

IRONCLAD DEVOTION

A MYTHOS LEGACY
NOVEL

JAMI GOLD



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Chapter One



HEAT IGNITED UNDER KIRA'S SKIN, SINGEING A PATH TOWARD her wrists. She shoved the pain into a back corner of her mind and resisted pulling back her long sleeves or gloves to check the damage. The answer was always the same.

The dark tattoo-like streaks weaving across her body were spreading. *Effing A.* Soon, the tribal marks growing like vines would reach their destination, and then she'd be out of time.

Despite the burning stings, no twitches of agony broke through her controlled expression, the better to avoid questions. Kira instead focused on Emily beside her, the little girl's fear detectable even in the dim light inside the local biker haven, Moose's Bar and Grill.

Ideas for how to reassure the child piled high in Kira's mind and then stalled. How had she ever thought she could manage this? Her history gave her insights into how best to help the girl, but mothering instincts fell far outside her capabilities.

Kids were the purest source on Earth of joy, happiness, and all those other feel-good emotions, so her bond with Emily had been a guilt-free conduit to the energy she needed to survive. But now she was failing them both, and the negative surge of Emily's worry cut deep. Fatally deep.

She stroked one of the girl's dark-haired pigtails and gave Renee Cushman a warning glare across the table. "What do you

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mean, the adoption process is on hold?”

Emily’s case manager pursed her lips. “Maybe we should speak privately.”

The girl’s determination to plead her case flared across their connection, and Kira nestled Emily under her arm. “I promised I wouldn’t do anything behind her back.” The child had been lied to enough already.

Renee tilted her head, unable to disagree. “The Phoenix police have been going through everything from the crime scene, looking for evidence to link Tito to the...” Her gaze darted to Emily and back. “Murder.”

“*Evidence?* How much more do they need? An arrest record two miles long for drugs, domestic violence, and child abuse isn’t enough?”

Oh yeah, the girl’s dearly-departed mom sure had known how to pick ’em. The one good thing she’d ever done was involve the leather-clad, intimidating members of Bikers Against Child Abuse to help Emily. Crissy Braxton might still be alive if she hadn’t gone back to her abuser and kicked Kira and the rest of B.A.C.A. out of the picture. She might still be alive if she hadn’t done a lot of things.

Renee opened a file folder. “Tito has the arrest record, but the previous charges against him haven’t stuck, so the police are being extra thorough this time.” She shuffled pages on the table. “Anyway, they found a note recanting the information Crissy reported on Emily’s birth certificate.”

Kira’s heart sunk so low it fought for space with her stomach. “A note.”

“Crissy gave a name. A man’s name. Claimed he’s Emily’s father.”

Emily trembled against Kira’s side, and pain flared along Kira’s forearms again. Damn it.

A beefy palm slapped the bar behind her. “You have *got* to be shi—”

“Moose,” Kira snapped a warning, recognizing the protective—and profane—tirade building in her former foster father’s mood. She couldn’t have him jeopardizing her adoption chances even more.

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“—kidding me. She can’t be punted off to someone she’s never met.”

Moose was the only man Emily *didn’t* fear, and that was only because he’d been her primary B.A.C.A. contact along with Kira. The rest of the men in B.A.C.A. were tolerated—but never trusted. Trust was in short supply after Emily had spent her six brief years in the company of Crissy’s boyfriends, who could all compete for *Worst Male Specimen of the Year*.

“Of course we wouldn’t just hand her over. We’ll first verify the claim and see if this guy even wants to be involved. But if he does...” Renee sighed. “If he does, then he’d have supervised visitation rights while we complete the background checks and home study certifications. Assuming all that goes well, the judge would award custody.”

Kira latched onto each *if*. Maybe he wasn’t really the father. Maybe he wouldn’t want to be a single dad. Maybe he wouldn’t pass the background checks. This guy was probably just like all of Crissy’s other boyfriends, right?

No need to change her plans for how to survive. And more importantly, no need for Emily to worry about something that wasn’t going to happen. Kira wouldn’t *let* it happen.

“So this is just a delay, not a rejection.”

“Prin...” Renee, using the only name humans knew for Kira, gave her a patient look. “We always knew this adoption would be a long shot. *I* know about all the great work you’ve done with kids through B.A.C.A., but any judge would look at you...” She paused meaningfully and waved, indicating the tattoo-like markings visible on Kira’s exposed skin at her neck and temples, the ever-present leather gloves and biker attire, and the wild colors of Kira’s hair, currently hot pink with orange tips. “And worry about your parenting skills.”

Moose’s heavy boots thumped from behind the bar. “That’s discrimination, pure and simple. We’re all licensed for the foster care system, so the state thinks we’re good enough for *that*. Besides, Prin is a better person than ninety-nine percent of the people out there. She’d give her right arm for this kid.”

“I know that, but the court could find an excuse if they wanted to. Concern for Emily living in a trailer behind a bar—a *motorcycle*

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bar. Something.”

“Don’t give me that crap.” Moose crossed his arms. “There’s no state law against kids being *in* a bar, much less living near one.”

Renee’s shoulders lifted in a shrug. “Regardless, if all the other conditions are met, short of Emily’s court-appointed guardian convincing a judge that this guy shouldn’t get her because of issues discovered during the investigation, a biological parent has priority.”

They’d escaped Tito’s obscene request for custody unscathed because of the abuse charges, and given Crissy’s taste in men, this was sure to be the same. No problem. “And I’m her court-appointed guardian, right?”

“Yes, we established emergency guardianship for you when we first started the adoption process.” Renee clicked the end of her pen several times. “But so help me, Prin, if I think you’re not acting in Emily’s best interest, I’ll go to the judge myself and have it revoked.”

“Of course.” No matter how much Kira wanted to keep Emily close for survival reasons, she wouldn’t ignore what was best for the girl.

She looked down, meeting her foster daughter’s dark eyes. With Emily’s faith in her renewed, the drain on her energy ceased. Too bad the growth of her magical power lines couldn’t be reversed.

