before you join Rev and Olivia.”

Gina flinched with the memories of Jack and Spyder’s attack and the destruction they’d left her to find. Her hand lifted, and her fingers met the bandage on her throat. “How bad is it?”

“Not as bad as you think. It won’t take long to heal.”

She sighed, laying back against the pillows. “Jack and Spyder?”

“Dealt with. *Permanently.*”

If she was shocked by that admission, Gina didn’t voice it. “He destroyed everything,” she whispered, her voice faltering. “The tree. The decorations. The gifts. He ruined Christmas for Rev and Liv like the Grinch.” Her head lifted, and tears shimmered in her pretty blue eyes. “They won’t have anything under the tree. Or even a tree at all.”

“You’re wrong about that,” I replied gently.

She didn't know it yet, but I'd taken care of the mess. By the time the kids returned home tomorrow after their sleepover, Santa would have delivered a holiday miracle. One that Gina and her children desperately needed.

"I don't have any money to replace their Christmas. I don't —"

"Gina," I interrupted, but she kept talking.

"There won't be anything. They'll be so heartbroken."

"Gina, baby."

Her watery gaze finally met mine.

"It's taken care of. I promise."

She swallowed hard, and a single tear slid down her cheek. "I don't understand."

"Santa is bringing Christmas."

"Diablo, I don't—"

"It's already done, sweetheart."

"Sweetheart?"

"Yeah, honey." I sat down on the edge of my bed, where I'd brought her as soon as I walked inside the Crossroads. She wasn't going anywhere but this room from now on. My bed. My ol' lady. She just had to say yes.

"Diablo?" Her voice was laced with vulnerability and need that I wanted to cure.

My hand reached for hers, and I intertwined our fingers. "I know it's been a rough couple of days, but you aren't alone, Gina. Let's give this relationship between us a chance. I'm not gonna lie and say I don't want you."

"And my kids?"

"Always under my protection. That never changes, no matter what occurs between us. You have my word."

"But can you handle what that means? Having two young children competing for your attention?"

“You bet, baby. Rev and Olivia are badass. Not gonna be an issue since you’re gonna be my ol’ lady.”

She mulled that over and then offered a sweet, simple smile. “You free for dinner tomorrow?”

“Hell yeah, my sweet mama.”

Chapter 18 Diablo

“Holy shit,” Rev exclaimed, eyes wide as he spun in a circle. He rushed to the center of the living room, falling to his knees as he watched the Christmas train circling beneath the enormous tree I’d hauled in and decorated with a few of my brothers. A little toot left the engine, and he grinned. “I always wanted one of these!”

Olivia squealed, running across the room to the new dollhouse Gina spent most of the day decorating while the kids stayed with Bodie and Sasha. The other had been smashed, all the dolls and furniture broken. This house was more of a mansion with three stories and plenty of rooms. I even bought a little van for the family, which consisted of a mom, dad, little girl, little boy, and teenage brother.

And yes, also the damn gray cat.

“Oh, wow!”

Bright eyes glistening with unshed tears met mine. “Did you do this for me?”

Nodding, I pointed at her mother. “Both of us.”

Olivia tackled her mother, nearly knocking them both to the ground. “I love you, mama.”

“Love you, baby. Always.”

The happiness on my woman’s face filled my heart with warmth. When I told her I wanted to replace everything they lost, she cried with relief and gratitude. The smiles beaming on Rev and Olivia’s faces made it worth every dime I spent.

Olivia smiled up at me, her chin wobbling. “D-Dee,” she stuttered.

I opened my mouth to reply, but a single tear slid down one of her cheeks, rendering me speechless.

“Dio,” she corrected.

Dio. The nickname Thunder gave me when he couldn’t say my entire name. At four, he was already far more intuitive and

intelligent than most kids his age. Maybe it was the environment he grew up in or how Anita raised him, but Thunder processed life differently. He saw the magic in the little things, and he understood that living life in the light meant crossing paths with darkness.

Olivia, in her own way, reminded me of Thunder. Her sweetness. Her self-awareness at a young age.

Gina brushed the tears from Olivia's cheeks, kissing her forehead. "You okay, baby?"

"Yes! I have my family back!"

She ran to the dollhouse, dropping to her knees to place the family members in different spots. Mom in the kitchen. Kids in their rooms. Dad on the front porch.

Rev chuckled. "Why is the dad on the porch?"

"To protect the house," she replied, picking up the teen brother. "And he helps too."

