



**DIESEL'S**

**PERSEVERANCE**

**INSURGENTS MOTORCYCLE CLUB**

**CHIAH WILDER**

**DIESEL'S  
PERSEVERANCE**

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**AN INSURGENTS MC ROMANCE**

CHIAH WILDER

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## PROLOGUE

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THE WIND THRASHED through the trees while rain pelted against the windows. She was on her knees cleaning up the mess, so much bleach it burned her eyes and gave her coughing fits. There was so much blood. She wasn't sure what had happened, but the fact that Freddy had disappeared meant that he'd done something devastating and had left her behind to deal with the fallout.

The last time she'd heard from him, he was in San Diego. He promised to send for her, but she doubted that he would. Looking down at the bleached-out spots on the hardwood floor, a mixture of emotions swirled inside her: fear, disbelief, anger, sadness, confusion. A few days before, she'd made up her mind to leave Freddy. The man she'd fallen in love with three years earlier had been changing for the last year in disturbing ways. The final straw was the beating he'd given her just a week ago. *So much has changed since then.* She'd planned to steal away from him while he was at work, but fear kept her from taking concrete action. But now he'd screwed up big time, and this was the window of opportunity she'd been waiting for.

*But he could be in trouble.* It seemed that Freddy had gotten mixed up with the wrong kind of people for the past two years. He'd assured her all was good, and when she'd asked how they could afford a mansion in one of the most affluent neighborhoods in Denver, he'd simply laughed, pulled her close to him, and told her that he finally got the break he'd been waiting for all his life. He never mentioned what "the break" was, but she suspected it had something to do with the pain clinics he'd opened. Dr. Stauber seemed like a decent enough guy. He reminded her of the type of dad she would've liked to have had, but when she met Peter Cano last year, he'd given her the creeps right off the bat. She'd told Freddy about



it, and he'd laughed and said she was being silly, but her gut feelings were usually right. She'd spent most of her twenty-six years trusting in those vibes.

The sound of her cell phone ringing interrupted her thoughts. She jumped up and hurried over to the wet bar.

"Hello?"

"Where's the fucker?" a gruff voice said, causing chills to run up her spine.

"You have the wrong number."

"No, baby, I've got the right number, and if you want to keep breathing, you'll tell me where that coward is."

A sick feeling twisted in the pit of her stomach. "I don't know where he is," she croaked out.

"Don't fuck with me."

"I'm not." She recognized the voice now: it was Peter Cano. "I came home, and he was gone."

"He didn't call you?"

"No."

"I'm not believing any of this, baby. Let's you and me have a nice talk in person."

"I'm not home."

"I don't wanna hurt you, but I'm gonna find that asshole one way or the other. Did you know he was gonna do it?"

"Do what?"

"Kill my brother."

She glanced over at the blood on the floor. "Freddy did what?"

"I'm not buying your act, baby. I'll be in touch."

The line went dead. Rising panic clawed its way up her throat. *What the hell did you do, Freddy? How could you kill*

*anyone? Trying to remain calm, she took several deep breaths. Maybe you had to. Maybe it was self-defense.*

She rushed into the storage room, pulled out two big suitcases, and threw clothing, toiletries, and ten large jewelry pouches into them. She dashed around like a mad woman, trying to find as much money as she could. Freddy loved to put spare change and dollar bills in jars that he'd stash around the house.

After thirty minutes, she backed out the BMW Freddy had bought her the year before for her birthday, jumped on the freeway heading west, and hit the accelerator.

The only place she could think of going was Pinewood Springs. Freddy's brother lived there. She'd corresponded with him when he was doing time in the penitentiary. They'd actually become friends through the numerous letters they'd exchanged.

*Diesel will know what to do. Damn you, Freddy.*

She turned on the radio and glanced in the rearview mirror to make sure she wasn't being followed.

As the lights of the city lights fell behind her and houses gave way to clumps of evergreens, she began to relax. Once again, her life had been upended. She sighed. Nothing ever seemed to work out for the long haul. She leaned back against the seat and rolled down the window. The cool night air washed over her as she drove toward the unknown.

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## CHAPTER ONE

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DIESEL LEANED BACK in the chair and counted the wad of bills in his hand.

“How much you won off those puny assholes?” Rags asked before bringing a bottle of beer to his lips.

“Almost a grand.”

Rags shook his head. “They never learn that we can kick their asses each and every time.”

“And you know they’re gonna tell their buddies I hustled them. Like I need to hustle drunk college kids,” he said, shoving the money into his pocket.

“Asswipes shouldn’t play pool if they can’t handle their liquor,” Rags said as he placed the empty beer bottle down on one of the high tables lining the billiard area.

Nodding, Diesel kept his gaze focused on the three men who hadn’t looked at Rags and him since they slinked away after their loss. They knew better than to eyeball him or give him, or any Insurgent for that matter, any lip.

A few of the chicks who came in with the dudes had rushed to the far side of the bar when the three games were over. Two of them, one blonde and one brunette, looked at him sideways-like, acting like they were glancing at something else, but he knew better. Diesel was just what they wanted, just what they needed—a hard ride with the right amount of roughhouse so they could tell their nice-and-proper friends all about it on the front porch of their daddies’ mansions on the hill. He saw how the brunette’s gaze skimmed over his broad shoulders and firm biceps. She was so fucking transparent.

“A table’s opened up over there,” Rags said as he stood up and walked away.

Diesel looked over his shoulder and found Rags sitting at a table near the bar. Without a second glance at the chick, he sauntered over and plopped down into a chair.

“Beau said our food’s coming. Did you notice that brown-haired chick checking you out? The skinny one keeps staring at me and turning away when I look back.” He chuckled. “Maybe we should fuck those dudes’ chicks, too.”

“Not interested.”

“Why not? You got something better?”

“Nah. It’s just that any night of the week, I can go into a bar, pool hall, or anywhere, and there’ll be women like that wanting some action with a biker.”

Rags shrugged. “That’s one of the perks of being an Insurgent. I’m not seeing a problem with that.”

“Too easy.”

Rags guffawed. “Since when is *that* a drawback? You’ve been fucking up a storm ever since you got out of the pen. You must’ve smoked some bad weed, bro, ’cause you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Here you go, sugar—Tex Mex burger, medium, extra guac, and jalapeños.” The redheaded waitress leaned down low enough to give Diesel an unobstructed view of her generous cleavage. “Do you want me to freshen up that drink for you?” The tip of her tongue skimmed the top of her glossy lip.

“Sure.” He handed her the glass. “And what’s your name?”

A wide smile broke across her face. “Sandy.”

He watched the rhythm of her hips, swaying back and forth as she walked away. When she disappeared into the crowd at the bar, he turned away and picked up his burger.

“Where the fuck are my damn wings?” Rags grumbled.

Diesel grinned, then took a big bite of his dinner.

“Here you go, buddy,” Beau said, placing a steaming basket in front of Rags. “You guys need anything else?”

“Another beer would be good,” Rags said.

“Sandy’s getting my drink.” Diesel glanced at Rags and grinned again.

“Asshole,” he muttered under his breath before picking up one of the wings.

“What’s eating him?” Beau said.

“Beats me.” He took another bite out of his hamburger. “You make a damn good burger, bro.”

“I should. I’ve been making them for more than half my life. How’s Banger doing? I haven’t seen him in a couple of months.”

“He’s good. Busy with the club and his family. He’s gone softer than shit since Kylie gave him a granddaughter.”

Beau laughed. “I bet he dotes over her the way he did Kylie when she was little. I remember he’d be like a damned old hen when we’d take the kids to the park.”

“He’s still that way with Kylie,” Rags said.

Beau shook his head. “I gotta give that guy some hell real soon. I’ll send Sandy over with your beer.”

Beau didn’t take any crap from anyone. During his thirty-five-year ownership of the pool hall, he’d thrown out more unruly, disrespectful, and just plain old pains in the asses than he could remember. Diesel liked his toughness, but he also admired how the old dude had raised four kids single-handedly after his wife had died. Being single dads was the thread that had drawn Beau and Banger together initially. Still, their love of riding Harleys and listening to heavy metal intertwined the two men into a lifelong friendship.

“Beau’s okay,” Rags said as he watched the older man walk away.

“He should’ve been an Insurgent.”

“Here comes Sandy. She’s hot for you, dude.”

Diesel looked up just as the waitress reached the table.

“Here you go.” She put the beer bottle in front of Rags. “And here’s your double whiskey.” Her tits were almost popping out of her low-cut top as she leaned down even further than before. “I hope you like it.”

“Beau’s whiskey is always top-notch,” he said.

“Do you need *anything* else?”

“I’m good. Rags?”

“Have you ever been to a club party?”

Diesel kicked his friend under the table.

“No, but I’ve heard they’re wild. Do you both go to the parties?”

“Never miss them,” Rags said.

“Never?” She fixed her gaze on Diesel.

“Depends on what else is going on. Sometimes we’re outta town.”

“But that doesn’t happen too often. Like the party in two weeks. We’ll all be in town.”

“You too, Diesel?”

“Two weeks is too far out for me to say. Things can come up fast in our world. You never know.”

“I’ll call you and let you know, okay?” Rags said.

Sandy pulled her eyes away from Diesel and glanced over at his friend. “Okay, I’ll give you my number for the next time you have one of those parties. I have a girlfriend who’d like to go too. Is that okay?”

“Sure. The more chicks, the better. The brothers would love a clubhouse of pretty women like you.”

“Aren’t you sweet,” she said.

Tired of the whole situation, Diesel pulled out his phone and checked for missed calls or texts. There were several, mostly from women who wondered when they could hook up with him again, but the one call and text he was searching for wasn't there. *Where the hell are you, Freddy? Just give me a fuckin' call already.*

"She's hot as fuck." Rags's voice broke into his thoughts.

"Who?"

"Sandy."

"Oh, yeah, she's okay."

"Okay? She's more than *okay*."

"Just so you know—for the next time you wanna pick up a chick—stop sounding so desperate. Fuck, dude, it was pathetic."

Rags glared. "I was doing it for you."

"Bullshit. Anyway, I don't need you getting chicks for me."

"I know that, but you've been acting fuckin' weird lately, and it's freakin' me out. Wheelie and Throttle notice it too."

"Notice what? And why the hell are you guys discussing who I fuck and who I don't? Are Throttle and Wheelie bored with their ol' ladies already?"

"No," Rags said quickly. "You just seem off or something. Like tonight. You coulda had that brown-haired chick and Sandy, and you didn't give a shit about either. What the hell, dude? We're worried about you."

Diesel threw back the rest of his drink, enjoying the warm, smooth burn down his throat. "I'm good."

"You couldn't get enough fucking when you got outta the pen."

"Obviously, but now it's outta my system. I'd like something more than just a quick fuck and on to the next one."

“You got a special lady you haven’t told me about?”

Diesel shook his head. “Nah.” He sighed and leaned back against the chair. “I haven’t heard from Freddy in two weeks. It’s not like him not to return my phone calls.”

“Did you call his chick? What’s her name?”

“Myla? Yeah, I called her, but she must’ve changed her number.” A frown pinched the space between his brows. “The one I have is from a while back.”

“Maybe she broke up with him, and he’s nursing his wounds. My brother did that when his girlfriend dumped him. He didn’t talk to my sisters or parents or return my call for weeks.”

“Yeah, that’s probably it. I know he’s real stuck on Myla. She’s pretty cool. I dunno, for the past year or so, Freddy seems like he’s hiding something. I get the feeling he’s doing shit that’s way over his head.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. He was always wanting to be a big shot. When I was in high school, he always tried to tag along with me and my friends, but I didn’t want him around. We’re three years apart, a big difference in school years. I always used to ditch him.”

Rags laughed. “Sounds like something I would’ve done if my little brother wanted to hang out with me.”

“Yeah. Probably, it’s what you said about breaking up with Myla.”

“He’s just licking his wounds and doesn’t want to tell you she kicked his ass out. You know how it is? We got our pride.”

“And egos.”

“I don’t have any ego issues,” Rags said.

“You’re such a bullshitter.” He laughed. “You ready to head out? I gotta be at the car wash by seven in the morning.”



“Okay.”

Diesel watched his friend guzzle the rest of his beer, then pushed up from the table. He glanced around and noticed the crowd had thinned out a bit. The college guys he'd taken to the cleaners and their chicks had left.

“Aren't you gonna say goodbye to Sandy?” Rags asked.

“No, but go ahead if you want to. I'll be outside.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

Diesel opened the front door. “It means I'll be outside.” He lifted his chin at Beau and stepped out.

Fifteen minutes later, Rags appeared with remnants of gloss on his face.

“Looks like it was a kickass goodbye,” Diesel said as he straddled his Harley.

“Not too bad, and I got her number too.”

A few lights from isolated houses twinkled in the darkness. The black outline of mountain peaks was barely visible against the night sky. The music from the pool hall faintly filtered out from underneath the door and the ill-fitting windows.

Diesel switched on the ignition, and Rags followed suit. The roar of the powerful engines cracked through the night air. The two bikers peeled from the curb and rode into the moonless night.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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MYLA LEANED AGAINST the wall, chewing on the corner of her thumb. The booth at the back of the diner held four men decked in leather vests with a ton of patches. She wasn't sure if Diesel was even in this group. Her only reference was a picture Freddy had given her of him and his brother, but it was at least twelve years old. She'd been scouting places she thought a biker might hang out, but after numerous bars, pool halls, small restaurants, and a couple of strip clubs, Myla had almost thrown in the towel. When she spotted a cluster of motorcycles in the diner's parking lot, she pulled in, and now here she was. At least it was something.

The last few weeks, she'd attempted to find out where the Insurgents' clubhouse was but it seemed to be a guarded secret. Fear crept into several people's eyes when she asked; others just looked down and shook their heads. There were times she wondered if she'd done the right thing by coming to Pinewood Springs, but what other choice did she have? Freddy was in trouble, and his brother had a right to know.

"There's a seat at the counter," the hostess said.

Myla glanced up from the photograph. "Oh ... I'm not ready yet."

The older woman cracked her gum, shrugged her shoulders, and pointed at a woman in a tailored suit. "I got a seat at the counter."

"That's great," the woman said as she walked past Myla.

The diner was busy. Myla watched as waitresses clipped tickets to the order rail, then snatched up fresh pots of coffee. Above the clatter of dishes and buzz of voices, she could hear the occasional strains of a country song from the large speakers perched on high shelves.

She glanced at the booth in the back again and locked eyes with one of the men. Turning away, she pretended to be engrossed in her phone, but when she looked up again, all four guys stared fixedly at her.

*Oh shit. They don't look very friendly.* Then she sucked in a breath. There he was; those piercing blue eyes gave him away. *Now what do I do?* Shrugging off threads of anxiety, Myla pushed away from the wall, stood up straight, and clutched her shoulder bag strap. *I didn't come all this way for the mountain air. I'm doing this.*

The walk to the booth at the back of the restaurant seemed like an eternity. She noticed the closer she got, the more the men stiffened up—if that was even possible. One scooted out and stood up while the others reached inside their vests.

Myla froze. *They look like they want to kill me. Would they really do that in front of all these people?* Her eyes darted around, and she noticed most of the diners dropped their heads and feigned interest in the laminated placards listing the daily pie specials. *You're on your own.* Myla had been on her own as far back as she could remember, so it seemed fitting at that moment the only person she could rely on was herself. *You can do it.*

Forcing a smile, she started walking again. Before reaching the booth, two bikers stood in tandem, blocking any access to the table.

“Turn around and take that pretty ass of yours outta here,” one of them said.

“I need to speak with Diesel. I—”

The biker's dark eyes narrowed. “Get your ass outta here. *Now.* That's your last warning.” He and his buddy took a step toward her.

“It's about Freddy.”

The broad-shouldered man with blue eyes pushed up from the booth and stood behind the two sentries.

“Freddy?” he asked as suspicious eyes scanned over her face.

“I’m Myla.”

A slow smile spread across his face, and she loosened the death grip on her purse’s shoulder strap.

“Hi,” she said softly.

The two men blocking her way didn’t budge an inch.

“It’s cool. This is my brother’s woman,” he said.

The men immediately relaxed and nodded at her before resuming their seats. Diesel pulled out some bills from his jeans and tossed them on the table.

“Let’s go outside,” he said.

As Myla walked back to the front door, she noticed how everyone now glanced her way, and a few even smiled at her. The whole experience was a bit surreal. Did Diesel and his gang hold that much control in the town?

“Tell me about Freddy,” he said the minute the glass door closed behind them.

“He’s in trouble.”

Diesel stomped his foot and shook his head. “I fuckin’ knew it. What kind of trouble did he get himself in, and why the fuck isn’t *he* telling me all this?”

Myla pressed her lips together while looking around. Leaning forward, she whispered, “He killed somebody.”

“Freddy? What the fuck.”

“I didn’t know where to go. When I came home that night, I found a shit ton of blood and no Freddy. I wasn’t sure what had happened. At first, I thought he’d been wounded or even killed.” She fought back the sob rising in her throat.

Diesel shifted from foot to foot but didn’t say a word.

Taking a few deep breaths, she pressed several fingers to her left temple to quell the throbbing that had been a constant

for the past three weeks.

“So, he called and told me he was in San Diego. Said he’d send for me. I didn’t believe him, but I didn’t tell him that. I haven’t heard from him since.”

“He hasn’t returned any of my calls. Did he tell you he killed someone?”

“Just that he’d done something real bad. I was shocked and scared when his business partner called claiming Freddy had killed his brother.”

“Did you see a body?”

“No, and that’s what’s got me mixed up. I mean, Freddy could’ve gotten rid of the body, but there weren’t any traces of blood anywhere except a big pool of it in the family room area. So when Peter told me his brother had been murdered, I was shocked. I still am.”

“Do you believe him?”

“Yes ... no ... I mean, I don’t know what to believe. I know Freddy and Peter had some major disagreements. Freddy kept telling me Peter was cheating him.”

“What do you know for a fact?”

“Freddy’s gone and I tried to clean up a lot of blood at our house. I’m not even sure if he’s in San Diego.” She brushed her wind-blown hair from her face. “I’m freaked out.”

“Where have you been since all this shit’s gone down?”

“Here.”

A look of surprise washed over Diesel’s face. “And you’re just telling me now about Freddy? What the fuck, woman?” he said, brows drawing together.

“I’ve been trying to find you. I don’t have your number and no one in this damn town would tell me where your clubhouse is. I’ve been dragging my butt all over town, going into places I’d never step foot in just to try and find you. Every time I’d see a motorcycle, I’d scope it out. I’ve probably got a

reputation around here as being a real nut. After seeing the bikes in the diner's lot, I came in to check it out. I'm happy to connect with you finally. So don't act like I haven't been trying to find you and don't care about Freddy." Her voice choked.

"Okay, take it easy. I was just asking a fuckin' question, that's all."

"It's the way you were asking it."

His gaze skimmed over Myla, and a softness eased the lines on his forehead. "Where are you staying?"

"At the Redwood Lodge. It's not too far from here."

"I know it. Let's head over there so we can have some privacy. I want to know *everything* that's been going on with my brother. I'll follow you."

The drive to the hotel wasn't long. Myla kept glancing in the rearview mirror at Diesel. She couldn't believe she'd found him and they'd finally met after all this time. He looked much different than she'd imagined he would. Somehow she'd pictured him resembling a boxer who'd taken too many hits in the ring. When they had corresponded while he was in prison, Myla always had the impression that he'd look like someone who'd been dealt a lot of crap in his life. She pictured deep lines etching his face, some scars for sure, and a scruffy beard. Boy, was she ever wrong. The guy had dark wavy brown hair that reached his collar and seriously blue eyes. Almost devastatingly blue—full-on field of cornflower, cloudless spring sky, perfect blue. Diesel was damn good-looking.

The subtle tap of Diesel's motorcycle against the back bumper of the BMW startled her. She glanced up, saw the green light, and stepped on the accelerator pedal. *I can't believe I zoned out like that. What the hell's wrong with me? Freddy's in big shit, and I'm thinking about his brother's blue eyes? How lame is that?*

A few minutes later, she pulled into the hotel's parking lot. Diesel parked next to her. They crossed the lot and rode the

elevator in silence. It was awkward, and there was a thread of tension coming from him. It was understandable that he was upset about his brother. Myla had many months of anxiety at Freddy's changed behavior and three weeks of not hearing from him under her belt. For Diesel, this was the first time he'd heard about his brother's disappearance and what he'd done.

"Do you want something to drink? There's some stuff in the minibar," she said, tossing her tote on the bed.

"Is there any whiskey?"

Crouching low, she perused the small bottles lining the shelves. "Let's see ... There's Jack Daniels and Johnnie Walker. Which do you prefer?"

"Jack."

"Do you want it with Coke, water, tonic, or seltzer?"

"Straight. No whiskey-drinking dude ruins a good shot with that shit."

"Good to know. I'll remember that the next time I meet a 'whiskey-drinking dude.'" She poured the alcohol into a short glass and handed it to him with another bottle of Jack. She popped open a can of Diet Coke and took a long gulp.

"Did anyone follow you here?"

Myla jumped at his deep voice filling in the room's silence.

"No. I watched my mirrors the whole time, and I keep watching them."

"Did Freddy tell anyone where I live?"

"I don't know. I'm sure he talked about you." She brought the can to her mouth, peeked at him over the top, and added, "He idolizes you." Then she took a sip.

"I know. He always did. I can't say why the fuck he does, though."

“He just does. He thinks you’re the coolest, badass guy ever. He always brags that he’s got a brother who’s a one-percenter and rides a Harley.” She laughed. “He wanted to buy a motorcycle last year. We went to the dealership, and he could barely stay on the seat. You know, he’s tall and lanky. The one he had his eye on was so big and powerful that it looked like it controlled him rather than the other way around. After that, he never brought up wanting to own a Harley-Davidson.” The memory tugged at her heart.

“Sounds like Freddy. He’s wanted to be a biker ever since I got my bike. Kid couldn’t ride one back then, either. I tried to help him, but he just didn’t have the confidence.” He paused, then drained the glass. “He always lacked that.”

It was true. Freddy never thought he was good enough or smart enough. When they first started dating, he’d always say how surprised he was that she liked him. Freddy was like a child in many ways. He needed Myla to boost him up, and after three years of doing so, it had become a chore. Freddy only felt on top of the world when he bought expensive things, gloating over his ability to have anything he wanted and how far he’d come since his growing-up years on the Colorado Eastern Plains.

“Freddy was selling opioids, wasn’t he?”

Diesel’s question pulled her out of past memories. “Selling drugs? No. He was a pharmaceutical rep and made real good money. Freddy did business with a lot of doctors. His territory was most of metro Denver, Weld County, and parts of Mesa County. He was tired of traveling so much and decided to go into business with Dr. Stauber. They opened a pain management clinic, which did so well that Freddy opened a couple more. Dr. Stauber had quite a few athletes as his patients.”

“Like I said, he’s selling opioids. Probably fentanyl and oxycodone. That’s just like him to do something that stupid. ‘Pain clinic’ is the buzzword for crooked docs and greedy



punks. Shit. You didn't know? Where'd you think all that dough was coming from?"

"The pain clinics. I worked as a receptionist at a pain management facility for a while. This was before I met Freddy. The doctors, nurses, and therapists did good work and helped a lot of patients who suffered from chronic pain."

"And they were probably owned by the docs, not some drug rep. How many therapists are at Freddy's clinics? And docs? I bet only one doc per clinic and no real therapists. Probably just the 'medication' dispensers who put some phony initials on their business cards. It's so fuckin' transparent. I knew he was into shit like this. I warned him to take it easy. I told him I'd come to Denver and help him find a solid business, but he said he knew what he was doing. He never copped to selling, but I knew he was. Then he went and bought all this expensive shit, including that mansion you guys live in. Again, how could you think all that money was coming in from a legit business?"

Diesel's words were like punches to her gut. As naïve as it sounded to her now, Myla had no idea Freddy was selling that garbage to people. "I wondered if something illegal was going on—like he was involved in insurance fraud or something—but I didn't think he was selling drugs. I never saw any narcotics at home or in our cars. I can't believe it."

Diesel leaned back in the chair. "It's drugs. I told him he had to stop that shit and even offered to help him open a grow store where everything was legal. He said there was too much competition, and he enjoyed helping patients. What a load of shit. He's been putting that junk on the streets. He knew I'd beat his ass if he told me, but he didn't fool me." He ran a large hand over his face. "He should've left the big leagues to people who knew what the fuck they were doing."

"This is real bad."

"No shit. Who's this Peter asshole you were talking about?"

“Peter Cano. Freddy brought him in as a partner. At least, that’s what he told me, but I always thought Peter had sought out Freddy. The guy looks like a gangster. I never trusted him and got bad vibes from him.”

“Were they fifty-fifty partners?”

“That’s what Freddy said. I know he was intimidated by Peter. About four months ago, he told me he was getting sick of Peter and his brother. He never mentioned the brother’s name, but he thought they were in cahoots to cheat him and steal the businesses. He said they made fun of him. I suggested he buy them out and be done with them, but he said it wasn’t that easy. I think he may have owed Peter money or something.”

“For sure. The Denver clinics are probably fronts for bigger things. You said Freddy was in San Diego when he called you. What’s going on in San Diego?”

“He told me he was there. He started having business there and in LA once Peter came on board. I went with him on these business trips a couple of times but ended up spending most of the time alone, so I stopped going.” The truth was Freddy would stay out all night, then return to their lavish suite hungover and reeking of perfume. He didn’t even hide the lipstick stains on his face or shirt. They’d have a big fight; once he smacked her hard. The Freddy she’d fallen in love with would never have hit her. She’d decided to break away from him after one of their more vicious fights, but it was extremely tough. He’d been her everything, and Myla had been so lonely before they’d met. When he’d beaten the crap out of her, she had enough. A short while after that, a pool of blood was on the shiny hardwood floors, and Freddy had taken off.

“Was this asshole Peter on these business trips too?”

Focusing back on the conversation, she nodded.

“Is he from Denver or Southern Cal?”

“I’m not sure. Like I said, I didn’t have much to do with Peter. I think he had a condo on the beach somewhere in San Diego.”

An exasperated sigh escaped through his pursed lips.

Myla looked away. “I’m sorry I’m not much help. Freddy shut me out when Peter came into the picture. He’d become secretive and told me that all I should think about was how to spend the money. He was moody, prone to angry outbursts, and it seemed we began fighting more than ever. We had the big house, the fancy cars, the speedboat, more jewelry than I’d ever wear, but we weren’t in sync anymore. I wasn’t happy, and I doubt Freddy was. He became restless and suspicious of everything, even of me.”

“You?”

“He kept thinking I was cheating on him. I was taking classes at an art school. The instructor and I clicked on an esoteric level. Nothing was going on between us except mutual interest in the medium and respect for each other’s work, but Freddy was convinced we were having a torrid affair.”

Diesel’s intense gaze pinned her to the spot. “Were you?”

“No. Allan is a brilliant sculptor and artist. I admire his talent. He is also a wonderful teacher. I didn’t even know I had a knack for painting. I’ll admit it was nice talking to him and the other students about art because Freddy wasn’t interested in that. He never wanted to go to art museums with me.” She tipped her head and stared into those beautiful blue eyes. “You know, Freddy was convinced you and I had something going on through the letters we exchanged.”

Diesel jerked his head back. “What the fuck? That’s just stupid shit.”

“I know, but Freddy was threatened by it. That’s why I started writing less.”

A bemused smile played on his lips. “I wondered about that. I figured you found something better to do.”

“I liked writing to you. In a strange way, I sometimes felt closer to you than to Freddy.” She felt her cheeks grow warm. *I can't believe I said that.* “That’s when Freddy was starting to get into the whole pain clinic thing,” she added hurriedly.

He stared intently at her, his gaze disarming in its fervor. “Your letters were the only sane thing I had during my stint.”

“I bet it feels good to be out.”

“That’s a fuckin’ understatement.” He stood up and went over to the minibar. “So, what are your plans now?” He took out another small bottle of whiskey.

“I’m not sure. I have to find out if Freddy’s okay. I need to know what’s going on, but I don’t know where to start.”

“I’ll take care of that.”

“I want to help you. You know, be part of it.”

“I’ll get some of the brothers to help. You don’t need to worry about it.”

“I need to do *something*.”

“You can stay out of it. I got this.”

She splayed her hands out wide to stretch, then relaxed them. “I’m not staying out of it.”

“We’ll talk about it later.” He threw back the whiskey and placed the glass on the table. “You’re not safe here. This jerk Peter is figuring you know something. It’s a matter of time before he finds you, especially if Freddy blabbed to him about where I live.”

“I’ve been looking over my shoulder since I got here.”

“I gotta think about this. I have to talk to Banger and Hawk to see what we can do.”

“Who are they?”

“Banger’s the prez, and Hawk’s the VP of the club. I’ll figure it out. I’ll be in touch.” He started to walk toward the door.

Myla leaped up. “Wait. What does that mean?”

A quizzical look spread across his face. “It means I’ll be in touch—you know, call you and let you know what’s going on.”

“I meant, when will I hear from you?”

“When I know something.” Diesel pulled out his phone. “What’s your new number?” After giving it to him, he said, “If you need me, call. I’ll text you my number.”

“Okay.”

Then he was gone.

From the window, she watched him ride away until his motorcycle disappeared into the distance. A sudden wave of loneliness washed over Myla, bringing a lump to her throat. She turned away, then perched on the edge of the bed and sobbed.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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DIESEL OPENED THE cooler, took out a can of Coke, and gulped down the cold liquid in one long pull. He crushed the can with his hand and tossed it in the wastebasket. Tugging his sweat-soaked T-shirt away from his chest, he strolled over to the reception desk.

“How many cars did you detail?” Jada asked.

“Three, and I’m done,” he replied.

“In that case, can you man the desk for me? I want to sneak out a little early tonight.”

“Whatcha got going on?” He leaned against the counter.

“A date.”

“With who?”

“No one you know.” She bent down and pulled out her purse.

“Does Animal know him?”

Jada rolled her eyes. “My brother doesn’t know *everyone* I go out with. Besides, I don’t need his approval. I’m twenty-one years old now.”

“That doesn’t matter. You’re like a sister to the brothers. You can be seventy-one years old, and I’ll still be asking you the same questions. You have to be careful. There are a lot of guys out there that only see a chick as a piece of ass.”

She laughed. “And you and the other Insurgents know all about that, right? Have you ever seen a woman as anything other than a sure thing?”

“I’m not talking about chicks who like the wild side; I’m talking about good girls.”

Another laugh erupted from her lips. “Good girls. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you are old-fashioned as hell. The fact that you, my brother, and well, all of you are staunch supporters of the double standard is a given. So will you cover for me for the next half hour?”

“Yeah, but don’t let this asshole mess with you. Tell him he’s got a whole lot of bikers to answer to if he does.”

“He already knows about my brother and his badass friends. Every guy in the county does. I’m surprised I have any dates.” She took out a tube from her purse and swiped some shiny stuff over her lips. “FYI: Colton is not an ‘asshole.’ He’s a nice guy who’s in my chemistry study group at college. I’m sure you’ll share that with Animal.”

Diesel grunted. “I’m not a fuckin’ gossip.” He pushed away from the counter and went behind it. He’d mention it to Animal when he saw him at the club later that night, but there was no need to let Jada know that.

“Yeah ... right.” Breezing by him, she said, “See you in the morning.”

Diesel angled the miniature desk fan toward him. The cool air hit his skin. The relief was sweet. He pulled out his phone to check if Myla had texted him, but there was nothing. He scrolled through his missed calls on the chance that Freddy had called, but again, nothing. He rocked back on his heels and stared out the front door. A light wind swayed the tops of the trees, dotting the center parkway. As usual, a few people were out jogging or walking their dogs. While he watched them, he thought of his brother. *Where the fuck are you?* He knew in his gut that Freddy wasn’t dead ... yet. Darkness took hold of him, and his body shook. It was only a matter of time before Freddy’s days ran out, and he had to find him before that happened.

“Where’s Jada?” Wheelie asked.

Diesel pushed down his thoughts and looked over at his business partner. “She had a date.”

A frown creased Wheelie's forehead. "With who?"

"Some nerd in her study group at school."

"I wonder if Animal knows him."

"She says no, but he will after I see him at the club. Are you coming by?"

"I can't. Sofia's not feeling so good, and I have to watch Macy. She's having a rough time of it this round."

Diesel could hear the concern in his buddy's voice. "I'm sure she'll be okay. You got one of the best docs in town watching out for her."

"Yeah. Once this baby is born, we're done."

"Two kids are good. Is Macy cool with being a big sister?"

Wheelie laughed. "Oh yeah. She's excited as hell about getting a brother. She can't wait to boss him around." He crossed his arms against his chest. "Any news about your brother?"

"Not yet. I'm gonna have to take some time and see what I can find out in San Diego. I'll put out some feelers in metro Denver."

"I feel for you. This shit fuckin' sucks."

Diesel nodded. He knew Wheelie could relate since he went through all the bullshit when his sister was murdered a few years back. It tore him up, and now Diesel was feeling the same anger and frustration in not knowing what the hell was going on with a loved one.

"Take whatever time you need, bro. Bones and Klutch can help out around here."

"Puck said he was down with it too. Why don't you take off? I can close up."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Julio and Dave can help."



“Okay, see you in the morning. Let me know if you need anything.”

The two men bumped fists then Wheelie walked away.

Rebels Car Wash & Detailing was a thriving business. He and Wheelie had each put in fifty percent. Wheelie did all the heavy work, like purchasing the equipment, renovating the building, and a ton of other things that transformed the place into one of the most popular car washes and detailing businesses in the county.

While Wheelie was doing all that, Diesel was sitting his ass in a prison cell, racking up more time because he couldn't keep his temper in check. Once Wheelie, Hawk, Throttle, and Rags finally got through to him, he kept his fists unclenched, his head down and bided his time until he got the hell out of there. After the doors clanged behind him, Diesel swore he'd never be back and meant it.

When he was inside, the biggest problem was sheer boredom. Then Myla started writing to him. He was suspicious at first and thought maybe she was a reporter or a college kid trying to do research for a bullshit paper or something, but when Freddy confirmed that Myla was his girlfriend, he began to write back. Diesel was surprised that a woman who'd never met him wanted to correspond with him to cheer him up and to make his time less boring.

Initially, her letters were all about Freddy and what he was doing. Sometimes she'd write about Diesel and Freddy's parents and how she and her brother visited them for Christmas or the Fourth of July. It had been years since Diesel had seen his parents, and he was fine with that. They never acted like parents, so he didn't feel he owed them squat, but Freddy was always trying to please them and gain their affection and attention. Some things hadn't changed in life.

Then their letters became more stimulating in that they “talked” about life, death, politics, philosophy, and a slew of other topics. They became more frequent and more personal. Diesel was beginning to feel something for her, and he quickly

shut that down. Myla was his brother's woman. However, in his defense, he hadn't fucked a woman in a long time, so his dick governed his feelings. At least, that's the way he looked at it.

He was taken aback when he met her the day before at the diner. He didn't expect her to have such beautiful long brown hair and dark lashes framing the most gorgeous green eyes he'd ever seen. And that mouth of hers was a perfect pout. *Fuck*. He bet her curvy figure drew a lot of attention from the men, and the way she was nicely stacked added fuel to the fire.

Diesel shook his head to dislodge the memory of her from his mind. *She's Freddy's woman, and he's missing*. The reality of the situation hit him square in the gut. One way or the other, he had to find his brother.

He pulled out his phone and tapped in Zach's number. Diesel had met him when they were both doing time. Growing up on the streets of Denver, Zach knew the ins and outs of the city's underbelly.

"Yo, Diesel." Zach's raspy voice crackled over the phone. "Whatcha need?"

"Information. I'll tell you all about it."



DIESEL SAT STARING at the muted television while a couple of club girls pranced around half-naked, gyrating to the pulsating beat of the music blasting from the overhead speakers. He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked at Hawk's face. The vice president tipped his head toward the door. Diesel got up and followed him outside.

A cool breeze shook through the oak trees. Smudges of lavender, coral, and orange blended in the sky as the sun descended behind the mountain peaks.

"The girl can stay here until you get things sorted out," Hawk said before lighting up a joint. He offered one to Diesel, who took it.

“That’s good to hear. I hope I can crack this sooner than later. I may need some help from the brothers.”

Hawk blew out a stream of smoke. “You know you got it. There’s a rally coming up in Spring Valley. Panther called to see if any of us were gonna be there. As far as the rally goes, Throttle and Rags are going. I think some others are thinking about it. May be a good idea to go so you can check around San Diego.”

“I heard about the rally. I was thinking of going before any of this shit started. Rags and I talked about it. I have to get to San Diego and LA. I have a gut feeling my brother *is* there. I just wish he’d call me. I could help him.”

Hawk nodded. “You still may hear from him unless ...” His voice trailed away.

“Yeah, I thought about that too. He may not be able to call me. I got Zach doing some digging for me in Denver. I want to know more about this Peter Cano asshole.”

“I’ll look into it too. We’ll help you find him.”

Diesel put his foot against the wall behind him and leaned back. Hawk’s words made his chest swell, and the bond to the brotherhood tightened that much more. The Insurgents were his family one hundred percent. Each brother was there for the other through good and bad times. He knew he could count on them just like they could count on him. They were drawn together not by blood but by loyalty, friendship, and love.

“Are you sticking around?” Diesel asked as Hawk dropped the spent roach and stubbed it out.

“Nah, I promised the kids we’d go for pizza tonight. Stay strong, brother.” Hawk clasped his shoulder, then walked away. Diesel heard the sound of gravel beneath his VP’s boots as he made his way to his motorcycle.

Tossing his joint to the ground, he stood rooted to the spot until the stars blinked in the sky and night sounds filled the air, a natural chorus of crickets, katydids, and critters scurrying through the grass.

“Dude, we need another hand at the poker table. Axe had to get home,” Rags said, standing at the door, holding it open.

Strains of hard-rock music filtered out into the night.

With a deep sigh, Diesel pushed away from the wall.

“I’m crushing it, dude. You feeling lucky tonight?”

“Nope, but what the hell.”

Rags guffawed, and Diesel followed him into the clubhouse.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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THE RING OF her phone startled Myla awake. Disoriented, she fumbled for it, knocking the clock radio onto the tan carpeting. Squinting at the screen flashing a number she didn't recognize, she swiped up.

"Hello?" she said, her heart still beating fast.

"Myla, it's me."

She switched on the lamp and sat up straighter. "Freddy? How are you? *Where* are you?"

"I'm okay. How are you holding up?"

"I'm not. I don't know what the hell is going on. I came home and found a pool of blood in the family room. Tell me what's going on."

"I'm sorry about that. I had to get out of there and couldn't risk leaving you a note."

"Peter called me."

There was a long pause, and she thought he'd hung up.

"Freddy?"

"I'm here. Sorry."

"Did you hear what I said? Peter called me."

"I heard."

"He said you killed his brother," she whispered.

Another long pause. This time Myla was convinced he'd ended the call.

"I'm in some deep shit, babe."

"Talk to me. What happened? Were you defending yourself?"

“Sort of . . . maybe. I mean, yeah, but Peter won’t see it that way. I don’t want to drag you into all this.”

“You already have.”

An audible sigh came through the phone. “I know. I’m sorry about that. You can’t say you didn’t like the good life.”

“I liked the way we used to be. I didn’t care about all the material things. You know that.”

“*I* cared. You never could catch on to that, could you?” The anger in his voice was palpable.

“Please tell me where you are.”

“I’m nowhere. I hope you got out of the house. Peter doesn’t play nice.”

“I left right after he phoned me.”

“Where are you?”

Suspicion descended on her. She wanted to tell Freddy about Diesel and being in Pinewood Springs but didn’t trust him and she hadn’t for the past year.

“Holing up at a motel outside of Denver.”

“Where exactly?”

“In Elizabeth. A family-run place. Are you going to come see me?”

There was another damn pause. *I don’t know him anymore. Not at all.*

“Maybe. Peter probably thinks you know where I am and all about the business. He won’t believe you if you tell him you don’t know shit.”

“I don’t.”

“We know that, but he won’t buy it. He’ll try to get to me through you. So me not telling you too much is for your own good.”

“How do you figure that? If he thinks I know what’s going on, he’ll try anything to get it out of me and hurt me real bad. It sounds like you not telling me anything is keeping you safe. You don’t trust me.”

“I haven’t trusted you since you started cheating on me.”

“Really, you’re going to bring all that up again? I never cheated on you, Freddy. You’re in deep trouble, I’m in trouble, and that’s what you want to discuss?”

“You can be a real bitch, Myla. A real fucking bitch.”

“And you can be a real prick. Don’t think I forgot what you did to me.”

“I told you a million fucking times I was sorry about that. I wasn’t right in my head that day. I didn’t mean for it to go that far. I sent you flowers and bought you an expensive as hell diamond bracelet. What more can I say?”

“Absolutely nothing.” She cleared her throat. “Did you call your brother? I’m sure he can help you.”

“Maybe. And don’t contact him. I don’t want you meeting him or anything, understand?”

“I’m just trying to help you. You know, make sense of all this. I’m figuring you’re using a burner phone.”

“Right. I gotta go.”

“Wait, tell me what I’m supposed to do.”

No answer. This time, Freddy had ended the call.

Exhaling a long breath, she tossed the phone beside her and massaged her throbbing temples. She glanced at the clock radio on the floor: 4:00 a.m. Was it too early to contact Diesel?

“Why wake him up when there’s nothing he can do now?” she said aloud.

The conversation with Freddy weighed heavily on Myla, and she knew sleep would elude her. She pushed out of bed,

padded over to the mini fridge, took out a bottle of tea, then curled up in one of the cushy chairs.

Freddy was downright hostile toward her. *If anyone should be pissed, it should be me. Actually, I am pissed.* And why wouldn't she be? Myla's life had been upended, and she had that creep Peter looking for her. She didn't doubt for one second that he wouldn't try any means possible to get information out of her. The kicker was that she didn't have *any* information.

"I was such a dumbass. How could I have been so naïve?" she said.

Had she been that desperate for stability? Maybe. As far back as Myla could remember, she always felt that she was living on shaky ground. She'd been born into a family mired in conflict and chaos that lacked any structure she and her siblings desperately needed. Inconsistency was the only constant in their household. Her mother was completely self-absorbed, and her father was non-present most of the time until he never returned.

The phone rang again.

"Hello?"

"Tell me where you are," Freddy said.

"I told you."

"Not the town, the name of the motel."

"Does it matter?"

"You act as if you don't trust me," he spat out the words.

"I don't know how I feel right now. Everything's surreal."

"So you're not going to tell me?"

"No."

He snorted. "Glad to know I have you in my corner."

Threads of anger weaved through her. "That's not fair, and you know it. You won't even tell me where you are. Don't



twist this around and make it my fault.”

“I told you why I can’t tell—”

“It’s a lame reason,” she said.

“Whatever. I gotta go.”

Before Myla could reply, Freddy hung up on her *again*.

She drew her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. She rested her head on her knees and waited for sunrise.

THE THIN SUNLIGHT awakened her as it filtered through the partially closed curtains, making a pattern of light and shade on the tan carpet. Myla rubbed the sleep from her eyes, then pushed open the window coverings and watched the sun spread its copper hues across the sky. Several cars drove down the street, and a delivery truck turned into the hotel parking lot and pulled into a space adjacent to the building. A few people stood by their vehicles as bellhops loaded their luggage.

Turning away, she glanced at the digital clock on the nightstand. It read 6:48 a.m. After a big yawn and stretch, Myla pushed up from the oversized chair and padded to the bathroom. She looked into the mirror and shook her head.

“I look like hell,” she muttered under her breath as her gaze skimmed over puffy eyes and smudges of mascara under her lashes. She grabbed her facial cleanser and scrubbed all the remnants of yesterday’s makeup from her face.

By the time she washed her hair and showered, the morning sun was streaming into the room. She picked up the phone and tapped in Diesel’s number.

“Yo,” a deep voice greeted her.

“Hi. This is Myla. I—”

“I know it’s you. I was gonna give you a call.”

“You were?”

“Yeah, I haven’t heard from you.”

“I meant to call, but I don’t want to be a pest.”

“Fuck that. You’re fine. What’s up?”

“Freddy called me early this morning.”

“Is he all right? Did he tell you where he is? What did he say?”

“I guess he’s okay. I have no clue where he is, considering he didn’t tell me much.”

“Did you get the vibe that he couldn’t talk freely?”