If only that problem didn’t matter. If only she could find a way to stay here for Emily’s sake, even after the magical circuitry tying Kira to her faerie homeland completed its connections—and yanked her back. If only Lirdeag wasn’t there, waiting to capture her.

She squeezed the girl and forced a smile. “Emily’s happiness is the most important thing.”

And there was no way Emily would ever be happy with a strange man.



THE RED GLOWING METAL CURVED IN A PERFECT SPIRAL UNDER ZAC’S precise strikes. Well, *almost* perfect. The scroll leaned a bit to one side, but with a couple of hammer blows against the anvil, he

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forced the work piece into a flat plane. Satisfied, he cut the swirl off the iron rod in preparation for the next step. If only life in general could match the plans in his head so easily.

A bright light flashed above him, signaling an incoming call on his business line. He glanced at his work piece lying on the dirt floor of his shop. The next step could wait.

He stripped off his gloves, plucked out his earplugs, and wiped his face with the closest towel. Nothing like working around a nearly two-thousand-degree fire in the Arizona desert. And the temps would rise another twenty degrees by next month as the full heat of summer cranked up the outdoor blast furnace. Pity the poor air conditioner.

Cool air met him in the doorway of his front office, and he picked up the phone. "Thanks for calling Chased by Fire. This is Zac."

"Zachary Chase?"

"Yes, ma'am. How can I help you?" He stubbed his boot against the door to the shop, closing it and keeping the heat of the forge away from the blessed air-conditioning. The air register blew directly on him, and it still wasn't enough.

"My name is Renee Cushman, and I'm with the Arizona DCS. Do you have a minute?"

DCS? Curiosity and his desk chair beckoned. Artistic blacksmithing wasn't a sitting-down kind of job, and kicking up his boots for a minute sounded good.

"Sure." He removed the protective leather apron shielding his clothes from burns and unbuttoned his shirt, letting the A/C reach his chest.

"Did you know a Crissy Braxton?"

"Crissy?" He sat down hard in the chair, his muscles tight under his skin. "Yeah, why?" Then the verb tense the woman had used filtered into his thoughts. "Wait, *did*? Is she..." He winced. Maybe he'd heard wrong and was jumping to conclusions, but he wanted to know for long-overdue closure's sake. "Is she dead?"

"Yes, I'm sorry to be the one to tell you. She was murdered a couple of months ago."

"Murdered?" Bloody hell. What could have led to *that*?

"Don't worry, you're not a suspect or anything, but may I ask

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you to be more specific about your relationship with Crissy?”

This call was making less and less sense. “Uh, I haven’t seen or talked to Crissy in years, but we lived together for a while.” He did the math in his head. It had been right before he’d left on his six-month trip to England for his journeyman training. “About six and a half years ago.”

“Is it possible she was pregnant when your relationship ended?”

Chills rippled across his skin. The implications of the woman’s question stampeded around his gut. A million thoughts followed, tangling between his heart and his brain. His mouth broke free of the impasse, words bursting out without stopping at his brain filter for approval.

“First of all, the relationship didn’t end with the usual breakup. She left me when I was out of the country on a work trip. I came home, and she was just gone. No note. No forwarding address. No answer on her cell. Gone. Secondly...” He took a deep breath, gained control over his mouth, and prepared for the news. “I used protection every time, but yes, ma’am, there’s always a chance.”

“In their investigations into the murder, the police found a note written by Crissy. She names you as Emily Braxton’s father.”

Emily. A daughter. His pulse pounded in his ears, and everything else slipped away.

The universe seemed to tilt, as though shifting its rotation. Dizzy, he clenched the arm of his chair, but nothing could bring the spinning to a halt.

The woman’s voice cut through the haze.

“What?” His question came out as a croak, his throat dry and constricted.

“I said, if Crissy’s note is accurate, I need to know if you’d like to be involved in Emily’s life.”

“Of course I would.” Despite his lack of parental role models, he’d figure out fatherhood. Somehow.

The woman’s sigh carried over the telephone speaker. “Due to Crissy’s death, we can’t complete the usual affidavits and forms, so we can’t legally establish paternity until a DNA test confirms the relationship.”

“What’s the quickest way to get that done?” After everything

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that had happened with his own mother, he couldn't let this girl think she was alone.

Five minutes later, Ms. Cushman had set up an appointment for him at a paternity testing office down in Phoenix. In forty-eight hours, the courts would have their answer, and then he'd be able to see his daughter.

He hung up the phone and drummed his fingers on the desk. It would be a long forty-eight hours.

Instead of giving in to the fervor pulsing through his body, urging him to do something about the situation—this very minute—he sat in his office long after the call had ended. His life had completely turned upside-down, and yet he wasn't freaking out. Maybe the opportunity to avoid his parents' mistakes was giving him access to a secret source of calm.

Rather than feeling panic, regret ate away at his lungs, stealing his ability to breathe without guilt. He'd already missed out on six years with his daughter. All because Crissy had ditched him.

He'd thought her betrayal of leaving him was bad. And hell, it *had* been bad. He hadn't been that blindsided since the cops tackled him in front of his old office and slapped him in handcuffs for his father's business fraud.

But this betrayal hurt on a whole different level. She'd left him—while *pregnant*—and then shut him out of his daughter's life. Why the hell had Crissy done that?

Whatever the reason, he *would* be there for his daughter now.

Chapter Two



KIRA SLAMMED THE CELL PHONE ONTO THE BAR AND PICKED UP a nearby beer bottle. Moose grabbed the bottle's neck before she could smash it against the phone's touchscreen.

His eyebrow waggled. "Mind if I return this beer to the nice man who ordered it?"

She released her grip on the glass and let him set the bottle in front of a tourist. Judging by the guy's wide grin, he'd gotten exactly the kind of show he'd hoped to have for his visit to a biker bar.

Pansy ass.

A tug on her jeans brought her back to the trouble at hand. Emily looked up at her, the worry in her expression already sending tingles of heat to Kira's wrists. "Was that Miss Renee? What did she say?"