Such insight. She saw the truth even when others dismissed her words. I told Anita the day we met that I thought kids should be listened to more, that they were brilliant, and often saw things adults missed. Olivia's perception of the world seemed as unique as Thunder's.

"That one is extra." Rev pointed to the teen doll. "There're too many family members to be ours," he pointed out, shoving a sugar cookie into his mouth from a nearby plate.

"No, it's right," Olivia argued.

He rolled his eyes.

"Really. It's Mama, Dio, you, me, and Thunder."

Gina's eyes widened. "Baby, how do you know Thunder?"

"He visits me sometimes." Her little chin lifted proudly. "Thunder knows things like Dio and me." She shrugged. "He's gonna be here for Christmas tomorrow."

I kept blinking, processing what she had just said. "Thunder?"

Olivia set down her dolls, spinning in a circle with a laugh before she hugged me around the waist. “Yes. He’s so happy. His eyes sparkle in my dreams.”

My hand rose, clutching my chest. “Thunder.”

“I’m allowed to call you Dio too. Just us two. Not Rev.” She stuck her tongue out at him. “I love you, Dio. You’re better than any Santa because you don’t visit just once a year. We get to see you all the time.”

The lump that formed in my throat felt too tight to swallow. “You, your brother, my boy Thunder, and your mama. You’re everything to me.”

“I know.” She smiled, dropping her arms as she snatched a cookie from Rev’s hands.

In fairness, he’d swiped the last three from the plate.

“Thunder said you’d say that.”

Full circle. That was what this moment meant. I’d come almost all the way around from that fateful day when Ani walked into my tattoo shop holding the hand of the boy who would become my son. In every way. We didn’t share blood, but we shared something much stronger.

Thunder would always be a part of me. His solidified a place in my heart many years ago when I was a young man and a new member of the RBMC. He brought light, love, and joy into the life of a young biker who felt consumed by darkness.

I missed him so deeply that I rubbed my chest, trying to brush off the ache.

“Why don’t we watch a movie?” I asked.

Olivia jumped up and down. “The Grinch!”

Rev shook his head at his sister. “Again?”

“Yes!”

Caught up in her excitement, we gathered on the new sofa, snuggling on the furniture while Gina plated more cookies and I started the movie.

As I surrounded them with my arms, I felt contentment. Peace. True joy.

And tomorrow, when Thunder arrived, I'd feel complete.



“THEY’RE FINALLY ASLEEP,” Gina announced, leaning against the wall in the living room where Christmas had been ruined by a worthless piece of shit only twenty-four hours earlier. The entire place had been transformed and was decorated as shiny and pretty as a new penny.

“That’s good. Both of them were exhausted,” I murmured as I rose and sauntered my way across the room, stopping only a few inches away in front of her.

“Ruthless Bastard. Protective Bastard. Sneaky Bastard. Red eyes Bastard.” Gina shook her head lightly and gestured to the room. “You really are a complicated man, Diablo. I don’t know what to say about such generosity or all you’ve done for us.”

“I told you I was,” I teased, loving the look that entered her eyes—an intriguing cocktail of adoration, gratitude, and desire.

“Thank you for doing all of this. There aren’t enough words to describe how much this means to me.”

I was just enough of an asshole to take advantage of her words. “Then show me with a kiss.” Pointing above our heads, I grinned stupidly at the mistletoe hanging between us.

Her full, sensual lips twitched with humor before I closed the distance that remained and placed one hand on the wall beside her head. The other lifted as my knuckles brushed the smooth, silky skin of her cheek.

“You’re goddamn gorgeous, babe.”

“You say that to all the girls?”

“Nope. Just the one I’m plannin’ to make mine.”

A flush of pleasure stained her cheeks pink. “Kiss me, Diablo, if you dare, but you better be ready,” she warned.

“Oh?” I asked, my gaze locked on her mouth.

“I’m not going to be able to stop with just a kiss. I want your hands on my body. Your lips on my skin. I need you inside me and to feel this connection between us so deep inside it’s anchored in my soul.”

My nostrils flared as my eyes snapped up to hers, and I caught the lust, affection, and deeply rooted need she didn’t try to hide. “Fuck, baby. I want to hear that again.”

“Which part?” she asked huskily. “That I want you? That I need to come on your cock? Or that I want you in my life because you’re already finding a home in my heart?”

“All of it. I’m a greedy bastard too.”