“No, I didn’t. I’m pretty sure Freddy was alone. He kept trying to find out where I was. I told him I was in Elizabeth, staying at a motel. He didn’t give me much information. He kept saying it was for my own good because I wouldn’t be able to tell Peter anything if he came after me.”

“Sounds more like it’s for Freddy’s good, not yours.”

“That’s what I told him. He got real pissed at me about that.”

“Did he give you any details on what happened?”

“At first he said it was ‘sort of ... maybe’ self-defense, then he said it *was* but that Peter wouldn’t see it like that. He didn’t tell me anything more. Oh, he also told me not to contact you.”

“Why the fuck would he say that? I’m the only one who can help him out of this shit.”

“I know. Maybe he’s embarrassed for you to know. Freddy always tried hard to be the best, so you’d be proud of him.”

“Shit. He needs to fuckin’ call me.”

“I agree. He was using a burner phone.”

“I figured that. I’m coming over now. Get all your stuff packed. You’re coming with me.”

“Where to?”

“I’ll explain when I get there. You’re not safe. It’s only a matter of time before Peter the Asshole figures out where you are. I’ll be there soon.”

Then the line went dead. Myla stood in the sunshine, wondering how her life had taken such a significant detour. Where was Diesel going to take her? Would her life ever be normal again? And why in the hell was Freddy so hostile toward her when he's the one who fucked *everything* up?

After taking several deep breaths to calm herself, she put on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, then began packing her suitcases.

Twenty minutes later, a knock sounded on the door. She looked through the peephole and saw Diesel. She swung open the door.

"That was fast. I'm not finished yet."

"That's cool. Take your time."

She walked over to the dresser, opened the drawer, and pulled out several casual tops. Turning toward him, she caught his eyes roving over her. A heated flush crept up her neck as she shuffled her feet. Glancing toward the suitcase on the bed, she mumbled, "I have to put these in there."

He brought his gaze to her face. "Go ahead."

"Where are you taking me?" she said, moving toward the suitcase.

"To the clubhouse."

Myla froze to the spot. "*Your* clubhouse?"

"Yeah."

She turned around. "Will I be safe there?"

He busted out laughing. "Fuck yeah. You got a bunch of outlaw bikers in a secure facility. What do you think?"

A smile whispered across her lips. "I meant, will the guys be okay with me being there?"

"Yeah, that's why I'm taking you there. The prez and VP are cool with it, and so are the brothers."

"Are you going to be there?"

He ran a hand through his dark hair. “I gotta figure out some things, but yeah, I live there.”

“I didn’t know that. It must be a big place.”

“It is. I’ll give you some of the rules you gotta be aware of. Also, some of the club girls may be a bit pissed to have a new woman in the place.”

“Club girls?”

Diesel cleared his throat. “Chicks who are taken care of by the club. You know, they help us out with some things and we give them room and board. It works out most of the time.”

Myla caught on right away that the women were there for the men’s sexual pleasure. She had to smile at how Diesel was trying to explain the situation without really explaining it.

“They won’t bother you. They’ll know you’re with me and respect that. It’s just that they may be snarky and shit like that.”

“I’m sure I can handle it. Besides, I’m not interested in making any new friends.”

Another laugh came from deep in his chest. “You’ll do all right. The other guys will leave you alone ’cause they’ll know you’re with me too.”

“Okay. I’ll do my best to fit in. Anyway, it’s only for a short time.”

“Yeah, that’s a good attitude.”

Myla checked the closet and drawers one last time and picked up her shoulder bag and tote.

“I’m all set.”

Without a word, Diesel grabbed the two suitcases, and they walked out of the room.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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THE HEAVY BASS beat made the floor in Diesel's room vibrate. Myla had been camped out there for the past three days, and it still seemed like she'd been dropped into another world. She couldn't get used to the constant noise that filled the clubhouse most hours of the day. If the men weren't playing poker, darts, or pool, they had parties—and boy, did they have a lot of parties—or watching car racing or sports on the big screen television in the great room. If everyone was hung over after a club party, they just moped around and listened to heavy metal or hard-rock songs from a jukebox.

Myla had been on her own since she'd turned sixteen and wasn't used to being around a lot of people, let alone living *with* them and their lifestyle. When she moved in with Freddy, it was exciting and new, but having someone in her space was a bit of an adjustment. However, it was never anything like what went on inside the clubhouse. During the last three days—it seemed much longer than that—she often wondered how the men and women who lived here could keep up the frenzied pace. It was driving her bonkers, and she was in Diesel's room most of the time.

The doorknob rattled, then the door flew open. Diesel walked in, throwing her a side grin as he made his way to the tall dresser against the south wall.

“Another party downstairs?” She stretched her legs out in front of her, smoothing her jean skirt with her hands.

“Looks like it. A few of the brothers are setting up the poker tables.”

“Do you guys ever just have a quiet night watching a good movie or reading a book?”

Diesel stared at her as if he were trying to gauge whether she was joking or serious, then he smiled and shook his head no.

“Doesn’t it get to be too much?” she asked.

“Sometimes, yeah. If I’m not feeling it, I go for a ride or come to my room. I’ll even go to Ruthie’s for dinner by myself if I want to get away. We all respect each other’s space.” He shrugged off his jacket and tossed it on the bed. “Is it getting to be too much for you?”

“A little. I’m used to a bit of partying and a lot of quiet time—just the opposite of here. When Freddy started his pain clinics, I was alone most of the time. He was gone all day and sometimes didn’t get home until ten or eleven at night.”

“That must’ve sucked,” he said, tugging his T-shirt over his head.

Mesmerized by how Diesel’s back muscles flexed and his biceps bulged, she couldn’t speak but only watch. The tattoo sleeve on his right arm seemed to dance with every movement he made. He tossed the shirt toward the bed, missed it, then bent over to pick it up. At that point, she couldn’t tear her gaze away even if she wanted to. His flat stomach tensed as he lifted the shirt and threw it into a hamper in the corner of the room next to the closet.

When she pried her eyes away, he slightly smirked. She flushed with embarrassment that he’d caught her checking him out.

“I’m gonna take a shower, then we’ll go out for some food,” he said, shooting her a wink.

Myla sat there in silence, abhorred by how she gawked at her boyfriend’s brother. *What’s wrong with me?* Her last conversation with Freddy echoed through her brain. *He still doesn’t trust me. He brought up Allan again. All this crap is happening, and he’s back to accusing me of cheating on him. It’s like that is justification for hurting me.* She walked over to

one of the open windows and breathed in the scent of blooming wildflowers.

The sky was still a vibrant blue, and the green leaves on the towering oak trees swayed in the light breeze. Down below, Myla spotted several men wearing leather jackets and black jeans leaning against their motorcycles like black crows huddled together. Their loud voices wafted up through the open windows. A couple of women in short skirts and makeup so glaring that Myla could see it from her vantage point sashayed toward the men, teetering on high heels. One woman sidled up to a long-haired biker, who tangled his hand in her long tresses and kissed her deeply.

“Anything interesting going on out there?” Diesel’s deep voice pulled her away from the scene below.

“Not really. Just a few of your friends with their girlfriends.”

“Girlfriends? Lemme see.”

He strode over to the window and stood beside her. The clean scent of his freshly washed skin embraced her, and the ends of his dark hair, still damp from the shower, curled slightly over the collar of a gray shirt.

Diesel laughed. “Those women aren’t girlfriends; they’re party girls. They come to a lot of the Insurgent parties. The one who’s wrapped around my brother, Helm, keeps trying to get him to go out with her outside of the club.” He turned away and ran a hand through his wavy hair. “That’s not gonna happen.”

Myla glanced down again. “Why not?”

“For one thing, Helm isn’t into dating, and for another, they’re party girls.”

“Party girls can’t date?”

He shuffled over to the closet, pulled out black biker boots, and slipped them on. “Yeah, they can date, but most bikers

don't get involved with them outside parties." He stood up straight and flashed a smile at her. "You ready to go?"

"Almost." She dashed into the bathroom, brushed her hair, and swiped pink gloss across her lips. "Ready," she said, walking out into the room.

Diesel's eyes swept over her figure, then landed on her face. There was something seductive in his look, and before she could process it, he turned away and crossed over to the door.

Casting her gaze downward, Myla slung her purse strap over her shoulder and walked out of the room.

"Stay close to me," he said as they descended the stairs. "They'll be some dudes here that are with another club."

"Should I be scared?" She joked.

He stopped so suddenly that she ran into him. Squinting, he replied, "Yeah. Stick with me." He grasped her hand and led her into the great room without another word.

The air inside was thick with smoke and noise. The lights were so dim that Myla could barely see a few feet in front of her. The pervasive smell of weed floated throughout the room, making her stomach roil a bit.

"Dude!" a big, beefy man with a bushy black beard said before engulfing Diesel in a huge hug.

"What the fuck are you doin' here?" Diesel said.

"Me, Crutch, Easy, and Iceman decided to go on a road trip. How've you been, brother?" The bearded man's gaze glided over Myla.

"Good." Diesel grasped her hand again. "What've you been up to?"

"Same old shit, you know. You comin' to the rally in our neck of the woods?"

"Yeah. Rags, Throttle, Bones, Hawk, and some other brothers are going too. It's been too long since we've been in



San Diego.”

“No shit.”

“Whatcha drinking?” Diesel asked, motioning to a biker behind the bar.

“Double Jack.”

He pointed to the bearded man and lifted two fingers in the air. The bartender rushed over with two glasses of whiskey, handed them to the two men, and hurried away.

Diesel bent down. “You want something to drink?” he asked, his lips brushing against her ear.

“I’m good,” she yelled back.

Diesel turned away and began talking with a few other scary-looking guys. Myla’s eyes had become accustomed to the dim light, and she scanned the room. It was packed with people, but the men far outnumbered the women. Several men and women engaged in sex right in the open. No one seemed to pay attention to what these couples were doing. Instead, they just kept talking, drinking, and playing pool. It blew her mind. Looking at Diesel, he seemed oblivious to the man playing around with two naked women on the table right next to them. Darting her eyes away, she focused her attention on the men at the pool table. One of them, the tall, skinny one with long hair and droopy dark eyes, looked familiar. *Where have I seen him before?* Racking her memory, she came up with nothing. *Maybe I’m wrong. It isn’t that well-lit in here.* Myla turned away even though a niggling feeling that she’d seen him before persisted.

“What’s your name, sweet butt?”

The pinch made her jump; she rubbed her behind and turned, glaring.

A man with blond hair down to his shoulders grinned. Before she could say anything, Diesel stepped in front of her.

“She’s off-limits, Iceman.”

The guy raised his hands and laughed. “No worries, dude. I didn’t know she was with you. If you wanna change it up a bit, let me know. She’s a fine piece of ass.”

Myla sensed Diesel grow tense.

“She’s *not* a piece of ass. Show respect, asshole.”

“Whoa, lighten up. What’s all this fuss over a broad?” the bearded guy said, placing a hand on Diesel’s shoulder.

He shrugged off the guy’s hand. “Stay outta this, Demon. I’m just telling Iceman that the woman’s off-limits. I don’t need to explain myself.”

Iceman took a few steps back. “I didn’t know, bro. Sorry.”

Demon nodded his head. “It’s an innocent mistake, right?”

Diesel gave a chin lift, then finished his drink. “Later,” he said, bumping fists with the two men. He put her hand in his, and they walked outside.

Myla breathed in the fresh air.

“Sorry about that shit in there. The guys thought you were a party girl.”

“It’s okay. It’s not like I’ve never been hit on before.”

“I bet you have plenty of times,” he said as they walked toward his SUV. “That guy, Iceman, isn’t from here. He’s a member of the San Diego Chapter.”

“I didn’t know you had a club there.”

“Yeah. We got several chapters in different states.”

“I heard you tell the guy with the beard that you’re going to San Diego. When are you leaving?”

“In two or three weeks. There’s a motorcycle rally I was planning to go to, and now maybe I can find out what’s happening with Freddy.”

“Can I go with you?”

He glanced at her sideways. “I travel alone.”

“I can help. I know the places Freddy went to.”

“You can tell me.”

“I want to go. I can’t just sit here alone and do nothing.”

“No reason to talk about it now. We’ll see.”

Myla crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t need your permission, you know. I can go if I want to.”

Diesel opened the passenger door and stood aside. “I’m not gonna stop you from heading out there on your own.”

“Then why can’t we travel together?”

“I told you we’d talk about it later.”

“But—”

He held up his hand. “This conversation is over.” He closed the door and walked around to the driver’s side.

A metal ballad played on the car radio as they drove toward town. The road curved around tall pine trees and towering cliffs. Myla rolled down the window halfway and breathed in the fresh air. The clean, sharp scent of butterscotch from the ponderosa pines filled the car. The smell reminded her of the hard candies she used to buy at the drugstore on the way home from grade school. The creamy, buttery deliciousness was one of the few bright spots during the turbulent days of her childhood.

As they neared the town, the rush of the Colorado River filled her ears. She looked over and saw the water gushing over jagged rocks.

“I can’t believe people go whitewater rafting in that,” she said, pointing to the river below.

“It’s awesome as hell. Have you ever tried it?” asked Diesel.

“No, and I don’t ever want to.” She shivered as they crossed over the bridge.

“It’s a fuckin’ adrenaline rush.”

“I’m sure it competes with riding on your motorcycle.”

He looked over at her. “*Nothing* compares to riding a Harley.”

She laughed. “Excuse me.”

“You don’t get it because you’re a citizen,” he said matter-of-factly.

“And only bikers get it?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding his head.

“I’m surprised we didn’t ride your motorcycle into town.”

“I ride solo.”

“You’ve never taken anyone for a ride?”

“Nope.”

“Is there a reason?”

“It’s an outlaw thing. Only someone special, like an old lady or a serious squeeze gets on my bike.”

“And you’ve never had a serious relationship?”

“Nope.”

“I’m surprised some woman hasn’t snatched you up.”

He glanced over at her. “I’m not looking to be snatched up.”

“Doesn’t it get lonely?”

He smiled. “I got plenty of chicks giving me attention. No problem there.”

The images of the scantily-clad women at the party and the club girls who lived at the clubhouse popped into her mind. Most of the clubhouse women didn’t talk to her. They glared at Myla and whispered things behind her back but never spoke to her. They acted like she was an unwelcome intruder in their world, and she supposed she was to a certain extent.

As they entered the town, they passed several people biking and jogging with dogs.

“You like barbecue?” Diesel asked.

“Yes,” she replied as they passed a few souvenir shops. “We were supposed to go on a family vacation here when I was a kid. My parents promised me, my brothers, and my sisters, we’d go if we were good, but we never went.”

“Maybe you all weren’t that good.” He joked.

A faint smile whispered across her lips. “That wasn’t it. My parents were so fucked up they could never get their act together.”

His fingers lightly brushed over her hand. “That must’ve sucked.”

She shrugged. “It’s whatever.”

“Do your parents live in Denver?”

Myla turned away and watched the shops and restaurants go by. “I don’t know if my dad does. He just split one day and never contacted any of us again. My mom does. She’s on husband number”—she racked her brain for a few seconds—“five, I think, or it could be six. I can’t remember.”

“Fuck,” he said.

She shrugged again. “I haven’t seen my mom in years.”

Diesel placed his hand on hers and squeezed it. “Parents can do a number on kids.”

“It is what it is,” she said, pulling her hand away. “So what’s this barbecue place like?”

“It’s one of the best in town. The club owns it.”

“Really? I didn’t think outlaw clubs owned legitimate businesses. I read that the one-percenters are into strip bars, prostitution, firearm sales, and drug manufacturing and dealing. Is your club into anything besides owning a restaurant?”

Myla saw the slight stiffening of Diesel's shoulders, and the fine lines around his eyes deepened.

"I don't talk about club business."

"It's not allowed?"

"Club business stays inside the club. Change the conversation."

*I hit a nerve, for sure.* The last thing Myla wanted was to get on his wrong side. He was the only one she could trust at that moment. "Sorry, I can't keep up with *all* your club rules."

"It's easy. There are only three things citizens need to remember: don't ask about club business, don't talk to members unless spoken to, and show respect at all times."

"Got it."

The vehicle swung into a large parking lot, and he took a spot in front of a sign that read "Members." Myla shuddered at the thought of what his club did to non-members who disregarded the warning.

A cute hostess with dark hair down to her waist smiled widely at Diesel the minute he walked into the restaurant, then threw a cursory glance at Myla.

"It's been a while since you've been in here," she said, fawning all over him.

"You're looking good." His voice was husky.

Stomach hardening, Myla turned away and looked around for the restroom. Spotting one, she tapped Diesel on the shoulder, told him she'd meet him at the table, and walked away. She stood inside the lounge area and stared into the mirror. *Why do I feel like pulling the hostess's hair from the root? Why do I care that she's flirting with Diesel, and he's flirting back?* She inhaled a deep breath and released it slowly. *Keep it together. He's in an outlaw club, he's got a ton of women at his beck and call, and he's Freddy's brother. His damn brother. Keep. It. Together.*

Myla pulled out a brush from her purse and ran it through her dark brown hair. The long, straight strands and the toffee highlights glistened under the recessed lights. The single crystal stud in her right nostril shone under the artificial light. After swiping on a little more pink lipstick, she snapped shut her small black purse and hurried out into the restaurant.

“I thought you got lost,” Diesel said as she approached the table. He stood up, stepped around the table, and pulled out a chair.

“Thank you,” she murmured, sitting down.

“What do you want to drink?” he asked, handing her the menu and motioning to the waiter.

“What are you having?”

“Whiskey.”

“That’s too strong for me. I’ll have a glass of chardonnay, please.”

Diesel gave the order to the waiter and then looked down at the menu. The early evening sun bathed his face in gold, showcasing his chiseled features: a perfectly square-shaped face, strong jawline, and a straight nose. Myla glanced away for fear of being caught staring at him again.

“This is a nice place. The scenery is beautiful. The mountains are all around, and the blooming wildflowers are gorgeous. I guess it’s pretty everywhere in Pinewood Springs since this is a mountain town.” *Okay, now you’re just babbling. Why are you so nervous?*

Diesel laughed.

“What would you suggest I try for dinner?” Myla took a large gulp of white wine.

“The pork and beef ribs are awesome. If you like hot stuff, then the spicy links and habanero barbecue ribs kick ass.”

She smiled. “You surprise me.”

“How?”

“You come off as a real rough badass, but then you pull out my chair. I’ve never had a guy pull out a chair for me.”

Diesel put down his menu and stared at her. “Freddy never did it?”

“No,” she said softly.

“Once I find him, I’m gonna kick his ass. He knows better. My old man was a fuckin’ hypocrite, but he taught us to always treat a lady respectfully.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Did Freddy respect you?”

Images from the early days of their relationship spun through her mind like a carousel, then the last fight they had crashed through the happy memories. No way would she tell Diesel that his younger brother had beaten the crap out of her. There was no reason for him to know that.

“He was okay. The beginning was great, but he changed after starting the clinics. I told you he was obsessed with the idea of me cheating on him, which I never did. I think Freddy kept it up because he felt guilty about stepping out on me.”

Diesel gazed at her over the rim of his glass as he took a sip. She couldn’t help but notice his full lips.

“He cheated on you?” he asked, placing the empty glass on the table.

“Yeah. Once he started making big money, it seemed like he got bored with our life and became increasingly restless. He craved the excitement of living in the fast lane. Variety became his mantra in his cars, clothes, and women.”

“Just like our parents. Our old man had a woman at every truck stop, and our mom used to step out with this asshole on the weekends. Fuck, I hated that jerk. I caught my mom with him when I was in high school. I was out with this chick, and I bumped—literally—right into them. I was so pissed off I almost killed Jack. My mom was crying and screaming, and it took five guys to pull me off him. It felt so good to bash in his



damn face.” He picked up the beer bottle and took a long pull. “When my old man would get home after a three-week run, my parents acted like the perfect married couple. Fuckin’ hypocrites. Anyway, Freddy got that shit from our people.”

“I didn’t know that about your parents. Freddy always talked about what a wonderful marriage they had. They seemed nice when we’d go visit them in Hayes.”

“Yeah, he was always the delusional one. I couldn’t get outta there fast enough.”

“Hayes seems like a nice town.”

“It sucked. It was scorching in the summer and freezing in the winter. We were only about ten miles from the Nebraska border, which the townspeople would tell anyone who’d come through Hayes. I never got that. There was a grocery store, a Dollar General, and one small street with businesses on both sides as a downtown area. The only good thing about that desolate town was the park by the Rider River, where I’d hang out with my friends and smoke weed. On the weekends, I’d take a chick down there to have some fun.”

“Freddy doesn’t feel the same way you do. He told me so many stories about his days in Hayes.”

“Like I said, he was delusional as fuck. He always saw things the way he wanted them and not the way they really were.”

The waiter placed a plate of spicy links and beef brisket in front of her and a steaming heap of ribs in front of Diesel.

“It smells incredible,” she said, cutting into one of the links. She placed the morsel in her mouth and chewed slowly. “This is delicious.”

“Best barbecue in the valley,” he said before picking up a rib.

“I feel bad that you’re not staying in your room. I can sleep on the couch. You should be back in your room.”

“I will be for the next few days. More out-of-town members are coming, and they’ll be crashing at the club, so all the rooms are gonna be full.” He took a big bite out of the rib. “And *I’ll* stay on the couch.” His eyes bore into hers. “And that’s not open for discussion.”

They ate, drank, and talked for an hour, avoiding any conversation about how Diesel would find Freddy. A gnawing feeling in Myla’s gut told her he was working to find his brother, but she wasn’t included in the plan.

“Are you ready to head back?” he asked after signing the bill.

Nodding, she pushed back her chair and stood up. The hostess gave him a big hug that made Myla grit her teeth. She opened the door and stepped into the night air. A few seconds later, Diesel came up from behind her.

They walked silently over to the SUV. A few stars scattered across the night sky. The yellowish light of the streetlamp shone down on the parking lot as miller moths erratically fluttered around it. Myla slipped into the car and tucked in her legs before Diesel closed the door.

“What kind of music do you like?” he asked, pulling out of the space.

“Pop, some metal, hard-rock, fifties, mellow rock, country—I’m pretty eclectic.”

“What about Bruce Springsteen?”

“Sure.”

He plugged the USB cable into his phone, and a few seconds later, Springsteen’s gruff voice sang, “Born to Run.”

Myla closed her eyes and let the melody and lyrics wash over her. She felt safe for the first time since that awful night when Freddy took off, leaving a bloodbath in his wake. Diesel had that effect on her. She knew nothing bad would happen when he was around, and the panic that always threatened to spill out of her was subdued in his presence.

Myla's heart sank a bit when he pulled into the clubhouse's parking lot. She wished they could've kept driving all night. Loud music spilled from the building's doors and windows, and more people milled around outside, smoking cigarettes and weed, drinking beer and whiskey.

"Are you going to hang out at the party?" she asked.

"Yeah, but first, I'll take you to the room."

"I can go by myself." She scooted out of the car.

"No way. The guys in there will take you for a club or party girl. Just stick next to me."

Diesel grasped her hand. A tingle ran along her skin where his warm fingers touched hers. She glanced up at him, but he looked straight ahead as they approached the front door.

Inside, the air was hot and thick. Two women with glassy eyes danced provocatively on a makeshift stage. A group of bikers *whooped* and clapped, their laughter sounding like tin in her ears. Several men greeted Diesel with back slaps. She ignored the wolfish stares as she sliced through throngs of leather-clad men. Myla looked around for the man she'd seen earlier, the one who looked familiar. She spotted him in a corner, his pants to his ankles and legs spread wide. A blonde head bobbed between them. Suddenly, the biker's dark eyes locked onto hers, and a shiver ran down her spine as a chill crept through her skin. *I know him. He knows me. Something's off here.*

Then Diesel led her to the stairway, and she followed him up to the next floor. When they entered his room, relief spread through her.

"Keep the door locked. I have a key, so if someone knocks, don't answer, okay?"

"Okay. I'll be fine. Have a good time."

He stepped out and closed the door behind him with a quick nod. Myla heard his boots reverberating on the stairs,

growing fainter and fainter until she couldn't hear them anymore.

Fatigue filled her body, and she quickly undressed and slipped on a nightshirt. All she wanted to do was sleep. She closed the blinds on the windows, then pulled back the covers and slipped between them. Myla wondered if Diesel would end up in the arms of one of the party girls. She turned from one side to the other, punched the pillow, then willed herself to banish images of him with a woman from her mind. After several minutes, she drifted off to sleep.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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“GET OVER HERE,” Demon said, waving his arm at Diesel.

Diesel walked over to the bar. He and Demon had become good friends over the years. He hadn't seen him or some of the other members from the San Diego Chapter since he was released from the slammer the year before.

“Drink up,” Demon said, pressing a tumbler into Diesel's hand. “You sure go for the pretty women.”

“That's fuckin' random,” he said before taking a sip.

“I'm talking 'bout the broad you're with. I saw you take her up to your room. Is she your flavor of the night?” Demon laughed and then brought a beer bottle to his lips.

“It's not like that, bro.”

“It's me you're talking to, dude. I don't go for any BS.”

It wasn't the time or place to tell Demon about what was going on with Freddy—that would come later.

“She's a friend who needs some help, that's all.”

The bearded man squinted at Diesel as if trying to ascertain if he were telling the truth. A slow grin spread across his lips. “I believe you, dude. There are a lot of hot broads here who need some help. I'm thinking of having some fun with that one.”

Diesel looked over at where he pointed and saw Tania. The club girl's large tits, curvy shape, and big brown eyes made her a favorite among visiting club members. “You better get over there while she's free. A lot of dudes go for Tania.”

“And you don't?”

Diesel laughed. “I go for her just fine. You're the guest. I can have it anytime.”

Demon let out a big guffaw that made his whole body shake. He guzzled the rest of his beer, let out a loud burp, and clasped his hand on Diesel's shoulder. "I'll catch you later," he said.

Diesel watched his buddy stagger over to Tania. The guy was more than tipsy. He doubted if Demon would last more than ten minutes.

When he caught sight of Sandy, the waitress from Beau's pool hall, he placed the empty glass on the bar and headed to the stairway.

THE ROOM WAS dim, but his eyes adjusted quickly with the moonlight filtering through the slats in the blinds. He looked over at the bed. Myla lay on her side facing him, her eyes closed, breathing soft and steady, and hair tousled on the pillow. *She's beautiful.* For a split second, something tightened around his heart. Diesel shook his head and knew he shouldn't be standing there staring at her. Dragging his gaze away, he walked over to the couch and pulled off his boots. A thread of anger weaved through him. He couldn't believe Freddy had abandoned her. *He left her in the middle of a clusterfuck, knowing she'd be in danger.*

The cell phone in his back pocket vibrated. He fished it out: Zach's name flashed across the screen. Diesel pushed up from the couch and strode to the bathroom.

"Hey," he said as he quietly closed the door.

"Yo, dude. Whatcha got going at the club?"

"The usual. You got something for me?"

A low chuckle echoed through the phone. "Yeah, dude. Your brother was into serious shit with some dangerous dealers."

"Like Peter Cano?"

"Exactly. The douchebag operates outta LA and San Diego. Denver was new territory, and your brother was way outta his league in trying to run a street-level distribution of

fantanyl and other opioids. He was also involved in the transportation and distribution of methamphetamine.”

“Fuck. I doubt Freddy knew what the hell he was doing. I’d like to know how he got mixed up with this Cano fucker.”

“My guess is from the opioid pill mills he was running. Your brother was pulling in megabucks, a magnet for drawing in dirtbags like Cano.”

“Is this fucker still in Denver?”

“I’m not sure. So far, I’m not getting shit on Cano’s whereabouts. I’ll keep digging.”

“I’m coming to Denver in a couple of days. I’ll let you know when I hit the city. I’ll bring you some good stash and some dough. I appreciate your help.”

“No worries, bro. I know you’d do the same for me. Have you heard from Freddy?”

“No, but his girlfriend did. Seems like he’s doing okay, but I still don’t know where the hell he is. He could be in Denver hiding out.”

“Or in Hayes.”

“Nah, he wouldn’t go there. That’d be the first place they’d look for him.”

“You’re right. I’ll keep sending out feelers. I hope to know more when you get here.”

“Thanks, man. I owe you.”

“Hang tight, dude.”

Diesel stared at the blank screen long after their phone call finished. A multitude of emotions churned inside him: rage, unease, guilt, and confusion. *Why didn’t Freddy come to me for help?* Maybe it was because Diesel pushed him away for most of their lives. When Freddy wanted to follow in his footsteps and prospect for the Insurgents, he talked his brother out of it. It wasn’t out of malice but because he knew Freddy wouldn’t make it through a week as a prospect. The thought

that Freddy was trying to show Diesel he could make it big on his own and be a badass kept looping through his mind. *I should've talked to him more, told him what was up in the world.*

“Ah hell,” he muttered under his breath. He pushed away from the counter and walked out of the bathroom.

Diesel pulled out a blanket, sheets, and a pillow from the closet's top shelf and placed them on the couch. He grabbed a pair of sweatpants from the dresser drawer. After stripping down to his boxers, he slipped on the sweats and lay on the sofa. He punched the pillow a few times, then glanced over at the bed. Even with the covers over her, Diesel still saw the shapely outline of her figure. Memories of their letter-writing days ribboned through his head as he watched her chest rise and fall with her soft breathing.

When Myla first wrote to him, he thought it was a joke, so he ignored the letters. Then, when he'd spoken to Freddy, his brother told him Myla had read that the two worst things about prison life were boredom and loneliness. Diesel agreed with the boredom and figured that was why he kept starting fights, but he never thought he was lonely. His brother urged him to respond to Myla as a favor to him, so Diesel answered back. At first, he sent back two or three short sentences, but the replies got longer as the letters kept coming. Before he knew it, Diesel was looking forward to the mail. Whenever he'd see a lavender or yellow envelope, a sliver of excitement ran through him. Of course, he'd never admit that to *anyone*. Over many months and tons of letters, Myla held a special spot in his life. After serving his full prison term—since all good behavior credits had been eaten up by his fighting, stubbornness to authority, and “general bad attitude,” as the warden had stated on Diesel's prison papers—he ended up doing a year of parole, which had ended three months ago.

At first, Diesel missed the connection he'd made with Myla during his prison stint. Still, as he got back into the swing of club business and running the car wash with Wheelie,



his letter-writing relationship had been relegated to a distant memory.

Freddy had begun to call him less frequently, and whenever Diesel asked about Myla, his brother seemed to resent it, so he stopped asking.

A pang of guilt twisted his gut. He should've called Freddy more, especially when his little brother stopped reaching out to him. If he was being honest, he'd sensed that something wasn't right with Freddy, but he'd been too busy with the club and his car business to deal with it. And now Freddy had killed someone and was in hiding. *Fuck.*

Myla's soft moans interrupted the thoughts swirling in his head. The blanket and sheet had slipped down her left shoulder to the top swell of her breasts. The image of her hit him right in the groin, and his dick twitched. Punching the pillow, he turned away and faced the back of the couch. He told his body to stand the hell down, then began listing Harley Davidson models from 1948 onward in his mind. When he hit 1961, sleep overtook him.



DIESEL GAVE THE MC president a chin lift, then slid into a folding chair. Throttle took the seat to his right, and Smokey plopped down on his left.

“Any news on your brother?” Smokey asked.

“Some, but nothing that tells me where he's at.”

“Hawk talked to Banger about the club helping out. I'm down with going to Denver with—”

Banger's gavel hitting the wood block stopped all conversations and marked the beginning of church. Hawk sat at the front of the massive table with Hubcap, the treasurer, and Buffalo, the secretary. Rock, the sergeant-at-arms, stood at the back of the room. As road captain, Throttle only sat up front if a rally, road trip, or run was planned. A couple of Insurgents from the San Diego Chapter—Demon and Iceman

—were also at church, which piqued the curiosity of Diesel and his fellow brothers.

“Our San Diego brothers, Panther and Jagged, are asking for our help.” Banger jerked his head in the direction of Demon and Iceman. “Two brothers are here to tell us what’s been happening with their club. We’ll hear them out, then”—he sat down in a wooden chair—“they’ll leave the room while we discuss the situation.”

Demon stood up and cleared his throat. “As your prez said, our prez and VP reached out because we got some shit going down back home. We’re being undercut in the distribution of weed and metal. We’ve been aced out on some major deals in the last eight months. Panther and Jagged thought it was a random thing at first. They had Termite, Iceman, and me put the feelers out.” Demon paused and took a big gulp of water.

“And it wasn’t,” Diesel said.

Nodding his head, Demon said, “No fucking way. We found out the local East Bay Dogs are helping the fucking Grim Henchman to undermine our deals. It goes beyond the clubs, though. Some gangsters out of LA are involved too.”

Diesel’s ear pricked up when he heard the word “gangsters.”

“Have you reached out to the Angry Disciples?” Throttle asked.

“Yeah. They’re looking into it on the LA side.”

The Insurgents MC, including the San Diego Chapter, allied with the one-percenter Angry Disciples MC, rivals of the Oakland-based Grim Henchman MC. The East Bay Dogs operated out of El Cajon in San Diego County and were a regional club with links to the Grim Henchman and claimed one-percenter status.

“Sounds like you got a rat among you,” Hawk said.

Iceman jumped to his feet, pushing his chair back so hard it hit the wall. “Yeah, we got a fucking rat. A brother who is a

piece of shit.”

An eruption of curse words punctuated by a loud pounding on the table filled the room, drowning out the gavel. Many members stood up, fists in the air, nostrils flaring, baring teeth. Banger leaped to his feet, the gavel’s hammering rising above the anger in the room.

“Calm the fuck down,” Hawk yelled.

There was a scraping of chairs and shuffling of feet as the members sat down. A lot of grumbling echoed through the room.

“It’s infuriating and sad when a brother turns rat, but we gotta detach from our emotions.” Hawk looked between Demon and Iceman. “Any idea who it is?”

Both men shook their heads no.

“We gotta smoke the fucker out,” Rags said.

“And when you find him, I wanna be there when he dies a slow death,” Rock said.

An eruption of *whoops* and hollers filled the air. Once again, Banger slammed the gavel several times on the wood block.

“Does everyone in the club suspect it?” Banger asked.

“Not really,” Demon replied. “It hasn’t been brought up in church. Panther, Jagged, Iceman, and me are the only ones who’ve discussed it. The last two deals went through without a hitch, so we think the fucker is laying low to avoid suspicion. He got a little too greedy and did too much, but he’s pulled back a bit.”

“Sounds like he’s a dumbass. Who the hell makes it obvious that something’s not right for eight damn months?” Diesel said. “And who are these gangsters you’re talking about?”

“Not too sure yet. Bastardo from the Angry Disciples is going to update us.”

“We’ll need names.” *Maybe one of them knows of Peter Cano.* It was a long shot, but it was all he had at that moment.

Demon nodded as his eyes slid from Diesel to Banger. “Do you want Iceman and me to step out?”

Banger stroked his beard for a few seconds. “I didn’t know what the whole situation was. Panther didn’t fill me in, telling me he didn’t feel secure talking about it in the clubhouse or on his phone. Now I can see why. I’m sure I’m talking for all the brothers when I say”—he glanced at Hawk and then met the eyes of each Insurgent—“we don’t need to discuss shit. We’re behind Panther and Jagged all the way. You got our help in whatever way you need it.”

A roar of applause burst from the brothers. It shook the meeting room and reverberated from its walls.

Demon and Icemen held up clenched fists. The sound of boots stomping and scraping chairs bounced around the room as all the members stood up, tattooed arms held high, chanting, “Insurgents forever, forever Insurgents” over and over.

After a while, the room quieted down. Iceman and Demon stood together, facing the brothers.

“We appreciate the help,” Demon said.

Iceman opened the door, and the two men walked out as protocol dictated.

“Betraying a brother is the worst thing a member can do,” Diesel said through gritted teeth.

“It’s the worst, and it’s something we’ve been through before,” Banger said. “We’ll get him, and he’ll get what he deserves.”

Hawk pushed off the wall and stood in front of the table. “Considering the shit that’s going on with the San Diego Chapter, we need more brothers to attend the rally over there. I know Throttle, Rags, Diesel, and Smokey are planning to go, but we need at least eight other members to make a presence.

I'm sure the El Cajon fucks are gonna be there along with some Grim assholes."

A rustle of chuckles rippled around the room.

"I'm in," Animal said.

"Me too." Shadow seconded.

"I wasn't planning on going, but seeing what's happening at one of our chapters, I'll be there," Banger said.

"Are you going, Hawk?" Buffalo asked.

Before the VP could answer, Banger, shaking his head, said, "We need Hawk here. We got that big firearms deal going down during the week of the rally. So I'll need Rock, Helm, Axe, Bones, Wheelie, Hog, Gopher, Cruiser, and Puck to stay put. I'd say we only need about three more members in addition to me to head over to the rally. You can let me or Hawk know by the end of the day."

The rest of church was routine club business and a report from Hubcap about their finances.

When Banger announced church was over, the men filed out and spilled into the great room. The club girls jumped up from the couches and greeted them while the prospects scurried around serving each member his favorite drink.

Diesel downed a cold beer in a few gulps, then headed to his room. He turned the knob softly and entered. Myla stood looking out the window, her back to him. The tight jeans she wore molded to her shapely ass and hugged her hips very nicely. *Damn.*

"I didn't hear you come in."

He tore his gaze away from her behind and glanced at her face. A soft blush stained her cheeks red.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"It's okay," she whispered.

“No, it’s *not* okay.” He turned away and walked over to the closet.

An awkward silence permeated the room as Diesel pretended to look through his hanging shirts.

“Did you have a good meeting?” Myla asked in a small voice.

“Yeah.”

“That’s good.”

He felt her gaze on him, but he kept pushing aside T-shirts on the clothes rack, one by one.

“What are you looking for?”

“Something.”

Silence drowned the room again. Then he heard her footsteps tapping behind him.

“It’s a bit claustrophobic in here. I’m going outside for some fresh air.”

Diesel heard the door close, then her footfalls on the stairs. He slammed the closet door shut. *This is bullshit.* So Myla caught him checking her out. So what. He was a man, and she was an attractive woman. *It’s just fucking biology. It doesn’t mean shit.* He should hook up with a club girl. Nina had been giving him the eye all week. She had a great pair of tits, and she liked it when he squeezed and played roughly with them while she sucked his cock.

Diesel ran a comb through his hair, then headed to the great room.

“You want a shot?” Throttle asked as he came through the doorway.

“Nah. Have you seen Nina?”

A huge grin spread across his friend’s face. “She was just asking about you. She’s in the kitchen making me a sandwich. Nina will be happy to see you. It’s about time you had a good

fuck. Rags was telling me you've been going through a dry spell."

Diesel glared. "I'm not going through shit. And tell Rags to get his fuckin' nose outta my business."

Throttle laughed. "Don't sweat it, dude."

"I'm not."

"Here she comes." Throttle sat down.

"Here you go," the club girl said, placing a plate in front of the biker. She looked up at Diesel and smiled. "How've you been?"

"Good." He ran his eyes over the petite brunette's tight body. "You?"

"All right, except that I've been missing you." She placed her hand on his bicep and squeezed. "I like this," she said softly, leaning against him.

The cloying scent of her perfume curled around him, and without thinking, Diesel stepped away, and Nina's hand dropped. He looked at her and wasn't prepared to see tears shining in her eyes. He'd hurt her. *Fuck.*

"Look—" he began.

"Don't. I know the score."

"It's not that, Nina. It's that I got a lot of shit on my mind."

"I get it, I really do." She swiped a hand across her cheeks, then threw him a weak smile. "Bones wants me."

He watched as she walked over to Bones, wrapped her arms around his neck, and kissed him deeply.

"You fucking blew it," Throttle said, pushing his empty plate away.

"I didn't want it." Diesel gazed out the window, wondering what Myla was doing.

"Why the hell not?" Throttle's voice pulled him away from his musings.

“I got shit on my mind, that’s all.”

“It must be tough not knowing where your brother is.”

“Yeah ... it is.”

“How’re you getting along with his ol’ lady?”

“Myla’s not Freddy’s ol’ lady.”

Throttle leaned back in the chair, a smile twitching the corners of his mouth. “I thought she was.”

“Not like in our world.”

“Then how is it in *their* world?”

Diesel’s jaw tightened. “What’s with all the fuckin’ questions?”

“Just making conversation.” Throttle chuckled.

“Fuck off.”

He turned around and strode out of the clubhouse. The warmth of the sun spilled over him. Wispy clouds fanned out across the canopy of blue sky. A soft breeze blew through the trees, rustling the leaves and carrying the scent of fresh pine as birds called to one another.

Glancing around, he didn’t see Myla. He walked to the back of the clubhouse and spotted her crouched down on her haunches by the riverbank. As he strode toward her, he could see by the foaming waves over the rocks that the river’s current was swift.

“Hey,” he said, bending down on his knees beside her.

She looked up toward him, drawing a hand to her forehead to shield the sun. “Hi.”

They sat in silence, listening to the rush of water.

After what seemed like forever to him, she said, “Do you want me to move out? I’m fine with that. I can go—”

“No, it’s fine.”

“I know I’ve disrupted your life.”



“You didn’t ask to be in this situation. I want you safe.”

“I think we need to talk about the elephant in the room, you know?”

“What do you mean?”

Myla twisted her fingers in the grass and pulled a few blades loose. “That we’re attracted to each other.” She kept staring down at the ground. “I’ll admit I was blown away when I first saw you at the diner. I didn’t picture you looking like you do.”

“And how is that?”

“Handsome as all hell.” She chuckled softly.

A grin spread across Diesel’s face. “Did you think I’d look like an ogre or something?”

“Something like that. I mean, you were in prison *and* an outlaw club. I thought you’d have an unkempt beard down to your chest and have some pounds around your waist or something. I don’t know.” She covered her face with her hands.

He laughed. “Maybe that’ll be me in forty years.”

“I doubt that,” she said softly.

Diesel watched the play of sunbeam and shadow on her dark hair.

“What did you think of me?” she asked, glancing up at him.

He averted his gaze to the river. He wanted to tell Myla she was beautiful and hot but didn’t dare. It wasn’t right; she might misunderstand and think he was interested.

“That you were classy.”

“Oh, is that all?” Disappointment laced Myla’s voice.

“You look fine. I’m going into town. Do you want to come? I figure you might want to get some things.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“Do you want to come or not?” He stood up.

Rolling her eyes, she replied, “Yes, I do. Can we go to the grocery store?”

“Sure. I’ll meet you by the SUV.”

“I’m ready now. I’ll walk with you.” Myla straightened out and fell into step with him. “You know it’s okay.”

“What is?”

“For us to be attracted to each other. It doesn’t *mean* anything.”

“It’s just biology.”

“Yes, exactly. I’m glad we cleared the air, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

In his opinion, nothing was resolved. All Myla did was bring their mutual attraction out into the open, which was the last thing he wanted. The sooner he found Freddy and cleaned up his mess, the quicker Myla could leave Pinewood Springs.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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“YOU ENTER THE item sold here.”

Diesel’s muscular arm brushed against Myla as he showed her how to work the register’s software. Distracted by his closeness, she only nodded as he continued the tutorial. Instinctively, she leaned a bit into him and inhaled. He smelled like the outdoors after an early spring rain—clean and crisp with a hint of earthiness.

“Are you paying attention?” he asked, stepping back from her.

“Sort of.”

The fine lines on his forehead deepened.

“I’m sorry,” she said, sitting up straighter on the stool and focusing on the computer screen. “Show me one more time, and then I’ll have it.” Myla grinned at him as he gave her an annoyed face. “I promise.”

“I have a shit load of things to do in the office and a car to detail for a big-paying customer, so you gotta focus.”

She raised her hand in a mock salute. “Yes, sir.”

A smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. “Each item and transaction has to be registered here.”

Fifteen minutes later, Myla was ringing up car washes, detailing services, and miscellaneous items like a pro. The software was similar to one she’d used at a charity consignment store she once worked at part-time to fill the long hours when Freddy was away from the house. He’d balked at first, but she pouted for days until he finally relented. Whenever Myla wanted something he was against, she’d learned that pointing out the logic of a situation never worked, neither did yelling or crying, but pouting hit the spot. For some

reason, Freddy couldn't bare it when she did that. It was odd, but it was ammunition she started using more often, especially during the last six months before he took off.

"Where's Miranda?" a guy with moppy blond hair asked. "Does she still work here?"

"She's off today." Myla scanned his full-service car wash and Snickers candy bar.