Kira tilted her head back and muttered under her breath, "Oh *fuck* me."

She was so dead. For a moment, the temptation to lie sat on her tongue. But the truth would be evident soon enough, and risking Emily's trust wasn't worth one night of peace.

"Remember that test I told you about when we went down to Phoenix?"

"When they put that stick in my mouth?"

"That's the one. That man Miss Renee mentioned last time took

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the test too. She just got the results back.” She crouched down and met Emily’s eyes. “He is your father.”

“I don’t want to go with him!”

Fire blazed along the lines under Kira’s skin, matching the vehemence of Emily’s negative emotions. Kira sagged against the back wall, unable to hide the effect of the energy drain. How could she recover? If this kept up, the Mythos plane might suck her back any second for a forced recharge.

“I know, Fairy.” She purposely used Emily’s road name, the one given to her when she became a member of the B.A.C.A. family. The one they used when they promised to keep her safe from her abuser. “But tomorrow...”

She glanced up at Moose, who was hovering close, and gave him a *pay attention* look. Then she returned her gaze to Emily.

“Tomorrow, he wants to meet you. Just *meet* you. You’ll still be coming home with me. Moose is going to call the family tonight, and we’re all going to the meeting with you. This guy’s going to know right from the start that we’re your family, and that if he messes with you, he’s messing with all of us.”

“Like an initiation?” Emily’s six-year-old tongue struggled with the big word.

Kira managed a smile. “Well, he won’t get the cool vest or bandanna. But yes, we’ll show him what he has to deal with if he wants to know you.”

“Will Rocky be there? And Bear? And Tiny? And Tin Man?” Emily’s list of all the biggest and most intimidating men of the B.A.C.A. chapter made her priorities clear.

Moose bent over, letting his “wild man” beard tickle Emily’s face. “I’ll call every family member, Fairy. You won’t be alone.”

“You’ll *never* be alone.” Kira forced herself away from the wall and leaned forward on one knee, getting closer to the source of her energy drain. “This doesn’t change the fact that we’re family.”

Emily planted her hands on her hips. “My mom made promises too. But she kept using, and she let him hurt me again. She lied.”

Each observation was an accusation stabbing Kira with Emily’s distrust. And with each one, the tattoo-like marks under her skin slithered, burning, closer to the power nexus on her palms.

Even if she found a way to avoid returning to her homeland for

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the necessary energy charge when the circuit completed, the maturation of her magical connections would allow Lirdeag to track her energy—and her. She'd gone into hiding for a reason. She could empathize with Emily's situation far more than the little girl could guess.

"I know. I'm sorry your mom couldn't keep her promises. But have *I* ever broken a promise to you?"

Emily sighed dramatically. "No. 'Cept the time my mom made you break it."

Sometimes, her attitude was more like a teenager than a six year old. Just more evidence of how much she'd already survived in her young life.

"Exactly my point." Kira opened her arms and hoped the worst was over. "Now come on."

Emily let Kira drag her into a hug. They collapsed into a huddle on the floor. Emily giggled at the near-tackle. At least Kira could protect her ward from *something*—awareness of her complete exhaustion if nothing else.

"Okay, tomorrow's going to be a big day. Why don't you let Moose tuck you into bed, and I'll be there in a few minutes." When she could stand again.

After they left for her trailer out back, Kira sensed someone watching her. The tourist was leaning over the bar, looking down at her. His amused arrogance gave her the strength to stand.

"Got a problem, asshole?"

Face-to-face with her now, his smile dimmed for a second, but then he recovered, and a smirk curved his lips. Typical.

The bar was close enough to Phoenix to attract the college boys looking for a thrill of imaginary danger. Like Moose would ever allow bar fights. On the other hand, brawls in the parking lot? That was a completely different matter. All the local bikers had learned to steer clear of her.

Tourists lacked that clue. She half-suspected some of the fraternities gave their pledges an assignment to come here as part of a hazing ritual. Their horny presence had come in handy before as an energy pick-me-up, but she'd given that up to focus on Emily and the girl's healthier source of energy.

Not that her plan was working so well.

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The college-boy tourist leaned closer. “Well, I *did* hear you ask someone to fuck you, and I was wondering if I was supposed to join you on the floor.”

She opened her mouth to tell him that he’d have a better chance with the exhaust pipe on her Harley. Before she got the words out, a wave of power from his horniness slammed into her.

Shit. She was desperate for energy, especially in preparation for whatever tomorrow would bring. And sexual passion—the other main source of pure connection to life’s spirit—was the irresistible junk food equivalent of what she needed to build up her strength.

Her expression fell into a mask she’d perfected over the years. Enough come-hither sexuality, vulnerable innocence, and tattooed-biker-chick danger to amp up his anticipation.

“When Moose gets back, meet me by the tree behind the building.”

She walked away before the guy could reply. Half the time, the tourists would chicken out and never show.

The last couple of years of frantic experimenting to figure out her limitations and abilities had taught her a few tricks. The odds were slightly better—and their energy higher—if she dropped the invitation into their lap and left them to build up their courage alone.

Fifteen minutes later, she crowded the college boy against the tree trunk, hidden from any random eyes by the deep twilight. Not that they would seem out of the ordinary, being fully clothed and only standing near each other and all, but she didn’t need anyone paying attention to her magic in the next step.

Her script—phone-sex-worthy dirty-talk designed to get them ready to blow their load before they even touched her—worked perfectly once more. At the height of his anticipation, she removed her glove and touched her bare fingertips to his temple. His eyes turned glassy and unseeing, and energy surged into her. Hell yeah, this was what she needed.

Her aura blazed with his feel-good emotions. And she’d made him feel *really* good.

Who needed actual sex? She’d tried the bump-and-grind a few times, but it didn’t do anything for her. The energy released during the mental simulation she used was more important. Holding off

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the growth of her magical circuitry so she could remain on Earth was top priority.

A minute later, she set his temple free and replaced her glove. The trance's influence would last for another couple of minutes. Enough time to get him back into the bar so his surroundings would match the last memory her magic let him keep.