My head lowered, and I pressed my lips to hers. It wasn’t a rough kiss at all, but there wasn’t a doubt I was claiming Gina for my own. My mouth molded to hers and seared my brain with a longing that I didn’t realize I’d been trying to hide.

Her lips parted, and my tongue plunged inside, delving into the sweetness of her mouth. Passion exploded between us as I groaned, sliding my hands around her waist and then over the luscious, round globes of her ass.

In one swift motion, I lifted Gina, and her legs wrapped around my waist. We walked down the hall to her bedroom, clinging to one another as I kept nibbling on her lips.

Her back met the mattress after I kicked the door shut with a click. We were both far too impatient to bother seducing one another. Our clothing hit the floor fast as she scooted up farther on the bed, and her legs opened wide to receive me. Fuck, if that wasn’t the sexiest thing I’d ever seen.

“You sure you want this?” I checked, barely restraining my Reaper. He wanted to fuck her hard and prove no man could ever please her as well as I could.

“I’m wet and aching. Don’t drag this out.”

“Damn, woman. You just made my dick throb.”

“Make me come, Diablo,” she begged.

There was no need to ask twice.

I settled between those divine thighs, and she welcomed me home as I lined up my dick and pushed inside her. That sweet, tight, heavenly pussy gripped my cock, and I was a goner. A guttural moan escaped my lips as I withdrew slowly and then rammed back in. Her nails dug into my arms as her head tilted back, and she made the sexiest noises of approval as I hammered into her without reprieve.

“Oh, shit,” Gina cursed with a gasp, trying to keep her cries at bay. The pleasure colored her skin a rosy pink, and my Reaper fucking devoured the sight. Perky, perfectly round tits bounced up and down as I lowered my head and sucked one of her nipples into my mouth. My tongue teased the nub into a tight little point as she wriggled beneath me and then matched my thrusts with the wild undulation of her hips.

“You’re gonna be the death of me, woman.”

“But you’ll die one extremely satisfied and happy man,” she moaned.

Fuck. My fingers dug into her hips as I braced one hand on the mattress, driving into her sweet channel repeatedly. Her walls clenched around my dick as I released her nipple and then sucked on a patch of soft skin above her breast. Something primal unleashed, and I marked her repeatedly, leaving hickeys all over her chest and one on her neck as I drove into the woman claiming me with every breathy sigh and flutter of her eyelids. The sound of her wetness mixed with the slapping of my balls filled the room.

“Diablo,” she cried out, so damn close to her orgasm that I nearly spilled my load.

“Give it to me, Gina. Fucking come all over me,” I ordered. “Soak these sheets.”

I pressed down on her clit as she jolted in my arms, screaming my name as I held her close, refusing to let her dislodge me with all the wild bucking that followed. My

thrusts grew erratic, and I hammered into her as she gushed, growling with approval as heat fired up and down my spine. Intense pleasure burst through, and I exploded inside my woman with several deep, satisfying thrusts before my lips found her sexy little mouth.

Our kiss grew languid, our tongues tangling together as the sweat clung to our bodies. She stayed wrapped up in my arms, our breaths still shallow and fast. I could feel her heart beating rapidly against my skin as I tightened my grip.

“You’re a lot more than I ever could have wished for Christmas,” she murmured lazily, tracing the lines of dark ink across my upper body. “I didn’t realize I got exactly what present I wanted until now.”

“And that is?”

“You, Diablo. My Santa biker and protective Bastard.”

“Damn, sweetheart. You’re goddamn perfect.”

“Merry Christmas.”

“With you and the kids, I think it’s gonna be badass.”

As the night wore on, I kept Gina between the sheets, enjoying every single orgasm I coaxed from her that night. This was only the beginning of our story. A holiday mess that became a miracle.

I couldn’t be fucking happier. Me, Diablo, a wicked Reaper, and a ruthless biker, found the perfect gift all wrapped up in a shiny package with a red bow. Gina and her kids gave me something I’d never had growing up. Something I almost had once with Ani and Thunder but lost. A family.

And becoming Santa was the best present of all.



“HE’S HERE,” GINA EXCLAIMED excitedly, pushing the curtain aside in the living room to check the driveway. She spun around, her blue eyes sparkling with infectious joy.

My heart felt full, touched by her reaction. That she would accept and love Thunder meant everything to me.

I flung open the door, a wide grin plastered on my face.
“My boy!”

“Dio!”

He ran up the steps, crashing into me as I held him against my chest, laughing and crying as he squeezed me back. Having him here felt too good to be true.