"I thought Wednesday was her day off."

She shrugged. "I'm just filling in. I don't know what the employees' schedules are."

The guy took the receipt and candy bar and shuffled to the inside window. She watched him press his face against the glass and gaze at the large brushes swishing against the sides and over the tops of the vehicles. *I bet his car isn't even dirty. Poor guy thought he'd see Miranda, and I spoiled his day.*

"Everything going good?" Diesel placed a box on top of the counter.

Myla stared at his tanned skin glistening in a light sheen of sweat. He wore a white tank top that showed off a muscular chest and arms. A sleeve of ink moved with him on one arm, and on the other, a human skull wearing a crown of barbed wire decorated the bicep.

Her mouth was dust-dry, and she swallowed. "It's all good."

Pointing at the box, he said, "I need you to put this merch on the shelves behind you. Nothing's heavy in there, but if you need anything, hit the button under the counter. Wheelie or I will come out."

Nodding, she watched him walk away, admiring his long-legged confident stride and how his snug black jeans hugged his narrow hips and tight butt. Myla groaned inwardly. Since she'd started noticing boys, she was a sucker for a bad boy with a hard body and blue eyes.

Leaning back, a memory of her first kiss swirled through her mind. She'd just turned fifteen, and she and her friends had decided to go to the traveling carnival that had set up shop in their neighborhood.

Myla hadn't been at the fair more than thirty minutes when a cute boy with arctic blue eyes appeared at her side and asked her if she wanted a Coke and some cotton candy. He was three years older, had broad shoulders, and wore a black leather jacket. He smelled of weed, engine grease, and danger. Grabbing her hand, he pulled her toward the carousel. All the carnival workers called out to him, and he told her he worked and traveled eleven months out of the year. His name was Shane, and he kissed her across the saddles of two horses under the multi-colored flashing lights and the loud calliope music.

"I'd like to buy this."

"What?" she asked, the memory skittering to the recesses of her mind.

"I'm in a hurry and want to get this card," the woman said, tapping the counter. She stared at Myla, a look of impatience spreading across her overly made-up face.

"Sorry." She scanned the barcode, then put the greeting card into a paper bag. "Four dollars and seventy-five cents."

The woman dropped a five-dollar bill on the counter. Myla noticed her sparkly blue nail polish, and on the index finger of the lady's right hand, a gaudy ring with a huge pink stone and cheap crystals surrounded it.

Myla opened the cash register, and the woman rushed out the door before she could hand the customer her change. She tossed the quarter into the tip jar, then began putting merchandise on the shelves.

A steady stream of customers came in and out of the business for the next two hours, which surprised her. Myla always washed her car on the weekends and never imagined that so many people brought their vehicles in on weekdays.

At the first lull, she walked over to the vending machine and purchased a pack of peanut butter and cheese crackers and a Diet Dr. Pepper.

“Didn’t Diesel tell you we’ve got snacks and drinks in the office?” Wheelie said, leaning against the front counter.

“No, but it’s cool.” She ripped open the package and pulled out a cracker.

“He should have. Do you need a break?”

“Maybe for ten minutes. I’d like to go outside and get some fresh air.”

“Take thirty if you need it.”

She smiled. She liked Wheelie. He seemed distant and gruff at first, but that was how all the Insurgents were; however, he’d loosened up a bit after a while. He kept popping his head around the corner during the day to see if Myla was doing all right. It seemed that Diesel and his partner got along and worked well together. From what she could see, Wheelie handled a lot of the inventory and accounting, while Diesel was more hands-on, working alongside the car detailing employees and fixing some of the equipment.

“Go ahead,” Wheelie said.

“Thanks. Is Diesel still detailing cars?”

The biker shrugged. “Go in the back and see.”

Two guys worked on a bronze SUV in the rear area, but Diesel wasn’t there, so she exited the car wash. The afternoon was warm and sunny, the sky a cornflower blue, the air fresh with the scent of pine and sweet peonies. Myla crossed the parking lot and headed toward a large patch of grass adjacent to the business. She sat under the shade of an oak tree and leaned back against the trunk. Small birds flitted back and forth amid the overhead branches, and she closed her eyes and let the peacefulness infuse her.

The roar of motorcycles shattered the tranquility of the moment. Myla’s eyes popped open, and she saw six gleaming

bikes turn into the car wash's parking lot. She recognized the Insurgents but could only recall one of their names: Hawk. She remembered the vice president's name because of his striking blue eyes and black hair. She watched them swagger into the building.

"Wheelie told me you were taking a break," Diesel said, crouching beside her.

Startled at his appearance, she shook her head. "I didn't hear you coming. You're light on your feet."

He smiled. "It's a necessary skill for an outlaw. You did a good job stacking the shelves."

She laughed. "It wasn't hard to do."

"You'd be surprised how many temps screw that up."

"You're joking, right?"

"Nope. I guess too much weed makes some people dull in the head."

"But not you or your friends?"

"Nope. It's too dangerous not to be in control."

"Are you always in control?"

"I try to be most of the time. What about you?"

"I'm not that good at it. Look at the mess I made of my life by staying too long in the relationship."

Diesel's head snapped back. "With Freddy? Why do you say that?"

Myla's stomach twisted. She didn't want to say anything to him about Freddy's increasing abuse. Instead of answering, she popped another cracker in her mouth and took a sip of soda.

"I thought you and Freddy had something good going on."

"We did initially, but it started to unravel when he got too involved with making a lot of money. Anyway, just forget what I said, okay?"

“There’s something you’re not telling me. I’ve sensed it for a while. Are you playing it straight with me?” His eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“Yeah. Are you saying you don’t trust me?”

“I’m saying you’re hiding shit from me. Do you know where Freddy is?”

Anger rushed through her. “No! I’d tell you if I knew. I thought we were on the same side here.”

“I didn’t know there were sides. I thought we had the same goal—find Freddy.”

Brushing back a few strands of hair from her face, she said, “You know that’s what I meant.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“We need to trust each other.”

“No shit.”

“But you don’t.”

Diesel’s eyes scanned over her face, but he didn’t answer.

“There are some things that a person may want to keep private,” she whispered.

“That’s true, but for me, trust is essential. It’s that simple.”

“Nothing’s that simple. Experiences make a difference on whether or not a person can trust someone or tell certain things.”

“What experiences?”

“Life. You know, childhood shit, like a boyfriend cheating on you or someone you love changing, stuff like that.” She crushed the empty soda can with one hand. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore. I came out here to relax.”

“You gotta talk about it sometime,” he replied.

“I know, but just not now.”



They sat in silence for the next several minutes, the leaves rustling through the tree enveloping them.

“I better get back to work,” she said, pushing up.

“Me too.”

“Your friends are still inside. Do you wash their motorcycles?”

A small laugh pushed through his lips. “No.”

“They just came by to say hi?”

“Or order some stuff. One of the brothers, Jerry, makes custom bike ornaments. We sell them in the shop and online.”

“I’ll have to check out the website.” She brushed the grass from the back of her jeans. “Are we good?”

He swept his fingers over her hand. “Yeah.”

The light touch sent electricity crackling through her. She jerked her hand back and looked away.

“There’s a family barbecue tonight. Do you want to go?”

“At the clubhouse?”

“At our VP’s house.”

“Does everyone go?”

“Pretty much. So, do you want to go or keep asking questions about it?”

“I’ll go. What time?”

“We’ll leave around six.”

They walked back to the car wash. Myla resumed her place at the front counter, and Diesel joined Wheelie and the other bikers in the back office, shutting the door behind him. She wrestled with whether or not to tell Diesel about Freddy’s physical abuse. Myla hated the idea that he didn’t trust her, but she was scared he’d think she was lying about Freddy and begin to doubt everything about her.

She glanced at the clock and saw that there were two more hours before the business closed. She figured the family barbecue meant that wives and kids would be there. A thread of excitement weaved through her at the prospect of meeting the women who loved these bikers. Since Myla had been in Pinewood Springs, she hadn't had any decent female conversation, and she hoped they'd be friendlier than the club girls.

The front door opened, and a spate of customers entered the place. Bracing herself, she plastered on a smile and rang up a deluxe car wash for the first person who reached the counter.



"I'LL WAIT FOR you downstairs," Diesel said as he left the room.

"Okay," Myla said through the bathroom door.

She plugged in the blow dryer and moved it over her hair while running her fingers through the tresses. After pulling a batik sundress over her head, she swiped her lips with peach lipstick and gloss, then walked out of the bathroom.

Myla slipped her feet into a pair of black leather thongs, then darted out of the room and headed downstairs. She spotted Diesel standing by the bar when she entered the great room, his boot propped up on the foot rail, a beer bottle in his hand, and a busty woman practically glued to his side. Myla recognized the woman as a club girl and caught on that the girl had a crush on Diesel. Not sure if she should approach him, Myla stood in the doorway feeling awkward and pissed. Awkward because she felt like a total stranger in this biker world and pissed because seeing the club girl hanging onto him made her feel like an idiot.

A flash of anger sparked through her. Clenching her jaw, she marched right past him and pushed open the front door. Myla heard him call out her name but didn't look back; she kept walking until reaching his car. As she debated whether to go to the barbecue, the sound of gravel crunching echoed behind her.

“What’s going on?” Diesel said as he opened the car door for her. “Did you hear from Freddy?”

Without answering, she slipped into the passenger seat, grasped the handle, and slammed the door shut.

Diesel hesitated for a few seconds, then walked over to the driver’s side and slid inside. “What did Freddy say?”

“He didn’t call me. Not everything in my life is about Freddy.” Pivoting her body away from him, she stared out the window at the forest of trees.

“I just figured you’d heard from him. You seem upset. What’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit. You were fine when I left the room.”

“I’m still fine. Are we going or not?”

“Not until I figure out why you’re acting like I’m the enemy. You’re pissed at me, and I don’t know why. And turn the fuck around and look at me.”

The concern in his voice soothed the edges of her bruised ego. Turning toward him, she offered a small smile. “I’m sorry. I guess I was just having a moment.”

“About what? Did something happen when you were in the room? Did one of the brothers come to the door?”

A shadow of anger moved across his handsome face.

“No, absolutely not. Nothing like that. I was just being stupid, that’s all.”

Rubbing his chin, he looked away and then back at her. “You’re not stupid.”

“I meant, I was *acting* stupid. I guess I was having an insecure moment. I feel lost, and everything is different for me. Living at the clubhouse is like being in another world. I appreciate staying here and being kept safe, but it’s challenging, you know?” She bit down on her lip to hold back

the sudden press of tears, but one escaped and slid down her cheek.

“Myla.” Reaching out, he cupped her chin and looked into her eyes. “I do know. I’m sorry as fuck you have to go through this.” Diesel’s skin felt warm against hers, his thumb rough as he brushed the tear away. “Freddy didn’t do you right, and I’m gonna try like hell to fix all this,” he whispered.

She leaned against him, and all at once, he wrapped his arm around her, tugging her closer as she buried her head against his chest and cried. He held her tight, and she was aware of the strength in his arm, the hardness of his chest, and the beating of his heart. She felt safe and protected for the first time in over a year.

After several minutes, he said, “Are you feeling better now?”

Myla pulled away and wiped the tears from her eyes. “Sorry for the meltdown. I don’t normally go around sobbing.”

He gave her a quiet smile. “No worries.”

She pulled down the visor and looked in the mirror, groaning at the black rings under her eyes. “I look a mess.”

“You don’t. You’re beautiful.”

“A beautiful raccoon.” She smiled while reaching for her purse. “Let me fix up for a minute; then we can go.”

“Take your time.”

On the way to the barbecue, Diesel reiterated the MC’s rules: don’t interrupt any members while they’re talking, don’t initiate a conversation with any of the brothers, and never ask about club business. He’d told her the rules when he first brought her to the Insurgents’ clubhouse, but she didn’t really mingle with anyone outside of Diesel. She usually stayed in the room or walked outside on the property. Myla didn’t have a problem with the rules because she wouldn’t know what to talk about with the bikers, even if she were allowed to

converse with them. She actually liked that the rules didn't make her appear unsociable.

The vice president's house was enormous and had more security systems in place than the White House. The walls surrounding the residence were four feet of stone and looked about fifteen feet high, with a steel entry gate rivaling any medieval castle. The grounds were beautifully landscaped, with a large fountain as the circular driveway's focal point. Various types of trees, bushes, and flowers decorated the perimeter of the stone mansion and the walls.

"This is gorgeous," Myla said. "It's huge."

"It has to be. Hawk and Cara have four kids, a couple of dogs, three cats, and some guinea pigs. I heard the kids want to get some chickens, but Hawk's still not budging on that."

"I bet the security system in the house is killer."

"All the brothers who live outside the club have top-notch security. Hawk being the computer and tech whiz, his system is top of the line. He also has roll-down stainless steel shutters that lock up the whole house. Banger's got them too. An outlaw has always got to ensure his kids and ol' lady are safe when he's not around."

"Freddy installed a top-of-the-line security system in our home. He also had a panic room built off the master bedroom on the second floor with a bookcase entry. It reminds me of the old homes I used to see in scary movies."

"Every Insurgent with a home has those. Freddy knew he was in some deep shit." Diesel reached over and squeezed her hand. "He shouldn't have put you in that situation, especially since he didn't know what the fuck he was doing."

Myla placed another hand over his. She liked the warm feel of his skin against hers. "I should have known something was going on when he built the panic room. Looking back, I was so damn clueless."

"Don't beat yourself over it. I never thought Freddy would get mixed up in the shit he did. He was the clueless one."

“I hope he’s safe,” she whispered.

“Me too.” He slid his hand away from hers and turned off the engine.

“I’m nervous. Are the women nice or bitchy like the club girls?”

Diesel guffawed. “You’re too cute, woman. Ol’ ladies and club girls are two different groups. The ol’ ladies are cool for the most part. Sometimes Marlena can be bitchy, and so can Bernie and Doris, but Cara, Hawk’s woman, is totally cool, and so is Banger’s woman, Belle. They’ll introduce you around. Just give them all a chance.”

“Do they know about me? I mean, about Freddy and all that?”

“Yeah, and they get what you’re going through.”

“And you. Freddy’s your brother.” She noticed Diesel’s jaw clenched as he nodded. “I know you must be dying inside.”

“I deal with it.” He swung open the car door and got out.

He grabbed her hand as they walked up to the house, and a tingle shivered down her spine.

A pretty woman with green eyes and chestnut brown hair opened the door with a baby on her hip and a toddler clinging to her leg.

“Hi, Diesel.” She glanced at Myla and said, “Welcome. I’m Cara.”

“Myla,” she responded.

“Come on in. A lot of the guys are out back”—she looked at Diesel, then shifted to Myla—“and I’ll introduce you to the other women.”

Diesel let go of her hand and stood aside for her to enter the house.

“You’re in good hands. Let Cara know if you need anything, and she’ll tell Hawk to come get me.”

Myla grabbed his arm as he began to walk away. “Wait. So, I’m on my own while we’re here?”

“Nope. I’ll find you when we eat. Don’t worry. I’m not abandoning you.” He laughed. “Are you good with that?”

“Sure. I’m used to being alone. I’m just wondering what’s expected of me.”

“Not much. The brothers hang together for a while, then everyone comes together to eat. It’s not that different from a citizen’s party where the women hang out with each other and the guys are in their own group talking shop, politics, or sports.”

“You’re right about that. I’m just not that good in large groups, but Cara seems friendly.”

“She is. You’re in good hands.”

Myla watched him walk away toward a group of men in jeans with leather vests. She recognized the men who lived at the clubhouse, but some of the others she’d never seen. A multitude of children ran from the backyard into the house and back outside, laughing and chattering.

“Come with me,” Cara said over her shoulder.

Myla followed her into one of the most beautiful gourmet kitchens she’d ever seen. “Your kitchen is gorgeous,” she murmured.

“Thanks. I love it. It’s great for entertaining.”

“You must cook a lot.”

Cara’s eyes widened. “You have no idea. Do you like to cook?”

“Sort of.”

“Do you come from a big family?”

“There are five of us, but we’re all scattered across the country.”

“I’m sure it makes getting together difficult,” she replied.

“How many kids do you have?”

“Four. I’m an only child, and so is Hawk, so we decided we wanted a big family. I always wished I had siblings.”

“My oldest sister became our surrogate mother in many ways. She was the one who got us ready for school, made sure we did our homework, cooked our dinners, and put us to bed. Looking back, I feel sorry she missed out on being a teenager.”

“Are you Diesel’s friend?”

Myla glanced at a woman with curly brown hair and electric blue eyes who was bringing a wineglass to her lips.

“I am.”

“This is Myla,” Cara said to the woman.

“I’m Belle. You don’t have a drink. We got red and white wine, any kind of liquor you can name, iced tea, lemonade, pop, and water with different types of things floating in it. I’m still not sure why Addie thinks plain ol’ water is taboo.”

Cara laughed, then glanced over at Myla. “I have plain water in the fridge if you want some.”

Myla smiled. “I’ll have a glass of white wine.”

“We could use your help in getting everything on platters,” Belle said.

Cara leaned over and said softly in Myla’s ear, “Belle puts *everyone* to work.”

“I’d love to help.”

She followed Cara to the massive prep station and met several of the Insurgents’ wives. Soon she was scooping mounds of potato salad, macaroni salad, coleslaw, and ambrosia salad into large bowls. She expected the women to be standoffish and crass, but her preconceived notions were



unfounded. They made her feel as though she belonged and was always a part of their group. It surprised her how much she was enjoying herself. Usually, Myla didn't like being at large parties or in crowds because they made her feel uneasy and on guard, but that wasn't the case now. These women were warm, authentic, and welcoming.

“Are you doing okay?” Diesel asked in a low voice, so close to her that his breath tickled her ear and made her pulse pound.

“I'm doing great.” She willed her voice to sound steady. “What about you?”

“Good.”

“Bikers are always happy when they can talk about motorcycles,” Addie said.

“Damn straight,” Diesel said. He was standing so close to her that Myla could smell his aftershave. Sandalwood. “Do you need help bringing out the platters?”

“You can bring this one,” Myla said, pointing to one filled with crackers, cheese, and cold cuts.

“This one's a keeper,” Belle said.

Diesel winked at Myla, and she felt the heat rise in her cheeks. She wedged the placemats under her left arm, grabbed the bowl of potato salad, and walked out to the patio.

Hawk, Throttle, and Rags stood by the grill cooking hamburgers, hotdogs, and chicken breasts. Mounds of pulled pork and beef ribs sat on several long picnic tables. Teenagers lounged by the pool while young children had fun on the playground equipment and in an impressively large sandbox. Myla noticed two women sitting on wrought iron benches watching the younger kids. A tinge of sadness enveloped her while observing the interplay between parents and children, siblings, and friends. The lovelessness of her childhood was juxtaposed with the adoration of the children. Images of her seven-year-old self, hiding in the closet, arms looped around

her knees, rocking back and forth as her parents fought viciously, skittered across her mind.

“I got us a spot at a table near the fountain.” Diesel’s voice yanked her from the past. “Do you want some more wine?”

“Yes, please. I’m drinking chardonnay. I’ll meet you there then.”

At the table were Throttle with his wife, Kimber, Smokey and Ashley, Animal and Olivia, and Rags. Rags seemed to be the only single guy at the barbecue. When she asked Diesel about it, he laughed and said he came for the food.

After a few hours, the kids seemed to have wound down, and many of the partygoers scooped up their half-asleep tykes and said their goodbyes. Myla helped the other women clear the tables and bring the food into the kitchen. Above Cara’s objections, she scraped off plates and stacked them in the dishwasher.

Diesel entered the kitchen and leaned against the counter, talking with Hawk and Throttle. Every once in a while, she’d catch him watching her, and a warm shiver spread over her skin. They came together because they were concerned for Freddy, yet this electric current of desire skipped between them. It had been there from the moment they met at the diner, even though they both fought it. Myla wasn’t sure how he felt, but she was mad at herself for being so attracted to him. She nibbled on the nail of her pinkie finger. *Who am I kidding? I’ve been attracted to him ever since he sent letters back to me. Something clicked between us. I wonder now if he felt it too.*

“Ready to go?” Diesel walked over and placed his hand lightly on her arm.

Nodding, she stepped away and turned to Cara. “Thanks for a great evening. I had a wonderful time.”

“You’re welcome, and thanks for all your help.”

Cara and Hawk walked their guests to the door, and Diesel held it open for Myla. She waved at the couple, then hurried to the SUV.

On the way back, they chatted about everything under the sun except the frisson of sexual tension between them.

When he pulled into the club's parking lot and switched off the engine, she leaped out of the car and rushed toward the front door. Loud music seeped out from closed windows.

"You don't want to go in there without me," he said, coming up behind her.

"I forgot that I'm entering a lion's den instead of a residence."

Diesel laughed. "That about sums it up." Taking her hand in his, he squeezed it gently and led the way inside.

The usual partying was going on: club girls giving head, bikers drinking, and a thick cloud of weed filling the room. Feeling claustrophobic, Myla tugged Diesel toward the stairway. He complied without any resistance, and in a few minutes, she opened the windows in his room and let in the crisp night air.

"Do you guys ever have a quiet night?" she asked as the breeze caressed her face.

"Yeah. Weeknights are quiet except for Thursdays."

"I haven't experienced that. It's like living in a college dorm." Myla pushed away from the windowsill.

"I guess it is, but the perks are a helluva lot better."

She laughed, kicked off her sandals, and settled into a comfy chair, then bent down and rubbed the soles of her feet. "I couldn't wait to do this." When he didn't reply, she glanced up and saw him staring at her breasts. She peeked down and realized that much of the swell of her bosom was in full view. She straightened up, and he averted his gaze.

A brief silence stretched between them until he cleared his throat and said, "I'm gonna go down and shoot a few games of pool. I'll crash with Rags tonight."

"Why don't you come back up here later? It's your room."

“I don’t want to wake you.”

“I’m so tired. I doubt that.”

Diesel’s gaze skimmed over her, then he looked out the window. She couldn’t help but notice the sudden bulge in his jeans, and a spike of desire shot through her. Myla looked up at him, and her breath caught when she saw the hunger in Diesel’s eyes.

Turning away, he said, “I’m just downstairs.”

“I know.” She watched him head toward the door. “So, I won’t see you tonight?”

“No, but if something comes up like”—he rubbed his chin with his index finger and thumb—“Freddy calling, let me know right away.”

“I will.”

“Remember to keep the door locked.”

“Okay.”

“Later.” He opened the door and walked out.

She listened to his footsteps fade away on the stairs, then grabbed the remote and turned on the television. The room seemed quiet without his presence. *It’s for the best.*

With a small sigh, she stared at the flickering images on the screen. It was going to be a long night.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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OVER THE NEXT two days, Diesel put a distance between Myla and him. She stirred up a crazy mix of possessiveness, tenderness, and something else he didn't want to feel. He tried to be indifferent to her, but Myla filled up his mind more than he was ready to admit. He was torn between caring for her and his duty to his brother.

A chair scraped across the floor. He glanced up, and she sat down, a frown wrinkling her forehead.

"Why have you been avoiding me?" she asked.

"I've been busy."

"Bullshit. You've spent the last two days with Rags. Tell me what's going on."

The angst in her voice ripped through his heart. *I'm fucking everything up.*

"Did I do something to make you mad?"

He leaned back and locked eyes with her. "No."

"Then what?"

A sigh slipped past his lips. "I need a clear mind to focus on finding Freddy."

"And staying away from me is the solution?"

"You got it."

"That's ridiculous."

"It is what it is. I'm taking off for a few days."

Myla shook her head and blinked rapidly. "Because of me?"

Diesel swallowed a curse and shifted uncomfortably. The last thing he wanted was to make her cry.

“No. I’m following up on some leads in Denver.”

Myla brightened up. “I’ll go with you.”

“I work alone. Besides, it’s too dangerous for you. You’re safer here.”

“I don’t want to stay here. The women hate me, and the guys won’t talk to me.”

“I’ll only be gone a few days. You’ll do okay. Kristy’s cool. She’s been with the club the longest. She’ll look after you. I’ll tell the other girls to back the fuck off. The brothers know I’m going and to watch out for you. They’re not gonna be your best friends, but if you need something or want to go into town, reach out to Bones, Razor, or Helm. If they’re not around, any of the other guys will help you out. As I said, it’ll only be for a few days.”

“Maybe I can stay with Cara. I could help her out with the kids.”

“You’re safer here. Besides, you’ll be putting Hawk’s family in jeopardy.”

“Nothing’s happened so far. No one knows I’m up here.”

“I got a sixth sense about these things, so trust me.”

“Will you tell me what you find out?”

“Yeah. I need your house key and the panic room code.”

“Do you promise not to ignore me when you get back?”

Diesel felt a faint smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.  
“I guess.”

“That’s not very convincing, but it’ll have to do for now.” She leaned forward with her elbows on the table. “When are you leaving?”

“Later this afternoon.”

Myla's mouth dropped open, and she leaned back in the chair. "Were you just going to take off and text me?"

"No, I was going to tell you. Right now, everything is about Freddy, Myla."

"I know," she whispered. "I wonder if Peter has been to the house."

"Probably. Did you want me to bring back anything for you? I know you took off in a hurry."

"Not really. I don't ever want to go back there. I want to start a new life." Her green eyes locked onto his blues.

"I get that."

"I don't think you do."

He turned away. "Yeah ... I do." He scraped back the chair and stood up. "I have some stuff I need to do before I take off."

"Are you going alone?"

"Nope. Rags and Animal are coming along."

"I'm scared for you. I don't want anything to happen to you."

Diesel smiled. "Neither do I, but I can take care of myself. Don't worry."

"I know I will. Can you text me when you get to Denver?"

"Yeah. Let's go up so I can get the key to the house and put the code in my phone. I also have to pack a few things. After that, we'll go find Kristy."

At first, it looked as though Myla was going to say something, then she jumped to her feet, dashed over to him, and burrowed against his chest, her fingers clutching his T-shirt.

"Please be safe," she whispered, then backed away.

Before he could respond, she rushed out of the room. He heard her footfalls on the steps, and he walked out of the great

room and slowly trudged up the stairs.



THE NEIGHBORHOOD, ITS manicured lawns and yards filled with evergreens, maples, and oaks, was dark and quiet. A few lights were on in some of the homes and television screens flickered in several upper windows.

Cursing under his breath, Diesel strained to see the street numbers. Animal whistled and veered his bike to the right and down a narrow road, and Diesel and Rags followed suit. A mile farther, a stately mansion stood among a forest of pine trees. A couple of lights illuminated the rooms on the ground floor and the second story. Myla had told him they were on rotating timers and would go on and off during the night until only one small light remained on. The porch light also stayed on, and motion lights were throughout the backyard and the sides of the residence.

The men shifted their bikes to neutral, switched off the engines, and rolled them to the front of the house. They stashed them among the evergreens, pulled out their Glocks, and silently reached the large entry door.

Diesel undid three of the locks with Myla's keys. The wooden door swung open. The alarm system beeped, and he went over to the panel and disarmed it with the code she'd given him. Once the system was deactivated, Animal shut the door behind them and secured the locks.

Rags whistled. "Nice digs."

Diesel shook his head as he glanced around the enormous marble entry and the grandiose spiral staircase. "China White brings in a ton of dough." Glancing around, he knew his brother had gotten in deep with the distribution of fentanyl and other opioids.

"Damn. It looks like your brother got in over his head," Throttle said, walking and touching the gold-gilded timber carved panels on the foyer's walls. "There's some expensive shit in here."



Diesel's jaw clenched as he nodded. *Freddy went over the fuckin' top.* Motioning to the two men, he walked toward the kitchen. Myla had drawn a rough sketch of the house, marking where she'd found the blood and the locations of various rooms.

"Here it is," Rags said, pointing his Maglite flashlight to a large area with a patchwork of ultra-light blotches and dark rust stains seeping into the hardwood floor.

Diesel pictured Myla on her knees, pouring bleach on the floor as she wiped frantically to get rid of the evidence of Freddy's indiscretion. Unfortunately, she wasn't successful.

"It doesn't look like anyone's been here since Myla left," he said.

"What the fuck happened to the body?" Animal asked, his eyes darting around the area.

Diesel crouched for a closer look; he pivoted, sweeping his gaze side to side. "Not sure. It doesn't look like there are any drag marks," he said.

"The dude's gotta be somewhere," Rags said. He walked into the kitchen and opened the door to a large pantry.

"We'd smell it if he were stuffed somewhere," Diesel said, rising to his feet.

"Unless your brother used acid or lye to get rid of him," Animal said.

Diesel shook his head. "I doubt Freddy would've thought of that. Besides, I'm sure he didn't plan on killing the sonofabitch. He definitely got rid of the body because when Myla got home that night, there was a shit ton of blood but no body." He looked over at Rags. "Anything interesting in there?"

"Nothing much."

Diesel heard Rags rummaging through the shelves.

"Wait a sec," he said.

“What’s up?” Diesel asked, walking toward the pantry.

“There are a helluva lot of plastic waste bags. The real big kind.”

“Lemme see.” Diesel took one of the boxes and noticed almost half the bags were gone.

“I wonder when these bags were bought,” Rags said.

“Who knows, but I say we check out the house and grounds,” Diesel said.

“The neighbors would’ve smelled it. And we don’t smell anything nasty in here.” Animal rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m betting he used those bags to hack up the body, but he must’ve thrown them out elsewhere.”

“No,”—Diesel shook his head—“Freddy would never be able to do that shit. He probably wrapped the body up with the bags. I’ll bet it’s somewhere in the house.”

“I don’t know,” Animal replied.

He snapped his fingers. “The panic room. It’s airtight, and no one can get in. The perfect place to hide a body and get the hell out in a hurry.” Glancing at the sketch, he rushed out of the room to the wide landing at the head of the staircase’s sweeping curve. He took the stairs two at a time, the echo of his friends’ footfalls close behind. Diesel hesitated after reaching the marbled-floor hallway and skimmed over the floor plan. He found the two double-wide doors at the other end of the hall and ran over to them.

The three men entered a spacious master bedroom with a tray ceiling, stone fireplace, sitting area, and a minibar.

“Myla said it’s disguised as a bookcase,” he said, scanning the wall of built-in bookcases. “It’s got to be one of these.”

“Let me see the map,” Animal said.

Diesel and Rags went over to the wall and started tapping.

“It’s the third case from the left. Take out the fourteenth volume of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*,” Animal said.

Diesel removed the book and saw a keypad that blended perfectly with the back of the bookcase. He punched in the numbers Myla had given him, and each side of the case swung open to reveal a clandestine space concealed behind the shelving.

A wave of a putrid, decaying odor washed over them.

“Fuck,” Rags said, plugging his nose.

Diesel entered the room, his hand covering his mouth and nose. Everything became apparent when he flipped the switch, and the light flickered on. Tracks of dried blood lined the tiled floor, ending where a mess of bags lay in a heap in the corner of the room. Tiny drops of dark brown fluid surrounded one corner of a bag.

Diesel walked over and pushed the bag with the toe of his boot. The two layers on top fell away and revealed a male’s red-colored, bloated body. He bent down and saw gaping wounds on the man’s torso and a couple of bullet hole wounds on the side of the head. From the looks of the body, it didn’t seem like Freddy was defending himself.

“What do you wanna do?” Animal asked.

“Get rid of him, but we’ll leave him here for now.”

“My buddy has a bio-clean business. He owes me a big favor. I can call him. It’d be all hushed up.”

“Yeah, let’s do that. I’ll pay for the service.”

Diesel noticed a large cabinet and stepped over to it. He opened it up and found several AK-47s, handguns, and pistols. An image of their dad taking them out to the shooting range when they were young flitted through his mind. Freddy would always squeeze his eyes shut and shoot. Then there was the time Freddy and their dad went hunting. Freddy had been almost thirteen. When they’d returned to the house, their dad looked disgusted, and Freddy sniffled and brushed away the tears rolling down his cheeks. Diesel had asked his brother what happened, but Freddy couldn’t talk. He was that upset. Later, he found out his brother had shot a bird and cried the

whole ride back to the house. Their father never took Freddy hunting again.

He closed the cabinet door and realized he didn't know his brother at all.

"Look at all the cameras installed in this house," Rags said from another room.

Diesel walked out of the panic room, and Animal closed the double-wide doors, turning the room back into a bookcase.

He strode over to Rags, who was inside a room with wall-to-wall cameras, showing each room in the house at different angles and the entire outside area.

"He must've had a shitload of product and money stashed here."

"Or people thought he did," Diesel said.

"He even had cameras in the bathroom," Rags said.

*I wonder if Myla knew about that.*

"There is a ton of flash drives too."

"Let's see what's on them. Put one in," Diesel said.

Images of three women having sex with Freddy popped up on the screen. Diesel sucked in a breath. "Go to another one," he said.

Most of the flash drives were of Freddy and different women engaged in various sex acts. Some of the flash drives were of Myla in the bathroom during private moments. Rags quickly pulled those out of the USB port.

"Looks like the cameras are motion-activated. Your brother seems to have saved some of the footage onto his computer or cloud and transferred it to flash drives," Rags said.

"Yeah, I'll take the rest of these, the two computers and the SD cards from the cameras. I bet the murder is on one of these," Diesel said.

“Dude, there’s a shitload of boxes here,” Animal said as he stood in front of a walk-in closet. “Do you want all of them?”

“Yeah. We’ll have to come back for them.”

“We’re gonna have to rent a van to take all this shit back,” Animal said.

“That’s what I’m thinking,” Diesel replied.

“Here’s the last flash drive in this box,” Rags said as he inserted a bright blue one into the port.

Images of Myla running flashed on the screen. Intently, Diesel watched as he saw her frantically unlocking the front door, fear etched on her face. Then Freddy appeared, his brow furrowed and his eyes blazing with rage. He yanked her away from the door by her hair. Myla’s pleas for him to leave her alone were met with a blow of his fist to the left side of her face. She fell back, and Freddy pounced on her, mercilessly raining down blow after blow with clenched fists. Myla tried to shield her face with her hands, but it was useless.

“You fucking bitch,” Freddy spat with each strike.

“Stop, Freddy. You’re hurting me,” Myla begged through swollen lips, but her pleas went unnoticed.

“Get up, you stupid slut. Get up! No one cheats on me!” He yanked her by the hair and began pulling her, but she planted her behind on the floor and fought for control of her hair. He fell back a few steps, and Myla scrambled up to her feet, grabbed a vase from the entry table, and threw it full force at him.

“Fuck!” Freddy staggered backward, blood gushing from a cut on his head.

Myla fled down the hall.

The following footage showed Freddy pounding on a wooden door, yelling for Myla to open up. He held a blood-stained towel to his head. After several minutes, he gave up and walked away. Another camera picked him up climbing the stairs. Additional recording showed Myla slipping out of the

room with dark bruises and red scratches marring her face, arms, and legs, and a swollen eye. The camera in the foyer caught her grabbing something out of the entry table drawer and dashing out of the house, and the outside camera showed her getting into a BMW and taking off.

“Fuck,” Animal said softly.

Diesel’s throat constricted, and fury boiled inside him. What he’d just seen tore at his heart.

“No woman deserves that shit,” Rags said as he pulled out the flash drive. He looked over at Diesel. “Did you know about this?”

“No. I didn’t know Freddy was such a fuckin’ pussy.” *Why the hell did she stay with him?*

“It looked like he was high. Not that it excuses what he did, but you know how that shit can fuck you over,” Animal said.

“I figured he was using. Myla said no, but I could tell by how he sniffled on the phone when we talked. He seemed edgy, nervous, and pissed the few times we spoke in the past year. But that was his damn problem, not Myla’s. *Nothing* excuses what he did to her.”

“Damn straight,” Rags and Animal mumbled in unison.

“Did you notice the time stamp on that shit we just saw?” Diesel asked Rags.

“It was five days before the murder. Your brother marked all the drives with date ranges. I’m surprised he kept this one.”

“Me too,” Animal said. “It’s incriminating as fuck.”

“He’s always been a dumbass.” Diesel glanced at his phone. “I gotta meet up with Zach. We’ll come back tomorrow and take all this shit out. Call your buddy to get him over here to clean up the damn mess Freddy made.”

“I already sent him a text. He’s good to go,” Animal replied.

After seeing what Freddy did to Myla, Diesel knew he was cleaning up the evidence to protect her, not his asshole brother. When he'd entered the panic room, his first instinct was to shield Freddy, but now he wanted to ensure Myla didn't get implicated in a murder. His whole focus was to take care of her. She didn't deserve any of the shit thrown at her.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," Diesel said and headed for the door.

IN THE PITCH black, Diesel coasted over trash and broken glass. Zach's pad was located in a rotted stretch of the city with few street lights and dilapidated buildings used as temporary housing for drug addicts and people down on their luck.

He pulled up in front of a run-down brown two-story with a toppled shopping cart and a broken bicycle on the front lawn. Diesel kept glancing around as he made his way up the broken sidewalk to the front porch. He knocked, and chipped paint scattered off the wooden door. The front door cracked open after several slides and clicks, and Zach peered out.

"It's me, bro," Diesel said.

The door opened wide, and he stepped inside. A single light bulb hung from a water-stained ceiling. A raw sewage smell lingered in the air.

"How's it goin'?" Zach asked.

"Okay. Whatcha got going?"

"Still low-level dealing."

"How's the meth trade going for you?"

"Fuck, man, I only did that for a short time. The people I sold to were too damn impatient and liable to do somethin' crazy. I only deal to professionals now, and they do coke. The docs and lawyers got somethin' to lose, so they make great customers."

Diesel laughed, took out a large Mylar bag, and tossed it to Zach. "That's two pounds of premium weed. The best shit you've ever had."

The man's eyes brightened, and a huge grin broke across his mouth. "Thanks, man."

"No worries. What's the news?"

Zach plopped down on a worn-out olive-green couch. "Take a seat, dude."

Diesel sat on a straight-back chair and leaned forward.

Zach picked up a pack of cigarettes from the coffee table. He tapped one out, put it between his lips, and lit it. "Your brother's hiding out. Cano's got some of his enforcers looking for him." He inhaled deeply, blew out a cloud of smoke, and tapped the ash into a beer can.

"Are they in Denver?"

"From what I hear, no one's in the city or even in the state. Your brother hit the road after he knocked off Miles."

"Cano's brother?"

"Yep. The word on the street is that Cano's looking for blood. Him and his brother were real tight."

"Where's Cano?"

"Southern Cal."

"San Diego?" Diesel leaned in further.

"Not too sure which city. I'll dig deeper. Word's out your brother's in Cali too."

"So Cano and Freddy were partners?"

"Loosely. Cano invested money into Freddy's clinics at about forty-five percent interest a week, then called it in."

"Fuck."

"Yep. Doing business with a loan shark gangster never turns out good if you don't got the money to pay back the dough. Cano took over the clinics and pushed your brother out. Miles was the heavy in making sure your brother paid the organization what he owed them."



“Where does Cano work out of?”

“He’s got interests in Nevada and Arizona, but I hear he’s based in LA primarily.” Zach stubbed out the cigarette and lit another one. “I’ll try and get the exact location if I can.”

“I gotta get to Freddy before they do.”

“You got that right. I’m surprised your brother ain’t asking you for help.”

Diesel shrugged. “What can I say? He’s got shit for brains.”

Zach laughed. “When you heading back to the mountains?”

“Tomorrow.” He rose to his feet and fished out a wad of bills from the inner pocket of his cut. “Thanks, dude.” Diesel put the cash on the scuffed-up table. “Let me know if you find out where this fucker is. An office or home address will work.”

“I’ll let you know, that’s for sure,” he said, scooping up the money.

“Take care of yourself,” Diesel said as he walked to the front door.

“You too, man.”

Zach stood smoking on the porch as Diesel mounted his bike.

“I gotta get me one of those someday,” Zach said.

“You’ve been telling me that for years.” He laughed.

He switched on the ignition, gave his buddy a chin lift, and rode into the night.

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## CHAPTER NINE

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MYLA SAT AT one of the tables in the far corner of the clubhouse, eating a ham sandwich on rye. The club girls whispered and giggled while throwing her an occasional smirk or death stare. Nina favored the death stare, along with Melanie and Charlotte, while the other women just smirked or rolled their eyes at her. No one said anything to her, and she supposed that was because of Diesel telling them to back the hell off.

A chair scraped back. “Don’t let them bother you,” Kristy said as she sat down and put a beer bottle on the table. “They’re pissed because you’re staying here.”

“That’s ridiculous. It’s like being back in high school all over again.” She popped a Cheeto in her mouth and chewed.

“We club girls are territorial of our men and our space.”

“You don’t seem that way.”

Kristy laughed. “I got that shit out of my system when Hawk hitched up with his ol’ lady. I had a real thing for him.” Sadness tinged her voice, and she stared into the distance for a long moment.

“That must’ve been tough,” Myla said.

“The worst thing a club girl can do is fall for one of these guys. It causes nothing but heartache.” A smile whispered across her mouth.

“So no one ever falls for each other?”

“Sometimes it happens, but not very often. A friend of mine was a club girl in Wichita, Kansas, at one of the Insurgents’ chapters. Now she’s Skull’s ol’ lady. They’ve been together for a couple of years. They seem happy, but she gets that he still likes to party. I wouldn’t be able to handle that. If I

hitch up with a man, he's gonna be all mine. I don't go for this club partying and fucking, you know?"

"I wouldn't want that either. Do you ever get to meet men outside the club?"

"The club is protective of their girls. They don't want any citizens to know what the hell goes on behind the walls. I get it. I've thought about going out on my own, but I wouldn't know what to do. I've been a club girl for over fifteen years. But I'm still popular. Nina and Charlotte think they're 'all that,' but I still give the best blow jobs of all of them." A note of pride echoed in Kristy's voice and showed in the way she held her chin high.

Myla supposed it was a big deal for an older club girl to be desired by the bikers. At a loss for words, she merely smiled and clinked her tumbler against the beer bottle.

"You're all right. At first, I wasn't sure if you'd be snooty and think you're better than us, but you're nothing like that, and"—Kristy tipped her head toward the women on the couch—"those jealous bitches are so fucking cliquish."

"You don't like any of them?"

"Lola and Brandi are cool. They've been here a long time. We all started together. They can't stand those bitches either, but enough about that." She locked eyes with her. "What's the story between you and Diesel? I never thought he'd settle for one chick."

Myla shook her head vehemently. "We're just friends."

"I bet. There's no fuckin' way one of these guys can just be 'friends'"—she said using air quotes—"with any woman, especially one as pretty as you."

"But it's true. Diesel's brother is my boyfriend ... or at least, he was."

Kristy stretched out her hand and put it on Myla's. "I heard he's missing. I'm sorry. It must be tough. I ... well, we all just figured you and Diesel were a thing."

“No, we’re not. We’re helping each other during this hard time, that’s all.”

“Do you think your old man’s dead?”

“No, why would you ask that?”

“Cause you said he *was* your boyfriend.”

“I didn’t mean that exactly. I had decided to leave Freddy, then he disappeared.”

“I gotcha. And now you want him back.”

“I want him safe.” Myla picked up her plate. “I’m going to get some fresh air. It was good talking with you, Kristy.”

“Same here. Tank’s giving me that look. He’s a good guy. Ex-military like Hawk, Gopher, and Buffalo. If you need anything, reach out to me.”

“Thanks.”

Myla watched Kristy sashay over to a nice-looking, muscular, solid guy. She guessed that was how he got his nickname. When Kristy reached Tank, he yanked her to him, kissed her deeply, threw her over his shoulder, and patted her rounded behind. Squeals of laughter pealed from her, and a few men cheered as Tank strode out of the room.

“I’ll take that,” one of the prospects said to Myla as he pointed at the empty dish.

“I can do it.”

The tattooed man seized the dish from her and marched away.

*I can’t seem to get a hang of the rules and protocols around here.* She pulled out her phone and glanced at the screen—nothing from Diesel. The last thing she received from him was a text simply stating he’d be home soon. That was it. There was no information about Freddy, what Diesel found at her house, or what the hell was going on.

She shoved her phone into the front pocket of her jeans and stomped out of the club. At times, Diesel infuriated her to no end. Half the time, she didn't know what he was thinking, and all the secretive bullshit between the bikers was getting on her nerves in the worst way.

Myla had been in Pinewood Springs for three weeks and knew nothing more now than when she'd first arrived. At this point, she had no idea if Freddy was alive or dead or if she was in danger. It felt as if she was in limbo. Her old life had imploded like a dying star, and she wasn't clear on what would happen next.