Sabotaging people's memories always made her skin crawl, but she couldn't let them remember her magic either. Desperate times and all that.

Thank goodness her relationship with Emily was close enough that she didn't need to use this brute force approach to feel energized by emotions. She couldn't stomach *taking* anything from the girl who had already lost so much.

The guy followed her lead, lurching zombie-like beside her. Inside the bar, she shoved him onto his stool and slid an ice water into his grasp. Her magic didn't physically harm anyone, but a drink of water would clear his mind of the remnants of the trance. If tradition held, Moose would be kicking him out soon, and he needed to be safe to drive.

She joined Moose at the other end of the bar and set up glasses for him to pour the next order. He eyed the tourist's glazed expression. Luckily for the sake of her secret, Moose always assumed the occasional dazed customer was simply stunned, figuring she'd given them a sharp enough earful to make their brain bleed.

"That guy bothering you, Prin?"

"I can handle myself." Even though she'd aged out of the foster system several years ago, Moose still treated her like his daughter. Sweet, in a sometimes-annoying way.

The tourist chose that moment to sip from the water. When they fully exited the trance, their first words were always unpredictable, dependent on where their memory left off. This one leaned over the bar, as though still looking for her on the ground so he could offer to fuck her there.

Oh *lovely*. Moose would kill him.

She stood in front of him and beat him to the conversation. "You need to leave and not come back."

One time was all she allowed herself with any guy—and never with anyone she knew. She didn't need anyone poking around her

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abilities, seeing too much or uncovering the truth.

"You sure?" He jiggled his brows and stretched out his arm, as though to grab her. "I could make it worth your while."

She gave him a glare harsh enough to peel paint off a gas tank. "Don't touch me, and don't make me hurt you. Ask yourself why the three-hundred-pounders in the bar leave me alone, and then go home."

He let his arm drop, and as she knew would happen, his male ego took over so he wouldn't feel rejected. "Your loss, bitch."

Beside her, Moose laughed at the guy's retreating back. "You know, Prin, I almost feel sorry for some of the guys you turn down."

"Not that one, I hope." His smirk had been the unattractive kind of arrogant.

"No, not that one. But one of these days you'll have to let a guy get close to you."

She stepped back and scrutinized him. "You been hitting the bottle when I'm not looking?"

"Princess." His use of her full human-known name spiked her pulse. Whatever he was about to say, she didn't want to hear it. He settled his large palms on her shoulders, preventing her escape, and looked her in the eye. "No matter what happens with Emily's adoption, this experience has brought out your mothering instincts."

Her? Mothering instincts? Moose must have hit *several* bottles.

Her expression—incredulous, no doubt—didn't dissuade him from pushing the issue. "I'm serious. Don't sell yourself short. Maybe you should think about getting out of here and finding a husband."

She scoffed and tugged out of his grasp. "I don't need a man around to have a kid."

Marriage meant bad news. She'd been evading Lirdeag, her fae intended, since her desperate escape at the age of five, so why would she volunteer for an Earth-bound version of the deal?

She avoided Moose's gaze by wiping down the bar and then tossed the towel into the bin. "Speaking of kids, I'm turning in for the night. I told Emily I'd be there soon, and I don't want to break any promises."

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“All right, I won’t keep you. Besides, we’ll be meeting up with the others early.”

The reminder of the next day’s schedule pressed on her chest, and her breath caught. The energy infusion had erased her worry about winking out of her existence here, but the other worries about Emily remained.

She needed to be ready for anything tomorrow.

Chapter Three



THE BAR'S PARKING LOT SET THE STAGE FOR THE MEETING between her, Emily, Moose, and nearly twenty other B.A.C.A. members the next morning. Emily basked in the center of the gathering and shyly thanked each one for coming. Even the men. Maybe now—when she knew these “big brothers” had her back for meeting a stranger—she might start to let herself trust them.

For her part, Kira dressed in her full leathers—no jeans for her today—to be as intimidating as possible. She'd also made her changeling hair take on a vivid, not-found-outside-of-a-Crayola-pack red shade. The color complemented the flames of the custom paint job on her Harley. *Angry* biker chick fit her mood for the day.

Everyone wore their B.A.C.A. vests—Emily's in denim and the rest in black leather. Patches covered their vests, some displaying the B.A.C.A. logo of a tattooed fist surrounded by the words “Bikers Against Child Abuse” and others stating their motto of “No child deserves to live in fear.”

Moose touched the motto patch on Emily's vest. “You're not scared now, are you, Fairy?”

“Not right now.” She gave him a weak smile. “I'm in the family.”

Kira hugged her close. “All your big brothers and big sisters will stay with us as long as you want. And Moose and I will stay with you the whole time. You'll never be alone.”

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Renee Cushman arrived and took in the crowd from inside the car, her eyes widening. A *whirr* signaled the opening of her side window. “I take it this means you’re ready to go.”

Kira nodded toward the road. “Where are we headed?”

“Just a few miles away. His address is out with those horse properties that back up to Cave Creek Regional Park.”

“Dirt roads.” Kira eyed the group. They’d be thrilled. Not.

She returned her attention to Renee and jerked her chin. “Take it slow through those sections. Street bikes are allergic to flung dirt and rocks messing up their chrome.”

Renee shook her head and caught Emily’s eye. “Sure you don’t want to ride with me, sweetie? I’ve got air conditioning and no dirt.”

Emily answered by stepping back and slipping her small hand into Kira’s.

Kira tied the B.A.C.A. bandanna do-rag style onto Emily and helped her into her helmet. In addition to the lack of restrictions on passenger age, Arizona didn’t require motorcyclists to wear helmets, but B.A.C.A. always made the kids wear them. Once Emily was securely behind her on the seat, Kira slid on her sunglasses to complete her “look.”

Almost like a precision team, the others followed suit and started up their bikes. The rumble burst across the pavement, and the pedestrians touring the art galleries down the road jerked to a stop. Yep, they were intimidating, and that was the whole point. The B.A.C.A. kids had encountered some scary people, but their family watching over them was scarier.