“Missed you, my dude.”

“Missed you, too.”

When we finally let go of one another, the introductions began.

“Welcome,” I finally managed to say, so thrilled to have all my family together in one place—all the people I loved.

Yes. Loved. Gina. Rev. Olivia. I loved them too.

“It’s freezing out here! Come on in,” Gina coaxed, ushering Rya inside.

Thunder smiled. We both felt the enormity of the moment.

“Merry Christmas, Dad.”

“Merry Christmas, son.”

And it was—the best merry Christmas of all.

Thank you for reading!



If you enjoyed the beginning of Diablo and Gina's story,
please leave a review.

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Watch for more Diablo in *Diablo's Inferno*, anticipated release
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receive updates.

THANK YOU

First, I want to thank one of my favorite authors, India R. Adams. In the Royal Bastards MC world, we collaborate and cross over characters often. When the opportunity arose to combine our worlds, I jumped at it. I'm honored to share Dio. He's special and precious to me.

Thank you, India.

To my ARC team and loyal followers who tirelessly promote, read, and review my books, I couldn't do this without you. I appreciate you all so much more than I could ever express with words. Thank you for believing in me.

To my readers, every message, share, encouraging word, comment, bit of excitement, and every review keep me going. You fill my world with love and support, encouragement, and light. You hungrily devour every book I write, and I love your unwavering dedication. Thank you for staying by my side.

To my husband and kids, thank you for giving up so much to allow me to do what I love. You support me, love me, and travel this journey with me. You're all my rainbows.



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TONOPAH, NV CHAPTER

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VP/Founder – Mammoth

SGT at Arms – Azrael, Angel of Death “Rael”

Enforcer/Founder – Exorcist

Enforcer – Jigsaw

Secretary – Wraith

Treasurer – Hannibal

Road Captain – Patriot

Tail Gunner – Daniel “Chaos”

Founder – Papa

Member – Bodie

Member/Cleaner – Diablo

Member/Tech – Xenon

Member – Shadow

Member – Toad

Prospect – Spook



THE OL' LADIES

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Sasha

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~~Cindi~~

Skyla

Gina



One Hell of a ride!

Royal Bastards MC Facebook Group -
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SNEAK PEEK Hell on wheels

“Were you having another nightmare?”

“W” Sighing, I ran a hand through my hair and squinted, staring at the therapist, who enjoyed asking personal questions and watching me squirm. I bet she was one of those kids who studied ants under a microscope to see if the direct sunlight would have any impact or baited worms on a hook only to dangle the little suckers and wait patiently for the fish to bite.

“Not like I used to,” I finally admitted with a grunt.

Nightmares were the least of my problems. It was my fuckin’ injuries that pissed me off more than anything. The damn VA Medical Center thought it was necessary to throw in sessions with a shrink because of what I went through overseas. I could have saved them a lot of money, time, and effort. It wasn’t like I was gonna do something stupid. I wasn’t into self-torture. I just had nightmares about the bombs and losing my buddies. Same shit a lot of guys went through. I wasn’t the only one.

A lot of us were fucked-up.

I got over it. Moved on. The past was the past.

“And your vision?”

“Good days and bad days.” Why did it matter? She always asked the same questions like the answers were gonna miraculously change.

“The bad days? Tell me about those.”

We had the same discussion last week. Didn’t she keep notes?

“Flashes of light. Blurred vision. Sometimes I see particles and floaters.”

She murmured a few words. Nodding her head, she wrote in her notebook for a few minutes. “What’s today, Flint?”

“A good day,” I acknowledged.

“That’s what I thought.” A smile lifted the corner of her ruby lips. “Kane isn’t here.”

Nope. My service dog Kane was the best thing that happened since I left the Corps. I’d been anxious and jumpy after returning to the U.S. The explosions and my injuries had taken a toll. I’d grown depressed, and that shit pissed me off until I was placed on the list and Kane was issued as my companion.

“He’s fiercely protective. Didn’t like being left behind this morning.”

She laughed lightly. One of those laughs that wasn’t forced but still too professional to be genuine. “He’s good for you. I can see it. You’re far less withdrawn than when we first met.”

She was right. I didn’t talk much the first few weeks. Didn’t have anything to say. What was the point? My brothers that I had known since basic training died just feet from where I stood, and I couldn’t prevent it.

Did I have survivor’s guilt?

Fuck yeah. I hated losing men I considered family. Who wouldn’t? I still didn’t need a shrink to analyze everything I said and did to make sure I wasn’t a danger to myself or others.