She walked down by the river. The birds flitting between the trees, the rush of the river over the rocks, and the sweet scent of pine relaxed her. She sat on the grass, watched the current move swiftly, and let her mind drift. Memories of the last days with Freddy made her cringe. His cruel possessiveness was juxtaposed with Diesel's heartfelt and unassuming kindness. *Diesel*. Just thinking about him made her stomach do flip flops. He came off as being gruff and badass, but she knew he was a sweetheart deep down. Myla had gotten a sense of that from the letters they had exchanged until Freddy made such a fuss about it she'd stopped writing. How she'd missed getting them with her printed name on a white envelope and the prison's return address in the upper left-hand corner.

She picked up a stone and threw it into the river. If Freddy hadn't taken off, she doubted she would've met Diesel. She'd made up her mind she was done with their relationship after that vicious beating. For over a year, Myla had noticed Freddy spiraling further and further out of control, but the abuse was the last straw. He'd slapped her a couple of times over the past year, but she excused those indiscretions to his being stressed over the businesses. Looking back, she should've left after he first laid his hand on her. She always had great hindsight.

In the distance, the faint roar of motorcycles made Myla's heart skip a beat, and she pushed up from the ground. *Don't get excited. Bikes come and go here all the time.* The night

before, she heard a bike revving and thought Diesel had returned. She'd peered out the window and tried to ignore her disappointment when she saw it was one of the club members straddling his Harley.

Nevertheless, the loud rumble of approaching bikes had her pulse racing and butterflies flitting in her stomach. She walked toward the clubhouse and stopped in her tracks when she saw the three bikes pull into the front lot. Diesel jumped off his bike. Myla's gaze scanned the length of him, all six feet two inches of pure, unadulterated masculinity. Even with sweat glistening on his face and grime streaking down his neck, he still looked sexy as ever.

When he caught her eyeing him, his lips curved slightly, and he winked. "Hey," he mouthed.

"Hey," she whispered, waving.

He said something to his two riding companions, then strode over to her.

"You're back," she said, the excitement of seeing him making her breathless.

"Yeah. How've you been?"

"Jumpy. I didn't know what was going on or how you were." She punched his arm lightly. "You weren't very good at sending me updates."

"Sorry. There was a lot to do in a short amount of time."

"Did you find out where Freddy is?"

"He's not in Denver. I'd say he's in San Diego."

"So he was telling me the truth," she said.

"Seems that way."

"And Peter Cano?"

"He's bad news, but you already know that. His base is in LA or maybe San Diego. I met up with that doctor who wrote the phony prescriptions at the clinic."

“Dr. Stauber?”

“Yeah. He’s not involved with any of this.”

“I didn’t think he knew anything about it. He was an okay guy.” Myla placed her hand on Diesel’s tanned arm; his skin was warm and smooth. “You didn’t hurt him, did you?”

“I used my power of persuasion. It didn’t take too long. The doc is a pussy and a greedy fuck. Those kinds of assholes crumble real fast.”

“He was always nice to me.”

“I bet.”

She stepped away from him. “Not like that. Is your mind always one-track?”

He shrugged. “I know men.”

“Dr. Stauber wasn’t like that. He was a gentle soul.”

“Who was writing phony scripts for desperate addicts? Yeah ... he was a *real* nice guy.”

“And your club never does anything wrong? Never hurts anyone?”

“Only the ones who disrespect us.”

Myla sighed. “I don’t want to argue about any of this, especially over Dr. Stauber. You’re right; he was dealing drugs just like Freddy, Peter, and whoever else was in the network. That’s what Freddy used to call it, and I stupidly thought he was talking about the clinics. I can’t believe what a fool I was not to have seen it. I guess I didn’t want to.” She swallowed the hard lump in her throat as tears filled her eyes.

“Come here,” he said, his voice a low rumble.

She bowed her head, not wanting him to see the dampness on her cheeks.

“Myla,” he said, tugging her to him.

He put his arm around her, and she pressed her wet face against his chest. The scent of *him* surrounded her, a mingling

of leather, sweat, sandalwood, and fresh air.

“I know all this has been hard for you. I understand your sadness. It’s about fear, broken promises, and ... betrayal.” He drew her closer into his embrace. “I wish I would’ve known what was going on and you would’ve contacted me. I could’ve helped you.”

“You’re helping me now. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” She looped her arms around his waist, relishing the solid strength of his body.

“I’m sorry and pissed as fuck at Freddy ... at *everything* he’s done to you. You didn’t deserve any of it.”

“None of this is your fault,” she whispered, tipping her head back and glancing at him.

“I would’ve stopped it if I’d known.” Diesel stared at her with eyes full of compassion.

*He knows.* Myla was pretty sure he wasn’t talking about the illegal activity Freddy was involved in. She felt the blood drain from her head and stumbled backward, away from him.

Diesel stepped forward and took her hand. “I’m sorry I couldn’t stop it.”

She met his gaze and knew he was apologizing for Freddy beating the hell out of her. *How does he know?* Her knees weakened, and the urge to flee seized her. Myla jerked her hand away and wrapped her arms across her chest.

“I have to go,” she mumbled.

“Talk to me.”

“I don’t want to.” She stared at the ground, kicking up small rocks with the toe of her shoe.

“Then we don’t have to.”

She heard the crunch of his boots and then felt his finger gently lift her chin.

“Myla.” Concern underpinned his hoarse timbre.



She raised her head, and their eyes collided. Diesel held her gaze, and the corners of his lips slowly turned up. Everything stopped for a split second, and his smile pierced through all the bad memories of Freddy.

“Thank you,” she breathed.

He shook his head at her as if she’d said something wrong. “Fuck, woman,” he whispered. And then he cupped her chin and kissed her.

Shivers skated across Myla’s skin, and she twined her arms around his neck and kissed him back. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer. Diesel teased her lips apart with his tongue, and she melted into his chest. His lips were firm and demanding, sending needles of pleasure to every nerve in her body. He then pressed against her, and she felt the thickness of his erection straining behind his jeans. When Myla palmed her hand against his hardness, he groaned deep in his throat, then slid his hands down her back to the curve of her ass. He gripped a cheek with one hand, grinding himself into her as he squeezed it hard, his ragged breath shuddering into her ear.

“Diesel, let’s go to the room,” she whispered.

It was as if she’d thrown a bucket of cold water on him. He mumbled something incoherent, patted her behind, and stepped away. At first, confusion washed over Myla, then anger sparked through her.

“What the hell?”

“I got out of line big time.”

She scowled. “Was I complaining?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Did you break up with Freddy before he took off?”

“Why are you asking me that now?”

“Just want to know if you two are still together.”

“It’s convoluted, okay?”

Diesel shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and rocked back on his heels. “Okay. I want a drink. What about you?”

“I guess.”

The sound of his boots hitting the ground seemed loud in the silence. When they reached the front door, he pulled it open, and loud laughter, music, and conversation assaulted her ears. He put his hand on the small of Myla’s back and guided her to the bar.

The prospect placed a shot of Jack and a beer bottle on the counter in front of them.

“What do you want?” Diesel asked.

“A beer is good.”

“Take mine,” he said, sliding the bottle to her.

“Thanks.” Before she brought the beer to her lips, another one appeared in front of Diesel. She wondered how the prospects could remember all the members’ drinks.

“Let’s bring them upstairs,” he said.

When they entered his room, Diesel went over to the window and opened it wide. A cool breeze stirred the blinds’ cords, its plastic knobs batting against the walls.

“I’m gonna jump in the shower.” He downed his beer, then put the empty bottle on the dresser.

Myla perched on the edge of the bed, legs crossed, and a finger tracing the foil still wrapped around the bottle’s neck.

Without looking at him, she said, “You know, don’t you?”

A few moments passed before he replied, “Yeah.”

Pressing her lips together, she simply nodded. He didn’t wait for her to say anything else. He grabbed some clothes out of the closet and walked to the bathroom. A couple of minutes later, she heard the water from the shower turn on.

She sat there trying to figure out what was happening. Somehow he'd found out about the abuse while he was in Denver, but she hadn't told anyone. *Maybe he found something in the house, but what?* Myla couldn't wrap her head around it. And what was up with that kiss? *That sexy, incredible kiss.* Her insides had melted as soon as Diesel's lips touched hers, and when he ran his hands down her back and squeezed her butt, the desire inside her exploded. *Then he pulled away and brought up Freddy. What the hell?* His actions yanked her back and forth like an emotional tug of war. But *what if the kiss was a pity one?* A sick feeling twisted in the pit of her stomach. *No way, it couldn't have been.* There was a spark between them. Myla had felt it the first time she'd seen him in the diner, and she knew he did too. The kiss was the real deal. Passion like that couldn't be faked. Diesel wanted her. She was certain of it, but he'd push her away whenever he let his guard down.

"Was everyone good with you while I was gone?"

The sound of his voice startled her, and she jumped. Peering over her shoulder, she said, "I didn't hear the water turn off."

"You were lost in your thoughts." He picked up a bottle of aftershave from the dresser, poured some into his hands, and patted it over his cheeks and chin. The scent of citrus and exotic spices wafted through the room.

"You smell good. Are you going out?"

"Yeah."

Turning away, she stared at hues of red, orange, and pink streaked across the darkening sky.

"Are you ready?"

Myla's gaze snapped to his. "For what?"

"Food. I'm starving, and a burger sounds fuckin' good right now. You up for that?"

“Sure. I’m pretty hungry too. And I’d love to get away from here for a while.”

“Let’s go.” Smiling, he scooped up the keys from the nightstand and walked toward the door.

THE LINGERING LIGHT grew a deeper purple, and a spattering of stars in the east twinkled as the summer night ushered in. The pine trees cast tall shadows across the parking lot, and the breeze fell soft against Myla’s face as she made her way to Diesel’s SUV.

“I’m not taking the cage,” he said.

Startled, she turned around and saw him standing by a gleaming emerald Harley Davidson that looked like it had just been wheeled off the showroom floor.

“Do you want me to drive your car?”

“Nope. You can ride with me.” He pulled on a pair of leather gloves.

“I thought you don’t take anyone on your motorcycle.”

“I’m making an exception.”

A warm glow flowed through her. “I’m honored and”—she pointed an index finger at the massive bike—“a little terrified. Your motorcycle is like you—big and intimidating.”

He laughed. “‘Big and intimidating’ works for an outlaw.”

Slowly, she approached the Harley. “It’s beautiful. I’m surprised it’s so clean and shiny after the trip from Denver.”

“The prospects wash the bikes after a trip. You don’t need to be nervous. I know what I’m doing.”

“I trust you. Just don’t go too fast and do some crazy things like wheelies or whatever.”

A guffaw burst from deep in Diesel’s chest. He touched her lips with his thumb. “You’re too much, woman.”

His gaze was as soft as a caress, making her heart race. She hoped he would kiss her again, but instead, he pinched her

chin between his thumb and forefinger, then swung his leg over the leather seat.

“Climb on behind me.”

“Wait! I don’t have a clue what I’m doing.”

“I’ll help you.” He extended his hand, and she grabbed it. “There you go,” he said, guiding her behind him. “Put your feet firmly on the foot pedals. The key is to let your body move with me and the bike. Like if we’re turning, lean with me. We gotta be in sync. You never want to lean the opposite way of the motorcycle. Picture yourself as being one with the bike and the motion. Got it?”

“In theory, yes. We’ll have to see once we get going.”

“Just follow my lead, and you’ll do fine. Now here’s the good part.” Diesel grasped Myla’s hands and placed them on each side of his waist. “Wrap your arms around me.” He looked over his shoulder and winked. “Hold on tight and press against me if you need to.”

Myla chuckled. “Is that a universal riding rule or just yours?”

He laughed. “When making turns, the passenger needs to lean forward, hug the rider, and get nice and close to him. It puts all the weight in the center of the bike. But my rule is for you to hang on to me the whole ride since you’re new to riding and all.”

“Yeah ... right.”

“Once you get used to it, you can lie back and relax like when we ride on back roads or the highway if there isn’t too much traffic. For now, hang on tight.”

“No worries there. I’ll be hanging on for dear life.”

“You’re gonna love it. Just enjoy the ride. Ready?”

“Almost.” She reached into her jeans pocket and pulled out a hair tie. With quick moves, she braided her tresses. “Okay, all set.”

“Here we go.”

Myla grabbed him by the hips to steady herself. He took her hands, tugged her closer to him, and she tightened her arms across his hard abs. The engine roared to life: the power she felt between her legs was exhilarating.

“I’m raising the kickstand, then we’ll be taking off,” he said.

Diesel backed the bike out of the space, then rode past the clubhouse and the sentry of trees. He waved to a couple of guys in the guardhouse who opened the iron gates for them, then he accelerated, and they were on the open road. Her grip tightened around him as the speed increased.

The wind whipped around them as they rode toward town. Myla experienced a combination of adrenaline, fear, and pleasure. The first thing she noticed after the rush of air circulating around her was the various scents and how acute they were. The pines smelled fresher, the wildflowers and plants sweeter, the grass earthier, and the exhaust fumes mustier. All her senses were heightened; she’d never experienced anything like it.

Diesel pulled into a space in front of a restaurant whose sign—propped up on a slightly lopsided roof—read Bud’s Grill and switched off the ignition. Realizing the ride was over, a thread of disappointment weaved through her.

Still feeling a rush from the ride, she staggered a little when he helped her off the bike.

“That was awesome! I never felt so alive. I can see how riding can become addictive.”

“Fuck, yeah. I’m glad you liked your first ride.”

“Liked? I fucking loved it!” Myla locked eyes with his gorgeous blue ones. “Thank you for that.” She grinned, snaked one arm around his neck, and pulled him down for a kiss.

Diesel’s lips brushed lightly against hers, and when she began to pull away, he crushed her to him and slipped his

tongue into her mouth, licking, tasting, stroking. She welcomed the urgent thrusting that sent a wildfire of searing flames racing through her body.

“Fuck, woman,” he said against her lips before plunging deeper into her mouth.

A low moan rose from her throat, and she perfectly matched his hunger with each twirl and stroke. She felt him yank off the hair tie, undo the strands, and then his hands got lost in her tresses.

“Maybe we should skip dinner and get a room,” she whispered in his ear.

Diesel held her close. “Everything’s so fuckin’ complicated.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

Stepping back, he released her. His forehead furrowed. “It is, though ... and you know it.”

Her shoulders sagged. “You’re right, but you can’t deny the spark of attraction between us.”

“Like a fuckin’ wildfire growing out of control.” He brushed the back of his hand over her cheek. “I need to keep a level head if I’m going to get to the bottom of this clusterfuck with Freddy.”

She sighed. “I know.”

“I owe it to him.”

Nodding, Myla replied, “I get it—he’s your brother. This whole thing with Freddy—not knowing where he is, if he’s hurt, alive, or dead has been incredibly stressful. Constant high-powered stress makes people emotionally vulnerable and open, wanting to feel something other than anxiety, fear, and sadness. And you’re right; our focus needs to be on finding Freddy and bringing him home. Once that takes place, then we can see what happens”—she waved her hand between them—“with us. We may find the spark has fizzled out.”

She seriously doubted that would be the case with her, but she suspected Diesel's guilt about his brother was interweaved by a conflicted past the two had shared. Myla feared that after Diesel played the knight in shining armor, he'd ride off on his iron horse and leave her and the remains of her shattered relationship with Freddy in the dust.

"You have to decide where you stand with Freddy," he said.

"Yeah, I do." Not wanting to discuss the abuse she'd suffered, she turned toward the patio and said, "Let's eat outside. It's a beautiful night."

"Inside is better. I can see all the doors. Eating outside is risky."

"Are you thinking of Peter Cano?"

"Him and rivals. A biker never knows when shit's gonna hit the fan."

"That makes sense. So we'll eat inside. I'm starving."

The hostess sat them at a table in the back of the restaurant. Diesel took the chair against the wall across from Myla. She noted that he could view the entire place from his vantage point. Diesel explained that the family-owned eatery dated back to the late 1940s and was a Pinewood Springs institution.

"I remember passing by this place when I first came to town. I got lost and ended up on this street. I wondered about it but didn't remember the name." Myla opened the menu and looked down. "It's pretty basic."

"Same listings since they opened. Best damn burgers, fries, and milkshakes in the county," Diesel said.

"It's cool that the later generations kept the traditions. A lot of places feel pressured to offer *everything* under the sun. So far, I like it, and I haven't even tasted the food. I'm going to splurge and order a double chocolate milkshake. I can't remember the last time I had a shake."



“They’re awesome. Everything here is made to order.”

Twenty minutes later, Myla sank her teeth into the best burger she’d ever tasted. “This is beyond delicious.” She swiped a napkin across her chin. “Juicy, perfectly cooked, and amazing.” She took another big bite.

“This is my go-to for burgers even though the club owns a burger joint.”

“I didn’t know that. Is it on Main Street?”

“No. It’s in West Pinewood Springs.”

“I haven’t been to that part of town. I’d like to check it out.”

“It’s a newer section built around ten or so years ago, about three miles from here across the river. That area has some kind of mall, a few chain restaurants, among other businesses.”

“You don’t go there very often, do you?” She smiled.

“Nope. Sometimes a group of us will go to Burger and Beer, the joint we own.”

“I’d still like to see that area sometime.”

“We can do that, but the ideal areas around here are the backroads crossing through the valleys and mountains. The best seat in the house for that is on a bike. It’s fuckin’ awesome.”

“I bet. That’d be great to experience some time.”

They kept the conversation light for the rest of their meal, ignoring the gigantic elephant in the room: what Diesel found at the house in Denver. Myla didn’t think it was the time and place to ask the questions that had been going through her mind ever since he’d returned. She also didn’t want anyone overhearing their conversation, but she was prepared to bring up the topic to Diesel when they got back to the clubhouse.

The ride back was a different experience from the earlier one. The night was dark, with a sliver of the moon slipping

behind fishtailed clouds. The headlight beam threw shadows around them, and black-limbed trees raced past in a blur as the cool air brushed Myla's skin.

As before, the journey had ended far too soon, and she pressed her head against Diesel's shoulder as he slowed down and hung a left turn onto the road leading to the club.

"How'd you like the ride back?" he asked as he helped her dismount.

"I loved it, but it was scarier at night. I never realized how dark that road is."

"Nighttime riding is more challenging. You can hear nature's conversation better at night, and that's what I enjoy. For me, riding is Zen-like; the landscape absorbs into my skin. I become completely aware of being in the moment. Everything is heightened, you know? I can feel the sky, taste the air, see the color of the wind." He ran a hand over his face. "It's fuckin' hard to explain, but the bike's vibration feels like my very life beat. When I was in the pen, not riding was the fuckin' worst thing of all. I used to dream about it all the time. Hell, it sucked."

"Now that I've been on a ride with you, I get it. I know you often wrote about missing your Harley and being unable to ride. I admit I didn't really understand it, but now I do."

"Yeah. The first thing I did when I got out was jump on my bike. I rode for hours. I went through every damn valley, canyon, and mountain road in the county. I couldn't get enough. One of my buddies in the pen talked about how when he got out, he was gonna fuck chicks until his dick fell off, but I knew the first thing I'd do is get on my Harley and ride until my ass was too numb to sit." He laughed.

"I love your passion and that you notice the beauty of nature. I've always found solace in nature. It's life-affirming when everything else around you is going to hell."

"Yeah."

“I want to speak to you privately but don’t want to go into the clubhouse just yet.”

“We can talk on the back porch.”

Myla followed him to the patio and sat on a small rattan couch. Diesel took a seat on the other end.

“I’ve been waiting for you to tell me what you found at my house since you came back, but you haven’t brought it up.”

Diesel pulled out a joint from his shirt pocket, cupped his hand to light it, then turned to Myla. “You want one? It’s good stuff. It comes from our grow store.”

“No, thanks,” she said.

He took a long hit, held it in for a few seconds, then blew out smoke. “What do you want to know?”

“Did it look like Peter or anyone had been inside the house?”

“No. I expected to find the place in shambles, but nothing was disturbed. The alarm system was still engaged.”

“I’m surprised. I thought for sure Peter would’ve gone over.” She looked away, took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. “Did you find a body?”

He blew out another stream of smoke, then nodded. “In the panic room.”

“Oh, God,” she choked, covering her face with her hands. “I can’t believe this. Who was it?”

“I’m pretty sure it was the fucker’s brother. Freddy had cameras everywhere. I saw what happened. It looked like the dude started shit first. He came at Freddy, kicking and punching, then got him to the floor and beat him. Freddy got in a real solid punch and pushed the jerk off him. He ran to the kitchen, grabbed a knife, and went after the guy.”

“Did the other guy have a weapon?”

“Didn’t look that way. I think Freddy just lost it. When the dude crumpled to the floor, he kept going at it.”

“I can’t believe this. Could you hear what he was saying?”

“Freddy kept telling the guy that he and his brother cheated him and took everything away from him. He was cussing and crying.”

“So it was self-defense, right?”

“I’m no lawyer, but the jerk attacked Freddy first. From what I saw, he would’ve killed Freddy if he hadn’t gotten in that lucky punch and grabbed the knife.”

“Freddy should’ve stopped when he saw the guy was incapacitated.”

“He had a meltdown. He couldn’t stop. It happens. There was a lot of emotion going on. Emotions fuck you over every time in a situation like that.”

“Poor Freddy. I bet he was so scared and freaked out after he saw what he’d done.”

“Pretty much. He wrapped him up in a ton of garbage bags and took him to the panic room. Then he grabbed some items from a couple of wall safes, his closet, and dresser drawers and left the house. He really should’ve taken the surveillance tapes. I can’t believe how many damn cameras were in the house. He had them in closets, the fuckin’ pantry. I mean, shit ... my brother was fuckin’ paranoid.”

“He was. He kept thinking people would break into the house and rob and kill us. I didn’t know he had cameras in the closets and pantry. That seems a bit extreme.”

“Maybe he wanted to keep tabs on you.”

“Me? Why?”

“You told me he thought you were having a thing with your art teacher, right?”

“Yes, but if I was cheating, why the hell would I do it at our house? I mean, I knew he had cameras in all the main

rooms and areas, like the hallways.”

“I don’t know. Drugs make some people paranoid and fucked in the head.”

The screen door opened, and one of the prospects stepped onto the porch. He placed a shot of whiskey and a beer on the table in front of Diesel and then put a glass of chardonnay and a Diet Coke can in front of Myla.

“Thank you,” she said.

Without saying a word, the prospect walked back into the clubhouse.

“Did you have to do that before you became a member?” She leaned over, picked up the wine glass, and brought it to her lips.

“Yeah, and a ton of other shit. Being a prospect is brutal, but that’s how the club knows if a guy is Insurgent material.”

“Does anyone ever throw in the towel?”

“Oh yeah. I’m betting Tags isn’t gonna make it. The other two—Rubble and Welder—got what it takes. There’s no fuckin’ way he’s gonna make it through the rally. Being a prospect at a rally fuckin’ sucks.” He laughed.

“I guess it’s like an initiation to one of the fraternities at a university.”

“Maybe in concept, but those pussies couldn’t make it through one hour at an outlaw club.” He picked up his shot glass.

She took another sip of wine and looked over the rim of the glass at him. “Are the cameras the way you found out about Freddy and ... me?”

He locked his gaze on hers. “Yeah. Fuck, Myla, why didn’t you tell me what he was doing to you?”

She placed the glass on the table and stared off into the distance. “I don’t want you to think what you saw was the sum

of our relationship. It was a singular incident in a three-year relationship.”

“He never laid a hand on you before?”

“Not like that.”

“Like how then?”

She grimaced. “I don’t know if I want to talk about this.”

“You opened the door, but if you want to let it eat you up inside, that’s on you.”

She bit the inside of her bottom lip hard, then glanced over at him. “He’d slapped me a couple of times, and a few times he shoved me, but that was all.”

“That was enough. I never took Freddy for a pussy-assed shithead. Our old man wasn’t the best guy, but he never laid a hand on our mom. You should’ve told me. I would’ve straightened him out.”

A weak smile whispered across her lips. “The first time Freddy smacked me across the face, I was flabbergasted. It felt like it wasn’t real. Of course, he apologized profusely. Then the few times he shoved me, he brought home small gifts to show his love. He even took me out after the second slap across my face to one of the most expensive steakhouses in Denver. At that point, I started thinking about leaving him.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it? I used to see how my sister’s boyfriend treated her when we were in high school, and I’d tell her to leave him, that she deserved better, and that she had to respect herself and be strong. What a fucking hypocrite I turned out to be. It’s always easier to give advice to others than to take it for yourself.”

“You’re too hard on yourself.”

“Maybe.” She took another sip of wine and leaned back against the cushion. “I met Freddy in a dive bar on a snowy Saturday night. I’d had a shitty day at work and stopped by

Hilltop for a couple of brandy shots before going home. I didn't have any close friends, and I preferred to drink alone, so when a tall, nice-looking guy with a lopsided smile sat down on the barstool next to me, I had to smile back. Anyway, that quick stop at the bar turned into three hours. Freddy was affable and made me laugh a lot. Soon we were dating and then living together." She smiled at the memory. "That first night, he told me all about you. I thought it was cool that he was so proud of you. And when we went to Hayes and I met your parents, I was blown away."

"What the fuck?"

"No, really. I remember thinking that Freddy had an actual family. He had an older brother he idolized, a mother who was flighty but sweet, and a dad who didn't talk much but would help if Freddy needed extra money. His parents were still together, and he had a home he could go to if he needed to. It just blew me away. At that point, my mother was on her fourth 'forever' husband and didn't have time for any of us. I hadn't heard from my dad in years, my brothers changed their phone numbers and never bothered to call me, and whenever I touched base with my sisters, they always seemed to be in chaos or uninterested, or both, so I just stopped calling. I was born into a family of seven, but I was alone in the world. Freddy"—she pointed at Diesel—"and you had a *family*. And when I went to your parents' house for Thanksgiving, it was the best."

"My mom made Thanksgiving?"

"Freddy said she used to when you guys were young."

"She did. My old man wasn't there all the time. He would be on the road or shacking up with some chick was more like it. He was always there for Christmas. My mom was into the holidays. I'll give her that. I'm just surprised she still did it after we left home."

"Actually, the worst times for me were the holidays. During my childhood, holidays were spent either eating at one of the shelters in town that opened its doors to the unfortunate

or spending the day eating whatever was in the refrigerator. When I got older and lived on my own, Thanksgiving was a day off from whatever job I had at the time. I would spend it alone with the *Homicide for the Holidays* series on the Oxygen Network and a few slices of peppered turkey and instant mashed potatoes from the grocery store while the rest of the world sat around family-packed tables, laughing and gorging on once-a-year side dishes and desserts.” She shrugged. “It was no big deal. I was used to lonely holiday meals. You can imagine what it was like to spend the holidays with your family. I guess that’s why I clung to Freddy when things started to turn sour. I loved being a part of a family, being a couple, and I didn’t want to go back to being lonely and alone. Pretty pathetic, right?”

Diesel leaned over and put his hand on hers, squeezing it gently. “No. Feeling alone can be the fuckin’ worst. You see my parents in a different light than I do, and that’s okay. They were never really there for me. A bit more for Freddy ’cause he followed the rules and was the ‘good boy.’” He chuckled. “I was always the rebel, so I wasn’t easy, and some parents only want to deal with easy.”

“It must’ve been hard,” she whispered.

“I didn’t give a shit. It just made me tougher and more of a rebel. I just stick my middle finger up to the world and don’t give a damn what anyone thinks. My real family is the Insurgents. There’s a closeness between us that citizens can’t understand. The MC isn’t simply a club; it’s a culture and way of life that goes hand-in-hand with the freedom and excitement of living life on our terms and not giving a damn if citizens like it or not. In our world, it’s a challenge to live up to being an outlaw biker. You gotta have the toughness, the moral fortitude to uphold biker values, and the spirit to live life to the fullest no matter what the fuckin’ consequences are. The brotherhood has a bond stronger than that of blood and a dedication to each other’s lives that most citizens would never understand. Citizens easily throw the word ‘brotherhood’ around a lot, but for us, we take it to a life-and-death level. I



would step in front of a bullet for any of my brothers, and they'd do the same for me. *That's* what a family is."

"Sounds like your world isn't for the cowardly or the weak."

"Damn straight. That's why I didn't want Freddy prospecting for the Insurgents. He wouldn't have lasted more than one day. He didn't have the backbone. He didn't have the strength of mind."

"I don't think most people could live in your world. Freddy wanted good things for us. He just took the wrong road in getting them and then got in with the wrong people. I know he wanted the American dream of the big house, the fancy cars, the pretty wife, and the two kids, but he was too impatient to get it. And now, here we are. It's sad."

"He knew what he was getting into. His mistake was letting this Cano fucker control the situation. He should have gotten out the minute it got shady. But none of this is an excuse for what he did to you."

"No, it isn't," she whispered. "I made excuses for the other times, but nothing justifies his actions. I had made up my mind to leave him. I planned to clear out the day I came home and saw all the blood. I thought someone had murdered Freddy."

"And now?"

"I need to see this whole thing through. I want to make sure he's safe and out of harm's way, and then I'll move on to the next chapter in my life."

"Did you tell Freddy you were gonna leave?"

"No. I was too afraid of what he might do. I thought it was better to leave while he was away. He was so sure I was having an affair with Allan. It was crazy. I've been thinking about what you said about Freddy using drugs, and it makes sense now. The paranoia, the extreme jealousy, the lack of reason, and the extreme mood swings. I couldn't see it when I was in the middle of it, but looking back, it explains a lot of things."

“Yeah. Just be honest and tell me shit, okay? There’s no judging going on here.”

“Okay, but the same goes for you.”

“If I can tell you, I will. That’s the best I can do. Club business stays—”

“With the club. I know.”

He chuckled. “You’re getting the hang of it. I’m impressed, woman.”

A huge grin spread across Myla’s face, and she knew she looked foolish but didn’t care.

“I’m glad we talked. You always make me feel better when things get tough,” she said.

A comfortable silence fell between them. Faint stars pricked the dark sky, a whippoorwill called plaintively from the thicket, and fireflies flashed through the air.

“You should call your parents and let them know what’s going on with Freddy,” she said, glancing at him sidelong.

“They probably aren’t even concerned about why they haven’t heard from him. It’s like it’s their world, and we just exist. They haven’t called me about Freddy. Have they contacted you?”

“No, but they should still know, just in case this turns out bad. They’ll be shocked and angry they were kept in the dark.”

He didn’t say anything for a long while, then he finally spoke, “I’ll do it for you.”

His words made her heart swell. “Thank you.”

A boyish smile flickered across his face, and it melted her heart.

The back door pushed open, and both she and Diesel looked over.

Tank filled the doorway. He pointed to Diesel. “Get your ass in here. We need another hand at the poker table.”

“I thought Bones was in the game.”

“Something came up with his old man.”

“Is everything okay?” Diesel asked, rising to his feet.

“He’ll let us know. Are you in?”

Diesel glanced at Myla, and she said, “Go on. I’ll enjoy the quiet for a bit longer before heading up to the room.”

“Are you sure you’re good?”

“I’m more than good. Have fun and win a ton of money.”

The two men laughed, then went inside the club. A warm, comfortable feeling spread through her as she stared into the distance. The sound of the river mesmerized Myla, along with the chirping crickets, rustling leaves, and the occasional hoot of an owl. As she let her mind drift, thoughts of Diesel took center stage. Getting to know him in person was even better than through the letters they’d exchanged. She never thought an outlaw biker who spent time in prison would be this kind and caring person. However, she did not doubt that he would be hard and calculating if anyone crossed him or disrespected him, his club, or those dear to him.

“Diesel,” she said out loud. Myla loved saying his name. It fit him to a T. He made her feel good—sometimes giddy—and safe. She liked being around him. He was the light in her darkness. He made her feel better when things got tough, sad, and scary—and he was a great kisser, for damn sure. Diesel had a strong body with some wicked abs and biceps. Those blue eyes were intense but warmed up whenever he laughed.

Myla pushed against the cushion and sat straight, her knees tucked up under her chin. She wrapped her arms around her legs and stared at the forest of trees silhouetted against the darkness. *Diesel*. His name kept running through her head over and over ...

“Are you still out here?”

Diesel’s deep voice startled her.

“I thought you were playing poker,” she said.

“I was for the past two hours. I went to the room and didn’t see you. I’m glad you’re here.”

“Were you worried about me?” She teased.

“Always. What’ve you been doing?”

“Enjoying the solitude.”

“I’m beat. Are you coming in?”

“Yeah.” She stood up, and her stiff knees screamed out. “I guess I lost track of time,” she said rubbing her knees.

“Looks that way.”

He opened the screen door for her, and she slipped inside. The great room had a few of the men playing pool and drinking. A couple of guys watched the big screen television while some club girls lounged on one of the couches.

“It seems quiet in here tonight,” she said.

“Weeknight. Everyone’s gotta work in the morning.”

“Are you going in?”

“Yeah.”

When they entered the room, she turned to him and said, “I wish you’d stay here tonight. I know you’re tired, and I’m fine with sleeping on the couch.”

“I’m so damn tired. I’ll be out the minute my head hits the pillow. I’ll sleep on the couch, and don’t start arguing about it, woman. I’m too fuckin’ beat.”

“No arguments. Let me at least make up the couch for you.”

“Do what you want. I’m gonna wash up, then hit the sack.”

Fifteen minutes later, his soft, even breathing wrapped around her like a warm caress. She burrowed deeper into the bed and pulled the sheet closer, tucking a hand under her chin.

Within minutes, her eyelids grew heavy, and she soon fell asleep.

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## CHAPTER TEN

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THE EARLY MORNING sun broke through the blinds, piercing Diesel's tanned skin. He jumped to his feet, quickly realizing he'd overslept. He looked over and saw Myla sleeping, her long dark lashes laying against her sun-kissed skin and silky hair fanned out behind her. The sheet had fallen down past her shoulders to her waist during her slumber. His breath hitched when his gaze fell on the swell of her tits, then to the nipples poking through the thin fabric of her translucent nightshirt. Arousal flashed hot through his system, looping around his hard dick. All he wanted to do was rip the sheet from her curvy body, touch her, taste her, and fuck her until she couldn't walk.

"Damn it," he muttered under his breath.

Myla had been in his head too much, and it turned him on and pissed him off at the same time. A crazy mix of emotions ripped through him: possessiveness, tenderness, anger, and something else that made him uncomfortable. He needed to step away, clear his damn mind, and screw one of the club girls to get Myla out of his system.

He forced himself to look away and slowly walked to the bathroom. He was kidding himself because he didn't want a club girl, or any woman, except for *her*. Myla captivated him in a way no other woman had. *But then there's Freddy.*

"Fuck it," he said out loud.

He turned the water to cold and stepped into the shower stall.

DIESEL WAS CHOMPING on an egg sandwich when Banger sat across from him. There were deep lines around the president's eyes, and he looked tired like he hadn't had a good night's sleep in a while. Diesel knew the snitch business at the

Insurgents' San Diego Chapter was eating at him. Hell, it was a thorn in the side of all the members, but Banger seemed to be taking it personally.

He sucked in a deep breath. "This mess in San Diego needs to be cleared up while we're down there."

Diesel nodded. "Animal, Rags, and I were just talking about that yesterday. We're gonna make sure we find out who the fucker is. I told Demon he could count on us one hundred percent."

"Okay." Banger squared his shoulders, and a ghost of a smile touched his eyes. "I know I can count on my crew. It's always a gut-wrenching day when a brother turns against his club."

"Yeah, it's the fuckin' worst. Does Panther have *any* idea who it could be?"

"Not really. What about Demon or Iceman?"

"They got their suspicions, but nothing concrete. The problem is that you lose trust in your brothers when something like this happens. Demon's to the point where he thinks it could be more than one member. Iceman disagrees."

"So does Panther. The facts point to one traitor from the way things have played out. Panther still hasn't shared any of this with the MC except for Demon, Iceman, and of course, the VP."

"Yeah, Jagged's an Insurgent through and through," Diesel replied. "I talked with the brothers going to the rally, and we're gonna be taking shifts watching the club to see who's going where and who's meeting who."

"I'll be there right along with you all. Panther said the club's been losing a fortune, which affects us and all the other chapters. When we get this fucker, he'll beg for a quick death." Banger's jaw visibly tightened.

"We've got this."

Nodding, Banger said, "Any news on your brother?"

“Some. Freddy’s probably hiding out in San Diego, but I don’t know where. He got involved with some dirtbag, low-level gangster out of LA.” Diesel shook his head. “What a fuckin’ stupid move. He offed this asshole’s brother.”

“Shit,” Banger muttered under his breath.

“Yeah. Freddy put cameras all over his damn house, so I saw what happened. I mean, the dirtbag brother started the fight, but Freddy let his emotions take over and did an overkill.”

“Your brother’s got a fucking target on his back.”

“No shit. I need to find him before they do.”

“He hasn’t called you?” he asked, surprise etched on his face.

“Nope. I’m fuckin’ livid about that. I could help the kid, you know?”

“What the fuck’s wrong with him?”

“I guess he wants to try and do this on his own. Like I said, he’s made a ton of stupid decisions.”

“Has he called the girl?”

“What girl?” Diesel asked.

“The one who’s staying here. Isn’t she his ol’ lady?”

He cleared his throat. “They’re not hitched up, but yeah, he’s reached out to Myla once since she’s been in Pinewood Springs.”

“You got something going with her?”

“Nope.”

“That’s not what the brothers are saying,” Banger said, his eyes boring into Diesel’s.

“I don’t give a damn what they’re saying. Sometimes they’re like a bunch of clucking hens.”



A small laugh slipped out from the president's lips. "That's true. I know you wouldn't be fucking your brother's woman, even though you want to." He pushed up from the table. "If you need any help with Freddy's situation when we're in San Diego, you got it."

"Thanks."

Diesel watched until the president disappeared down the hallway that led to his office. He wasn't surprised that the brothers were talking shit about him and Myla. Hell, if one of the other members had a sexy woman bunking with them, he'd think the same thing. Diesel couldn't deny that he was drawn to her in a way he'd never been with another woman. He felt connected to Myla somehow when they wrote to one another, and he'd never met or heard her voice. But she was Freddy's woman and could tell she still had feelings for him.

Images of Myla's body writhing in pain and Freddy kicking her spun around in his mind like a carousel. Since he'd watched the tape, he couldn't get the screenshots out of his head. He wanted to wrap his arms around her, hold her tight, and make sure that nothing or no one ever hurt her again.

When Diesel's cell phone rang, he came back to the present. It was a customer, speaking in a high-pitched voice, inquiring about the detailing status of her canary yellow Mercedes Benz convertible. She needed it finished in time for a weekend reunion trip. Apparently, she wanted to make her old high school friends jealous, and she'd be "devastated" if the car wasn't ready.

*If only life's problems were that fuckin' basic.* "It'll be ready by six o'clock today."

"Are you sure? I mean, I don't want to be crushed if it isn't."

"It will be ready by six o'clock today," he said, rising to his feet.

"For sure?"

“What aren’t you understanding here? I can’t make it any more simple than what I said. Six o’clock today. Later.”

“A pain-in-the-ass customer?” Tank chuckled.

“A fuckin’ princess who thinks she’s the only damn person in the county with a car to detail.”

“Hate those fucking princesses.” Tank smirked.

“You’d be cussing up a storm if you had to deal with some of the assholes who come into the business.”

“You’re right there, dude. That’s why I only work behind the scenes for the MC. I worked one day at the grow store and wanted to wring every jerk’s neck who asked me if the stuff was good and a bunch of other stupid questions. I prefer dealing with setting up the gunrunning and distribution channels and not dealing with inane citizens.”

Diesel chuckled. “Working with people who know the score sounds really good right now. Rags and Smokey set up a meeting for us tonight to go over the plan once we get to San Diego. Do you know about it?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there. It burns my ass that an Insurgent is a fuckin’ snake in the grass. I’m gonna stomp the shit outta him when we get him.”

“We’re all chomping at the bit to get a piece of the fucker’s hide.”

“Is the chick going?”

“Myla?”

“Yeah. I figured she was since your brother may be in San Diego.”

“I’d prefer she stays put, but she’ll raise holy hell and probably head out on her own. I’ll have my hands full at the rally finding Freddy and helping out our SD brothers. I won’t have time to babysit her ass if she comes by herself.”

Tank shook his head. “Citizens just don’t fuckin’ get it. They think they know shit when they don’t.” He looped his

thumbs through his belt loops.

“She’s anxious to find Freddy. I understand, but it’s easier if she’s with me, and I can control things.”

“Making excuses for her? There’s some shit going on between you two. We all see it.”

“Fuck off.” Diesel glanced at the wall clock. “I gotta get to the car wash and finish up princess’s sports car. See you tonight.”

“Ignoring what I said doesn’t change what it is,” Tank said.

Diesel turned around, held up his middle finger, and walked out of the club.

TWO HOURS AFTER arriving, Wheelie stuck his head in the work area and called out to him. “You got a phone call.”

Diesel grabbed a rag and mopped the sweat around his face and neck. “Is it that woman calling about her yellow sports car?”

“No, it’s Myla. She said she couldn’t get a hold of you on your cell.”

Concern and a tiny frisson of fear niggled at him, but he pushed it away, refusing to let it take hold. He had to keep a cool head and detach from any emotion.

“I’ll be right there,” he said, throwing the spent rag into a bucket.

As he walked to the office, he glanced at his cell, which showed five missed calls from her. The noise in the work area sometimes made it impossible to hear cell phones going off. Normally, he kept his phone in his pocket so he’d feel the vibration, but that day, he shelved it.

“I’ll transfer the call,” Wheelie said.

Diesel entered his office, closed the door, and picked up the phone on the first ring.

“What’s up?” he said.

“I tried getting a hold of you. You didn’t answer your cell.”

“I was detailing a car and didn’t want it to fall out of my pocket. Phones are hard to hear in the work area. What’s going on?”

“Freddy called me again.”

“When?” he asked, sitting down in the desk chair.

“About a half hour ago.”

“What’d he say?”

“He said he’s scared. He thinks Peter is on to him. I told him to call you.”

“Did he say he was in SD?”

“He said he was in San Diego County but wouldn’t tell me where.”

“So this Cano fucker is there too?”

“I think so, or at least that’s what Freddy thinks. He told me I’m a bitch for not helping him out.”

“What the fuck? How the hell can you or me help him if we don’t know where the fuck he is?”

“He’s just scared and upset. He sounded like he’d been drinking.”

“Did you hear traffic, sirens, or any noise in the background?”

“Yes! I heard several sirens. Does that mean anything?”

“He’s either staying near a hospital or fuzzi station. He must be in the city and not in a suburb. What else did he say?”

“He just asked if I’d been back to the house, and I said no, which is true. I didn’t tell him anything about you or about me being here. Freddy still thinks I’m somewhere in metro Denver. He kept trying to get me to tell him where I was. Then he said he’d be in touch and hung up.”

“How long did you guys talk?”

“About fifteen minutes, maybe a little less. But the freaky thing was that after I hung up, Peter called me.”

Diesel shot up in the seat, adrenaline pumping through his veins. “What the fuck did he say?”

“He kept asking me where Freddy was. He threatened to make my death slow and painful if I didn’t tell him. I kept telling him I didn’t know, but he didn’t believe me. I tried to be as convincing—”

“You don’t have to convince that motherfucker of *anything*,” he gritted. A tornado of rage swirled around inside him. “Do you have call trace?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll call Hawk. He’s at the clubhouse in his office. He’ll take your phone and see if he can trace it. Don’t go anywhere. Stay put at the clubhouse.”

“He thinks I’m in Denver.”

“Did he say that?”

“Not exactly, but I could tell by how he talked. Freddy told people he had a brother in an outlaw motorcycle club, but I guess he never told them the name of the club.”

“I used to tell him never to say where the club is located or the name of my MC. I guess he listened for once.”

“When will you be home?”

“I have shit to finish at work. I’ll be home around six thirty, but you’re safe at the club. Just stay inside until I get there, okay? I don’t want anything happening to you. I’ll call Hawk now.”

“Okay. I’ll see you later. I didn’t hear you leave this morning.”

“I left early. If you get any more phone calls, call me. I’ll keep my cell in my pocket.”

“All right. I’ll go downstairs and wait for Hawk to come into the great room. I miss you.”

Knowing that Cano had contacted Myla and that she was scared crushed him. At that moment he wanted to be with her, holding her close to him, stroking her hair, and inhaling her perfume—vanilla with a hint of orange. *If anything happens to her, I’ll ...*

“Did you hear me?” Myla’s voice broke in on his thoughts. “I miss you.”