Her lungs expanded, taking in a deep breath. She was damn proud to be part of this group.

Luckily, the pavement held all the way to the turn-off for the driveway. Fancy-ass homes stood watch in the neighborhood. Big horse spreads with bigger houses.

What was an ex-boyfriend of Crissy’s doing here? This area was nothing like the inner city hellholes Crissy had lived in the whole time Kira had known her. Not that it mattered. Money didn’t buy a guarantee of living abuse-free.

The bikes crept up the winding dirt driveway. A couple of horses behind a fence reared as they passed. She’d calm them in a minute, but for now, it was more important to make an impression.

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Renee stopped her car at a courtyard entrance. Swirling wrought iron filled the archway to the courtyard and lined the top of the adobe wall surrounding the residential section of the property. The metal's signature properties vibrated Kira's aura as soon as she pulled in front of the gate.

You've got to be kidding me. Iron? An iron fucking gate. And more iron surrounding the place like a damned anti-fae fortress.

Did the guy have a fear of faeries? If not, she was about to give him one.

She could handle the cast iron parts of her bike's engine in close proximity because—despite the word *iron* in the name—cast iron wasn't pure at all. Steel was a little trickier, a little purer. She could tolerate it touching her bare skin for short periods, and it wouldn't seriously hurt her as long as it didn't pierce her skin. But wrought iron—or the “mild steel” they often used for the decorative stuff—was dangerous. The purest iron in common use.

At the very least, any touch to her bare skin would cause instant energy-drain. At worst, it might kill her.

The leather gloves and full-length clothes she wore even in the heat of summer protected her from accidental contact, but purposely touching the near-pure iron might burn her even through the gloves. And *this* was where Emily's father lived?

She gunned her motor extra loud in protest, and the others followed her example. A man burst from the front door. “What the hell is going on? Are you *trying* to terrify the horses?”

At the reminder of the animals, Kira cut her engine and helped Emily down from the bike. While she unfastened Emily's helmet, Kira snuck a peek at the guy.

Her heart sank. Even though his striking face and muscled body looked nothing like Crissy's usual gangbanger or junkie type, he shared Emily's dark hair and eyes. The Native American influence over his genes was stronger, with broad, high cheekbones and deeper coloring that reminded her of the wind clan faeries, but there was no mistaking it. This cowboy-hat-and-boots-wearing man was Emily's father.

A cowboy with an unhealthy addiction to iron. Lovely.
Just lovely.

Chapter Four



A WHOLE OUTLAW MOTORCYCLE GANG BLOCKED THE FRONT gate, and Zac skidded to a stop halfway down the steps in his front courtyard. What the hell?

The invasion force finally shut off their engines and gathered in the middle of his driveway, shades on, arms crossed. Red hair caught his attention in the center of the gate. The curvy, leather-clad woman picked up something behind her and walked away, following the gravel back toward the road.

Well, this was *his* house, damn it, and he wouldn't let *anyone* just waltz in here. Skull-and-crossbones tattoos or no.

An older woman with short gray-streaked hair emerged from the lone car in the driveway and met him right as he yanked open the gate. She read from a pile of paperwork. "Zachary Chase?"

"Yeah, who the hell are you?"

"Renee Cushman. We spoke on the phone."

Crap. Yelling and swearing probably wasn't the best impression to give Emily's case manager. "Of course. Sorry, ma'am."

"No, it's quite all right. Sorry for the..." She looked over the motley crew behind her, as though debating the right word. "Welcoming committee. I didn't know we were going to have an escort, or I'd have warned you." She fanned herself with the file folder in her hand. "After we get into the air conditioning, I'll explain their connection to Emily."

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He scanned the crowd of burly guys—and several burly women. “Emily’s here? Where?”

Ms. Cushman spun around, searching, and pointed down the driveway. “There, Prin has her.”

The red-haired, leather-clad woman he’d first noticed was standing at the horse fencing, a child on her hip. *Emily*. The woman reached over the rail toward his aggressive stallion, and the smile on Zac’s face broke into open-mouthed horror.

“No! Don’t, ma’am! Bullet’s been known to bite.”

The redhead didn’t acknowledge his warning, and he ran toward them, fearing he’d be too late, especially after how worked up the horse had gotten with the motorcycle noise. But instead of charging the fence—Bullet’s usual way of expressing dominance to those he didn’t respect—the stallion approached the woman meekly, his head and tail lowered.

Impossible.

Zac’s steps slowed in the middle of the driveway, still twenty feet away, giving him time to try to make sense of the scene. The redhead stroked Bullet without a care in the world for his teeth. Those teeth that had just recently stopped trying to bite *him*. The stallion nickered at her touch.

The woman’s murmurs carried over the dirt drive. “I’m very happy to meet you too. May I introduce my friend? This is Fairy. She’d like to pet you if that’s all right.”

Bullet thrust his head forward, within range of Emily’s reach, as though the stallion could suddenly understand English. Emily giggled and rubbed his face.

After his daughter had her fill, the woman spoke again. “Thank you. I would greatly appreciate it if you and the others could help me keep Fairy safe. She’s very important to me.”

Zac started forward, ready to introduce himself, when his stallion shocked him once more. The animal lowered his front half, like a circus-trained horse’s approximation of a bow.

How did Bullet even know how to *do* that trick? That position—one foreleg forward, one foreleg back, head curved down—wasn’t normal horse behavior by a long shot.

His daughter asked the question that sat on the tip of his tongue as well. “What’s he doing?”

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“He’s showing that animals and faeries are friends, and your name is Fairy, right?” The woman returned a bow, graceful despite Emily on her hip. “Thank you. I am honored to have your assistance.”

Hearing her two sentences back-to-back—one directed toward Emily, the other directed toward Bullet—added to his confusion. Her attitude when speaking to Emily was casual, matching her motorcycle-riding, leather-clad appearance. In contrast, her words to Bullet were formal, almost musical, and a complete clash with her persona.

Which was the real her? And more importantly, what the hell had she done to his damn horse?