“Maybe I am, doc,” I agreed.

“You can call me Joan.” Her voice gentled, and I knew what she was saying without pointing it out.

I never called her by her real name. Didn’t feel comfortable addressing anyone with familiarity. Maybe that was foolish, but I wasn’t growing close enough to another soul only to lose them at some point in the future. My dog? Sure. Kane was my best friend.

People? I’d rather not.

“When’s your next appointment?”

“Three days.”

“I’m optimistic you’ll hear something favorable.”

Favorable? Right.

Lady didn’t have a fuckin’ clue. She meant well, but all her knowledge came from books and not real-world experience. She’d never fought for her country and nearly died. Or watched a friend’s chest explode in front of you from the force of a dozen bullets at the same time.

“Yeah,” I replied, my snark evident.

“I know you don’t like to let hope slip in only to be disappointed again, so I’ll hope for you.”

Hope was a delicate thing. A small flame that could quickly grow without warning, and if you weren’t careful, it would erupt into a towering inferno. Then you were stuck with all that heat and burning blaze. When it was doused with water faster than you could blink, it hurt like a motherfucker.

I couldn’t afford to think that way.

My vision blurred slightly, and then tried to refocus. Little flashes of light blasted off in my peripheral, and I ignored it, not wanting to reveal that I was having any problems. I’d fought hard to be able to keep my driver’s license. No way was I losing my Harley now.

That bike was the only thing that kept me going besides Kane. I couldn’t live without either one of them.

“Detached retina injuries take time to heal, Flint. You’ve been through a lot in the last few months. It’s still raw, especially all the loss you suffered. Emotionally and physically. I’d like you to tell me about the journal you’re keeping by your bedside. Have you been writing in it?”

Shit. I didn’t use the damn thing, and she knew it.

“Not so much.”

“Why?”

“I haven’t had as many nightmares lately.” The lie was easy to tell, and I didn’t care if she knew it.

“I see.” Joan folded her hands primly in her lap. “You know you’re not fooling anyone, right? I’m not here to judge you, Flint. You’ve got to be ready and willing to make changes for the nightmares and pain to get better.”

“I know,” I admitted.

She glanced at the clock on the wall. “I think that ends our session for this week.”

Nodding, I stood, careful to keep my balance and stop squinting.

“You sure you’re okay to drive?”

“I ride, not drive. My Harley has never failed me.” Neither had my quick reflexes or gut instincts. You were born with them, or you weren’t. I guess I could say I was lucky enough to have them both.

She tilted her head to the side, studying me as if I was an anomaly. “Alright then. See you next week, Flint.”

“Sure,” I drawled, heading for the door as fast as I could. Once I was out of her office, I began to relax. My shoulders eased back a little, and I let out a deep breath. Those appointments always made me feel anxious and tense. I never knew what she would ask or what memory would pop up. In the early weeks, I brought Kane with me to almost every session. He was the only thing that brought comfort and prevented the episodes I used to have.

Didn’t like to think about that now. Memories weren’t always my friend.

The Nevada skyline was bright and clear as I exited the Medical Center. Cerulean blue stretched as far as I could imagine without hardly a cloud in the Las Vegas sky. I missed the days when I could see the detail, but I wasn’t about to feel sorry for myself. Years as a Marine brought discipline and the hard acceptance that life often didn’t work out the way you expected.

I wasn’t lying when I told the shrink that it was a good sight day. Particles and floaters were almost nonexistent, and the blur wasn’t bad. Light still bothered my eyes, so I always

wore sunglasses, even indoors. The only exception was night. As long as I was home, I didn't bother.

Rumbling down the busy road, I was distracted by my thoughts and the visit to the VA. It wasn't long before I was in my neighborhood and a few streets from my house. My bike rolled to a stop at the nearest intersection as I balanced her out, sitting comfortably in the saddle as I waited for the light to change. I lifted my head, scanning the area before turning right.

As I rounded the corner, I caught sight of a man and a young woman arguing. She had her hands in the air, animatedly waving them around in frustration. I was all set to keep riding when he lifted a hand and cracked her hard across the face. The girl crumpled to the ground as I stopped, dropping the kickstand and hopping off my bike.

There were two things I didn't condone. Bullies were one. Men who hurt women were another.

This motherfucker was about to learn a hard lesson.



Hell on Wheels, Royal Bastards MC releases October 2023!
Click here: [Hell on Wheels](#)

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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