“Yeah, I heard you.” *Stay cool. You need to detach and not fuck up anything.* “I better call Hawk. Sit tight.”

“Okay,” she replied, her voice reflecting disappointment. “Bye.”

The phone clicked off. *Damn it!* And a great emptiness filled him. An unexpected urge to call her back—to tell her he missed her too—washed over him, but he resisted. He took a deep breath, expelled it, then slowly tapped in Hawk’s number.

WHEN DIESEL RODE into the clubhouse’s parking lot, he spotted Myla leaning against the brick wall, looking down at her phone. She wore white shorts that showed off her long, lean legs and a fuchsia pink T-shirt that hugged her breasts and bared a sliver of skin at her midriff. Her hair was loose and tumbling over her shoulders. His breath quickened. *All that creamy flesh. She’s so damn beautiful. Fuck.*

He averted his gaze and slowly walked toward the front door, the gravel crunching under his boots. Myla glanced up. Her eyes locked on his broad chest then moved up to his gaze, and a warm smile lit up her face as she pushed away from the wall and walked toward him.

“You’re home,” she said, a tinge of pink colored her cheeks.

“Yeah. How are you?”

“Good now that you’re back. I’ve been nervous ever since I heard from Peter. I feel better now that you’re here.”

She stepped closer, and her familiar scent of vanilla and orange wrapped around him. She reached out and brushed her fingertips across his forearm.

“Your skin’s warm.”

“From the sun. Did you hear anything more from the asshole or Freddy?”

“No. Hawk took my phone and kept it for most of the afternoon. He returned it but didn’t tell me anything when I asked.” She shrugged. “I’ve gotten used to that around here.”

“I’ll touch base with him. I noticed his bike’s still here.”

“Did you have a good day at work?”

“It was all right.”

“I wish I could make a nice meal for you. I know you work hard.” Myla stepped closer to him. “I’m a pretty good cook.”

Diesel groaned inwardly. Her nearness, the way that damn T-shirt molded around her tits, and those eyes—green and blazing with desire—drove him wild. If he didn’t get away, he’d go all caveman, throw her over his shoulder, haul her ass to his room, and fuck her all night long.

He took a few steps back. “I better touch base with Hawk before he leaves.”

She glanced downward. “All right. Can we go for a ride tonight?”

If he felt her arms wrapped around his waist and her tits against his back, he’d succumb to the desire between them. “Another time. I’m pretty beat.” He slipped the keys to his bike in his pocket. “I’ll let you know what Hawk found out.” Without waiting for her to answer, he strode away, then entered the clubhouse.

“Hey,” Hawk said as Diesel walked into the office.

“Hey,” he responded before plopping down on one of the black leather chairs. “I’m glad you’re still here.”

“I waited for you. I’ve got to get going in a few. I’m meeting Cara and the kids at her parents’ house.”

“I don’t want to keep you.”

“You’re not. I’m not exactly fond of Cara’s mother, so the less time I spend over there, the better.” Hawk laughed.

“Parents can be a pain in the ass, so I can’t imagine what in-laws are like.”

“Her dad’s cool, but her mom is a bitch. It’s pretty simple.”

Diesel laughed and stretched his legs out. “Any luck in tracing the two calls?”

“Yeah. I got a location on your brother. He uses a burner phone. He’s in San Diego, but I can’t give you an exact location. The other call belongs to Peter Cano. I got a location and an address in LA.” Hawk shook his head. “I can’t believe this dumbass is playing gangster. I found him in less than a minute. What the fuck?”

“Of course, the fucker’s a dumbass—my brother got mixed up with him. Freddy was never a good judge of character.”

“He’s distributing and selling opioids, right?”

“That and probably coke and meth. What’s his address?”

Hawk slid a piece of paper across the desk. “Everything’s there.”

“I’m gonna pay the fucker a visit when I get to Southern Cal.”

“Take a few brothers with you.”

“I plan to.”

“I hope you find your brother. The dude needs to be calling you and not his woman.”

Diesel nodded, wincing slightly at the “his woman” moniker. “I don’t know why he’s keeping me at arm’s length. I just have to find him and put this to rest, you know?”

“Yeah. Do your people know about him?”



“Myla wants me to call them, but I can’t, at least not right now. She doesn’t get that they don’t give a shit.”

“Maybe they do with something like this. It’s your call.”

“Yeah.” He stood from the chair and slipped the address into his jeans pocket. “Thanks, dude.”

“When you’re down there, let me know if you need anything, okay?”

“Okay.” He rapped the desk with the knuckles of his right fist, then walked out of the room.

Diesel left the clubhouse by the back door and walked over to the riverbank. He stared at the water rushing over the rocks for a long while. A mélange of emotions swirled inside him: anger, confusion, frustration, sadness. He had to make everything right for Freddy, and he had to make sure Cano was out of the picture for good. Then there was Myla, but he pushed those emotions far away.

He let out a lengthy sigh, took out his phone, and plugged in his parents’ phone number.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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DIESEL WOKE UP with his head pounding and his mouth feeling like a desert. He groaned as he struggled to sit up, then reached over and grabbed the water bottle on the small nightstand.

“You really tied one on last night,” Rags said as he ran a comb through his hair.

“No kidding. I feel like hell.”

Diesel brought the bottle to his lips and drained it.

“You going to work?”

“I have to. We’re leaving for San Diego in a couple of days, and there’s too much to do at the car wash before I can take off. Damn.” He rubbed the back of his pounding skull.

“Myla was so pissed at you.” Rags laughed.

“Yeah ... well ... whatever.” He grasped the corner of the nightstand, hoisted himself up, then placed a hand on the wall to keep from toppling back onto the bed.

“I’ll catch you later. I have a big landscaping project I want finished before we head to the rally.”

Diesel grunted, then weaved toward the bathroom. Cranking the cold-water faucet, he cupped his hands under the stream and splashed his face several times in a futile attempt to find some relief. He turned on the shower, stepped gingerly into the stall, and braced both hands on the tiled wall, allowing the warm water to pelt his aching head. The events of the prior night slowly slipped back into consciousness: The phone call to his parents, his anger at their unconcern, the meeting about the surveillance operation in San Diego, Myla’s body pressed against his, her head on his shoulder as he comforted her, his

decision to bunk with Rags, and bottles of beer and shots of whiskey.

“Myla was pissed at me because I was drinking, right?” he asked out loud as his train of thought hit a bump.

All at once, like a flash, he remembered. After many bottles of beer and shots, Nina had come over, wrapped her arms around Diesel, and kissed him.

“Myla saw that. Fuck!” He pounded the tile, and the pain shot straight to his throbbing head. The last thing he wanted was to hurt or cause her more distress than she already had.

*Did I talk to her about going to SD?* He searched his dulled memory bank and couldn't remember bringing up the subject to her. *I'm sure I'd remember that.* He racked his brain again, but nothing came up. Chances were high that Diesel never got around to it. He'd have to find her and try to make everything right again.

He turned off the water, stepped out of the stall, and washed up. After dressing, Diesel downed three aspirins, locked the door behind him, and searched for her.

Sitting cross-legged on the couch's tropical cushions in a tank top and cutoffs, Myla held a mug of coffee and scrolled through her phone with the other hand. A pair of sandals sat under the coffee table.

Diesel pushed open the screen door and stepped out onto the back porch. A frown settled on her face when she saw him.

“Hey,” he said as he walked over and sat on the other end of the couch.

Ignoring him, she took a sip of coffee, then went back to scrolling on her phone.

“I know I got wasted last night, and I fucked up.”

Myla didn't say anything or even glance at him.

“I called my people and told them about Freddy.”

That got her attention, and she looked up. “And?” she said curtly.

“They didn’t give a shit. I knew they wouldn’t, but still ... it pissed me off big time.”

“I don’t believe that they didn’t care.”

Anger pricked at his nerves. “I forgot, you’re an expert when it comes to my people. You’ve met them a handful of times and know them better than I do.” He locked his gaze on hers. “They. Don’t. Give. A. Flying. Fuck. It can’t be more simple than that.” Diesel rubbed his temples, trying to knead away the pain in his head.

“I’m just surprised, that’s all.” A few seconds passed, then she added, “But you’re right about knowing your parents better than I do. I guess family is always on better behavior in front of newcomers.”

“I guess.” He popped two more aspirin into his mouth and swallowed them dry.

“How’re you feeling?” she asked softly.

“Like shit.”

“You were an asshole last night.”

He leaned against the cushion and said, “I’m an asshole most nights. You’ve only seen the good side of me.”

“I don’t believe that. You were upset. I wish you would’ve talked to me about it instead of getting drunk and acting rude.”

“I don’t remember much of what I did last night, but I didn’t mean to be rude to you.”

“Didn’t you? It seemed like you were trying to give me a message.”

“Don’t psychoanalyze it. I was fuckin’ drunk. That’s all.”

“You made sure I knew you and that club girl have a thing going on.”

“I didn’t mean to disrespect you like that. I don’t have ‘a thing’ with Nina or Rosie or Kristy, or *any* of the club girls. I’ve explained that to you before.”

“*Right*. It’s just sex. Okay. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. You’re a free agent, and I’m in limbo with my relationship. It’s no big deal. We’ve been thrown together because of a horrible set of circumstances.”

“Then why are you pissed at me?”

“Because you acted like a jerk, and I felt disrespected. Isn’t *respect* a biggie in your world, or does it just go one way?”

“Fuck, woman. I’m trying to apologize to you. And you know we’re more than just two strangers bound by a fucked-up situation. Anyway, Nina saw I was drunk and took advantage of that. She’s threatened by you.”

A dry laugh pushed through her full lips. “Okay, so you’re throwing the blame on a club girl who *you say* took advantage of the big, bad outlaw.”

“Damn, woman, you sure can cut with your tongue. I’m owning what happened. I’m just saying I didn’t seek out Nina, that’s all. Anyway, what happened is over. You don’t want to try and understand it. I’m done.”

“Whatever.” She looked back at her phone and started swiping her fingers across the screen.

“We need to talk about San Diego.”

The screen door closed with a soft *thud*, and Diesel saw Welder walking toward him with a beer bottle and a shot of Jack. He groaned and shook his head. “Just bring me a couple of water bottles.”

The prospect tipped his head and rushed away.

“What about San Diego?” Myla asked.

“I’m leaving the day after tomorrow. We got the rally going on, and I’m gonna try and find Freddy and the asswipe—Cano.”

“You know where Freddy is?”

“San Diego. You know this, woman. I told you Hawk traced the call there, remember?”

“Right. That’s before you got drunk and acted like a frat boy.”

“I know you want to go to SD with me,” he said, ignoring her comment. “I’m going by bike, but you can book a flight.”

“Why can’t I go with you on your motorcycle?”

“You’re new to riding. It’s a long-ass trip from here to Southern California, grueling for a seasoned rider, let alone a newbie. I’m sending Welder with you. He’ll make sure you’re safe. I’ll pick you up at the San Diego airport.”

“When am I leaving?”

“A couple of days after I get to SD. We’ll ride as far as possible but usually spend the night in St. George, Utah, or Vegas.” He chuckled when he saw her mouth turn downward at the mention of Las Vegas. “But this time around, we’ll crash in Utah. I’ll need a couple of days to do some club business in SD.”

“It seems like I don’t have much say in any of this.”

“You do. You can stay or go. Which do you want to do?”

Myla rolled her eyes. “That’s not much of a choice, is it? Of course, I’ll go. I know a great hotel on the bay where I want to stay.”

“You’re staying at the chapter’s clubhouse. You’ll be safer there.”

“No damn way. I’m not staying at another club and dealing with the snarky women and the wolfish men there. I’m staying at a hotel.”

“No, you’re not. This isn’t a fuckin’ vacation. This is a mission to find Freddy and deal with Cano. I can’t be worrying about you while I’m doing what needs to be done.”

“You don’t have to worry about me. I’ll be careful.”

“I think some of Freddy’s naiveté and foolishness have rubbed off on you. Cano’s serious about locating you; I promise he won’t play nice when he does. The deal is you’re staying at the chapter’s clubhouse or here.”

“Okay ... I know you’re right, but I’m feeling so antsy and claustrophobic that I’m climbing the walls.”

“I get it, but you’ve come this far, so don’t blow it now by being impatient. You gotta stay cool and precise. After this is over, you can hang out at the beach all day if you want.”

“Promise?” she said.

Myla smiled at him for the first time since he came out to the porch. Her big, beautiful smile pulled him in, and he craved to press his mouth on her soft, full lips.

“Fuck, yeah, dar—” he stopped short, then cleared his throat. “Yeah, sure, of course.”

“You’ll be at the clubhouse, too, right?”

“Yeah.” He downed the bottle of water the prospect left on the table. “So we’re good here?”

“We’re good.”

Diesel pushed up from the couch. “I have to get to work. I’ll be back later, and we’ll go out for dinner.”

“I’m craving Mexican food.”

“El Tecolote rules. We’ll go there.”

“And I’d like to get some things at the drugstore for the trip.”

“We’ll do that too. If something comes up, give me a call.”

“I will. Have a good day at work. Let me know if you need a spare to help out. I’m definitely available.”

He laughed, then went back inside the club to grab a quick bite before heading to the car wash.



*Three days later*

*San Diego*

BY THE TIME Diesel and his fellow Insurgents entered San Diego County, hundreds of Harleys crammed Interstate 15. The thundering roar of that many motorcycle engines was music to his ears. Threads of excitement weaved through him as they always did before a big rally. The SoCal Motorcycle Association Rally wasn't the biggest in Southern California and definitely no match to Sturgis. However, it still brought out a lot of nomad bikers, riding clubs, and of course, one-percenters. Most of the Insurgents from the mother chapter hadn't been out to Southern California for a few years, so an air of anticipation floated around the members. Still, a note of seriousness marred the visit due to the task of smoking out the traitor in their clubhouse.

The Insurgents San Diego Chapter was located in coastal Mission Beach. Nestled between the Pacific Ocean and Mission Bay, their clubhouse had picturesque waterfront views close to stunning beaches. The building was a sprawling three-story stucco mansion with terracotta roof tiles, a signature of many homes in the county. Thirty-foot thick stucco-clad walls with wrought iron spikes on top surrounded the property.

When Diesel, Tank, Throttle, Rags, Animal, Smokey, and Shadow arrived at the entrance, Crutch greeted them with a wave and opened the iron gates. Diesel lifted his chin as he and the others drove through.

Banger, Klutch, Razor, and Jax stood on the large porch, talking to Panther and Jagged, when Diesel pulled in front of the clubhouse. Banger and the other Insurgents had left a couple of days before Diesel and the others. The president lifted his fist as his brothers dismounted their motorcycles.

"You finally got your asses here," Banger said with a smile in his voice.



“We took it easy,” Shadow replied as he approached the veranda.

Panther tipped his head at the men. “Good to see you.”

Glancing at the colorful and lush landscape of palm, orange, and avocado trees, Diesel whistled. “Damn, you got a fuckin’ country club here.”

“And the beach is only a few blocks away,” Tank said. “I could get used to this.”

Panther laughed. “What can I say? We’re fucking spoiled.”

“This must’ve cost a ton of dough with this size and location in Cali,” Animal said.

“It would’ve, but we lucked out. Scratch’s great-aunt left the whole place to him. We’re sitting on prime real estate,” Panther replied.

“He’s the treasurer, right?” Diesel asked.

“You don’t know that?” Banger said.

“My ass was in the can for a few years, so I’m outta touch.” Diesel laughed.

“Glad you’re finally out, bro,” Panther said.

“We got a private church scheduled in about two hours. Is that good for everyone?” Jagged asked, his voice dropping.

The Colorado Insurgents nodded, and some of the men began unloading their saddle bags.

“It’s only going to be us”—Panther pointed to himself and Jagged—“Demon, Iceman, and all of you. No one else in the MC knows about it.”

“Gotcha,” Diesel said as others mumbled their agreement.

“We’ll meet in the guest house at the back of the property,” Panther said.

“A guest house? Damn, this is getting too fuckin’ fancy for us,” Rags said.

The men guffawed, then Panther said, “Go on in. Easy will show you where you can put your shit.”

The newly-arrived bikers shuffled into the clubhouse, greeted by a bevy of beaming club girls who rushed up to them.

“Hi there, I’m Claire,” a pretty blonde said as she sidled up to Diesel. “What’s your pleasure?”

“A cold beer on tap if you got it,” he said, taking a step backward.

“Right away, handsome.” She winked at him.

He watched the rhythm of her hips swaying back and forth as she walked away. A smile twitched on his lips as a memory of Myla, pissed at him, walking away in her high heels, jaunty hips swinging, filled his mind. All at once, Diesel realized he’d become used to the days they spent together, and even though he wouldn’t admit it, he missed her. *Damn.*

“Here you go,” Claire said, handing him a frothy mug of ice-cold beer. “Let me know if you want anything else. I’m available for *anything.*” She licked her glossy lips and ran a pointed bright blue nail down his arm.

“Thanks for the beer,” he said before bringing it to his lips.

“You’re not gonna let that one get away, are you?” Smokey asked.

“I’m gonna finish my beer, then take a cool shower. Where’s Rags? I think we’re bunking together.”

“He’s already hooked up with one of the girls.” Smokey laughed. “I don’t think you’ll be seeing him for a while.”

“He’s pretty beat, so I may see him sooner rather than later.” He chuckled.

Smokey busted out laughing. “That’s too much, dude, but you’re probably right. I’m headed to my room. I want to call Ashley and let her know I arrived in one piece.” Smokey took

a swig of his drink. “I’ll admit that I wanna hear Carter say ‘dada.’ Fucking corny, right?”

“Nah, dude, not at all.”

“Fatherhood makes you fucking mushy inside when it comes to your kid, but that’s how it should be.”

“Damn straight.” Diesel finished his beer and handed it to one of the men wearing a prospect cut. “I’m gonna head upstairs to my room. See you later, bro.” He clasped Smokey’s shoulder and headed out of the room.

Jagged had let all of the Colorado members know which rooms were available. Banger was the only one with a private room, which made sense since he was the national president of the Insurgents MC.

Diesel looked out the window of the room he and Rags were sharing. Sailboats dotted the blue waters of the bay. A few jet skis skimmed across the surface, leaving ripples of waves in their wake.

Reaching into his cut’s pocket, he pulled out his cell and tapped in Myla’s number. She picked up after two rings, her breathless voice music to his ears.

“Hi. Where are you?”

“At the clubhouse. It’s like a fuckin’ resort. I’m in my room looking out at the bay.”

“Wow, the club must be on the coast.”

“It’s in Mission Beach. One of the members got it as an inheritance from a relative.”

“And he gave it to the club?”

“Yeah. That’s what I’ve been telling you—the brotherhood is a family. It’s always about the MC, you know?”

“Sort of, but it’s a hard concept to understand for a ‘citizen.’”

He laughed. “You’re too much, woman. So you got your wish for a hotel overlooking the bay.”

“I was thinking more of room and maid service, but I’ll take what I can get.” There was a smile in her voice. “How was the ride?”

“Long and hot as hell, especially through Nevada. It’s cooler here. I didn’t expect that.”

“June in San Diego can be cool because of all the morning gloom. The locals refer to it as ‘June gloom,’ but it makes the days nice and cool and the evenings sometimes chilly.”

“I like it. How’ve you been?”

“Okay. Getting ready for the trek to the airport in a couple of days. It’s been weird not seeing your face these past few days. I got used to it.”

“I got used to yours too.”

For a space of a held breath, there was silence, then she whispered, “I’m glad you’re safe. I was worried about the long ride.”

“It’s good to hear your voice. You excited about coming here?”

“I am, but I hope we can resolve things with Freddy.”

“Any calls from him?”

“No,” she said. “I wish he’d stop playing this game and tell me where the hell he is.”

“He’s just scared and not sure who to trust. I get it, but I wish he’d call me. He knows he can trust me.”

“I’ve told you this before, but I think he’s embarrassed about screwing up big time.”

“And that’s fuckin’ stupid, but I’ve told you that before as well.”

“I know. What are you doing tonight?”

“We’ve got church, a couple of pool games, and then I’m hitting the sack. I’m beat.”

“I thought you’d take a ride along the coast. It’s beautiful at night,” she said.

“I’m waiting for you.” He cleared his throat. “I better get in the shower. I smell like hell.”

She chortled, and Diesel smiled to himself. Myla’s laugh was like sunshine—so bright and warm. It wrapped around him.

“I’ll pick you up at the airport when you get here. Let Welder know if you need anything. I told him he could talk with you during the trip if needed.”

“I’ll remember that—he’ll only talk when spoken to.”

“Smartass,” he said.

“And you’re not?”

“Never.” He teased back. “You can call me at any time, you know that, right?”

“I do now. I’ll see you soon. My flight arrives in the evening. I hope it’ll be on time.”

“I’ll check the schedule before I head out. Until then, see ya.”

He placed the cell on the table near the window and gazed out at the bay again, wishing Myla was with him. He’d take her on a long bike ride, feel her arms wrapped around his waist, her tits pushing against his back. Diesel’s dick twitched, and he groaned, imagining her lips against his, tasting her sweetness with his tongue. *Fuck.*

He turned away from the window, pulled a clean pair of jeans and a T-shirt from his small bag, and walked to the bathroom. The ache in his groin, tightening his jeans, said he’d be taking an icy cold shower. If it weren’t for Freddy, he’d have screwed Myla more times than he could count, and she would’ve been a more-than-willing lover. Still, he knew they

were doing the right thing by keeping their lust in check; however, it didn't quell the desire pulsing in his groin whenever she was near, or he thought of her.

Diesel turned on the shower and stepped under the cold water, hoping it would douse the fire in his blood.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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MYLA QUICKLY CLAMMED up when idle pleasantries were met by grunts. To say Welder wasn't a conversationist was a huge understatement. She leaned against her seat's armrest and gazed out the round window at the wispy clouds streaming past and the pale blue sky beyond. Welder sat next to her, squirming and constantly glancing up and down the aisle.

"Are you okay?" she asked. His movements were making her more nervous by the minute.

He nodded.

"You seem restless. Do you want something from the flight attendant?"

He shook his head no.

*It's going to be a long flight.* Slightly tilting her head backward, Myla brought the glass of white wine to her lips and knocked it back.

Welder stuck by her side like glue as they walked toward the baggage claim area. Hundreds of people packed the airport, some sporting loud Hawaiian shirts, shorts, oversized straw hats, backpacks, and fanny packs.

They sliced through the mass of travelers until they stood in front of their flight's baggage carousel. Myla scanned the immediate area, hoping to find Diesel. She glanced down at her phone, but there weren't any texts or missed calls from him.

"Do you see your luggage?" Welder asked.

Startled by the number of words he'd spoken, she stared at him.

He pointed at the suitcases going around the conveyor belt.

Myla glanced over. “Sorry. I was looking for Diesel. I don’t see mine yet.”

“Lemme know, and I’ll get them.”

“Okay, thanks,” she said, focusing on the bags tumbling down the chute onto the carousel.

Suddenly, she had the feeling someone was watching her. She turned around. A black-clad figure quickly hid behind a column near a rental car kiosk. A shiver tiptoed up her spine.

“Myla,” Diesel’s voice boomed through the baggage area.

Relief wrapped around her like a hug. Before she could move, Diesel was at her side, crushing her against him. She threaded her left arm between his vest and T-shirt and gripped his waist, breathing in his familiar scent. She really missed him, and even though he’d only been gone five days, it felt like five months.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Diesel whispered, his lips against her ear, his breath hot on her skin.

“Me too,” she said, burying her face in the crook of his neck.

Then Myla remembered the creepy guy, and she pulled back from him. “I think someone was watching me.” She felt his muscles stiffen.

“When?”

“Just before you came over.”

Diesel dropped his arm from her and snapped his finger at Welder. “Have you seen anyone suspicious?”

“No.”

Turning back to Myla, Diesel said, “Where did you see him?”

“Over there,” she said, pointing to the pillar by the rental car stand.



Before Diesel said another word, Welder sprinted over to the area.

“Did you recognize the guy?”

“It may have been Peter, but I’m not sure. He was dressed in all black and wore a hat pulled down low. But he was definitely watching me.”

“Fuck,” he muttered. “Are your bags here yet? We should head out now.”

She glanced over at the conveyor belt. “Yes.”

“Come with me and point them out.”

By the time they had the two suitcases on the trolley, Welder returned, shaking his head. “I didn’t see anyone. The fucker’s long gone.”

“Maybe, but I wouldn’t bank on it,” Diesel said. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

The drive from the airport was uneventful. Diesel kept glancing in the rearview mirror while Welder’s eyes darted from right to left until they drove through a large iron gate manned by two fierce-looking men. Diesel lifted his chin at the men as he passed them.

They continued past lush bushes, palm trees, and flowering shrubs of vivid reds, yellows, and pinks. Rainbows shimmered from the spray of sprinklers—uniformly placed—watering the impressive vegetation.

“The landscape is beautiful. I’m impressed at how well it’s kept up,” Myla said.

“It’s the ol’ ladies’ doing. They hired a retired member. The dude’s got a landscape business.”

“Like Throttle and Rags.”

A warm smile curved Diesel’s lips. “You’re getting to know my world.” He reached over and brushed his fingers against the back of her hand. “I like that.”

A hot flush flowed through her, and she shifted in the seat, and her body suddenly heated up. Myla's cotton shirt stuck to her back, and as she felt sweat beading around her hairline, she dreamed of plunging into a cool pool.

"Is there any chance there's a pool on the property?" she asked.

Diesel laughed, and Welder snickered.

"This may look like a resort, but it's an outlaw clubhouse."

"So, no pool."

"Right."

"Then, are you up for a dip in the ocean?"

Diesel looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. "No fuckin' way. Until I nail the fucker, you're not safe in public places."

Anger streaked through Myla. "Are you saying I can't leave the property?"

"No. I'm saying that we've got to be smart. We gotta limit exposure in public places until I have control over the situation. Being on a beach with thousands of people right now doesn't make sense. You need to be patient."

"I've *been* patient, but it's getting old."

Diesel squeezed her hand. "I know, but hang on a bit longer."

She pulled her hand away and sulked until he turned into a parking space.

Welder jumped out of the car, grabbed the suitcases from the trunk, and walked into the clubhouse. Diesel ran his fingers up and down her left arm.

"Being hasty can bring dire consequences. The enemy counts on you to drop your guard. I understand this is a pain in your ass, and you want it to be over, but you can't run outta steam now, especially since you spotted the fucker."

"But I'm not a hundred percent sure it was Peter."

“Your first impression was that it was him, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then we’ll listen to your gut instinct. His being here means someone tipped him off you were coming to San Diego today. Who did you tell?”

Myla ground her teeth as sparks flared inside her. “I didn’t tell *anyone*. Who did *you* tell?”

Diesel glared. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“You’re accusing me, so I’m throwing it right back at you. Doesn’t feel so good, does it?” She reached for the door handle, but he pulled her arm back.

“I wasn’t accusing you of shit. I was asking a damn question. You’re always so fuckin’ defensive. It makes me wonder why.”

“I can tell that you and Freddy are brothers because neither of you knows the meaning of trust.”

“What the hell are you talking about? I didn’t say shit about not trusting you. I’m trying to figure out how the asshole knows what flight you were on. Just fuckin’ chill, okay?”

“I get the feeling you think I’m hiding something. I’m not. I haven’t spoken to Freddy since I last told you about it. I didn’t tell anyone I was coming here. I mean, who would I tell anyway? I don’t know anyone well enough except you.” She knotted her arms across her chest. “I want to wake up from this fucking nightmare.” Myla bit her lower lip to keep from crying in front of him.

“Myla,” he softly said as he tugged her to him and placed her head on his shoulder. “I can’t have anything bad happen to you; it’d kill me. I need you to trust me.”

“I do,” she whispered. “I’m just all mixed up inside.”

He stroked her hair without saying anything.

They sat silently for a long time, each lost in their thoughts.

Finally, Myla straightened up and reached for her purse on the car mat. “I should change out of these clothes. I’m dying for a cool shower.”

Diesel opened the car door and stepped out. “I’ll show you the room.”

She followed him up the porch, through a large wooden door, and into a red-tiled foyer. An arched doorway led into a sizable room with brightly colored Talavera Mexican tiles on the wall behind a curved bar. Pool tables lined the back of the room, and three long couches covered in Southwestern patterns formed a U-shape in front of a huge flat screen television. Men in leather and jeans and women in barely-there clothing filled the room. It was a scene reminiscent of the Insurgents’ clubhouse in Pinewood Springs.

“Did you want something to drink?” Diesel asked as he navigated them toward another arched doorway.

“A Diet Coke would be great, but I’d rather take it to the room than drink it here.”

“No worries,” he said as he moved them toward the bar.

A few minutes later, with a soda can in hand, she followed Diesel up two flights of stairs.

“Here you go,” he said, turning the key in a lock and opening the door.

“Thanks,” she replied.

A cool ocean breeze blew through an open window.

“We *do* have a view of the water.” Myla rushed over to get a better look. “Water has always been a salve for me. I find it soothing and comforting.”

“That’s why you hang out by the river so much,” he said.

Nodding, she said, “It energizes and calms me at the same time. I love it.” She pushed away from the window sill and popped open the Diet Coke. “So you’re staying with me?”

“I was with Rags, but you’re a prettier roommate.” He laughed.

She smiled, knowing that he struggled to say what he was feeling. Except for anger and lust, the show of emotions seemed taboo in the outlaw community. *But aren’t most men like that, outlaw or not? They think showing fear, insecurity, and vulnerability is a sign of weakness.*

“Is Rags upset that you pushed him out of the room?”

“Nah. He doesn’t care where he stays as long as he’s got a bed. Are you good if I go downstairs for a bit?” he asked.

“Of course. I’ll unpack, shower, and take in the beautiful view. Tomorrow’s the rally, right?”

Diesel’s eyebrows furrowed, and his lips pressed together.

“Don’t even think of telling me I’m not going because I am. If I can’t be safe with fifty-plus Insurgents, you’ve been feeding me a lot of BS about your club.” Myla batted her eyes and smiled.

“What am I gonna do with you, woman?” he asked, shaking his head.

“Take me to the rally.”

The corners of his mouth twitched and then expanded into a full-blown grin.

“I’ll be real good and stick by you the whole time,” she said.

“Other outlaw clubs we’re not friendly with will be there. You can’t question me or start arguing like you love to do when I tell you to do something.”

“I promise,” she said, crossing an *X* over her heart.

“Okay, then, you’ll be going to your first biker rally tomorrow.”

“I can’t wait!”

“There’ll be a lot of kickass bikes there. You should see how some of the bikers customize their motorcycles. It’s unbelievable, and they’re true works of art.”

“Will all the bikers be one-percenters?”

“Nah. The majority will be from clubs that belong to the American Motorcyclist Association. They’ll be some nomads there too. A lot of those guys used to be with an outlaw club but, for whatever reason, decided to live a solitary biker life. They still have associations with their old club and its chapters and support clubs, but they don’t stay in one place.”

“That’s interesting. I bet that kind of life could be very freeing. Right now, I wish I was a nomad biker.”

Diesel laughed. “You’re too much.”

“I’m serious. Now go and hang with your friends while I unpack. Are we eating dinner here?”

“I’d planned on taking you for a night ride along the coast and then eating at one of the small restaurants in Encinitas, but I don’t think it’s safe for you to do that right now.”

Myla’s stomach clenched, and she sighed heavily. “I know you’re right, but it doesn’t make me any less disappointed and pissed at the situation.”

“Another time. I’m pretty sure the ol’ ladies cooked up a feast for us. That’s what the protocol is when the national MC visits a chapter. I’ll get you in a couple of hours. If you need or want anything, call me.”

“Same rules except with an ocean view.”

“What can I say? That’s the way it is.” He lifted his chin. “Don’t open the door for anyone but me.”

Diesel walked out of the room. She heard the lock click and then his footsteps on the tile stairs bouncing off the thick walls. Myla turned back to the window and inhaled the salty air. In the near distance, she gazed at the blue ocean sparkling under the low sun that lay beneath a bank of clouds.

“I’m in San Diego, Freddy,” she whispered. “Where are *you*? Are you at our favorite place?”

There was no way he’d stay at the Grand Hyatt on the waterfront, but maybe that’d be the perfect cover because Cano would never think Freddy would be *that* transparent. Myla whipped her phone out of her pocket, scrolled through her contacts until she located the hotel’s phone number, and tapped it in. Her heart beat a mile a minute as the phone rang. She went through the phone tree and waited with bated breath for a receptionist to pick up.

“Manchester Grand Hyatt, may I help you?”

“I’d like to speak to one of your guests, but I’ve misplaced his room number.”

“What is the name of the guest?”

“Freddy Marshall.”

Myla heard clicking in the background as the clerk typed in Freddy’s name.

“I’m sorry, we don’t have a guest by that name.”

“Try David Marshall or David Gurley.” Sometimes he used his middle name with his mother’s maiden name.

“Please hold while I check.”

A few seconds later, the woman said, “I’m sorry, but no guest under any of those names is registered at the hotel.”

Deflated, Myla mumbled, “Thanks.” Then she disconnected the call. She knew it was a long shot but thought there was a chance he’d be there. Images slipped out from the corners of her mind: Freddy’s beaming smile as they sipped mai tais at the Top of the Hyatt and watched the sunset over the ocean, lounging by the pool in the late afternoons, eating fish tacos on Ocean Beach Pier and feeding the seagulls. The recollections were so vivid; it felt like she could reach out and touch them. Myla sighed deeply, feeling a profound sadness. For a long while, she stared at the rippling expanse of the Pacific as the memories slowly faded away.

She abandoned the window, leaned over her unpacked suitcase, took out a terrycloth robe, and headed to the bathroom to shower.

MYLA AWAKENED WITH a start, not knowing where she was. Dusk, just beginning to fall, sent shadows creeping across the tiled floor. Flickering from the outside floodlights below was the only illumination in the room. *Where am I?* She glanced around and spotted her suitcase on the far side of the bed, and then it all came back. *I must've fallen asleep after my shower.*

Myla placed her feet on the floor, sat up straight, stretched her arms above her head, and yawned. She started to stand up when she heard Diesel's muffled voice through the closed bathroom door. Unable to make out what he was saying, she tiptoed closer, leaned in, and heard him say, "No one was at the house?" There was a slight pause, and then she heard him say, "I know the fucker is here. I gotta get to him before he finds Freddy. Fuck! I don't know what the fuck's wrong with my sonofabitchin' brother. I can settle all this shit if I know where the hell he is. Shit!"

A loud sound made Myla jump. *Breathe.* She stood rooted to the spot, knowing she should slither away but was compelled to stay.

"I know, dude. I'll take you up on the offer. See you tomorrow. And ... thanks, bro."

Silence, then a few seconds later, Diesel was pounding like a madman on the shower door, cursing under his breath. Then it was quiet. She turned to leave but froze when he said, "Fuck, Freddy. Fuck!" The anguish in his voice pierced her heart.

Myla clamped a hand over her mouth to keep from sobbing. The doorknob rattled, and she hurried back to the nightstand and switched on the lamp.

The thud of his boots neared as she pretended to be absorbed with unpacking the suitcases.

"You're up." Weariness laced his voice.



“I didn’t realize I’d fallen asleep,” she said without looking up. “I just got up now. Crazy, huh?”

“You had a long day.”

Diesel walked over to the window, stood with his back to her, and stared out into the darkness. She padded over to him and laid her hands on his broad shoulders. Myla could feel the tenseness through his shirt. Smoothing her palms over his shoulders, she kneaded his muscles. After a couple of minutes, she felt him relax under her fingertips.

“That feels good,” he said hoarsely.

“You look tired. I get that it’s hard being here, knowing Freddy is somewhere in the city. It’s eating you up. I can tell.”

“It fuckin’ sucks,” he mumbled. “It must be hard for you too.”

“It is,” she said as she continued massaging him.

He reached for Myla’s hands, drew her around, and pressed her close.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Diesel whispered.

“Me too.”

They stood in silence, holding each other and staring at the shimmering water under the new moon.

After a long while, Diesel ran his thumb along her jawline and then pulled away.

“We should go downstairs and get some food. The ol’ ladies prepared a big meal. It’s disrespectful if we don’t eat it.”

Myla stepped back and ran her hands down the front of her jeans. “I agree. Besides, I’m pretty hungry.” She finger-combed her hair, then applied apricot lipstick and gloss on her lips. “I’m ready.”

“You’re so beautiful on the outside and the inside,” he said.

“Thanks for the compliment,” she replied, somewhat uncomfortable.

“I mean it,” he said. Even though his tone was light, it didn’t match the intensity in his gaze, which made Myla’s heart quicken.

“We better go before all the food’s gone,” she said, turning and heading to the door.

A deep chuckle rumbled in his chest, making her insides flutter.

“Then we better go,” he said, locking the door behind them.

As they descended the staircase, the voices from below became louder. As if Diesel sensed her awkwardness, he tucked her hand in his. Threads of relief weaved around her anxiety, and she relaxed, trusting him to take the lead and steer her in the right direction. Leaning against him, they entered the main room.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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DIESEL RECHECKED HIS phone, hoping Viking texted him some new information on Cano. The night before, Viking had told him he'd located Cano's house, but the fucker wasn't there. Diesel wasn't surprised because he knew the SOB was in San Diego, biding his time until he could snatch Myla and find Freddy. A helpless feeling weighed heavily on Diesel, and it killed him.

He had met Viking, the president of the Angry Disciplines, at Sturgis. Viking was a big fellow with long sandy blond hair and a full beard to the middle of his chest. Diesel had just received his patch, and he and Viking bonded over numerous shots of whiskey and lap dances. They'd been tight ever since.

"Are you heading out?" Myla sat up, her back against the headboard, her arms around her bent knees.

He noticed how her tits pushed against the thin fabric of her pajama top. Arousal flashed hot through his system, and he averted his gaze. "Yeah. You'll drive with Welder and one of the prospects from here, Popeye. I'll be behind, following you."

"What time are we planning to leave?"

"Soon, so get your sweet ass moving."

Myla pushed off the mattress. "You should've woken me earlier," she said, hurrying to the bathroom.

THE SoCAL MOTORCYCLE Association held its twenty-fifth annual biker rally at Thirty Oaks Ranch in Spring Valley, a suburb in the East County region of San Diego County. The event attracted mainstream bikers, wannabe bikers, and one-percenter clubs from California and neighboring states. It was perfect grazing for outlaw clubs to gather intelligence, recruit prospects, and flex muscle.

Diesel opened the SUV's door and helped Myla out of the cage. She glanced around, green eyes growing wide.

"I didn't expect it to be so crowded," she said.

"Bikers love anything to do with motorcycles. The more popular events can bring in hundreds of thousands of people."

"Like Sturgis?"

He smiled. "You know about Sturgis?"

"Well, yeah. I'm not totally clueless when it comes to motorcycle things." She plopped a wide-brim black straw hat on her head.

"You look cute," he said, tweaking the tip of her nose.

"And you look badass. You're in full biker gear."

"I'm at a fuckin' rally, woman." He teased.

Myla ran her fingers over a few patches on his cut. "What do these mean?"

"Stuff."

"I know *that*, but what kind of 'stuff'?" She tapped a diamond-shaped patch, the number 13 embroidered in red.

"It stands for marijuana, or it could be methamphetamine."

"Wow, I never would've guessed that."

"The number is chosen from the thirteenth letter of the alphabet—*M*. There's logic in that, right?"

"It makes sense when you know it's based on letters in the alphabet. Do you do that with most of the letters?"

"Nah, just some of them. Like this one"—he pointed to a round patch with the number 9 in cobalt blue—"means Insurgents because *I* is the—"

"Ninth letter of the alphabet," she said, finishing his sentence. "I get it. It's kind of like a code or something."

"Maybe to citizens but not to outlaws."

“And this one?” Myla ran a red fingernail over a black square patch in the middle of the left side of his cut. The initials *FTW* stood out in white stitching.

“‘Fuck the World.’ This one stems back to the soldiers in the Vietnam War. You know, after they put their lives on the line, they were treated like pure shit when they returned home. I mean, no support, respect, gratitude—nothing. So they created *FTW* as an acronym for how they felt about the American public. The vets could only rely on each other because they all went through the same shit during the war and back home. Many Vietnam vets joined motorcycle clubs, which gave them a sense of brotherhood again.”

“I can see that. So wearing it is honoring those veterans who served in the war?”

“In a way. I mean, we remember their story and salute them and all veterans who risk their lives whether a war is popular or not. But the *FTW* patch has been adopted by the biker community as a whole. It shows our contempt for mainstream ‘society,’ you know, the citizens’ world. Fuck them.”

“I’m a ‘citizen,’” she said.

“You’re not mainstream. Anyway, some citizen chicks are all right.”

“Good to know that I’m ‘all right.’ Now I can finally quit worrying about *that*.” A smile twitched on Myla’s lips.

“Smartass,” he said, loving how her eyes sparkled when she teased him. He took her hand and walked toward the event.

The areas open to motorcycle traffic were an ocean of multicolored bikes and a wave of men wearing denim and leather for the most part. A lot of the women’s attire was leather and denim, too, but just a whole lot skimpier.

“I think I’m wearing too many clothes,” Myla said as her gaze fixed on a woman in Daisy Duke denim shorts that left little to the imagination.

Diesel laughed and lightly squeezed her hand.

Booths selling bandanas, leather gloves, sunglasses, T-shirts, jewelry, and motorcycle parts and accessories of every description lined both sides of the street. Beer tents stacked with kegs continually flowed to throngs of people, and under a large tent, heavily made-up chicks paraded on a makeshift stage in stilettos, flashing their tits in wet T-shirt contests while wiggling sequined G-string asses to crowds of men in leather.

The aroma of grilled onions and tangy barbecue sauce wafted around the food stalls dotting the area. Under a large canopy, sweaty men cooked ribs, chicken, and burgers on large grills while their ol' ladies replenished containers of meat, corn, coleslaw, and potato salad. Several platters of cornbread adorned red plastic tablecloths on a string of buffet tables. A few food trucks served fish tacos, shredded beef and chicken flautas, and Baja California-style rice and beans.

Yellow crime tape circled the motorcycles of different outlaw clubs: Insurgents MC—San Diego and CO chapters; Angry Disciples—LA-based; East Bay Dogs—El Cajon San Diego County; Grim Henchmen—Oakland, CA, and the prospects of each club manned the individual areas. Motorcycles from mainstream riding clubs were on display for anyone to see.

The Grim Henchmen and East Bay Dogs kept their distance from the Insurgents and the Angry Disciples, but the tension between the one-percenters was palpable.

“Hey, bro,” Demon said, sauntering over to Diesel. “Have you checked out Viking’s custom bike? It’s wicked as fuck.”

“I’m heading over there now,” Diesel replied. “How long have you been here?”

“Since the fucking crack of dawn setting up shit with Easy, Iceman, Crutch, and Dixie.” He glanced over at Myla and then back to Diesel. “You just arrive?”

“Yeah, anything new?” Diesel said in a low voice.

“No. The asshole has gone underground for now.” Demon’s eyes darted between the rival clubs’ booths and the Insurgents’. “He knows something’s up. At least that’s what we’re figuring.”

“Throttle, Rags, Shadow, and Animal told me nothing’s been outta the ordinary. I’ve been derelict in staking shit out, but—”

Demon clasped a hand on Diesel’s shoulder. “Don’t say another fucking word, bro. You’ve got a ton of shit going on with your brother. Any news on that?”

“Nothing I can do anything with,” he replied through gritted teeth. He jerked his head toward the Grim Henchmen’s booth. “They got a bug up their ass.”

“They’re flexing their wimpy-ass muscles, and I’m chomping at the bit to shut that BS down.”

“I’m with you, bro,” Shadow said, sidling up to Demon and Diesel. “They’re trying to start shit with Viking, and he’s about read to burst a damn blood vessel. I’m ready to set these assholes straight.”

Diesel kept a tight hold on Myla’s hand. For a split second, he regretted letting her come to the rally. Something didn’t feel right. He couldn’t say what, but his gut told him some shit was going to fly.

“The Grim fuckers are plotting something,” Smokey said as he joined the three men.

“I have the same vibe,” Diesel said.

“We all do. Panther and Banger are talking about it now.”

“Fuck,” Diesel muttered. He glanced at Myla. “Do you wanna buy a souvenir or get something to drink?”

Her eyes darted to the three bikers and then back to Diesel. “I guess.”