Zac took another step toward them, and Bullet instantly stood upright and tossed his head, back to his normal self. The woman angled her face toward Zac, her expression changing from smiling to stone-faced in a second.

Violet eyes seized his attention and didn’t let go. He wanted to get his first real glimpse of his daughter, but the girl hid, tucked against the woman’s far hip, so he had no choice but to give in to the redhead’s gaze.

Colored contacts? Had to be. Eyes couldn’t naturally be that color. These weren’t just *sort of* violet. They were as violet as could be. Yet the color shimmered in rainbow speckles below the surface of where a colored contact would sit, proving his theory wrong.

His hands clenched and then released. That wasn’t natural. For that matter, the rest of her face wasn’t natural either.

Even though the color already made her eyes stand out, thin tattoos also outlined them, like in the ads for permanent eyeliner. But unlike the pictures in those ads, her tattoos extended onto her temples with swirls and curving lines. The artist in him couldn’t help memorizing the design for future ironwork projects.

Only those dramatic eyes and her dark lips colored her milky-white skin, like a goth and a biker chick rolled into one. And somehow, her look came together with a regal beauty.

A frown formed on her face, and she jammed her sunglasses over those mesmerizing eyes. The spell broken, he could finally tear his gaze away and seek out Emily, peering around the woman’s shoulder. She clung to the redhead, her expression round and

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fearful.

A broad grin stretched his mouth. There was no doubt this beautiful girl was his daughter. He recognized himself in everything from the curve of her wide-set eyes to her thick, dark hair, unconstrained by the bandanna falling off her head.

“Hi, Emily.” He tipped his hat to the woman. “Howdy, ma’am.”

Emily buried her face in the redhead’s hair. He hadn’t been expecting this little girl to welcome him—a stranger—with open arms. Not really. She’d just survived her mother’s murder after all. But his heart still felt like it shrank in his chest.

This wasn’t yet another betrayal to add to his collection though. He needed to remember that.

Behind him, Ms. Cushman’s voice carried down the driveway. “Can we *please* go inside? I’m dying here.”

He smiled at Emily and the redhead and extended his arm back toward the house. “This way, ma’am.”

He’d be polite and welcoming to this group Emily obviously trusted if it killed him. And it might.

Now that he wasn’t running to warn the woman about his horse, he had no choice but to notice the gang almost blocking his way to the front gate. Sleeveless T-shirts and vests showed off their tattooed biceps, and as if that wasn’t intimidating enough to walk past, several carried sidearms. And here he was with all his weapons locked safely away like a normal person.

At the top section of the patio, he checked behind him. Only Ms. Cushman and an older bearded man, who looked like he could be a missing member of ZZ Top or *Duck Dynasty*, had joined the redhead and Emily inside the courtyard. The others remained standing guard in the driveway. Maybe that was a good sign.

“If the rest aren’t joining us, could one of you close the gate? Otherwise the javelinas will get into the courtyard and eat all the plants.”

As ZZ Top yanked the gate shut, Zac’s gaze was once again drawn toward the redhead. Everything about her struck him as not natural. Not just her looks, but the way she effortlessly held Emily on her hip despite her short stature, the way light seemed to bend around her, adding a rainbow brightness to the area. Hell, the way his garden’s flowers were more noticeable after she walked past.

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This redhead didn't follow the laws of nature. She couldn't be categorized. And that nagged at him like a piece of metal that wouldn't bend the way he wanted.

He let the group into his house, holding open the iron-accented wooden door. "Come on in."

The redhead might have sworn under her breath as she entered.

"This is beautiful, Mr. Chase." Ms. Cushman looked up, taking in the two-story entrance and upstairs loft. "I don't get a chance to see many homes with this level of craftsmanship. Was this all part of the house when you bought it?"

"Thank you, ma'am. And please, call me Zac. My father is Mr. Chase."

Ms. Cushman laughed and examined one of his sconces on a stone pillar. "Fair enough. Feel free to call me Renee."

He made a mental note to try to remember that, but he tended to fall back on his *ma'ams* and *sirs* in uncomfortable situations, just like how upsetting situations sometimes brought out the British slang he'd picked up during his journeyman training.

"The woodwork and stonework was mostly in place. I made all the ironwork, like that scone light, myself." At her widened eyes, he explained, "I'm an artistic blacksmith. Light fixtures, stair rails, gates, furniture accents, and other artwork. If you've seen that open-scroll cowboy boot in Old Town Scottsdale, you've seen my work."

"Oh yes! Every time I take snowbird visitors to Old Town, they want pictures with the giant boot." She gave him a genuine smile. "Very impressive."

He removed his cowboy hat, now that they were indoors, and used that excuse to hide his face for a second. Should he cringe at Renee's praise—or at the redhead's scowl? Any minute, World War III might break out in his foyer.

Chapter Five



ZAC HUSTLED THE GROUP DOWN THE HALL TOWARD THE DINING room. At least there, a table would stand between them all. Renee reached toward the iron and colored glass chandelier over the tabletop. “Gorgeous. I think I should start saving my money for a present to myself.”

Once they were all seated, Renee indicated the bearded man. “This is Jack Forester, but he usually goes by his road name of Moose. You might have heard of him from Moose’s Bar and Grill in downtown Cave Creek.”

Zac nodded. He’d passed the biker hangout many times to deliver pieces to the art galleries the next block over.

Renee swung her arm toward the redhead, now with Emily on her lap, at the end of the table. “This is Princess. And this, of course, is Emily Braxton.”

His daughter emerged from her cower long enough to exclaim one word. “Fairy.”

“Oh yes.” Renee grinned. “Her road name is Fairy.”

He didn’t want to think about how or why his daughter had a *road* name, but he tried to express interest. “Fairy, huh?” He gave Emily what he imagined a fatherly smile would look like. “You like Tinker Bell?”

The redhead snorted, twisting the you-don’t-have-a-clue-what-you’re-doing dagger in his chest.

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Emily rolled her eyes. “Tinker Bell isn’t a *real* faery. Prin says *real* faeries are strong warriors, and that’s what I am. Strong.”