“I’ll be back,” he said to the group, then turned away abruptly. He was practically dragging her away from where

they'd been standing.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“You said you wanted a souvenir.”

“No, you said that. I want to know why I feel like something bad is going to happen.”

“It’s nothing ... yet.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“There’s always tension when rival outlaws are in the same space. What about a T-shirt or a pair of sunglasses?”

“Not really. I’d like to check out those prints and paintings,” Myla said, pointing at a booth a few feet away.

“Let’s go,” he said, picking up the pace.

After negotiating with the vendor, Diesel paid the artist. Myla clutched the acrylic painting of a lone motorcyclist riding along the damp coastline, leaving tracks in the sand as the last rays of sunset illuminated the ocean.

“I wish you would’ve let me buy it,” she said.

“Next time,” he said, his senses continued on high alert.

Myla leaned against him. “I love it. Thank you.”

“For sure.”

They wandered over to the motorcycles that were showcased behind bright orange ropes. Myla admired them while Diesel kept glancing back at the area where the outlaw booths were. A multitude of people, some with children, milled around the Insurgents’ and their rival clubs’ merchandise.

He and Myla sat at a table and chomped on pulled pork sandwiches and coleslaw, washing it down with ice-cold beers. Hard-rock music filled the air as performers played their guitars, belted out lyrics, and banged out some wicked drums on a makeshift stage. Throngs of people surrounded the area, dancing, yelling, and singing along.



Diesel knew things weren't good at the far side of the event when he saw Rags and Tank approaching. Welder and Popeye trailed behind them.

"What's up?" he said, rising to his feet.

"Viking, Mayhem, and Demon are getting into it with the Grim Henchmen," Tank said. "Banger needs all brothers on board ... *now*."

Diesel nodded. "Hang on for a sec." He bent down and met Myla's gaze.

"Something's going on. I can feel it," she said, fear skating across her face.

"I gotta go. You can't stay here because it's not safe."

"What's happening?"

"It's club business. Don't argue with me 'cause there isn't time for that."

"I'm not. What do I need to do?"

"You have to go with Welder and Popeye. They'll return to the clubhouse with you and the ol' ladies."

"I don't know any of the ol' ladies," she said. Threads of panic laced her voice.

"I know, but Welder and Popeye will bring you to them. Wanda, Amber, and Shania will take care of you until I get back to the clubhouse."

"I don't want you to get hurt."

"Don't worry about that. I'll be okay. You just need to get a move on." He motioned to Popeye. "Where are the women?"

"I'm getting them now," he replied.

Diesel turned to Tank and Rags. "I'll join you in a short bit. I have to make sure Myla is safe."

"We get it, dude," Tank replied.

In less than ten minutes, Myla was tucked into the SUV with Welder at the wheel and under the watchful eye of Shania, the head ol' lady of the chapter.

A gentle breeze wafted the scent of wild roses through the heated air. A few strands of Myla's hair strayed and landed on her cheek. Diesel reached through the open car window and brushed them away with his knuckle. Their eyes locked. She searched his face, concern painting her expression.

"Diesel," she said, her voice breaking.

"It's going to be fine," he said, but the truth was, he couldn't assure her of anything. In a millisecond, life could be irreparably changed. He'd seen brothers gunned down, simple brawls turned deadly, and so much more over the years. Shit happened. People died. Good people. Bad people. After all, life and death were one thread.

"Promise?" she whispered.

He couldn't do that. Instead, he leaned in and gently touched his lips to Myla's. Diesel pulled away and tapped the car door. The engine purred to life and then moved forward. He stood there watching the back of Myla's head until the SUV disappeared down the road. He stayed rooted to the spot for several minutes, making sure no one followed the vehicle. Satisfied that Myla was in good hands, he turned away and walked back to the Insurgents' booth.

"Here you go," Demon said, handing Diesel a whiskey shooter. "What are you carrying?" he asked in a low voice.

"Glock and a Bowie knife. You?"

"Same, except I have a straight-edge."

Diesel nodded, then threw back the shot. "All the guys are talking about your bike. It's fuckin' awesome, but you know that. It's wicked competition to Viking's."

Demon laughed. "It better be. Cost me a damn fortune, but it's worth every penny. Let's go for a ride up the coast

tomorrow. There's nothing better than riding along the ocean, breathing in the salty air. It's fucking nirvana."

"Sounds good. I'll let you know."

"I know you got other shit you're messing with, bro. I hope you can join us. Crutch, Iceman, and Willie are coming. We can stop off at Huntington Beach for a cold beer and the best damn cod you've ever tasted."

Diesel nodded then stiffened when he saw a man dressed in all black with a hat pulled down low standing at the Grim Henchmen's booth. He motioned Viking over.

"What's up, bro?" Viking asked.

"Do you know that dude?" He tipped his head toward the stranger.

"Doesn't look familiar. Should he?"

"I'm wondering if it's that fucker Cano."

Viking glanced over again at the man. "I'm not sure. It's hard to tell 'cause he's hiding his damn face."

"And why the fuck's he doing that?"

"Do you have a photo of him?"

"Just a crappy DMV image. Hawk sent it over last night, but it's blurred."

Viking laughed. "Hawk fucked up a simple text photo? Damn, he's slipping, and you tell him I said that." A huge grin spread over his face.

"Yeah, he's gonna really like that."

"He'll wanna kick my ass for sure."

A beeping sound from Diesel's phone drew his attention away from Viking. "Speaking of Hawk," he said, opening the text from the VP.

"Tell him what I said," Viking said, inching closer to Diesel.

“He knows he fucked up. He’s sending another pic of the fucker.”

“Damn it!” Viking bellowed.

Diesel chuckled and waited for the next message. In a few seconds, he tapped on the small picture and pulled up a crystal clear photo of Peter Cano. A muscle ticked in his jaw. His eyes darted to the man in black, the text photo, back to the guy, and then away. A tornado of rage swirled around inside him.

“Take a look at this.”

Viking took the phone, stared, then nodded. “That’s him, and he’s standing right there.”

Diesel’s impulse was to grab the fucker and beat the hell out of him, but he knew he had to stay cool.

Everything depended on it.

He had to focus on the main objective: keeping Myla safe and finding Freddy. He needed to concentrate on facts and garnering information, not how he wanted to rip the fucker apart, limb by limb.

“Let’s beat the shit outta him,” Viking said.

From the way his words were slurred, Diesel knew his friend had had too much booze, which could make a dangerous situation even worse.

“I’m working on another plan,” he replied, hoping that would satisfy Viking, but he knew better. The biker turned away and glared at the Grim Henchmen’s booth.

“Why the fuck are you just standing there, asshole?” he yelled at Cano. “Are you buying those shitty T-shirts from a shittier club?”

“What the hell’s he doing?” Tank asked, suddenly right beside Diesel.

“He’s drunk, and he’s going to fuck everything up.”

Cano turned and looked at Viking.

“I’m just looking at all the booths. We don’t have any problems between us,” Cano said.

“You breathing is a big fucking problem!” Viking started to walk toward the booth, but Tank pulled him back.

“Shut the fuck up, dude. There are citizens here with kids.”

“I don’t give a shit! I don’t like this fucking asshole!”

Several members of Angry Disciples walked over in support of their president. Diesel glanced around and noticed most of the people checking out the outlaws’ booths and motorcycles were rushing away with their children in tow.

“Who’s the asshole in black that has Viking all riled up?” Tank asked.

“He’s the fucker who’s looking for Freddy. He’s a piece of shit who was stalking Myla at the airport when she arrived.”

“How’d he know she was coming here?”

“Someone told him,” Diesel replied.

“The mole?”

“Who else? No one knew but our club and the SD Chapter.”

“Damn. Who the hell is this fucker?”

“What’s going on?” Crutch asked. “Do you guys need any help? Demon and Iceman are right behind me.”

“Shit’s gonna go down,” Tank replied.

Diesel tipped his head to Cano. “I don’t want to lose sight of that asshole.”

“Is he a Henchmen?” Crutch said.

“Worse,” Diesel replied, his eyes narrowed.

Crutch shook his head. “Who could be worse than those pieces of shit?”

“That fucker.”

Crutch looked over at the guy. “Who is he?”

Before Diesel could answer, Demon came rushing up to the Insurgents. Banger was two steps behind him.

“We got some shit going down with the East Bay Dogs. Three of their members just showed up with ‘San Diego’ on their cuts’ bottom rocker,” Demon said, his fists clenched. “We kicked their fucking asses over this shit a year ago. They’re shoving it in our faces because they got back up from the Grim Assholes.”

The East Bay Dogs operated out of El Cajon, a city in San Diego County. The Insurgents’ SD Chapter laid claim to the city *and* county of San Diego, which basically meant that they’d allow some smaller motorcycle clubs to exist as long as they didn’t wear “San Diego” on their bottom rocker. Over the years, the East Bay Dogs kept a low profile, but they’d been growing in numbers and turning more hardcore. They became a support group to the Grim Henchmen about three years before, and clashes between the East Bay Dogs and the Insurgents’ SD Chapter had been escalating.

“That’s bullshit,” Crutch said. “Didn’t they think we were serious when we beat their asses the last time?”

“Obviously not,” Tank said.

“We’re not backing down. We’re men, not fucking pussies,” Demon gritted.

“Shit’s gonna hit the fan,” Banger said as he came up to Diesel. “You carrying?”

“Yeah.”

“The fucking badges will be here the minute a citizen calls nine-one-one. Your ass will be back in the pen for a long time if you’re caught.”

“I’m an Insurgent, and I stand with my brothers,” Diesel said.

Banger nodded. “I’d do the same. Ditch your metal if the damn badges get here and we’re still around. Panther and I

agree that we go in hard and fast, then get the hell outta here. The Grim Henchmen will back the East Bay assholes, but we outnumber both clubs. I've been telling our members to use their metal only if necessary. We go in with fists first and knives if needed. I know these fuckers aren't gonna fight fair, so if we need to escalate, we will."

"That fucker Cano is with the stupid Henchmen." Diesel glanced over, and his stomach lurched. Cano was gone. "Shit!" A sick feeling spread through him. He'd gotten caught up in the drama with the loser club disrespecting the Insurgents that he took his eye off his target. Now he was back to where he'd started—nowhere.

"Where?" Banger said, cutting in on Diesel's self-recriminations.

"He's gone. Damn it! I fuckin' blew it."

"The asshole's probably in with the Henchmen. After this shit's over, we'll find the SOB," Banger said.

"Yeah. I let my emotions get the better—" Diesel was interrupted by Viking racing up to the Grim Henchmen's booth and pushing it over.

Several Angry Disciples rushed over to their president, and then all hell broke loose. Insults and fists flew as Diesel, Tank, Throttle, and Rags joined in the fight with the Henchmen, while Banger, Demon, and Crutch took off in the opposite direction, where a major brawl was taking place at the East Bay Dogs' booth.

Viking was on top of a Henchmen, pummeling his face while another Angry Disciple kicked the downed biker in the ribs. Diesel spotted a Henchmen with greasy hair and a matted beard whip out a straight-edged knife from his cut and rush over to Viking. Diesel sprung to action—a Bowie knife flashed in one hand—and with his other, he grabbed the Grim Henchmen's long hair, threw him to the ground, and pounced on top of him. The knife dropped out of the downed man's hand, and Diesel squeezed the biker's throat with one hand.

“You scumbag asshole! Tell me where to find Peter Cano, or I’ll cut your fuckin’ throat!” Diesel skimmed the blade across the outlaw’s skin and drew blood.

The greasy-haired man’s eyes bulged as he felt around for the knife on the ground. Suddenly a sharp pain spread between Diesel’s shoulder blades.

“Fuck!” he said, springing up and then turning around.

A burly man with a bun of blond dreadlocks held a blood-stained knife, his eyes glinting with hatred.

“Fuckin’ asshole,” Diesel gritted as his fist, decorated with silver skull rings on several fingers, bashed the biker’s face. Blood gushed out of the man’s shattered nose. The grease mop on the ground sputtered and coughed as he tried to stand. As Dreadlocks lunged at Diesel, he smashed an elbow into the side of the Henchmen’s skull, high on his temple. The man dropped to his knees, and then Diesel kicked him with a steel-toed boot, sinking into the outlaw’s side, stomach, and back. Dreadlocks’ hands instinctively flew up to ward off the blows, his knife falling by his side.

From the corner of his eyes, Diesel saw Throttle swiping up the knife, sliding it in his cut, and then kicking the shit out of the greasy mop on the ground.

With both Henchmen writhing and moaning on the grass, the two Insurgents rushed over to help out Viking and some of the other Angry Disciples who were in the throes of battle.

“Where’s Demon?” Diesel asked above the fracas.

“He’s teaching the East Bay Dogs a lesson about respect,” Throttle said.

Viking was beating the hell out of a Henchmen, and Diesel spied Smokey fending a rival member who slipped his hand under his cut while he rushed toward Viking, and he ran over. The handgun shone under the late afternoon sun. Diesel grabbed the man’s wrist from behind and slid his hand under it. In a flash, the man’s arm was pinned behind his back, and Diesel pulled him down, taking the gun before the guy crashed



onto the dirt. Rage consumed him like a wildfire, and he pistol-whipped the rival as blood splattered around them.

Citizens scattered, screams and gasps punctuating the sounds of anger and hate. Several discarded packages of items recently purchased lay on the ground.

The pain in Diesel's back was excruciating, and he straightened up, hoping for some relief. All at once, a muscular Henchmen sucker-punched him, and he crumpled to the floor. *Fuck! I let my guard down.* His brain screamed as he gasped for air. Out of the corner of his eye, the big lug's black boot aimed for his gut. Slipping out the knife from his cut, Diesel stabbed the asshole's knee. The guy bellowed, and Diesel sliced the man's shin. Blood flowed. The biker went down like a tree in the forest: loud and crashing. Still catching his breath, Diesel propped up on his knees.

"Take my hand, buddy," Rags said.

"Thanks, bro." Diesel gripped Rags' blood stained hand.

*Pop. Pop. Pop.* The staccato shots punctuated the chaos.

"Get the fuck outta here," Banger yelled as sirens screeched the air.

Diesel, Smokey, Rags, Throttle, and Animal ditched their weapons and bolted. Diesel knew he'd be looking at fifteen years plus if he was caught carrying metal. They were all carrying ghost firearms: guns lacking serial numbers, making them untraceable.

"You look like you're struggling," Rags said to Diesel.

"I think one of the fuckers stabbed me," he replied.

"Fuck, dude."

"I'll have the club doc check it out. We gotta get the hell outta here before the fuckin' badges arrive."

A roar of engines shattered the chaos around the area. Several men lay on the ground; some were moving, others

were not. Booths from the outlaw clubs were overturned and merchandise littered the ground.

“Follow me. I know a back way outta here,” Demon said as he turned his Harley around.

A convoy of bikes took off in a cloud of dust as the wail of sirens drew nearer.

THE CLUBHOUSE’S IRON security gates rolled open, and a string of Harleys sped by. Willie held up a fist to each of the members as they passed the guard house. Two of the older members stood on the porch steps watching the men park their bikes and dismount.

“Is Scalpel here?” Demon asked. “We got injuries.”

One of the older members, Tats, nodded. “He’s setting shit up. Did you kick some ass?”

Demon grinned. “Fuck yeah.”

Banger walked over to Diesel. “I heard you got hurt.”

“Yeah, some fucker pierced me from behind. I don’t think it’s bad, but it hurts like fuckin’ hell.” Diesel raked his fingers through his wind-tangled hair. “I’m so fuckin’ pissed.”

“We all are,” Smokey said, sidling up to the two men. “We didn’t go to the rally to bust heads. Hell, there were kids there.”

“Yeah, but those SOBs started it,” Banger said. “Of course, we’re not gonna back down. We’re Insurgents, and we’re not gonna take shit from anyone.”

“Damn right, but the kid stuff blows,” Smokey said.

“Banger’s right—it couldn’t be helped. The citizens got the hell outta there when shit hit the fan,” Diesel said, scuffing the toe of his boot against the ground. “I’m just pissed as fuck I lost sight of Cano.”

Banger clasped his hand on Diesel’s shoulder. “There was so much crap going on, and you were looking out for your

brothers. Don't be hard on yourself, man. You can't blame yourself for losing track of him."

With a tight face, Diesel stared up at the swaying palm fronds. "But I do." He spat on the ground.

"We know the fucker's in San Diego, and he knows the damn Grim Henchmen," Smokey said. "There's no way an outlaw would be talking with a citizen the way they were."

Joining in on the conversation, Rags said, "We should've grabbed one of the Henchmen fuckers, brought him back here, and made him tell us where Cano is."

Banger shook his head. "As much as we may want that, we don't need to start a war with the Henchmen, then leave the San Diego Chapter alone to deal with it. The shit with the East Bay Dogs has got to be straightened out. They wanted to start crap today by wearing the bottom rocker. They were flaunting it, so we kicked their asses."

"They thought they were fuckin' invincible just 'cause the asshole Henchmen were there. What a bunch of dumb pussies," Diesel said.

"The doc's ready to see you," Iceman said to him.

"Did anyone get hurt real bad?" Diesel asked.

"Easy's cut up pretty bad. Doc's gonna take him to his clinic. He wants to look at you before he heads out. Otherwise, we all came out okay. Just minor cuts and bruises."

Demon laughed. "Our badges."

"We earn them every time some fucking club tries to best us. When are they gonna learn?" Rags said as the other members nodded and mumbled in agreement.

"I've gotta see Myla before I go to Doc."

"Myla's fine. She's in the room."

"That's good, but—"

“Get your ass over to Doc. The woman can wait,” Banger cut in. He waved his hand toward the front door. “Go on, and that’s a fucking order.”

Grumbling, Diesel walked away with Rags and Demon on each side of him.

Demon led him to a large back room off the kitchen. The room looked like an examination room in a doctor’s office. An exam table was angled away from the white walls, lined with pristine counters. A stool with wheels was tucked into a corner, and various items sat on the counter against the north wall: a blood pressure cuff, boxes of gauze and gloves, paper towels, hand sanitizer, and several clear plastic containers of tongue depressors, cotton pads, and cotton swabs. A medical IV fluid bag and some sort of imaging machine stood beside each other on the opposite end of the room.

“Damn, we need a room like this at our clubhouse,” Diesel said.

“I’m Doc,” a man in his early fifties said.

Even with the white lab coat covering most of him, Diesel could see Doc had some muscles on him.

“Hey,” Diesel said.

“Take off your cut and T-shirt.”

Most outlaw clubs had a doctor who’d help out when one of the members got injured by fists, knives, or guns. The same was true when they needed help with legal problems: they had a lawyer on speed dial. Doc went through medical school on the Navy’s bill and paid that back by giving ten years of military service. Once back in San Diego, he joined up with two other former military doctors, and their medical practice thrived. Doc met Iceman and Willie when he was scoping a Harley-Davidson at a local motorcycle dealership. He and the older Insurgent, Willie, had clicked, and a friendship had formed based on the love of riding. Before long, he was attending parties at the clubhouse and helping out when one of

the outlaw members needed patching up or some other medical assistance.

“You got stabbed all right,” Doc said.

“I know that. Is it superficial or deep?” Diesel asked. Diesel was not a newcomer when it came to stab wounds or gunshots. The scars on his body documented his life as an outlaw biker. He’d been lucky since none of his numerous injuries had been life-threatening.

“It doesn’t appear to have gone in too deep, which is good news, but it’s still bleeding. The risk of an infection is high, so I’m going to clean up the wound, dress it, and give you some antibiotics. You’ll have to disinfect and change the dressing every day for about ten days. Can you manage that?”

“Yeah. No stitches?”

“Right. Like I said ... you’re lucky. How long are you going to be in town?”

“At least a few more days.”

“I’ll come by again tomorrow and check the laceration. I want to make sure it looks good and isn’t oozing. Do you need pain medication?”

“Nope, I’m good.”

“I can leave you some, just in case.”

“I said I’m good.”

Twenty minutes later, Diesel downed a shot of Jack and then headed upstairs. He slipped the key into the lock, turned the knob, and entered the room. Myla sat on the edge of the bed, her eyes glued to the television. He glanced over at the screen and saw images of the badges swarming the area where the fight had taken place. Several bikers were escorted away with their hands behind their backs in cuffs. Diesel mentally counted the Colorado Insurgents who’d come back to the clubhouse. *Everyone accounted for.* Then he started on the San Diego members. *Demon, Crutch, Iceman, Panther, Jagged, Easy, Lucky—*

“Diesel!”

Myla’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“What the hell happened?”

She leaped off the bed and hurried to Diesel, wrapping her arms around him and pressing her soft curves against him.

*Damn, she feels good.* The scent of her shampoo filled his senses, and he wanted to bury his hands in her hair, yank it back, and crush his mouth down on hers.

“Are you okay?” Myla looked up at him, and he moaned inwardly.

“Yeah,” he said, stepping back.

Her arms dropped, and her eyes scanned his face. “Are you sure?”

“Just tired as fuck,” he said. He walked over to the dresser and pulled out a black tank top.

A loud gasp circled around him. He slid his gaze over to her and saw her staring at the large bandage on his back.

“Don’t freak out. It’s nothing. There was some trouble at the rally. Some fuckers started up some shit and”—he lifted his hand and pointed a finger behind him—“this is the fallout.”

“Did you get shot?” Apprehension laced her voice.

“Nope. Just someone with a switchblade or something. It’s nothing big.”

“A switchblade. That’s awful. Those things can be real dangerous.”

“I know, but everything is cool.”

Myla glanced back to the television. “I’ve been sitting here on pins and needles watching all this. I was so scared something bad happened to you. The police have arrested several people. They said that they’ve found a lot of guns around the area. I’m surprised no one was killed. And what

about all the kids that were there today? How could these guys start a fight knowing that children were there?”

Diesel pulled the tank over his head. “They’re fuckin’ assholes.”

“But you knew something was going down. That’s why you had me go with Shania. How did you know? Was this planned?”

“Nothing was planned. When rival outlaw clubs come together at rallies or poker runs, things go from okay to pure shit real fast. I felt the tension brewing, and I knew it was gonna boil over.”

“How?”

“Years of living this kind of life and doing a stint in the pen. You get a sixth sense about this stuff.”

“Why did the fight break out?”

“Who knows. Could be for a simple thing like one of the asshole rivals didn’t like the way an Insurgent looked at him.” Diesel had no intention of telling her anything about the fight and what transpired. He answered, but he didn’t say a lot.

“I’m glad you weren’t hurt. I don’t know what I would’ve done if you were.” Her two front teeth bit her lower lip. There was silence for a space of a long breath, and then she said, “Or you could’ve been arrested. The news showed a lot of bikers being led away by the police. Did anyone you know get arrested?”

“The Insurgents are good. I don’t know a lot of the Angry Disciples members.” *I wonder if Viking got away.* He’d lost track of his friend when the melee began.

“Thank God for that. The news said that a lot of weapons were found. They said the bikers discarded them so they wouldn’t be caught with them on their person when the police got there. Were you there when the police arrived?”

“Nope, I booked it.” Her questions were bordering on club business and not her business, so he turned away and headed

to the bathroom. "I'm gonna take a shower."

"Okay."

"Stop watching that shit. The news is wrong about most facts, and they don't know fuck about the real outlaw world," he said over his shoulder.

Doc had told him not to get the bandage wet, so he grabbed the hand-held shower head and aimed it everywhere but his back. By the time he'd finished, the wound was throbbing like hell. Wondering if he should've taken a few of the pain meds Doc offered, he wrapped the towel around his waist and leaned against the counter. Diesel didn't want to dull his mind because he was on a mission to find Cano and get to him before the dirtbag found Freddy.

A fuzzy idea began to take shape as Diesel contemplated what he should do. *What if I use Myla as a decoy to draw the fucker out?* It was dangerous, and a whole lot of things could go wrong, but it could work if he planned it out carefully. *I don't want to put Myla in danger. It would kill me if something happened to her. But Freddy's holed up somewhere in this damn city, and I don't know where. Fuck, this whole thing pisses me off!* He slammed his fist on the bathroom counter, then dismissed the idea. It was too unsafe, and he couldn't chance it. Cano had already slipped away, and he couldn't risk the asshole doing it again, especially if he had Myla in tow.

Diesel switched off the light and walked out of the bathroom.

The television was turned off. Myla stood gazing out the window. She glanced over her shoulder and then turned around.

"All done?" she said, her gaze skimming from his face to his naked chest to the towel slung low around his waist. He watched as a reddish stain spread across her cheeks.

"Yeah." He strode over to the closet and, with his back to her, pulled out a clean pair of jeans. The last thing he wanted was Myla to see him pitching a tent. "We can go downstairs



and get some chow,” he said as he grabbed his clothes then headed toward the bathroom.

“Sounds good.”

Diesel slipped his clothes and boots on, splashed cold water on his face, and inhaled and exhaled several times. “Keep it together, man,” he said to the reflection in the mirror.

“Ready.” He walked out of the room.

“Me too. Do you know what’s for dinner?”

Myla stepped closer to Diesel, and lust slammed into him, tightening his balls and making his cock grow hard from the scent of her perfume.

“Burgers,” he said, his voice a hoarse rasp. Then he cleared his throat. “Burgers,” he replied again, relieved that he didn’t sound like a weak pansy.

“I love burgers. I hope they’re as good as the ones we had at Bud’s Grill. Can we eat outside? It’s such a beautiful evening.”

“Yeah.” He opened the door and caught another whiff of her sexy scent as she passed by.

*Fuck ... it’s gonna be a long night.*

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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THE BANDAGE WAS lightly soiled, indicating that the bleeding had subsided quite a bit from the night before. Myla cut away the gauze, gently cleaned the wound, and applied a new dressing. She inhaled slowly, gazed at Diesel's well-defined muscles, taut against his tanned skin, and softly traced a finger over the letters on a tattoo covering most of his back.

"It matches the patch on your vest," she said.

"It's the club's full colors. Most full-patched members have the tattoo. It's called a *back-pack*." He'd propped himself up on an elbow and looked up at her.

"That must've hurt," she said.

"It's whatever. You got any ink on you?"

"No. I've been tempted, but I'm too chicken. This here"—Myla pointed to a crystal stud in her nostril—"hurt like hell. I can't imagine needles pushing into my skin for any length of time."

"It's not that bad. I'm gonna have to talk you into a small one. Once you get that, you'll be hooked."

"I doubt that." She smiled and pointed at his back. "Does your wound hurt much?"

"Not too bad. How'd it look?"

"Real good. There wasn't any pus, and the edges are barely red. The doctor's going to be pleased." Myla picked up the glass of water and bottle of pills from the nightstand. She shook out one capsule. "You need to take your antibiotic."

Diesel pushed up to a sitting position. The grimace on his face told her he was in pain, but she knew he'd never fess up to it. She gave him a pill and the water.

“Here you go,” he said, handing her the empty glass.

When she reached for it, their fingers brushed. Warmth curled deep in her gut, and she wanted to loop her arm around his neck and pull him to her. The memory of his kisses ached on her lips, and she wanted nothing more than to press her mouth to his.

“The fucker was at the rally.”

The words came as a shock, acting like a bucket of cold water on the desire swirling inside her.

“Cano was there? Where? I didn’t see him.”

“The fucker was at the Grim Henchmen’s booth, chatting up a storm, which tells me he’s tight with them. There’s no fuckin’ way any one-percenters will say more than a couple of words to citizens at a rally. No fuckin’ way.” Diesel propped a pillow behind his lower back and leaned against it.

“So it was him at the airport. I thought it probably was.”

“It was the asshole.”

“How did he know I was coming to San Diego and would arrive on *that* flight? Who else knew about it?”

“No one but the Insurgents. Not even all of them.”

“What do you mean, not all of them?”

“Only a few here knew you were coming.”

“But others could have overheard. It’s hard to keep things secret when so many people live under the same roof.”

“True, but we’re pretty good at keeping certain information quiet.”

Then the memory of the biker at the party in Pinewood Springs skittered across her mind.

“Oh, damn, I forgot to tell you. There was a biker at that party you guys had a couple of days after I moved in who looked familiar. I couldn’t place where I’d seen him, though.”

The veins at his temple strained. “Was he an Insurgent?”

“I haven’t seen him since that night, so I know it wasn’t anyone from your club.”

“Have you seen him at this clubhouse?”

“No, but then I haven’t seen many of the people here. I just came in yesterday.”

“What did he look like?”

“I’m not too sure. It was dark and smoky in the great room that night. I only noticed him because I felt someone staring at me. When I looked around, our eyes met. A glimpse of recognition ran through my head, but I couldn’t place where I’d seen him before.” She paused to take a sip of water from a bottle on the nightstand. “I saw him again when you and I got back from dinner. I looked around for him and saw him with a woman. He must’ve felt me watching him because he looked up, and our eyes locked. It was just for a few seconds, and then we went upstairs. His eyes were dark, his face was long and kind of narrow, and he creeped me out. I felt like something was off, but I couldn’t say what. It was just a feeling, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. It’s your gut, and it’s never wrong. He must have dark hair if his eyes were dark.”

“Probably. As I said, the room was dim and filled with smoke. I wish I could be more helpful.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about it?”

“It didn’t seem important. After we entered the room, I thought the guy looked like someone I’d seen before. The guy at the club that night looked like a biker with the leather and stuff, so I figured I’d made a mistake since I’d never met a biker before coming to Pinewood Springs. Were all the men Insurgents that night?”

“No,” Diesel said, shaking his head. “Some were from other chapters and support clubs.”

“Except for the San Diego club, were the others all local?”

“No. Some were from our chapters in Idaho, Montana, and Kansas. The ones from different MCs were from Southwestern Colorado, but I can’t believe the dude would be a Night Rebel. Maybe a Fallen Slayer or a Grave Fiend ...” his voice trailed off like he was thinking aloud.

“As I said, I’ve never met an outlaw in my life, so I’m probably mistaken.” Myla sensed that what she’d recounted bothered him a great deal. “Are you okay?”

“Just trying to put some pieces of a fucked-up puzzle together in my head.” He turned his back to her and gazed out the window.

“I guess I should’ve told you. I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. You have to understand I live in a world where nothing is a coincidence. That guy *was* someone you’d seen before—your gut told you that. The last time you saw him, he wasn’t wearing his cut or jacket. A lot of us don’t wear our colors all the time.”

“But you *look* like a biker even without the leather and vests.”

Diesel looked over his shoulder and winked. “Thanks for the compliment.”

“I’m serious ... and you’re welcome.” A smile danced across her lips.

“A dude in jeans and a T-shirt could be anyone. I mean, go to a rock show, and you’ll see a sea of black T-shirts with stuff on the front. When you’d seen this guy, do you remember if he was with Freddy?”

“I’m sure he was. I think it may have been at the clinic.” Myla tapped the side of her head. “Yes, I’m sure it was at the clinic.”

“That’s good,” Diesel said, turning around. He leaned against the window sill. “Was it when Freddy worked solo or when he hooked up with Cano?”

“I’m pretty sure it was when Cano came into the picture. It doesn’t seem that long ago that I’d seen this guy. He wasn’t doing anything or didn’t seem all that important, he was just there in the background.”

“He was doing plenty,” he gritted. “I’ve got to get together with some of the brothers to go over some things.”

“About what I told you?”

“And other shit.”

“When will you be back?”

“No more than a couple of hours. I’ll be on the property, so call me if you need help.”

A tingling sensation snaked across the back of her neck. “Why would I need help?”

“Shit happens.” He walked over to the closet and pulled out a black T-shirt.

“That isn’t a good enough answer for me. You suspect the guy I saw at the club is here and might try and do something to me, like bring me to Cano, right?” Myla paced the floor between the bed and the window. She pressed both hands to her face as the panic inside her rose. “This isn’t good. Oh, shit, this isn’t good at all. It’s not good. Not at all, it’s bad—”

The closet door banging shut interrupted her. Startled, Myla glanced over and saw Diesel striding toward her. Without saying a word, he pulled her into a strong embrace and crushed his mouth over hers. Desire shot through her and replaced the panic that had consumed her just seconds ago. She twined her arms around his neck, arched against him, and parted her lips. Diesel’s tongue plunged into her mouth, coaxing hers. A moan of pleasure escaped from the back of her throat as their tongues met thrust for thrust, biting, licking, sucking. Savage sparks raced through her nerve endings, and she tangled her fingers in his hair and pulled it hard.

“Fuck, woman,” he rasped.

His hand held the back of Myla's head while the other traveled down her back to her behind. He squeezed one of her cheeks and then pulled her even closer. Gasping, she yanked his hair harder and rubbed against his body, feeling his erection and loving it.

Several loud bangs on the door reverberated through the room. Myla pulled back, breaking the kiss, and Diesel cursed beneath his voice.

“Dude, open up.”

“Rags,” he spat. Shaking his head, he bent down and brushed his lips against hers. “Sorry.” He dropped his arms and walked toward the door.

Myla felt the lack of his warmth immediately. She finger-combed her hair, then padded to the window and gazed at the ocean. Low murmurs kept her from hearing what Diesel and Rags were saying. Her body, still in high gear from the kiss, ached to be back in his arms, holding and touching him.

“Hang on,” she heard him say, then the soft thud of the door closing.

She kept staring at the ocean, wishing they could be out there on a sailboat, drifting away from all the pain, worry, fear, and hurt that had encompassed them for far too long.

She felt Diesel's strong hands on her shoulders.

“Myla, I have to go.” He spoke into her ear, his breath warm against her cheek and neck. “You're going to be okay. I've got your back, so don't worry, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Are you good?”

“Yes.” And she was. She trusted him and knew he wouldn't let any harm come to her. She'd never felt so comfortable and safe with *anyone* in her life, and it was a liberating feeling.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.” He tugged her earlobe between his teeth.

She leaned back against him, her eyes fluttering closed.

“You’re making it hard for me to go,” he growled.

“I don’t want you to,” she whispered.

“I have to.”

“Club business?”

Diesel laughed and kissed the top of her head, then stepped away. “You’re getting the hang of this, aren’t you?”

“I don’t have much of a choice,” Myla said, throwing a smile at him over her shoulder. “Don’t be too long.”

“If you want something to eat or drink, text Welder. I plugged his number into your phone last night.”

“Got it.”

The door closed softly. As his footsteps faded away, the ache for him grew stronger. *When is this going to end? What’s going to happen when he finds Freddy?*

Myla knew she’d leave Freddy before she left for Pinewood Springs. And now there wasn’t a doubt that their relationship was over. What she hadn’t planned on was falling in love with Diesel. And she was in love with him even though she’d never let him know. She was pretty sure that he was in lust with her, but a man like him, who’d been with so many women *and* had so many at his beck and call, would never want to settle down. Then add Freddy to the mix, and she was positive they would go their own way once he was located.

Myla looked back at the shimmering ocean and the waves with curling whitecaps rolling toward the coastline. *Maybe I’ll move somewhere near the sea. I love it here, but it’s too expensive. Perhaps I’ll go East—Maine or Vermont, maybe South Carolina.*

An ache tugged at her heart as she thought about reconfiguring her life once again. But she was a survivor.



Myla's parents taught her two things: how to care for herself and not depend on anyone. Growing up as a child and beyond, she had to fend for herself, and she did. She was still standing. What more could she ask for?

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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PALM FRONDS RUSTLED in the warm coastal wind, and the sweet scent of orange blossoms wafted through the open windows. Diesel tipped his chair back against the wall and tried to focus on what Panther was saying, but the memory of Myla's lips crushed against his made it difficult. Their kiss was fast and aggressive: biting and demanding. The sounds she made and how she reacted to him blew his mind. His feelings for her were unlike anything he'd ever experienced with any woman, and keeping a lid on them was getting more challenging the more time they spent together. In the room earlier, he'd lost his restraint. Still, so many things about Myla amped up his feelings *and* his libido: her smile, how he could make her smile, catching her beautiful eyes gazing at him, her strength, sarcasm, playfulness, and how natural things felt with her. As much as he tried to deny it, Diesel was hooked, and it surprised the hell out of him.

"Banger's giving you the death stare, dude," Rags whispered.

Diesel snapped back to the present and glanced over at the president. Banger looked pissed as hell. He averted his gaze to Panther, who was saying something about the rally and the snitch.

"We've been watching the club, following every member outside the core group, and we haven't found anything out of the ordinary yet," Throttle said.

"A few buddies from my military days even helped me out. They're in security and live here. They're not finding anything either. The fucker has definitely stopped operations, at least for now," Tank said.

"Is there any way it could be someone *outside* the club, like maybe a party girl, a housekeeper, a gardener, or a

member's friend or sibling?" Axe asked.

Panther shook his head. "No one but a member would know club business. We always check for bugs and wires before church. It's a member. He knows he got too fucking greedy, and that's why he's gone underground. Fuck!"

Diesel set his chair down on all four legs. "It's someone who may be involved with Peter Cano. He's the fucker who —"

"We know who he is," Panther said. "Banger filled us in on what's been happening with him and your brother. Demon said you saw him hanging out at the Grim Henchmen's booth."

"Yeah. I lost sight of Cano when shit started going down. My gut's telling me the traitor's mixed up with the Grim Henchmen, which we already know, *and* with this Cano fucker. Myla just told me she recognized one of the bikers at our party a while back. There were Insurgents from here, Idaho, Montana, and Kansas."

"What are you saying?" Demon asked.

"There's no fuckin' way Cano knew Myla was gonna be arriving in San Diego on that particular day and time unless someone told him. The only ones who knew were the members here and the members of the mother club."

"He could have her phone traced. It's not hard nowadays to do that," Panther said.

"Then why hasn't the fucker been to Pinewood Springs? Nope. Someone told him," Diesel replied.

"Anyone could've overheard, even at your club," Panther said.

"There's no fucking way the brothers in Colorado said shit," Banger said, his face reddening.

"We thought all our brothers were loyal, too, but we were wrong. You know how that is, Banger. You had some shit go down a few years back with turncoats in *your* club," Panther said.

“I’m just saying I think if we find this fucker, we’ll find the snitch,” Diesel said, hoping to quell both presidents’ rising anger.

“What’re you doing about *that*?” Panther asked, his dark eyes bore into Diesel’s blues.

“I’m working with an informant in Denver. Also, Viking has some men on it in LA, where the fucker lives. No one’s been around the house so far, but I’ll get him, and when I do, you’ll have your traitor.”

“You might be on to something with the airport thing,” Demon said, pulling at his beard. “The only Insurgents partying at the mother club that night were Iceman, Easy, Crutch, and me. No fucking way it’s any of those guys. We all started together. I know these brothers. I think overhearing talk about the chick coming in makes more sense. Maybe it could be one of the prospects. Sprocket is always broke. He’s got a bunch of debt. I heard he’s a regular at the Del Mar racetrack. Seems to be fond of losing money on the horses.”

“But he wouldn’t know about club business,” Panther said.

“I’m not sure the two are related. Sprocket could’ve just needed money. He probably got to know this Cano asshole through the racetrack,” Demon replied.

“I don’t think so. I really feel the two are related,” Diesel said.

“Maybe you want there to be a connection because of your brother. We have to look at this without any emotion,” Panther said.

“Diesel’s not dealing with emotions on this. If we’re going to smoke this SOB snitch, we gotta look at all the possibilities. The one thing we know for sure is that the fucker’s laying low. Maybe this Cano bastard is our key to finding out what the hell is going on,” Banger said.

“Could be. It doesn’t hurt to look into it.” Panther glanced over at Jagged, Iceman, and Demon. “Help out Diesel with whatever he needs. Keep your eyes on Sprocket. I’ve

wondered about him making the grade to becoming a full-patched member but didn't get the impression he was disloyal, but you never know. Money is one of the strongest motivators to do a whole lot of shit you wouldn't normally do. Any questions?" he asked, glancing around the room.

"Did Viking make it out without getting his ass arrested?" Diesel asked.

"He did," Jagged replied. "Some of the other Angry Disciples got busted. A few of the fucking East Bay Dogs got their asses hauled away. Only two brothers got popped—Fish and Gears. Our attorney is setting up bail as I speak. The fucking badges charged them with lame shit. The attorney said it's bogus, and he'll get them dropped. Neither had weapons on them when they got nabbed. I heard several dumbass East Bay Dogs and a couple of Grim Henchmen got caught carrying."

"We always knew they were dumbasses," Demon said.

"At least it'll take some of the East Bay Dogs assholes outta commission for a while," Smokey said.

"We'll make sure we take *all* of them out of commission. They're getting to be a real pain in our asses," Panther said. "If there isn't anything else, we can adjourn."

The sound of chairs scraping back and steel-toed boots stomping on the terra-cotta tile resounded through the room. The men scattered when they walked out of the guest house. Diesel, Tank, Rags, and Animal strode over to one of the palm trees across from the guest house. Tank pulled out four joints, handed three to the bikers, and slipped one between his lips.

"I don't think a prospect is the shit rat," Animal said before lighting up.

"No fucking way," Rags agreed.

"It's a club member, but I get why Demon doesn't want to believe it's a patch-wearing member." Diesel inhaled deeply, then slowly blew out a stream of smoke. "It fuckin' blows to think a brother you've laid your life for on numerous

occasions is the one stabbing you and the club in the damn back.”

“And all the times shared between the brothers. Fuck, I can’t even imagine it,” Animal said. “All the rides taken together, the rallies, the poker runs ...” his voice trailed off.

“The club parties, the women you fucked together,” Rags added.

“It’s the worst knife in the back,” Tank said. “I’m fucking pissed about it, but the rat isn’t a brother in our club. We’ve been there in the past, so we know what Demon and the others are going through.”

“It’s the worst, and the fucker’s gotta pay for his disloyalty to the club, the colors, and the brotherhood,” Diesel said.

“Damn straight. Are you getting any closer to Cano? I’m with you, bro, about there being a connection,” Rags said while Animal and Tank nodded in agreement.

“I’ll get him. Viking’s helping out, and so is the security guy Demon knows. I just want to get to him before he finds Freddy,” Diesel replied.

“No word on him?” Animal asked.

“Nope. If he’d call me, I could get the trace going. It’s so fuckin’ frustrating.” Diesel pounded his fist against the trunk of the tree.

“We hear you, man,” Rags said. “How’s Myla holding up?”

“She’s tough. I know it’s killing her, but she’s doing all right.” Diesel stubbed the dying embers of his roach.

“What the fuck are you standing around the tree like a damn broad’s group?” Demon asked as he approached the quartet.

“Just shooting the shit,” Diesel said.

“Beast, Stoney, Lucky, Iceman, Gears, and me are going for a ride up the coast. Wanna join us? Smokey, Throttle, and

Shadow are coming along,” Demon said.

“I’m in,” Tank replied.

“Me too,” Rags said.

“Right with you, bro,” Animal added.

Diesel glanced up at the clubhouse. “I’ll pass. I’ve gotta check on Myla.”

“Check on her, then join us. It’s a kick-ass ride.” Demon grinned.

“Another time, buddy. Have a good time.” He bumped fists with Demon and then made his way toward the club.

WHEN DIESEL WALKED into the room, Myla greeted him with a smile and a cold bottle of beer. Unexpected tenderness mingled with excitement rushed through him as he realized her sparkling green eyes and bright smile aroused him more than all the nakedness of the club girls.

“How did it go?” she asked, handing him the beer.

“Okay. What’ve you been doing?”

“Waiting for you.” Another smile hit him straight in the groin.

“How’s your back? Do you need a Tylenol or something?”

“It’s fine. I actually forgot about it.”

“I know you’ll say no, but don’t interrupt me until I finish. I’d love to go to the beach; maybe not here, but there’s a ton more up the coast that we could pop in for a little bit. We could go by car if that would be safer. It’s just that I’m climbing the walls. We can be back before dark. Can we go? Please?”

He rocked back on his heels, his gaze scanning over her face. Myla had been a good sport since all this went down. Her whole life had been upended, and she took it like a trooper. Being confined was mentally challenging, and he knew that all too well. *Yesterday at the rally was supposed to be fun for her,*

*but then shit went down. Most chicks would still be squawking about that today. Myla wasn't even pissed yesterday. All she's concerned about is me and how I'm feeling. She deserves to have some fun, but if something happens to her, I'd never forgive myself.*

"I'll help be a lookout, too," she added.

He laughed. "Hang on. I gotta figure something out before I answer."

"What?"

"I'll be right back."

Diesel locked the door behind him and bolted down the stairs. He scanned the common room looking for any of the guys going on the bike ride. When he spotted Rags leaning against the bar, he rushed over.

"You still going on the ride?"

"Yeah. Did you change your mind?" Rags asked.

"Sort of. I want to take Myla. She's been cooped up since Freddy made a fuckin' mess of things, so I thought we'd join you. I'd go alone, but I can't take a chance with Cano still lurking around."

"Let him try shit with us. We'll beat his sorry ass," Rags said. "Demon's coming now."

Diesel looked over his shoulder and saw the burly biker approaching.

"What's going on?" Demon asked when he got to the bar.

"I want to take Myla for a ride, but it's too risky if it's just me and her. Where are you guys heading to?"

"Laguna Beach today and Huntington or Santa Barbara before you dudes head back home. Is she cool riding with a caravan?"

"She's easygoing ... so ... yeah."



“Good to have you along.” Demon nodded. “We’ll be extra vigilant while looking for asshole Henchmen and East Bay pussies too. We’re gonna leave in about twenty minutes. Is that cool?”

“Sounds good, bro. I’ll meet you guys outside.”

When Diesel entered their room, Myla sat by the window, picking at her fingernails and bouncing her leg up and down. She looked up, her gaze searching his face.

“You got fifteen minutes to get ready before we head out,” he said.

“Yes!” she squealed, leaping up.

He chuckled, her reaction warming his heart. Myla crossed the room in a few quick strides and hugged him tight, nestling her head against his chest.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

He ran his hand down the length of her hair, then eased himself from her.

“You better get going. Bikers don’t like being kept waiting.”

“I won’t be more than five minutes,” she said, rushing toward the bathroom.

Diesel pulled out a bottled water from the mini fridge, vowing to get one of those in his room when he returned home. He twisted off the top and slowly drank while gazing at the ocean. Fear pinged within him, and the threads of sadness weaving through him pulled and tightened. Cano was on the loose, and Freddy was in a metro area with over three million people. *How the fuck am I ever gonna find you, little brother? Call me so I can trace your call.* Staring out in the distance, he repeated “Call me” over and over, like a mantra.

“I’m ready.”

Myla’s voice pulled him away from his thoughts.

Diesel turned around and smiled. She'd changed into jeans, ankle boots, and a top with cap sleeves. Her long hair was pulled back into a braid. She had a pair of sunglasses in one hand and a bandana in the other.

“What? Why do you keep staring at me? Aren't I dressed okay for a ride?”

“You're dressed perfectly. I'm just surprised you caught on so quickly. You'll be more comfortable now than in the shorts and sleeveless top you had on. Do you need anything else before we head out?”

“No. Everything I need is in my front pockets.”

“Then let's go. We're joining some other members. It's safer that way for now.”

“Sounds good. I'm excited to get on the back of your motorcycle, but I'll probably keep my eyes closed until we get off I-5. The traffic here is crazy, and practically everyone speeds on the freeways.”

They walked out of the room and descended the stairs. On the way to his motorcycle, Diesel reminded Myla about what to do while riding as a passenger.

“Ready to go?” Demon said, as the duo approached the members.

“Yeah.”

“Okay then. To avoid the damn freeway, we'll take the route from here to La Jolla to Oceanside. Once we get to Oceanside, we have to jump on I-5 'cause we can't drive through Camp Pendleton, the military base. We'll get back on the coast highway in San Clemente—about 22 miles from Oceanside. At that point, it's Highway 1, or we just call it *PCH*—Pacific Coast Highway. We'll be hugging the coast the rest of the way to Laguna Beach.”

“I've always wanted to see Laguna Beach,” she whispered to Diesel, squeezing his hand.

“Any questions?” Demon’s dark eyes scanned the group. “Okay, then, let’s fucking rock ’n’ roll.”

The motorcycles thundered out of the compound and made their way onto the city streets. Once they picked up PCH, Diesel could relax a bit since the traffic wasn’t as congested as in metro San Diego.

Having Myla on the back of his bike felt damn good, and her arms squeezing his waist and her tits crushing against him made his cock jump. He had to admit that her body melding into his was fucking hot. Whenever the bike hit a bump, he chuckled because her hand slipped down past his waist, jerking away when it touched his hard-on.

Diesel looked over his shoulder at her, and their eyes locked. A huge grin lit up her face, and he winked at her, then averted his gaze back to the road. Yep, having Myla plastered to him while riding was kick-ass; he liked the feel of her.

The road wound snugly against the blue ocean and was more beautiful than he could’ve imagined: waves crashing against the jagged rocks, sea stacks, high cliffs, and picturesque urban spaces. He loved the Rocky Mountains with its snow-capped peaks, verdant valleys, and crystal-clear lakes, but the view before Diesel made him daydream about spending a few winter months by the ocean.

A little less than an hour later, the bikers entered Laguna Beach. Diesel was blown away by the spectacular hilly landscape dotted with rock formations, beautiful beaches, and parks.

“This is gorgeous,” Myla yelled to him.

Nodding his head, he followed his fellow bikers for a few more miles until they turned off Pacific Coast Highway. Their stopping point was the north side of Laguna Park at Crystal Cove State Park. After paying the parking fee, the group headed over to the beach area. Crystal Cove was a peaceful, narrow beach about three miles long, sheltered by a border of

rocks. The coral reef, natural pools, and the immense forest behind it added to the area's natural beauty.

The men plopped down on the beach and took out beer cans they'd stored in their saddle bags. Diesel popped the top on a Dos Equis.

"Want one?" he asked Myla.

"No, thanks. Did you bring a Diet Coke or Sprite?"

"I did." He pulled out a Diet Coke from the plastic bag.

"You're so thoughtful," she said, taking the can from him. "It's so beautiful here. I could watch the ocean for hours."

"It's fuckin' awesome."

And it was. The shoreline stretched as far as the eye could see, and the waves on the beach broke into choppy foam, receding, then moving forward again.

"Thanks for bringing me here," she whispered, slightly leaning into him.

"No worries. I like sharing this"—Diesel waved his hand toward the water—"with you."

He swept a few stray hairs from her face and smiled.

"This kicks ass," Throttle said. "Is the water warm?"

"It depends. It can be, or it can be cool. So far this summer, it's been running on the cool side, like sixty-eight degrees," Iceman answered.

Diesel chuckled. "Are you planning to take a dip?"

"Nah, just curious," Throttle said over the rim of his beer bottle.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" Diesel asked Myla.

"I'd love to. I'm going to take off my shoes. I love the feel of sand between my toes."

"We'll be back in a few," he said to his brothers.

When they were a short distance away, Diesel tucked her hand in his as they walked. It was so quiet and perfect. He wished he could stay in the moment longer than they had, but he knew it wasn't possible. Much more still needed to be done: find Freddy, eliminate Cano, and dispose of the snitch.

"Freddy never wanted to walk on the beach with me," she said.

At the mention of his brother's name, he let go of Myla's hand, pretending to scratch an itch on his jawline.

"Why not?"

"I don't know. Like I told you, I was mostly left alone in the hotel room when he was doing business. I used to sneak out to Harbor Drive and walk along the bay. It's beautiful there. You can see Coronado across the bay and the ocean in the distance. I'd scope out the shops at Sea Port Village. Then I'd buy a fish taco, sit on one of the benches, and watch the water. I loved seeing the sailboats and wondered if I'd get seasick if I ever got on one. Silly, huh?"

"No. Getting seasick is probably like getting car sick. A lot of people get that way going over the mountain roads."

"And the high altitude can make it worse."

He laughed. "When some of the San Diego members come to Colorado, they gotta keep pulling over to catch their breath on the high passes anytime we ride with them. We always joke that they're a bunch of pussies." He bent down, picked up a seashell, and handed it to her.

"That's so pretty," she said before tucking it in her pocket. "Do you want to take off your boots and get your feet wet?"

He jerked his head back. "No fuckin' way. That's not my scene, but go ahead if you want to."

Laughter peeled from Myla's lips. "I didn't know that was a 'scene.' Sometimes you're so adorable."

"I've never been called *that* before," he said.

Diesel watched her as she rushed to the water and splashed her feet along the frothy edge. He noticed her dark hair glistening in the sun and how her jeans molded to her body. His balls tightened, and he knew he should look away but couldn't. Myla did something to him. He was captivated by her beauty, sass, toughness, and smile. Damn, that smile lit up her whole face and made him feel things deep inside him.

"The water is cool and refreshing. I love it," Myla gushed, twirling around with her head tipped back.

"Glad you're enjoying yourself," he said.

Myla strode over to him and smiled. "I'm just happy to be here with you on the beach." She looped her arm through his, resting her hand on his forearm.

The softness of her touch had him thinking all kinds of nasty thoughts.

"Whatcha thinking?" she asked, looking over at him.

*You don't wanna know.* "That we should head back. I see Rags waving his arms at me."

Myla shielded her eyes with her hand. "I see him. I didn't realize how far we walked."

"They probably want to grab some chow. Are you hungry?"

"I'm famished. I've heard sea air can do that to you."

He chuckled. "Where do you get all this trivia?"

"I read a lot."

Demon, Shadow, and Animal motioned Diesel over as he and Myla approached the members.

"I'll be right back," he said to Myla.

"I hope everything's okay," she replied.

"I'll just be a sec." He strode over to the three guys. "What's up?"

“Smokey spotted a fucking badge. We gotta get rid of the beer cans. I’m not up for being hassled by some asshole cops,” Demon said. He handed Diesel a large plastic bag. “Have the broad take this and dump it in the trashcan. The badge won’t pay attention to her.”

Diesel looked over at Myla, and she threw him a big smile. He turned back to his brothers. “Why don’t we just stash it in the woods behind us? I don’t feel comfortable having Myla go to the trashcan by herself. It’s by the parking lot, and that’s too far.”

“Do you want your ass back in the slammer?” Animal said. “These fucking badges are always looking for a reason to take us in. It’s probably just a hefty fine and a citation, but your ass hasn’t been outta prison that long.”

Diesel clenched his jaw. “We could’ve had the shit disposed of by now. Give me the fuckin’ bag, and I’ll take care of it.” He pointed to Shadow. “You watch Myla, and you—” he pointed to Animal—“come with me. Let’s go.”

After a short while, Diesel and Animal emerged from the thicket of trees without the bag. He motioned to Myla to come over, and she hurried to his side.

“Where did you go?” she asked.

“I wanted to check out the forest. Let’s get some food.”

“Are your friends coming?”

“Yeah. We’ve gotta book it.” He grabbed her hand and hurried her away from the area.

The men jumped on their Harleys, and Demon yelled, “Follow me. We’re going to Las Brisas for food.”

When the group entered the restaurant, Diesel heard Myla gasp.

“This is gorgeous. Look at that view. It’s like we’re right on top of the ocean.”

Diesel glanced around and had to admit the view was kick-ass: The eatery was perched above the coastline, blue water everywhere, and crashing waves below.

“A table by the window,” Diesel said to the hostess.

“Make ours next to theirs,” Demon added. “We got twelve and wanna sit at one table.”

The hostess’s eyes widened. “I’m not sure we can do that, sir.”

“I bet you can. Get your manager.” Demon leaned in closer, and fear streaked across the poor woman’s face.

A man in his mid-forties with a tinge of gray at his temples came over to the hostess stand. “Is there a problem?” His brown eyes darted back and forth between Demon and the other bikers.

“We need a table for twelve, and we wanna be sitting close to them,” Demon pointed at Diesel and Myla.

“All right. I can put a few tables together. It’ll take a few minutes.” The manager glanced over at Diesel. “Where are you sitting, sir?”

Jerking his head toward a corner table, he replied, “That small table by the window.”

“All right.” He whispered something to the hostess, and she practically ran away from the group, disappearing behind the kitchen doors.

After the fiasco of accommodating twelve patrons at one table without advance notice, Diesel settled into the comfy seat of the bamboo dining chair and picked up the menu.

“Don’t you want to sit by your friends?” Myla asked, glancing up.

“Nope. They’re gonna talk Harleys and ...” his voice trailed away.

“Women?” she said, a smile in her voice.



“Yeah. They’re sitting close by in case any trouble goes down.”

“In here?” she replied, her gaze scanning the restaurant.

“You’d be surprised. Many outlaws have no qualms about exacting revenge in public places.”

“Revenge because of the rally or because of me and the connection to Peter Cano?”

“The rally for one since a couple of Henchmen are stewing their asses in the county jail waiting for bail to be set. I don’t know how that Cano fucker operates, but I’m not taking any chances with him.”

“I highly doubt he’d make an incriminating scene in front of a room full of witnesses. No, he prefers to operate in the shadows.”

*Like the Insurgents.* “I’ll find the asshole, shadows or not.”

“To change the subject, I noticed that except for the family dinner at Cara and Hawk’s, there are never any women around when you guys eat out or go to bars or wherever. I know there are club girls, but they seem to stay in the club, and some of the guys have wives and girlfriends, but I never see them.”

“The ol’ ladies are kept pretty much separate from the main goings on in the club. They plan the club’s two big charity events each year: the Christmas toy drive and the spring food drive. Belle is the head of the ol’ ladies since she and Banger are hitched, and Cara is second in charge ’cause Hawk’s the vice prez. Twice a month is family night, usually at Steelers. It’s a favorite not just for the Insurgents but other bikers and citizens too. Sometimes the family night is at a member’s house, like the one we went to at Hawk and Cara’s.”

“Do the women ever go to the club parties?”

“Depends. Mostly no, but in rare cases, yes—never if out-of-town bikers visit. The ol’ ladies aren’t interested in going, so it’s never a problem.”

“Who had the lobster bisque?” a waitress with short, curly blonde hair asked.

Myla raised her hand. “I did.”

The waitress set the dish in front of her and then placed a plate of calamari in front of Diesel.

“Would you like another beer, sir?”

“Nah, I’m good.”

“I’ll have another glass of chardonnay,” Myla said.

The waitress nodded, then turned around and ambled toward the bar.

“This is perfect: lobster bisque, crusty French bread, a gorgeous view, and one very sexy man.” With eyes fixed on his, she blew gently on the soup, then put the spoon in her mouth.

Diesel watched her movements intently, picturing his cock slipping between her glossy pink lips. *Damn it!* He wriggled uncomfortably in his seat as his jeans choked his erection.

“Aren’t you going to try your calamari? I’m plotting to steal a few from your plate.”

He cleared his throat. “Go ahead.”

“So, getting back to what we were talking about, how do the ‘ol’ ladies,’ as you call them, deal with the club girls?”

“They don’t. The club girls are just that—girls for the club. The ol’ ladies don’t have any contact with them, and vice versa. It’s the way it is. If a chick gets involved with a biker and it gets serious, she’s gotta understand his culture and his world. If she doesn’t, it’ll never work.”

Myla put a piece of bread in her mouth, chewed for a few seconds, and said, “Isn’t jealousy an issue? I mean, the club girls are pretty and always willing.”

“I guess it’s a matter of trust and loyalty between a dude and his ol’ lady. Some of the ol’ ladies get pissed and talk shit,

and there are a couple who tell their old men that fucking a sweet butt a couple of times a month is okay, but most couples seem to be together and not let that shit get in the way.”

“It does come down to trust. Some guys can love a woman but can’t be faithful. Others are faithful for life. It goes both ways too. Some women love their husbands but cheat on them. Funny, huh?”

“Never thought about it much. As I told you before, my people cheated on each other. I never got it. I figured they should’ve moved on if they didn’t wanna be together, but they’re still playing house after thirty-three years. I’m sure they’re still both cheating. The whole thing’s kind of fucked.”

“My mom never cheated on any of her husbands. She’d just get divorced and find another one. That’s pretty fucked too.”

Bringing the beer bottle to his lips, he laughed.

Diesel shared snippets of his childhood with Myla for the next hour because she kept asking so many questions about it. She wanted to know how he liked high school, if he played sports, did he get a lot of Christmas presents, and a bunch of shit that he hadn’t thought about in years. He mainly answered in two or three words, and after a while, she seemed to have caught on that those years of his life were over in his mind. He told her that his family was the Insurgents and that joining the brotherhood was the best thing he ever did.

From the corner of his eye, Diesel saw Smokey and Tank stand and glance over.

“You guys getting ready to leave?”

“Yep,” said Tank as he walked over. “We were waiting to see when you would get tired of talking, but you just kept yapping.”

Diesel gazed at Myla. “Are you ready to hit the road?”

“I’m good. I just have to use the bathroom, and I’ll be good as gold.”

“I’ll meet you guys out front,” he said.

“We’ll be there.”

Orange and warm coral-pink streaks painted the sky, making the ocean glow. Bright jacaranda trees lined residential streets, forming a canopy over the roads while their fragrant purple flowers carpeted the pavement.

Diesel lifted his chin at Easy, who was manning the guardhouse as he followed the line of Harleys through the clubhouse’s iron gates. He pulled into a space and killed the engine. Myla let go of his waist and leaned back, and he immediately missed the feel of her against him. He swung his leg over the seat and helped her off the Harley.

“The ride back was even more gorgeous than the one up to Laguna Beach. The sunset is spectacular. It looks more beautiful on a motorcycle than in a car,” she said.

“That’s why I ride in cages as little as possible. I feel so damn confined in them.” Diesel removed his sunglasses and put them on the collar of his T-shirt. “You want something to drink?” he asked as they entered the main room.

“No, thanks. Shania gave me a six-pack of Diet Coke, and I put it in the mini fridge. If you want something, go ahead. I’m going to the room.”

“I’ll go with you.” He placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her to the stairway.

“You don’t want a shot of whiskey or something?”

“I do. I just want to splash some water on my face before going back down.” Diesel wanted to check the room to ensure everything was all right, but he didn’t want to worry Myla. He still believed the snitch and Cano were connected.

After making sure all was good and freshening up, he put on a clean T-shirt. Myla had already changed into pajama pants and a loose top and stood by the window holding a can of soda, her back facing him.

“Enjoying the sunset?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s gorgeous,” she said, glancing over her shoulder. “Are you heading out?”

“Yeah, I’ll just be downstairs. Do you need anything before I go?”

“No, I’m good. Are you going to be late? I know there are things to do, and you probably are a bit frustrated.”

“What’re you talking about? I’m not frustrated about anything except finding that fucker Cano.”

“I noticed you were a magnet for several club women.”

“What the hell does that mean, Myla? Are you telling me to fuck one of them?”

“No.”

“Then why are we talking about this?” Diesel rubbed the side of his face as anger snipped at him. “I’m gonna go down and hang with my buddies. You got that?”

“Yes. I just meant ... I don’t know ...”

Rooted to the floor, he tried to figure out what Myla was saying and what brought this on.

“Say something—I’m sort of embarrassed right now,” she said.

“What am I gonna say? I don’t even know what the hell your point is. If you’re pissed because I’m gonna head downstairs to hang out, that’s on you.”

Myla’s face fell, crestfallen at his words. “I’m not pissed.”

“Then what? What’s eating your ass?”

“Nothing.”

He shook his head in exasperation. “Whatever, I gotta go.”

“Don’t,” she said, her voice strained.

“Don’t go?”

“No, I mean ...” She averted her gaze from his as a pinkish-red color stained her cheeks.

“Tell me what’s goin’ on in your head, Myla. I’m not a damn mind reader.”

Lifting her chin, eyes brimming with determination, she met his gaze. “Don’t screw anyone.”

“I wasn’t planning to.”

The only woman he wanted was standing in front of him. How could she not know that he wasn’t interested in random pussy, or that no woman—club girl, party girl, or citizen—could ever measure up to her?

“There are a lot of pretty, fun girls downstairs. I saw a couple of them giving you the eye when we returned from our ride.”

Despite knowing better, he couldn’t stop the smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. *She’s jealous.* A sliver of machismo mingled with satisfaction ran through him. Pretty damn childish, but what could he say ... he was male.

“Damn, I sound so fucking petty and insecure, and I hate it.” Myla folded her arms across her chest. “I’ve never been either of those in my life. I don’t know what got into me. Forget this whole conversation and have a good time. I’m going to watch a movie and veg.”

Diesel was in front of her in one lengthy move, drawing her into his arms and fitting her curves against him.

“Don’t beat yourself up. If you were the one going downstairs with all those testosterone-crazed dudes, I’d be stuck to your side like glue, punching every brother who checked you out.”

She tipped her chin at him, her gaze meeting his. “You would?”

“Fuck, yeah.”

She giggled. “We *are* pathetic.”

“Nope, we’re just human and care about each other.” He bent his head down, pressed a hard kiss to her lips, then pulled

away, letting his arms drop. “Again, if you need something, lemme know. I’m downstairs.”

Smiling, she nodded her head and padded behind him. He opened the door and stepped out, but before he could say anything, she said, “I’ll lock the door and not open it for anyone.”

He snorted out a laugh as he leaned back on his boot heels. “I’m not movin’ ’til I hear the locks turning.”

She stuck her tongue out in jest and shut the door. After hearing the locks click in place, he descended the stairs.

When he entered the main room, hard-rock music blasted from tall speakers against the back wall. A pretty brunette dressed in a neon-pink thong bikini stood on the bar, shaking her ass and barely concealed tits to the music beats while cockteasing Tank, Rags, and Klutch. A curvy blonde sat on the bar, wearing nothing but a strip of thin fabric across her enormous tits, and spread her legs wide. Demon, Iceman, and Crutch stood glass-eyed, beer bottles in hand, watching her as she took her finger, licked it, and touched her pussy.

Diesel’s dick twitched, and he turned away and strode over to the opposite end of the bar.

“Are you looking for some fun?” A cute redhead leaned against him and rubbed her ample breasts against his arm.

“I’m looking to play a few rounds of pool,” he said, stepping back.

“I can cheer you on,” she said, running a glittery fingernail down his arm.

“I’m already cheered up.”

“You sure? We could have a lot of fun. I’m one of the most popular girls in the club.” She rubbed her hands slowly over her boobs then moved them down to the button on a micro-miniskirt.

“I bet you are,” he said as he ran his gaze over her round ass, toned abs, and a set of perky tits.

“Ginger loves fucking,” Panther said, sidling up next to Diesel. “She especially loves playing rough.”

“Sounds like she’d be perfect for Razor,” Diesel replied, scanning the room, looking for him.

“What about you?” Panther asked.

“Not feeling it.” He held up his hand and motioned for Welder to come over. “A double Jack,” he said to the prospect.

“Fuck, I forgot you got a woman with you. You got a good time waiting for you.” The president nudged him.

Diesel bristled but resisted the urge to sink his fist into Panther’s face. Banger would not be cool with that.

“Are you with that dark-haired girl with the highlights?” Ginger pushed out her shiny red lips in a pout.

“Yeah,” he said. He took the drink from Welder, lifted his chin at Panther, and walked to one of the pool tables.

“You wanna lose some money?” Smokey asked with a laugh in his voice.

“You’re gonna have those words up your ass after I take that wad of dough you got busting outta your pocket,” Diesel replied.

For the next few hours, Diesel and his buddies drank, played pool, smoked weed, and talked motorcycles. In the end, Diesel walked away with a thousand bucks, Smokey had two grand, Animal lost his ass big time, and Shadow won a measly hundred dollars. Banger perched on one of the stools for part of the games, drinking whiskey and egging the teams on.

The bikers who had ol’ ladies followed Diesel out of the main area, and the others stayed behind, indulging in all types of sexual delights with the over-eager club girls.

When Diesel returned to the room, it was past midnight. It was dark except for the dim glow of the waning moon shining through the open windows. Myla lay tucked under the covers, the light blanket pulled up snugly under her chin. Gazing



down on her, he took her all in—hair spread around her like a luxurious panel of silk; full lips slightly parted as she quietly breathed; long, dark lashes resting on her cheeks. She looked beautiful in the moonlight ... in the sunshine ... in the morning when she first woke up ... when she smiled and laughed ... after a ride when her eyes danced with exhilaration. *She's fuckin' gorgeous all the time.* Leaning over, he softly kissed her cheek, and she shifted a bit, still visibly deep in sleep.

Letting out a long sigh, Diesel walked over to the couch. He stripped down to his boxers, pulled on a pair of sweats, then lay down. As soon as his head hit the pillow, he was out.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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DIESEL WOKE TO his phone vibrating in his pocket, against his thigh. A number he didn't recognize blinked across the screen. He jumped up from the couch and held the phone to his ear as he made his way across the room.

"Hello?" he said in a hushed voice. He glanced back at Myla, who was still asleep, walked into the bathroom, and closed the door.

The sound of static and a garbled voice came through the phone.

"I can't hear you. There's a bad connection."

The line went dead.

Leaning against the counter, he texted Hawk the number of the disconnected call.

The cell vibrated again.

"Talk to me," he said.

An unintelligible voice came over the phone punctuated by hesitant breathing.

"I can't understand you," he said.

Diesel headed to the couch and grabbed his boots and T-shirt. The first rays of dawn filtered through the blinds, and he glanced again at Myla, who hadn't stirred. He hurried out of the room, closed the door behind him, and headed down the corridor in the direction of the stairs.

"Who is this?"

"It's me, Trenton," a low voice rasped.

He stopped in his tracks. "Freddy, is that you?"

"Yeah, it's your little brother."

Buzzing traffic, distant sirens, and Freddy's quick, sharp breathing could be heard through the phone.

"Tell me where you are," he said.

"I'm nowhere," Freddy whispered.

"I'll come get you. You can stay with me and the brothers."

"It's too late for that."

"What the fuck does that mean? It's never too late for anything, dude. You know that. Whatever shit you got yourself into, I can get you out of it. You're not alone. I'm here for you."

A heavy sigh. "I fucked up real bad."

"We all fuck up. I spent four years in a damn cell 'cause I fucked up. I can help you get through whatever you did. I can take care of whoever's causing you grief."

"The money was too easy," Freddy said as if Diesel hadn't said anything. "You know how it was growing up. Money was always so fucking tight. In high school, I hated the kids on the hill with their fucking Nike LeBron Elevens and Jeep Wranglers, and we got our shoes from some damned charity! Of course, Connor Brawley made sure to point that out. He loved flaunting his wealth in my face. The shoes and his damn Mercedes made me see red every time."

"You shoulda told me you wanted the Nikes. I would've bought them for you."

"Yeah, you were always hustling for a buck." Disgust laced his voice.

"Back then, I worked at Chatfield Stables scooping up horse shit. The hustling came later."

"I don't know how you did that fucking job. Connor used to tease me about that all the time. 'Tell your brother to get you a job scooping up horse shit so you can buy some decent shoes.' Damn, I hate that sonofabitch. Probably running the

stables and the ranch with a perfect wife with big hooters. Asshole.”

Diesel switched the phone to speaker mode while he pulled up his boots and slipped a T-shirt over his head. He walked outside and sat on a cushioned chair on the veranda.

“I didn’t know about Connor. You should’ve told me. I would’ve rearranged his face.”

“I didn’t need you to fight my battles.” Freddy scoffed.

“Didn’t say you did; I’m just telling you I would’ve been there if you’d asked.”

There was a long pause. He thought Freddy had disconnected then he heard his brother clear his throat.

“I know that.” His voice was so low Diesel had to strain to hear him. “Dad always had money for beer and the pool hall. I’m sure he spent money on plenty of lot lizards when he was on the road. Mom never had time for shit around the house but always managed to go out to the clubs with friends on the weekends.”

He blew out a breath and ran both hands over his face. “We got shitty parents—no argument there. But we got each other. I care about you, bro.”

“I know,” he said, his voice cracking. “But we had good Christmases, didn’t we? I got lots of gifts. Remember that?”

Memories surfaced from when he and Freddy sat on the floor ripping open gold, red, and green shiny packages while their parents sat on the couch watching.

“I remember. Our people thought those gifts made up for the rest of the year.”

“But it was good, wasn’t it? I mean, Mom and Dad weren’t that bad. They love us, right?”

“Yeah,” Diesel said, but his mind screamed that they didn’t give a shit.

“When they were together, it was good. We had dinner as a family, Mom didn’t go out on the weekends, and Dad ... well, Dad had his pool buddies. But Sundays, he’d putter around in his workshop. I used to help him, remember?”

“Yeah. I never did know what the hell you were doing in there.” He chuckled.

“Bonding with Dad. You were never interested in the workshop. You’ve always been a rebel.”

“Guess I have. I know not having our people give a shit bothered you much more than it did me.”

“Stop calling them ‘our people.’ They are our *parents*— Mom and Dad. You always gave them trouble even before you were a teenager. I tried like hell to please them, do what I thought they wanted me to do. You said they were shitty parents, but they tried; money just was tight, and I hated being looked down on by the rich sonsofbitches at school, that’s all.”

“It’s best not to give a damn about what people think.”

“I’m not like you. I can’t do that. I *care* what people think. I wanted to come back to Hayes and show all the assholes that I made it. You should’ve seen some of their fucking faces when I came back home to visit Mom and Dad last year. I arrived in a bright red shiny Mercedes convertible. Jade almost shit her tight-fitting jeans when she saw me roll into town. I bumped into her on Main Street the next day, and she went out of her way to chat with me. She never gave me the time of day in high school. Jade was one of the rich bitches who thought their shit didn’t stink, but there she was, laughing and talking and even *flirting* with me. It felt good, you know?”

Diesel looked at the expanse of blue in the distance, watching the waves tumble onto the shore in an endless rhythm while seagulls swooped toward the pier. He leaned back against the chair. “Yeah, I bet it did. Let’s talk in person. We got a lot of memories to catch up on. Just let me know where you are, and I’ll come pick you up.”

“I told you – I’m nowhere.”

His brow creased. “This is stupid shit, man. I told you I can help you.”

“I can’t do time like you. I wouldn’t survive.”

“I can help you disappear and start a new life somewhere else. The brotherhood will be behind you.”

“Do Mom and Dad know about ...” His voice trailed.

“Nah.”

“The cops didn’t go to them?”

“The badges don’t know shit. I made sure everything was cleaned up. There’s no evidence. There’s nothing but an empty house.”

“But Peter knows.”

Diesel scooted closer to the cell phone on the table. “Peter who?” Of course, he knew, but he wanted Freddy to keep talking, hoping his brother would slip and say where he was staying.

“Cano. He’s a bastard, but I made a shitload of money with him. He hooked me up. I was living in a ten-thousand-square-foot mansion. Can you believe that? Whaddya think about that? No one ever thought I’d make it.”

“That’s cool. I never doubted you, bro. So you were in business with this Cano dude?”

“Sorta. I started the pain clinics, but he came to me and wanted in. He came *to me*.”

Scratchy, rough-edged laughter rang out over the phone.

“Then what happened?” Diesel asked softly.

“We partnered up, but I never trusted the bastard. Never thought he was on the up and up, but he had the connections and the protection, so I just went with it. The money kept coming in. So fucking much money. My girl was scared and kept telling me to stop whatever I was doing. She thought it

was too much money. She never liked the house and thought it was too big, giving her the creeps. You know Myla, right?”

Guilt ripped through him. “Yeah.”

“She wrote to you while you were in the slammer. I was jealous of that. I guess I was always a bit jealous of you and how women flocked to you. But once I had some bucks, I was a chick magnet.” Freddy laughed too loud. “All I wanted to do is fuck. Myla had become a pain in the ass, but I didn’t know how to break up with her. Anyway, she made the best Irish stew I ever ate.” He laughed again.

“Where’s Cano now?”

“Cano? Oh, that asshole. He’s got his goons looking for me. He wants me real bad. I offed his baby brother. I’m not sorry I did. I’m sorry that I left Myla to deal with that mess. I called her a couple of times and she said she was in Elizabeth, but I didn’t believe her. I wonder where she is.”

“Why did you leave her with that mess?”

“I had to get outta there. I knew my ass was on the line.”

“And Myla?”

“She’s a survivor. I knew she’d be okay.”

“What if this jerk found her?”

“He didn’t—he would’ve told me. He would’ve used Myla as a bargaining chip to get my ass. I’m glad he didn’t. I’m not sure what I would’ve done.”

“Do you love her?” Diesel held his breath.

“Not really. I guess I’m just used to her.”

“Did you ever?”

“In the beginning. We hit it off hard; it felt like love. I was in lust for sure.” He chuckled. “But things changed between us when the money started pouring in. It felt like Myla was trying to keep me down. I wanted to grab it all—the chicks, the dough, the fast lane—all that shit, you know?”

“Yeah, that’s how it was when I patched in with the Insurgents. It was like a fucked-up Candyland with the club girls, the parties, and the booze. It was a massive high, but it couldn’t be forever.”

“I’d hoped it could’ve gone on for a bit longer, but Peter double-crossed me. I found out he was dealing with some biker club in Oakland. When I called him on it, he told me I was a loser, a nothing, and I was holding him back. It was Connor Brawley all over again.”

Diesel stiffened. “What biker club?”

“I forget the name.”

“Grim Henchmen?”

“That’s it. They were moving a lot of opioids up and down the coast with some other clubs in El Cajon and LA. A smaller one, I think. One of your guys was in it too.”

Diesel jerked his head back. A sudden coldness hit the base of his spine. “What the fuck are you saying?” *No way anyone from my club’s involved in this shit.*

“Not in Colorado. I think it was somewhere in California.”

He exhaled. “The only chapter we got is in San Diego.”

“I guess that’s right. As I said, a small club in El Cajon was involved, and that’s in San Diego County, but that’s all I know.”

“Who’s the Insurgent?” Diesel held his breath.

“Dunno. I overheard Peter a couple of times when we were in LA. I heard the one guy say something about being in the Insurgents, and Peter would be a dead man if he tried to start shit with him.”

*I knew the snitch was involved with Cano. Both fuckers are history.*

“Anyway, I know the biker is one of those after me. It’s just a matter of time before he finds me. I know how you guys operate.”



“We’re nothing like this sonofabitch. Brothers don’t betray the brotherhood.”

“This *brother* did. The lure of money was too great. I can relate to him.”

“Tell me where you are. I can take care of this fuckin’ shit rat and that asshole, Cano.”

“I keep telling you that I’m nowhere.” Ice cubes clinked against a glass. “Peter wasn’t man enough to kill me, so he sent his brother, Miles, to do his fucking dirty work. I just happened to have seen him slip through the sliding door into the family room. If I hadn’t ... well, I wouldn’t be talking to you right now.

“I grabbed a knife and went over to him. He pretended that he wanted to talk about business. He said he knocked on the door for a while and called me but didn’t get a response. The fucker said he was ‘worried’ about me. What a lying piece of shit. Miles called me a ‘pathetic nobody.’ Told me that he and Peter were the brains, and I was nothing but a mediocre lackey. When he said that, I went ballistic. The bastard never knew what hit him.” A dry laugh echoed through the phone.

“We’ll get this all sorted. I can help you out.”

“I don’t want help. I want to disappear.”

“I’m in San Diego. I can get you right now.”

“I figured you were. You’ve been talking to Myla, right?”

“Yeah. She was scared and worried about you. She told me you were in danger.”

“Do you know where she is?”

“She’s been staying at the Insurgents’ clubhouse. I brought her there ’cause I knew she’d be safe.”

“So, she told you about Cano and all that?”

Afraid that his brother may get angry and hang up, he replied, “Myla just said some bad people were after you, and

she was afraid. She said she didn't know much about your clinics."

"Is she in San Diego?"

Diesel hesitated, then said, "Yeah."

"At the clubhouse?"

"Yeah."

"You put her in the cage with one of your *brothers* who's dirty." A peal of raspy laughter came over the line. "You fucked up."

"Myla's fine. Don't worry."

"I'm not worried. If something happens, her blood is on your hands."

Suddenly paranoid, Diesel looked over his shoulder to make sure no one was listening. He doubted anyone was even up; if they were, they'd be nursing a helluva hangover. Just to be safe, he walked down the porch steps and settled a distance away from the club.

"Nothing's gonna happen to her," he replied.

"Do you have your *brothers* taking turns guarding her? You know, I always hated hearing you call your friends and club members *brothers*. It made me feel like I wasn't your brother. It made me feel like I was a nobody ... like I was invisible."

"You're my true brother. Nothing can change that."

"I'm not convinced of that. You adopted the club as your family, so where did that leave me?"

"As my true brother. The club is my life, my world. It doesn't replace my bond with you. Lemme pick you up, and we can get some breakfast and talk. We haven't seen each other in a long time."

"I'm not hungry. Besides, I'm drinking my breakfast." There was another peal of laughter.

“But—”

“Just let me go. That’s the best thing you can do for me. It was great for a while, but it’s time to go.”

“Freddy.”

“You were a good brother, Diesel. You watched out for me.”

He hissed. “I did a shitty job.”

“Don’t blame yourself. This is all on me. I knew the risks. It’s okay, really, it is. I got a good safe place here. I’m gonna chill and enjoy myself before I move on.”

“Move on where?”

“Don’t know yet. Maybe Argentina or Bali. The whole world is open to me. I can start a new life ... reinvent myself. There are a lot of possibilities,” he slurred. “Wait a sec.”

“What’s going on?”

“I dunno. I think ... oh, fuck I’m ...”

“Freddy, talk to me!”

An unmistakable *click-clack* filled Diesel’s ears and the pit of his stomach. The sound of the shotgun blast was all too familiar to him. So was the second and third one.

Then the screen went black.

“Freddy!” He tapped his phone, and the password box popped up. “Fuck!”

Anger rippled through him so fiercely that his whole body shook. *I fuckin’ failed him.*

Freddy’s voice filled his head as if he were right there before him. Fragments of their times together swirled in his mind: Swimming in the river when they were kids. Eating burgers at the lunch counter in Wyler’s Drugstore. Teaching Freddy to drive the pick-up truck. Buying beer for Freddy and his buddies. Sitting in the front row at his high school graduation. There were so many moments in their lives that

he'd forgotten. He wiped his damp cheek with the back of his hand.

The jarring ring of the cell phone sliced into his grief. Glancing at the screen, he brought the receiver to his ear.

"Hey."

"I couldn't find shit, bro. I can see if we can—"

"Thanks for the effort, but the motherfucker got him. Right when I was on the damn phone," he said to Hawk.

"Fuck, man, that's tough. I feel for you. Damn it to hell, that's too fucking rough."

"It is. I couldn't help Freddy. Fuck." Diesel kicked his boot against the palm tree trunk.

"It was like finding a damn needle in a fucking haystack. Don't beat yourself up over this. You tried, but your brother didn't want to be found. But we're gonna find the fucker who did this."

He could feel Hawk's anger through the line. "Freddy confirmed that one of the San Diego brothers is involved with that motherfucker, Cano, and the asshole Grim Henchmen. East Bay Dicks are in the mix, too, but I'm not sure if they were connected to what was going on with Freddy."

"Did he say who the turncoat is?"

"He didn't know. Just that he overheard the snitch talking with some Henchmen and Cano."

"The traitor has to be snuffed out. Any ideas?"

"It's gotta be someone who was at our club for a party a while back. Myla thought one of the dudes at the party looked familiar. Panther doesn't want to address that the snitch is working with Cano. He kept saying it could be someone from another club 'cause there were a lot of bikers there. Banger sort of agreed, but Freddy verified that this shit rat is not only dealing with the Henchmen but with the fucker too. I've gotta find Cano. I've gotta avenge Freddy's death."

“Of course you do,” Hawk said in a low voice. “I’ll call Banger. We gotta find this motherfucker and take care of him, and then we’ll deal with the backstabber.”

“I’ll give Zach a call in a bit to see if he’s found anything else. He knows some people in LA. I’ll touch base with Viking too.”

“Any idea where your brother was when he called?”

“I think he may have been in a hotel downtown near a hospital or something. I could hear traffic and sirens. It was early when we talked, so I figured it must be downtown. I’m gonna start there.”

“The fucking badges would know. It’s your call,” Hawk said.

“I’ll see what I can find out on my own first.”

“We’re gonna get this fucker. I’ll work from my end.”

“Thanks, bro.”

“Later.”

Diesel swiped the phone and trudged toward the clubhouse. It was still early, and the main room was eerily quiet. He walked behind the bar, poured a healthy amount of Jack in a tumbler, and then made his way upstairs.

Weak sunlight slid in through the slats in the blinds. Diesel padded carefully to the couch and put his glass on the end table. He glanced over at Myla; she was still sleeping. A sigh of relief pushed through his lips as he slumped down on the cushion and retrieved the glass. He tipped his head and threw back the whiskey. A smooth burn slid down his throat, hitting bottom and radiating outward. Diesel’s eyes closed, and his mind drifted back to his early life in Hayes when Freddy had been safe and alive.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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SNUGGLED INTO THE pillow, Myla cracked open her eyes; sunlight poured in through the windows. Bolting upright in the bed, she glanced at the green numbers on the nightstand clock: 11:45 a.m.

She couldn't believe she'd slept that long. *Is Diesel still conked out?* Flicking her gaze to the couch, she saw him sitting on the sofa, his head buried in his hands, elbows resting on his knees. Myla thought he was napping at first, but then he glanced up.

"You're awake," he said, straightening himself.

"Just now. I can't believe how late I slept. I didn't even hear you come in last night. I was so tired."

"A long ride in the heat will do that."

"Sort of like a day at the beach."

"Yeah."

Myla stood up, squirming a bit. "I have to go to the bathroom," she said, hurrying away.

After she'd cleaned up, she walked over to the couch and sat beside him.

"How much did you win last night?"

"A grand," he replied in a flat, monotone voice.

She tilted her head slightly, studying him. A forlorn gaze replaced the brightness in his blue eyes. His face was drawn and tired even in the sunlight, and stubble covered it.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

“Diesel, I know something’s wrong. You look so glum and ... I don’t know ... sad or something.”

He shifted to turn sideways, facing her. Clutching her outstretched hand, he said, “Freddy’s dead.”

She heard the words, but they didn’t compute. A sudden coldness hit her core. Her mind raced. Her blood pumped. Her heart hurt. *Freddy wasn’t supposed to die. We were supposed to find him and bring him home.* But if she were honest with herself, was she shocked? This wasn’t a movie where everything was wrapped up in a happy ending. The stakes were too high: Peter Cano won, and Freddy lost.

Recollections of the night Myla had first met Freddy played through her mind like a carousel. *Now he’s gone. Dead. Peter finally found him ...* She slumped against the couch, dissolving into tears.

“*That bastard,*” she spat the words out in anger and disgust, “used him, betrayed him, and murdered him!”

Myla rocked back and forth as images of the past three years ricocheted in her brain. Diesel drew her to him and held her tight to his chest as fast, choking sobs consumed her. A deep sadness welled inside her. Even though things had been good between them for quite a while, she hated the thought that he’d been killed ... that he was dead.

“I know you’re hurting,” he said, rubbing soft circles on her back.

Burrowing her face in his T-shirt, she didn’t answer. They sat silently for a long time, each lost in their memories.

“I’m sorry as fuck that you’re going through this,” he murmured, snapping her back to the present.

Swiping at the streaks on her face, she glanced up at him. “You’re going through it too. I’m not the only one hurting. Freddy was your brother.”

Diesel’s jaw visibly tightened. “I failed him. I should’ve been able to save him.”

“You didn’t know where he was,” she said softly.

“I should have.”

“How?”

“Fuck, I don’t know. I just failed him. Freddy looked up to me his whole damn life, and in the end, I let him down.”

“If you could have, you would’ve helped him. Freddy knew that but, for whatever reason, didn’t want any assistance.”

His arm tightened around her. “It’s the *why* that fuckin’ kills me. I could’ve gotten him back on track, but he didn’t want my help. Fuck, I’ll never understand it.”

Silence descended on them again. He absentmindedly played with the ends of her hair, twirling the strands around his fingers as she rested her head against his chest. All at once, a flashback of Freddy beating her spread through Myla’s mind, making her palms sweat as panic set in.

“What’s going on?” Diesel asked, cupping a hand under her chin and raising her face. His eyes searched hers.

The remembrance dispersed to the depths of her mind.

“I feel guilty about not feeling guilty that I was planning to leave him. Is that stupid?”

He shook his head. “No. When something bad happens, all the shit gets put aside, and we tend to remember the good stuff. It’s important to remember the pain, too; it balances things out. You made up your mind to leave, so there’s no reason to feel guilty about that decision.”

“You’re right. I feel bad because he’s gone, but I know if he weren’t, I wouldn’t have gone back to him.” Myla inhaled and slowly exhaled. “And ... I feel like a real heel about that.”

“Don’t. Dying doesn’t elevate a person to a hero. Feel what you feel. There isn’t any right or wrong; they’re *your* feelings.”

“I loved him—”



“I know,” he said.

“I was going to say that I loved him but was never *in* love with him. We had some great times, and I felt grounded with him. Then those damn pain clinics threw us off-balance, and he began to transform in front of me. Maybe I didn’t handle it well. I should’ve understood him better, maybe—”

“Maybes can drive you fuckin’ crazy. They’re like a tiger chasing its tail.”