The redhead squeezed her tight. “Yes, you are, Fairy.”

Zac buried his wince. “Of that, I have no doubt.”

Without meeting her eyes, he looked at the woman holding Emily. She’d taken her sunglasses off, and he didn’t want to get distracted again. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I didn’t catch your name.”

“Princess.”

“No, I mean your real name.”

The redhead nailed him with her gaze. Even with the muted illumination of the room, sparkles continued to light up her eyes. “For as long as I’ve been on Earth, Princess has been my only name. No last name. No middle name. Just Princess. My friends call me Prin for short. *You* can call me Princess.”

Yowch. Maybe he could categorize her after all.

Both Renee and Moose called out a chastising “Prin.” But she ignored them, keeping her eyes on him. Challenging. Daring him to piss her off.

Well, for as long as *he’d* been on Earth, he’d tried not to be stupid. “Princess it is then.”

Just as he was about to put her firmly into the *bitch* category, she broke off their eye contact and smiled in the direction of the hallway. Her end of the table brightened. A trick of the sun?

A second later, Honey, his half-deaf yellow Labrador, padded into the room. He stood to put her into one of the back rooms before she could freak out about all the strangers in the house.

Honey passed by him in favor of going straight to Princess and Emily. Of course she did.

Princess shifted Emily on her lap and bent down to the dog. The tabletop blocked his view, and he leaned over to see what the woman was doing this time. She was whispering in Honey’s bad ear, and the dog’s tail was wagging so hard her back end swung side to side.

He was tired of things that didn’t make sense. “She’s deaf in that ear.”

Princess sat up and raised her brow. “Your point?”

The woman caught Emily’s gaze. “See? They’re all going to watch over you. Are you ready to tell the rest of the family they

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can leave now? They're probably getting hot out in the sun."

Emily nodded, and the two left the room, heading toward the front door. A moment later, Honey followed them, without so much as a glance in his direction.

He took a step, about to chase after them, but instead pivoted back to Renee and Moose. "What's her deal? And why haven't I even been able to approach my own child yet?"

The two looked to each other, and Renee opened her hand. "I'll share Emily's story and leave Prin's to you."

Moose sat back from the table, rolling a gold coin around his knuckles, and let Renee take the lead.

"Zac, there's a reason I wanted to explain the situation in person. That same reason is why I said on the phone that I didn't think it would be a good idea to set up a meeting right away. And that reason is related to why the others are all here. But you insisted, so here we are."

He shifted his jaw, chiding himself, and returned to his chair. "I'm listening."

"A couple of years ago, your daughter entered the Child Protective Services system because Crissy's boyfriend—in addition to abusing Crissy—was sexually molesting Emily."

Zac's mouth went as dry as the desert outside even as nausea rolled through his stomach. How could someone *do* that? To a *child*? An even tinier child than he saw here today.

He wanted to deny it was possible. Something that bad *couldn't* have happened to *his* daughter. But he hadn't been there, had he?

His gut spasmed like he'd been sliced open, and acid seared up his throat. He hadn't been there to protect his daughter from the worst kind of crime imaginable. His limbs trembled, and he clenched the arms of his chair. He'd failed her already.

Heat rose in his chest all over again at how much Crissy had screwed him—and Emily—by cutting him off from her.

Renee's continuing explanation dragged Zac back from his roiling emotions. "Moose and Princess—and all those bikers outside—"

At the same time as her reminder of the invaders at the gate, motorcycle engines started up and drove off.

"—are members of B.A.C.A., Bikers Against Child Abuse, a volunteer organization dedicated to making kids feel safe again.

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Members are trained by mental health professionals on how to help the kids, and they have to go through the same background checks as police officers. They stand watch outside the kids' homes, they escort them to and from school, and they sit with them in court as they face their abusers. In short, they're the good guys, dedicated like you wouldn't believe, and what they do *works*."

The welcome bit of positive information distracted Zac from the tightness in his ribcage, and he peered at Moose with fresh eyes. The patches for the organization covered his leather vest, and now the show of force and weaponry made sense.

Renee waved toward Moose. "Emily's first CPS case manager put Crissy in touch with B.A.C.A., and they made Emily a member of their biker family, so she'd know someone always had her back. Moose and Princess were her 'primaries,' the members on call for her twenty-four-seven. Unfortunately, unknown to CPS, Crissy got back together with her abuser, and he convinced her to cut Emily off from her B.A.C.A. family."

Wait a minute... "How could CPS *not* know Crissy had returned to her abuser? Wasn't anyone paying attention?"

"Honestly? No."

His body tensed so hard his chair jumped, scraping the wood floor.

Renee dropped her gaze before Zac's glare set her on fire. "I don't know if you remember reading about CPS's problems last year, before the reorganization into DCS, the Department of Child Safety, but Emily's case was ignored. The reports from Prin and Moose were never investigated until the governor's task force reprioritized case assignments."

At least the woman was honest. He ground his teeth and willed his muscles to relax. No killing the messenger.

Renee fluttered her arms, as though trying to shove away the past. "Anyway, we learned of the boyfriend—and the continuing abuse—just a few months ago, and we'd started proceedings to remove Emily from the home when Crissy was murdered."

Damn, that was one ugly-ass picture. And not a lick of it made sense.

"I don't understand why Crissy would put up with that. The

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Crissy I knew wouldn't have stood for someone abusing her, much less a child. *Her* child."

"Her boyfriend was also her drug dealer, so he had a lot of power over her."

"Crissy was doing *drugs*?" What the hell had happened to her while he was in England?

"I take it she wasn't on drugs to the best of your knowledge when you were together?"

"*No*." He shook his head, adding to his emphatic answer. "I wouldn't have been with her if she was."

She'd known enough about his history with his mother to know that was a deal-breaker. Crissy had sworn her teenage experimentation was long in the past, a foolish mistake never to be repeated. If he hadn't already witnessed Emily's resemblance to him, he might have asked if Renee was sure they were speaking of the same Crissy Braxton.

"Well, I'm sorry to say that she struggled with drug addiction for years. And she had a history of allowing guys like that into her life. Almost every man Emily's known has hurt her in some way."

Zac leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. Bile threatened to bubble up his throat, and he couldn't swallow away the nauseated sensation. His arms shook with the effort to *not* destroy something. To *not* rampage like a madman. To *not* lose his ever-loving mind over thoughts of what she'd witnessed, what she'd lived through.

How was he supposed to just *accept* this? And if he was struggling this much, what had it done to Emily?

No wonder the poor girl was terrified. She had no reason to trust him—and every reason *not* to.

Chapter Six



THE ACHE IN ZAC'S CHEST FROM CRISSY'S BETRAYAL TURNED hot. He would sell his soul for the chance to prevent Emily's torture. But that chance didn't exist.

All because of Crissy.

He stood and paced from one end of the room to the other, his feet unable to stay put. "I don't understand any of this."

He rubbed the back of his neck, as though *this* pain could ever go away.

"Hell, I never even understood why she left me." His arms swung out, indicating the house. "I mean, I wasn't living in this place yet, but we weren't desperate for money. Yeah, I was going to be gone for six months, finishing the last of my blacksmith training, but we'd talked about getting married after I came back. Why would she leave—when *pregnant*—if that's all she had waiting for her?"

Renee flipped open her file folder. "You're a member of the Navajo tribe, correct?"

He stopped pacing. "Technically, yes. I'm one-half Navajo. My mother did all the paperwork when I was a child." What the hell did that have to do with anything?

"Have you ever heard of the ICWA, Indian Child Welfare Act?"

The phrase rang a bell, but he couldn't place it. "Not really, no."

"The ICWA states that when a child qualifies as a member of a

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Native American tribe, the tribe can transfer jurisdiction for custody cases to tribal court. I suspect Crissy feared losing custody of Emily. Even if you'd terminated your parental rights, the tribe could still gain jurisdiction. Under their jurisdiction, priority is given to placing the child within the tribe. Even placement with strangers in the tribe is considered preferable to placement with non-Native Americans."

"Why would she worry about losing custody?"

But even as the words fell from his tongue, he suspected the truth.

Renee met his gaze. "Emily was born with drugs in her system."

Zac dropped into the nearest chair and propped his hands on top of his head, breathing deep. *Of course.*

Sometime while he'd been in England, too busy to maintain regular contact, she'd started using again. And because she *did* know that drug use was a deal-breaker for him, she'd left. Then she'd discovered her pregnancy, learned that she'd have close to no rights in a custody case if the tribe gained jurisdiction, and decided to keep Emily's entire existence a secret from him to prevent the tribe from ever knowing about her.

He wanted to rage at the insanity. He'd never lived on the reservation. Hell, he could count on one hand the number of times he'd even visited the Navajo Nation in his whole life.

His Native American heritage from his mother's side was simply a fact of genetics, not anything he practiced. Especially not that spiritual mumbo-jumbo she'd talked about. His mother had given up the right to influence his life when she'd left him and his father decades ago.

But because of those damn *genetics*, he'd lost his daughter for six years. Then Crissy had let others harm his daughter to the point that—even beyond the grave—she was *still* keeping him from Emily.

Emotionally and mentally, the girl might never be able to trust him. And without trust, how could he ever reach past that pain to help her?

He dropped his fists onto the tabletop with a bang. Life was just one big damn betrayal after another.

"I'm sorry, Zac. I truly am." Renee closed her file folder. "If

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you'd like to step away, I'd understand. Due to Emily's involvement with our department, complications I didn't even go into with Crissy's murderer trying to force Emily to testify in a separate case, and the issues she has with strangers, I think the State of Arizona could make a good case to retain jurisdiction."

Moose had remained quiet during Renee's story, his haunted gaze a reflection of how Zac felt. Now the big man tapped his gold coin on the table.

Renee nodded and cleared her throat. "If you abandon your attempt to gain custody and we can keep her in our courts, she'll be in good hands. Prin's fostering her now and had already started the adoption process before we learned of your existence and Emily's tribal qualification. Emily wouldn't be a victim of the system if we could help it."

"Prin?" Zac waved toward the doorway. "You mean Princess was trying to adopt her before Crissy's note threw everything for a loop?"

No wonder the woman hated his guts.

"That's about the sum of it, yes."

Emily's life could be worse than growing up in a good-guy motorcycle gang. Hell, her life *had* been worse. But he refused to be like his mother. He couldn't abandon his child. He'd hate himself if he didn't even try. Not every child got to have a father, but he was here and wanted to help.

"On the other hand," Renee echoed Zac's thoughts, "I'd be remiss if I didn't point out that studies show that girls with involved fathers are less likely to have issues with drinking, drugs, and teenage pregnancy."

He couldn't argue with that. Crissy had grown up without a father, and look how *she'd* turned out. He wouldn't risk Emily doing the same if he could help it.

Whether Emily knew it or not, she needed him. And he would be there for her.

He lifted his chin and pressed his shoulders back. "I need to be part of Emily's life. What's the next step?"

"I hope you understand why we won't turn a child in the system over to a non-custodial, biological-only parent right away. Especially to a male parent in a case like Emily's." Renee clasped

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her hands together. “We first have to do a thorough investigation, similar to how we’d evaluate and certify a potential foster home or adoptive family. That means background check, home study to certify a safe environment, references, and so on.”

“Understood. How long are we talking about?”

“The whole process takes about ninety days. In the meantime, you’ll have supervised visitation rights. You’ll arrange for those with Emily’s court-appointed guardian.” Renee gave a half-hearted shrug. “That’s Prin if you hadn’t guessed. She’ll be the one supervising all visitation and retaining custody until the process is complete.”

His jaw slackened, and his confidence level dropped with it. Princess held the reins on his relationship with Emily. That should prove...

Irritating.

No. He swallowed and gathered his focus. He’d find a way to make this work. For Emily’s sake.

Negotiating with Prin for visitations wouldn’t be irritating. It would be *interesting*.

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