“You’re right. I just wished I could’ve helped him more, but he shut me out,” she said.

“Yeah, he shut me out, too, and it fuckin’ eats me up.”

Myla squeezed his forearm. Nothing she could say would ease the guilt Diesel felt. He was Freddy’s big brother and wanted to be there for him to save the day. He would have to work through the regrets and self-recriminations just like she would. Someone’s death created a tailspin of emotions.

“How did you find out about Freddy?” she whispered.

“He called me. We talked some. I kept trying to get him to tell me where he was, but he wouldn’t. The fucker nailed him when we were on the phone.”

She gasped. “That’s awful. Oh, Diesel, I’m so sorry.”

“Death is part of life. In my world, we face possible death every day. I never know if some rival biker or smartass wannabe will take a shot at me or any of the brothers. Then there are the citizens who don’t watch for motorcycles. I’ve buried more members than I can count due to violence, crashes, and illness. That’s why outlaws live in the present. We live for *today* ’cause we don’t know if we’ll have a tomorrow.”

“Doesn’t the lifestyle scare you?” she asked.

“Nope, it saves me.”

“I wish Freddy had something he could’ve believed in and been a part of. I thought I was it, but I wasn’t. I’m glad that you talked with him. It feels right that his last conversation

was with you and you with him. I'm sure it brings you some comfort. Did you call the police?"

Diesel jerked his head back. "No fuckin' way. I'm gonna handle it myself. It'll take the badges weeks or months to do what I can do in a few days or less. I don't need them. Insurgents handle our own business in the streets. I'll make sure that the fucker and whoever else is involved will pay for what they did. They'll be justice—Insurgents-style."

A finger of nausea poked her stomach. "I couldn't handle it if something happened to you."

"I'll be just fine. I've dealt with all kinds of fuckin' scum, and Cano is scraping the bottom of the damn barrel." Diesel shifted a bit, then stood up. "I gotta get cleaned up." He headed to the bathroom, stopped, then turned around. "Are you good?"

Shrugging, she replied, "If you mean am I okay to be by myself while you wash up, the answer is yes."

Nodding, he said, "If you need me, rap on the door."

Myla waited until she heard the water from the shower turn on. Picking up the remote, she switched on the television and turned to the local news station. After two commercials and a short clip about a fire burning in Vista, the images of flashing lights from multiple police cars filled the screen.

In the background, a newscaster said, "Police are still on the scene at the Hotel Perla in downtown San Diego on Front Street. A young man was shot in his hotel room early this morning. Several hotel guests reported hearing loud gunshots. This is a developing story; we'll have updates as new information becomes available."

Myla turned off the television and stared at the blank screen. Everything seemed so surreal. She never imagined Freddy's life would be over at twenty-nine years old and in such a violent way. *If only he wouldn't have opened those damn clinics. He was making great money as a pharmaceutical rep, but it wasn't enough for him.* Freddy

always wanted more, as if he was trying to fill a void, but the problem was that void was bottomless.

She walked over to the window and watched the ocean's movement; it was calming and mesmerizing. *Poor Diesel. I know this is tearing him up.*

"How's the view?"

The sound of his deep voice wrapped around her like a warm blanket. She couldn't imagine what she would've done without his presence and support.

"Not bad," she said over her shoulder.

"Is the water calm?"

"Yes."

It was strange to hear him try and engage in small talk when she knew he didn't give a shit about the movement of the ocean.

"Freddy was at Hotel Perla. I saw it on the news."

The muscles in his arms grew taut, and his eyes narrowed. "Do you know the hotel?"

"No. We never stayed there. They said it's downtown on Front Street. I think you'll have to deal with the cops"—she raised a hand to stop him from interrupting her—"even though you don't want to because you'll have to tell them you're his brother. Also, don't you want to bring him home?"

Diesel blew out a long, audible breath. "Fuck, I hate dealing with the damn badges."

"I could do it."

"No," he said sharply. "I don't want you involved in this. They'll be all over you about Freddy's life, business, Cano ... you name it, and they'll interrogate you. They'll wonder why you didn't report him missing and accuse you of being an accessory after the fact and all that other fuckin' legal bullshit. Once the damn badges got you, they don't like letting go of their hold. I'll take care of it."

“Aren’t you going to tell them *anything*?”

“Nope. Just say I was in town for this rally, and my brother called me saying he was in town too. I made sure the badges wouldn’t find shit at your house. Is the place in both your names?”

“Just Freddy’s.”

“That’s good.”

“Won’t the cops wonder why you didn’t get together with him in San Diego?”

“They’ll wonder a whole lot of shit, but I don’t give a fuck. I’ll just say we were gonna hang out later today. Then I saw the story on the news.”

“So you’ll tell them you knew where he was staying?”

“Yeah. That I found out this morning. I’m not sure if his burner phone was taken by the fucker who killed him, but in case it wasn’t, my number will be in there, so I have to keep my story consistent.”

“I don’t know,” she said, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Don’t worry, I got this. I know how to deal with the fuckin’ badges. I’ll be back.”

“No way I’m staying here alone. I want to come with you. I can wait in a coffee shop nearby, but I can’t stay here by myself. And don’t say I’m safer here. Peter Cano is long gone. Anyway, he doesn’t need me anymore. He found Freddy.”

“But you know about his brother.”

“Cano handled his brother’s death without the police. He’s not going to expose more of his illegal activities now.”

“True, but you’re still a loose thread that I’m sure he doesn’t want in the background. I know I wouldn’t. You could go to the damn badges anytime down the road.”

“I didn’t think about that, but I’m positive I’m not in danger at this moment.” She locked gazes with him. “I’m

going with you, and that's that."

"Whatever. I'm not gonna stand here and argue with you, woman." A bemused smile played on his lips. "We'll leave in fifteen minutes." He walked over to the dresser and rummaged through a drawer.

His gruff tone didn't fool her. She caught his smile, which had warmed her heart. There was no way she'd let him deal with all of this alone. Even though he was an outlaw biker and came off as being harsh and perhaps brutal in certain situations, Myla knew he was a generous, kind man who loved his little brother. And whether he admitted it or not, she was pretty sure he was glad she was coming along.

When they entered the main room, Banger approached Diesel and drew him into a strong bear hug, replete with back patting. Banger released him, and her eyes met the president's. With a solemn face, he lifted his chin to her, put his arm around Diesel, and whispered in his ear. She knew he didn't want her to hear what he was saying. She guessed it had something to do with finding Cano, but she wouldn't ask Diesel about it, and he wouldn't tell even if she did.

Throttle, Smokey, Rags, Tank, Animal, Shadow, and some other Colorado Insurgents whose names she didn't know hugged him and spoke in hushed voices. Rags, Tank, and Animal lifted their chins to her, like Banger had, and the others glanced at her and then shifted their gazes downward.

Demon and a few more local Insurgents approached Diesel. Myla didn't know the names of any of them except for Demon and Iceman. She figured the tall, muscular man with jet-black hair and clear green eyes was probably named something like Panther or Jaguar because of the hair and eyes. She had begun to catch on as to how some of the members got their nicknames, or road names as Diesel called them.

"I'm so fucking sorry, dude." Demon kissed both of Diesel's cheeks and hugged him tightly. "This shit's not gonna go unpunished. We're ..."

His voice faded away while she walked to the front door. Stepping out onto the large porch, she breathed in the fresh air, strolled over to the edge of the veranda, and watched the sailboats on the water. Myla was blown away at the love and support Diesel received from the club members. Watching how they gathered around him, giving him their shoulders to lean on, she understood what he meant about the Insurgents being his family. For a split second, she almost envied the closeness, love, and bond between him and the others. It was something she'd never felt, not even in her own family. The only person she ever felt connected to was Diesel. Their relationship had been formed through the letters they exchanged, but in the weeks she'd been with him in Pinewood Springs, it had grown, and she felt closer to him. He made her laugh, feel safe, and cared for, yet sometimes she could scream in frustration. Guilt pangs zigzagged through her, and she chastised herself for thinking about Diesel in *that* way.

“Ready to go?” he said, startling her out of her musings.

“Yes. Are we taking your motorcycle?”

“We’ll take Demon’s cage.”

“I’m surprised about that,” she said.

“I don’t want to draw attention. Besides, I gotta see someone real quick, and I don’t want you on the back of my bike. You’d be too vulnerable,” Diesel replied as he opened the door of a black pickup truck. “We’ll drive by the hotel to see what’s up.”

“You’re not going to park and talk to the cops?”

“I’ll go to the station later. The badges aren’t gonna let me go in and see Freddy. It’s not like on TV. Freddy probably had identification on him or somewhere in the room, but in case he was using fake shit, do you have a photo of him?”

“Yes,” she said, her mind swirling.

“I’ll take it when I go to the station.”

“Are you going later tonight?”

“No. I’ll go after I deal with Cano.”

A shiver slithered up her spine at his words. She knew what “deal with Cano” meant but didn’t want to dwell on it. She clambered into the truck and shut the door. Diesel settled into the driver’s seat and switched on the ignition.

He backed up and said, “When we pass by the hotel, look around and tell me if you see anyone you recognize.”

“Okay,” she said.

The closer they got to downtown, the faster her pulse raced. Diesel turned onto Front Street, and they slowly drove up the road. A couple of blocks in, Myla noticed several police cars and an ambulance parked in front of a five-story building sandwiched between two larger and taller ones.

Pointing ahead, she said, “That’s probably the hotel.”

He nodded, pulled into the right lane, and slowed his speed even more. Driving on the same side of the street as the hotel was impossible due to the multitude of law enforcement and emergency vehicles, so he pulled into a parking spot and cut the engine.

“He was so damned close.” He gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles white. He sat still, staring at the hotel.

“I know,” she whispered.

“Why the fuck didn’t he tell me. I’d been here in a flash, and he’d still be here. Fuck it!” He slammed his fist on the steering wheel so hard it made her jump.

“It’s okay,” she said softly.

“The fuck it is!” His head jerked around, and his eyes flashed fire.

She could see the dark flush spreading across his cheekbones.

“Don’t fuckin’ tell me it’s all right when it isn’t. I let him down!” The look he gave Myla was so anguished that it

shredded her heart. He turned away from her, his eyes fixed on the hotel, his body stiff.

Myla wished she could say something to help comfort and soothe him, but she didn't have a clue what to say. Freddy was dead, and he didn't let either of them help him. Now Diesel had to deal with the fallout of that action.

*Oh, Diesel.* She wanted to take his hand, hold it close to her heart, and tell him how sorry she was for his pain and that Freddy's death wasn't his fault. But she didn't. He needed time to come to terms with the fact that he couldn't save his brother no matter how badly he wanted to.

"Do you recognize anyone?" he asked gruffly.

Staring at the group of people who stood behind the police line, she shook her head. "I don't."

For a long while, he kept his eyes glued to the scene unfolding in front of the hotel, not uttering a word, although Myla was pretty sure there was plenty of conversation going on inside his head. She watched for Cano or any familiar face but didn't recognize anyone. Freddy had kept his business associates away from her. The only people she'd ever met besides the pain clinic staff and Dr. Stauber were Peter Cano a couple of times, and she'd seen his brother one time only. However, Freddy hadn't introduced her. Meeting Peter Cano had been unplanned, and Freddy hadn't been too happy about it. She'd come to one of the clinics one night to see if he wanted to go out to dinner. She'd been in the neighborhood and hadn't thought it was a big deal.

When she entered the back office, she was startled to see someone with him. Peter Cano sat in Freddy's chair behind *his* desk. The guy's hair was greased back, he wore an expensive silk shirt and crisp, tailored pants, and he adorned more jewelry than she ever had in her life. The thick gold bracelet and two gold chains around his neck looked tacky, and the rings on several of his fingers, gleaming with diamonds and sapphires, made him look like the stereotypical two-bit pimp. He smiled widely at her and tried to be friendly but seemed



smarmy and insincere. Freddy sat in a chair in front of the desk, wearing an expression of worry tinged with fear. Later, Freddy yelled at her for dropping by unannounced, making a big scene over nothing, or at least that was what she'd thought at the time. She never dropped by any of the clinics again.

The sound of the engine pulled Myla out of her thoughts. She looked at Diesel from the corner of her eye, wondering if she should say something to break the silent veil hovering over them.

Swallowing, she wiped her damp palms on her jean-clad thighs. "I'm sorry I couldn't recognize anyone."

"Don't be. The asswipe comes off as a dumbass, so I thought maybe he'd want to see what he'd done. Some people get a charge doing that." He reached over and took her hand and squeezed it. "Don't sweat it."

Relief flooded through her. *He's back.* "I've read that arsonists usually show up at the scene while firefighters battle the flames they caused. It's strange."

"Not really. Some people like seeing what they did, knowing they had the power and control and that no one knows it was them. They get a high from it. It's not a detached act that needs to be done to complete an objective."

*Like it is for you and your club.* "Right. So what's next on the agenda?" she asked, wanting to change the subject. The less she knew about *that* aspect of Diesel's world, the better it would be.

"Just one stop, then we can get some chow. You must be hungry."

"Kind of. This whole thing is upsetting at best."

"I hear ya."

"Where are we going?"

"Not too far from here," he said.

Stately houses with manicured lawns and blooming bougainvillea trees took the place of high-rise hotels and office buildings. Soon the higher-end neighborhoods gave way to sketchier ones. Weed-infested yards replaced the well-maintained, and several storefronts were empty with For Lease signs plastered to their windows, and stucco walls decorated by graffiti in many colors and symbols. A half-lit neon sign proclaiming Dive Bar was sandwiched between a small market and a pawn shop. Several people milled outside a methadone clinic smoking cigarettes while a few others shuffled by pushing grocery carts filled with dingy blankets, bulging plastic bags, and other items Myla couldn't make out. A cross adorned the peak of a shelter's roof, and across the street, a young man stood on the corner, holding up a handwritten cardboard sign explaining why he needed a helping hand.

Parked at the light, Diesel pulled out his wallet, motioned the guy over, and handed him a ten-dollar bill. The youth's pale blue eyes widened, and mumbling his appreciation, he shuffled away.

"That was nice of you," Myla said.

Diesel shrugged. "Life's tough for a lot of people."

"This neighborhood sure is seedier than the one we drove through with the gorgeous houses overlooking the bay. It's sad that there's such a dichotomy between people's lives."

"Yeah, it sucks."

He turned into an alley where overgrown weeds grew from cracks in the cement and dumpsters overflowed with trash. The truck maneuvered around a large pile of garbage spilling out into the alley from a driveway behind a dilapidated house. She noticed two sloppily dressed teens dart behind a weathered garage. Suddenly, Diesel slammed on the brakes and killed the engine.

"Lock the doors. I'll be right back."

She watched him dash off and then turn in the direction of where the teens had gone. Not knowing what was going on,

she felt like a sitting duck in the vehicle. She yanked the keys out of the ignition, closed the door softly, and locked the truck. Glancing around, she made her way toward where Diesel and the teens had gone.

Peeking around the corner of the garage, she saw the two teens, a trembling middle-aged woman against a chain-link fence, and Diesel standing behind a large oak tree.

“This all you got, bitch?” one of the boys spat while throwing the woman’s purse on the dirt.

The other kicked the handbag and then backhanded the woman, knocking her to the ground. Myla clasped a hand over her mouth to suppress a gasp. She glanced at Diesel, who slipped out from behind the tree and slowly approached the teens like a mountain lion would its prey. Without saying a word, he grabbed one of the muggers by the neck and slammed him to the ground. The boy’s partner sprang into action and rushed behind, punching Diesel’s lower back. Without hesitating, Diesel threw a leg back and up, striking the attacker in the chest, flinging him to the ground. He whirled around and kicked the downed teen in the ribs. The thug groaned and curled into a fetal position.

The other youth pushed up from the ground and pulled his arm back, his hand in a fist. Diesel reached up and caught the approaching punch in the air. The teen stumbled, the move throwing him off balance. Before he could recover, Diesel had him pinned against the fence with his right hand clamped over the kid’s throat.

“Only fuckin’ pussies pick on a defenseless woman. I don’t like pussies,” he said, squeezing tighter.

The youth sputtered and gasped for air.

Myla suppressed a shiver and was ready to intervene when Diesel released the mugger’s throat, threw him to the ground, and kicked him hard in the stomach. The other teen still lay on the ground clutching his belly.

“Let me help you up,” he said to the frightened woman. He offered his hand, and she took it.

“Thank you so much.” Her words were heavily accented. “I took the shortcut because too hot. Mi esposo told me no do.”

“Your husband’s right about the alley. It’s not safe.”

Her brown eyes flicked between the two downed punks. “I never do again. I go by street where people are. You help me. You are un buen hombre.”

“Let me take you home.”

Suspicion flashed in her gaze as she studied him.

“I got my woman with me.”

A smile spread across her mouth. “Oh ... sí ... I go. Muchas gracias, señor.”

As Diesel bent down to pick up the woman’s bag, Myla hurried back to the truck. She settled into the passenger seat, put the keys in the ignition, and locked the doors. Her heart swelled, witnessing this side of him. He’d come to the woman’s rescue without any hesitation, not knowing what danger lurked behind that garage. Her pride at that moment mingled with a surge of affection and ... love. *Love. How is it possible I’m thinking of that today of all days?* But the feeling wasn’t new. It’d been growing the more time she spent with Diesel. And when she heard him call her “my woman,” she couldn’t believe it. Maybe it didn’t mean anything; that was just his way of speaking, but hearing those two words sent a flurry of butterflies to her stomach.

Diesel motioned for her to unlock the doors. The middle-aged woman climbed into the back of the truck.

“This is Josefina,” he said.

She half-turned around and met the woman’s gaze. “I’m Myla. Nice meeting you.” She noticed the woman pressed a tissue against her left knee.

“Mucho gusto,” the woman replied.

After dropping the woman off home, Diesel pulled in front of a house a few blocks away. He didn’t explain who the woman was; if he was surprised she hadn’t asked him, he didn’t show it.

“Be back soon,” he said, switching off the engine.

“Okay. Are you leaving the keys in case I have to make a quick getaway?” She chuckled.

He laughed. “Yeah. Keep the doors locked, and don’t roll the windows down too much. This isn’t the best neighborhood.”

“Really? I never would’ve guessed it. I figured you were taking me on the scenic route of the city.”

“Smartass.” He leaned over and tweaked her nose. “I’ll only be a sec.”

She watched him walk up the broken sidewalk to a small bungalow that looked like it’d been neglected for quite a while. The blue paint was faded and peeling and the railings on the wooden porch were missing. Several panes were shattered in the windows, and the shutters hung upon broken hinges.

The door opened, and a scrawny man with a thin beard down to his chest stood in the doorway. He gave Diesel a nod, then stood aside for the biker to enter. He shook his head no, and the guy’s gaze darted around before handing Diesel an envelope from inside his jacket. Diesel slipped the envelope into his jeans front pocket and then gave the guy what looked like a wad of bills. The man thumbed through the money, lifted his chin, and stepped back inside the house. Diesel turned around and walked quickly to the truck. Myla wondered if he had a gun stashed in the small of his back, tucked into the waistband of his jeans, or maybe a knife hidden in one of his boots. She’d read that a lot of outlaws carried weapons on their person, especially if they were

anticipating trouble—and this was the perfect house and neighborhood for trouble.

“That wasn’t long, was it?” he said, sliding into the driver’s seat. He donned a pair of sunglasses and turned over the engine. Glancing at her, he smiled. “Let’s get something to eat.”

Once they drove out of the dilapidated neighborhood, Myla began to relax. She didn’t ask him anything about what had transpired back at that broken-down house because she was sure he would only tell her it was “club business,” but she was certain it had something to do with Peter Cano and where he was.

The sun was bright, and the calm ocean shimmered under it as waves lapped gently at the shore. Various colored towels, umbrellas, and bathing suits covered most of the sand. It was the height of tourist season, and beachgoers were sunbathing, swimming, scolding children, eating, or flirting with a boy or girl they just met.

Diesel and Myla ate outside at a small restaurant on the pier. Seagulls glided and hovered above, waiting for the chance to swoop up a morsel of food dropped by a patron. Diesel munched on fish tacos while Myla ate a spicy shrimp appetizer. They talked about their likes and dislikes, and their favorite memories of Freddy, and Diesel shared more of his childhood memories. He told her why Harleys were the only motorcycle to own, and she told him about her secret desire to own a small art gallery.

By the time they’d finished their lunch, two rounds of cold beer for him and white wine for her, and the gooiest hot fudge and marshmallow sundae she’d ever had, the sun began its slow descent, painting the sky in a glory of orange and dusky pink. The beach had thinned out quite a bit, and Diesel suggested a stroll along the shore before heading back to the clubhouse.

When they arrived back at the club, Myla was exhausted. It had been a long day with a flurry of emotions that ranged

from deep sadness to bubbling happiness. She couldn't imagine anyone she'd rather spend the day with than with him.

The club members bumped fists with Diesel and diverted their gazes with her when they walked through the main room. Once in their own quarters, Diesel tugged her to him and held her tight.

"Are you doing okay?" he asked.

"It comes and goes. I'm doing well, then I remember Freddy's gone, and it's like a punch in the gut," she said.

He held her closer.

"How are you doing?"

"It hurts, but I know we'll meet again someday."

"I couldn't have handled this without you," she said softly.

"You're stronger than you give yourself credit for, but it's good we're here for each other."

"I still can't believe he's really dead," she said.

"Yeah."

"I noticed your friends had shots lined up on the bar. I think they were for you."

"It's our custom when one of us loses a family member that we drink to the memory of the deceased and rally around the brother who suffered the loss. Booze, reminiscences, and some laughs are how the club supports a member who's suffered a loss. It's like we mourn the loss together as members and celebrate the life the deceased once had."

"That's so cool and amazing. Talk about having the support of your friends and family. I don't want you to feel like you have to stay with me. Go on down and be with your club."

He pulled back a little, his eyes boring into hers. "Are you sure? I can stay with you—"

“I’m positive. I’m a loner, so I need some quiet time to digest all that’s happened. Go down and drink a shot for me.”

“You’re amazing. You know that?”

A pinkish hue raced through her. “Go on, now.” Her insides melted when he kissed her sweetly on the lips.

“I won’t be more than a couple of hours.”

“I’ll probably be conked out by the time you return. I’m beyond tired.”

She walked with him to the door. He kissed her lightly once again and stepped into the corridor. She watched after him until he disappeared, then closed the door and locked it.

After changing into her comfy pajamas, Myla grabbed a can of Diet Coke, turned off all the lights, and scraped a chair to the open window. Quietness descended all around her. A steady ocean breeze blew in through the window, caressing her and rattling the dry fronds on the palm trees.

Myla lifted her soda can and tipped it toward a bright twinkling star. “Here’s to you, Freddy. I’m sorry your life ended this way. I’m sorry we both quit loving one another. I hope you’re at peace now. I’ll remember our good times, and ... I’ll miss you.” She took a sip from the can, then put it down.

She placed her elbows on the windowsill, propped her chin in her hands, and stared into the encroaching darkness.



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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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THIN RIBBONS OF white light filtered in through the Venetian blinds, casting a dim glow to the darkened room. The doorknob jingling woke Myla up. She glanced at the couch and noticed Diesel wasn't there. Switching on the small nightstand lamp, she rolled out of bed and padded to the front door as someone messed with the lock.

"Who's there?" Myla asked, her heart pounding.

"I can't open the fuckin' door. My key's not working," Diesel said, his words slurring.

"I'll open it," she said.

"Hey," he said with a sheepish, lopsided grin.

"Hey." She stepped to the side.

Diesel stumbled into the room and reached out to touch the wall, steadying himself.

"What're you doing?" His unfocused eyes wandered around the room.

"Sleeping. Do you want a glass of water?"

"Nah, I want a beer."

"I think you've had a lot of those." She wrapped an arm around his waist and guided him to the bed. "Why don't you take off your boots, relax, and I'll get you some water."

He sat on the edge, his body swaying slightly, his gaze glassy as he stared ahead.

"Do you want me to help you with your boots?"

"Nah, nope, you don't have to do that," he said as he continued swaying.

Myla bent down. "Lift your foot."

“I’m good. Really, I am,” he said, his words slurring together.

“Just do it for me, please?”

“Okay, okay, but my boots are good. They’re like you ... good and nice, you know?”

“Yeah, I do,” she said, pulling off one of them. “Now the other foot, please ... the left one.”

“What did I leave?”

Myla tapped his left leg, he raised it, and she yanked off the other one. She coaxed him down on the pillows and tugged at the sheets underneath him. After much exertion, she finally succeeded in getting him under the covers.

“I’ll be right back with your water.” She hurried to the minifridge and pulled out a cold water bottle. “Here you go.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll figure it out,” he replied.

Of course, what Diesel said didn’t make sense. She placed the water on the nightstand and headed to the bathroom. When she returned, she heard soft snores coming from him. The corner of her mouth twisted up slightly. She glanced at the couch and debated whether she should sleep the rest of the night there or go back to bed. Diesel was so out of it, that he’d probably sleep the rest of the night and most of the day away, so Myla walked around to the other side and slipped between the covers. She reached out to shut off the lamp and then burrowed down into her pillow.

It had been many months since she’d slept next to someone. Freddy had moved to one of their many guest bedrooms a few months after he and Peter Cano had become business partners. He’d told her it was better for her since he didn’t like waking her up all the time. Freddy would come home at all hours of the night and sometimes not until the following morning. She’d grown used to his absence and filled up her empty time with reading, art classes, visits to the museum, lunches with some of her acquaintances from art

school, and perfecting her cooking skills by watching tons of videos on a slew of different internet platforms.

*Freddy, you pushed me so far away.* That thought made her sad. The idea of him lying on a metal slab reminded her of her own mortality and that her life, or anyone's really, was just a tiny speck on the earth's timeline. Even though things weren't good in the relationship for many months before he disappeared, they shared some wonderful and loving moments together for over two years. Thinking of him and his death created a profound loss of closeness and shared memories, even though the ending of their time together was fraught with suspicions, recriminations, and abuse.

Wiping away the tears that slipped from her eyes, she sat up and switched on the lamp again. After rummaging through her makeup pouch, she secured the bottle of Excedrin PM, poured out two tablets, and washed them down with a couple of gulps of bottled water. Diesel was breathing quietly now, deeply asleep or, more than likely, passed out. She punched her pillow into a more comfortable shape, pulled the covers up around her shoulders, closed her eyes, and let the tablets do their magic.



MYLA WOKE UP to the rumbling noise of engines, the smell of gasoline, and the feel of Diesel's erection against her lower back. She heard his deep, even breathing and tried to slow her beating heart. Being this close to him was making her body hum and she had to shut *that* down right away.

"Morning." A carpet of goosebumps flashed down her spine at the sound of his deep voice.

"Good morning," she mumbled. "Did you sleep okay?"

"I did," he said, his hot breath brushing against the nape of her neck.

"That's good. You were pretty smashed last night," she said.

He chuckled. "Was I a big pain in the ass?"

“No, you were cool. I thought you’d be totally hungover today.”

“I got up earlier this morning and took a shower, so that helped.” Tightening his arm around her waist, he pulled her closer to him. “I like the way you feel against me.”

His deep voice washed over her, fanning the desire inside Myla. She softly ran her fingers down his corded arm, loving how the dark hairs stood on end. Nestled against him, she felt warm, safe, and *alive*. She turned over onto her back and studied him—his hair was tousled, his seriously blue eyes were no longer bloodshot, and the smile playing on his lips was beyond sexy.

Propping up on his elbow, he said, “Hi,” as his blues roamed over her.

She swallowed hard. “Hi,” she whispered, running a finger along his stubbly jawline.

Diesel dipped his head down and pressed his mouth to hers, moving his lips back and forth over hers before nibbling gently on her lower lip. She reached up, buried her fingers in his hair, and yanked the strands hard. A devilish glint sparked in his eyes and then she kissed him back, her tongue slipping through and into his mouth, coaxing his to invade her own. A deep growl from inside his chest spilled out, and she swallowed it.

“I’ve got a real burn for you, woman,” he whispered in her ear.

“I can’t resist you,” she murmured back, her talons lightly digging into his scalp.

Groaning, he slid a hand under her satin pajama top, cupped one of her breasts, and squeezed hard.

“Fuck,” he hissed.

His thumb circled her aching nipple while his mouth devoured hers as their tongues twisted, breaths mingled, and teeth clashed. Every nerve in her body snapped in pleasure.

Connecting with Diesel was a way of feeling something other than grief, sadness, and the *finality* of death. Being with him, feeling his lips on hers, his hands exploring her body, the desire zapping every nerve cell in her body, was life-affirming. Myla craved his touch, his strength and she clung to it, clutched at it as if it were her last life raft.

Slowly, Diesel pushed up her top while he trailed feathery kisses along her jaw and down her neck until he came to the swell of her breasts. A dusting of gentle nips and soft kisses made the ache throbbing between Myla's legs intensify. His warm breath scorched her skin as he licked the curve of her breast. She inhaled, holding her breath in anticipation.

"You like that?" he asked as he sat up.

Nodding, she exhaled slowly.

Capturing her green gaze, Diesel's index fingers stroked the very tip of her nipples. "Your tits are beautiful," he murmured, lowering his head. He seized her stiff nipple between his lips and sucked it while lightly rolling the other between his fingers. She moaned and closed her eyes, getting lost in the explosion of senses; it felt so damn good. His fingers alternated between swirling around her hard peaks and sucking them until they ached. Myla's back arched and legs parted when he tugged on them and scraped his teeth across one pebbled nipple and then the other.

"I bet you're dripping," he said, his voice a low growl in her ear.

"Diesel ..." she whispered, her desire escalating higher.

His eyes locked on hers as he pinched her nipple, and sweet pain pulled at her clit. His gaze was intent, and Myla gasped, unable to look away, losing herself in his piercing stare and unbridled passion.

Tugging hard on her reddened buds, he lowered his head, claiming her mouth with his teeth and tongue. She moaned into the kiss, and he drew away, gently cupping both her breasts and brushing his lips across them. His mouth traveled

down her rib cage and lingered on her belly, then traversed a path back up to her breasts, grazing each taut bud with his five o'clock shadow.

“That feels so good, Diesel,” she said in a breathless voice.

“I love your tits, darlin’.”

He slid his hand down the flat expanse of her stomach. She sucked in a breath when his hand slid farther, and he cupped it over her sex.

A low grunt rumbled from his throat. “Fuck, you’re wet. You soaked right through your panties.” His voice was raw. “Raise your ass a little bit, darlin’ so I can get rid of this lacy thing and on to that pretty pussy.”

Myla felt her cheeks flush, but she complied and lifted her bottom. Diesel slid her undies off her, the lace edges scratching her legs before he flung them on the floor. The breeze from the window felt warm on her exposed private parts, and she clamped her legs together.

A smile tugged at his lips, and he slipped his hand between her legs and pushed his fingers between her pulsing folds.

“So warm ... so wet. I like that,” he rasped.

Desire flooded her. She had never been this turned on, this in tune with a man in her life. She spread her legs and ground into his hand. He leaned in and nuzzled the swell over her sex with his nose. Fervent kisses around her pink folds drove her mad with desire, and she silently begged him to move his mouth to her aching sweet spot. Instead, he ran his tongue from the tip of her heat down to her opening in one long languid lick.

“Oh, fuck,” she muttered beneath her breath.

Glancing up at her, Diesel held her gaze as he spread open her swollen folds and flicked the tip of his tongue against her clit. Fire burned through her at the contact, and she bucked her hips toward his face, a groan breaking from her.

“You like that, don’t you? You’ve got a sweet-tasting pussy,” he said as he inserted a finger in her opening. “And you’re just so fuckin’ wet. I love it.”

She moaned her response as another finger slid inside her. The two digits worked into her in a steady rhythm while his tongue licked and stroked her, lightly brushing over her sweet spot each time. Grabbing his head, Myla’s hand tangled in his hair as she ground against his tongue.

He increased the speed of his fingers, the wet slippery sound broadcasting how aroused he’d made her. Then he pulled out and slid down a bit, his blue gaze holding hers, and she watched as he plunged his tongue into her heat, thrusting in and out, faster and faster while repeatedly swirling a finger around her clit. Myla closed her eyes and moaned when his fingertip stroked the side of her sweet spot. She sank all her fingers in his hair and yanked, groaning and thrashing her head while her whole body quaked.

As Myla’s breathing returned to normal, her eyes fluttered open, and Diesel stared at her with a big-ass grin and her juices glistening on his chin. Locking his gaze with hers, he slowly sucked her come off each finger.

“You taste real good.”

“And you are so awesome. That was just over the top. I mean ... I don’t even know.” Myla reached out and ran her nails down his chest.

Diesel seized her hand, kissed it and then bent over and drew a nipple into his mouth while he stroked the other one. “Now I want to feel my cock inside your sexy pussy,” he said in a low voice.

“I want to feel you too.” She stroked the side of his face and smiled when he stood up, walked over to his saddle bag, and took something out. He shrugged out of his boxers, and she gasped when she saw the size of his erection. It wasn’t small, that was for sure, but it wasn’t humongous either; it pulsed and looked perfect with its smooth taut skin.

“Like what you see?” he asked, climbing onto the bed.

Nodding, Myla reached out and wrapped her fingers around him. The skin felt velvety, and she stroked it gently. She squeezed the head as pre-come seeped through.

“That’s for another time, darlin’,” he said, tenderly moving her hand away.

“You don’t want me to touch you?”

“I do, but I’m ready to blow, and I want to do it inside your sweet pussy.” He dipped down and crushed his lips against hers in a passionate, toe-curling kiss.

Breathless, she panted while he pulled out a packet. The sound of foil tearing sent shivers of anticipation down her spine. He captured her mouth and plunged his tongue inside. Moaning, she entwined her arms around his neck and pulled him closer, deepening their kiss. As their tongues danced and twisted, she felt his hard dick poke at her thighs. He pulled back and his eyes roamed over her.

“You’re so damn beautiful, woman.”

Before she could say anything, he dug his fingers into her soft flesh, spreading her bent knees wide until she felt a small stretch down the insides of her thighs. Diesel bent down and pulled her nipples into his mouth again, alternating between sucking them hard, then gently. Pulling away, hunger filled his eyes as he lifted one of Myla’s legs, draped it over his shoulder, and kissed her ankle and inner calf. He glanced down and smiled.

“Your pretty pink pussy is all wet and ready for my cock,” he said, swiping a finger through her slick folds.

Myla groaned and shifted her hips, and he gripped her other leg and placed it over his shoulder as well. The head of his dick pressed against her entrance, and with intense eyes fixed on hers, he shoved into her.

“Yes!” she cried as her warmth molded around him.



“Fuck, darlin’. Fuck!” He pulled out, then plunged in again deeper and harder.

Her fingers clutched onto his shoulders as Diesel fucked her hard and rough. As he pummeled her, he bit her boobs, her shoulders, and crushed his mouth to hers.

“You feel so fuckin’ good, Myla,” he said, panting.

As she lifted her hips, their two bodies met like claps of thunder, and her inner walls clenched around him tightly with each stroke. Diesel gripped her hips so hard she was sure there’d be bruises.

He reached down and stroked the side of her special spot, and it sent her over the edge. Faster and harder, he thrust into her, and Myla couldn’t stop the whimpers as her body kept coiling tighter. Faster ... harder ... in and out while his finger ran over her knot of nerves, and then a multitude of colors erupted behind her eyelids as waves of pleasure washed over her body.

“Woman,” he grunted before stiffening, and then Myla felt his dick spasm inside her. The muscles of her walls hugged him, and Diesel dug his fingers deeper into her skin. “Fuck, babe,” he rasped as her pussy milked every drop from his dick.

He collapsed over her, Myla’s breasts pressed against his chest as her arms tightened around him. She lowered her legs, and they lay panting, staying connected until they caught their breaths. Diesel rolled off Myla and drew her to him, and she rested her head in the crook of his shoulder. He kissed the top of her head, and when she gazed up at him, he pressed his lips tenderly on hers. Wrapping an arm around her, she settled deeper into him and sighed.

“That was fuckin’ incredible, and your body is damn amazing, woman,” he said as they lay in the slanted light that streamed through the blinds, twirling a strand of her hair around his finger. “Are you good?”

Myla tilted her head back and met his warm gaze. “I’m fantastic. You made me feel so incredible ... and *alive*.”

He chuckled. “I’m happy I could help you out.” He pulled her up until their lips met and kissed her deeply. “I fuckin’ love kissing you, woman.” Diesel patted her behind, then untangled his arm from around her and discarded the condom in the waste paper basket. “Shower time. I’d love you to join me, but I’m on a tight schedule. I’m going on club business with some of the members.”

Disappointment spread through her. “I thought we could go for a ride to the beach.”

“We will when I get back.” He winked at her.

“Are you going to be gone all day?”

“And night.”

“So I’m on my own tonight?”

“Yeah, but stick around the club. I might be back in the early morning.”

“I have an old work friend who moved here. I met her at the pain clinic—a legitimate one—in Denver. She was one of the massage therapists and settled here a few years ago. I’ll see if she’s available to go out for dinner or something.”

“What’s *something*?” he asked, his jaw tight.

“I don’t know. I guess something like a drink or a walk on the boardwalk in Mission Beach. It’s whatever.”

“Not a nightclub, and be careful at a bar. You’re hot, and you’ll get a lot of asswipes bothering you.”

Shaking her head, she said, “I’ve taken care of myself for a long time, so I’m sure I can handle a few ‘asswipes’ who come on too strong.”

“I’m just saying ... I don’t like the idea of guys coming on to you and knowing I’m not there to set them straight.”

“I’ll deal with them the way you deal with women who come on to you.” She laughed when a look of shock plastered his face. “Or is *that* what you’re worried about?”

“Smartass,” he said, scowling.

“You know it. Do you have the plastic cover the doctor gave you?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I’ll adhere it to your back. I’ll clean and replace the dressing on your wound when you’re done showering.”

“You like being bossy, don’t you?” Diesel walked over to her, grabbed a fistful of her hair, yanked it back, and crushed his mouth on hers.

Moaning, she threaded her arms around his neck and pulled his head down more to deepen the kiss. Diesel tweaked one of her nipples, and a jolt of pleasure swept through her body. He broke contact and brushed the back of his fingers across her cheek.

“Fuck, you’re sexy, woman,” he said hoarsely.

Myla pulled the sheet up past her breasts and leaned back, thoroughly enjoying the sight of his tight, naked ass as he walked away toward the bathroom. *He has a fine, sexy butt.* A smile whispered across her lips as images of their lovemaking filled her mind.

After slipping on her pajama top and bottom, Myla picked up her phone and tapped in Caitlyn’s phone number, hoping she’d be able to do something that evening. The thought of spending the whole day and night in the clubhouse, most particularly in the room, turned her stomach. She had to get away from its confines, and after the exhilarating experience she’d shared with Diesel, energy coursed through her. If she didn’t get out behind these walls, she’d burst.

Diesel walked into the room just as she disconnected her conversation with Caitlyn.

“That was fast.” Myla looked over her shoulder and smiled.

“I’m running late. Did you call your friend?”

“Yes.”

“And ...?” he asked as he slipped on a pair of boxers.

“We’re going out to dinner.”

“Where?”

“In Pacific Beach. The restaurant is Baja Beach Café. She said it’s only a few steps from the ocean on the boardwalk and claims it has the best margaritas she’s ever had. It should be fun.”

“Don’t have too much fun,” he said as he stepped over to Myla, wrapped his arms around her, and pulled her close.

She inhaled his fresh scent. “I wish we were going instead.”

“Me too,” he said, nuzzling her neck. “I gotta go now.”

“I have to clean your wound,” she said pulling away from him. “Hang on.”

After brushing her teeth and splashing water on her face, Myla scooped up the antiseptic cream, bandages, gauze, and a cleansing pad and then walked back into the living space. Diesel sat on the edge of the bed pulling on his boots. She gently took care of the wound, happy that the redness had completely gone away.

“It looks real good,” she said.

“That’s ’cause I’ve got the prettiest nurse taking care of it.”

A warm glow spread through her, and she kissed the top of his shoulder and then stepped back.

“All done.”

“Thanks.”

Diesel stool up, and Myla watched as he pulled a black T-shirt over his head and donned his leather cut. As he slipped a wallet in his pocket, he turned to her.

“Write your friend’s full name and description of her car on a piece of paper. I’ll let the members know she’ll be

coming through and to let her in. What time is she picking you up?"

"Six thirty. I don't know what her car looks like, but I'll text her real quick."

"Wait for her on the porch. She can't come into the club, okay?"

She glanced up from her phone. "Okay." She peeked back down at the sound of the beep. "Caitlyn Monroe. She'll be in a red Infiniti two-door. She sent me a picture of her car." Myla laughed.

"Smart girl. Forward it to me, and I'll give it to whoever's gonna be manning the gates tonight."

"Okay."

Diesel picked up one of the saddlebags, went into the bathroom, and closed the door. Myla wondered what was in the bag that he didn't want her to see. *Maybe he found Peter Cano and that's the club business.* Thinking of what could be in that saddlebag made her shiver. *Please be safe, Diesel. Please ...*

"I'm gonna take off now," he said, placing the bag in the closet. "If you need anything washed, give it to me. I'm giving some stuff to the club girls who'll do the laundry."

"I'm good. I traveled with a regular suitcase. I couldn't possibly have made it with just those two little bags you have."

He laughed. "You get used to it. I've become very familiar with laundromats in different cities. If I'm at a chapter or support clubhouse, the club girls do laundry for visiting bikers."

"Since I was a kid, I went to laundromats. Our washing machine was always breaking, and my family was too poor to replace it. Then, when I was on my own, most of the apartment buildings I lived in had machines, but they were usually busted. I felt like I moved into a luxury building when

I got a place that had a compact washer and drier in the apartment. If I never have to go to one of those places again, I'll be ecstatic."

"It beats washing it in the river. I've done that a few times when I've gone off-grid." He glanced at the clock on the nightstand. "Gotta go. Make sure to lock the door, and don't let *anyone* in. I'll tell Welder to walk you to your room when you get back from dinner. Just look for him when you come back to the main room. What time are you figuring on returning?"

"I don't know. We'll probably go for a stroll on the boardwalk, look at some shops around that area, and just hang out a little by the beach. Maybe around midnight."

"I'll let Welder know. If anything comes up, let Scratch know. He's the club's treasurer and can be trusted. I'll text you his phone number."

"I can't call you?"

"Nope."

"Can you text me to let me know you're doing okay?"

"I'll try but can't promise it. Don't worry. I'll be back before you know it."

"Be safe," she said, walking with him to the door.

"I will." Diesel drew her close to him and gave her a tender kiss. "Later."

Then he left. The emptiness of the room surrounded her, and she missed him already. Walking into the bathroom, it felt as though Diesel was in there with her. His smell was everywhere—the enticing scent of fresh pine from his bath soap and sandalwood aftershave mixed into one, and wafted around the room. Sighing deeply, she went over to the shower, turned on the faucet, and stepped inside, letting the warm water spray across her chest.

Thirty minutes later, Myla emerged from the steamed-up room with her hair and body wrapped in towels and padded

over to the window. She saw a group of bikers standing around, and her heart skipped a beat when she noticed Diesel. Gripping the towel tighter around herself, she watched as a large cluster of the men broke into smaller groups and headed toward a bunch of cars—or *cages* as Diesel would say—in a small lot. Diesel slipped into the front passenger seat of a black minivan, and it looked like Throttle, Smokey, Rags, and two others she recognized but didn't know their names, piled into the back two seats. The caravan of vehicles rolled out of the lot and soon disappeared from view. *That's strange. Diesel or the others didn't take their motorcycles. I wonder what's up.* The idea that Diesel had discovered Peter Cano's whereabouts gnawed at her gut. She knew Cano was bad news and played dirty, real dirty. Look what he did to Freddy. *Freddy*. Shafts of sadness and guilt spiked through her: shame about her feelings for Diesel and how she lost herself to him in lust and passion and grief that Freddy lost his life.

The doorknob rattling sent her recriminations scattering away. She glanced out the window, but none of the vehicles had returned, so she knew Diesel wasn't outside the door. Besides, he had a key.

Myla didn't say a word; rather, she tiptoed to the door. Again the doorknob jiggled and then a knock, making her heart skip a beat.

"Diesel needs something," a voice she didn't recognize said.

"Who are you?"

"Demon."

Hairs prickled on the back of her neck. She had seen Demon getting into one of the SUVs and leaving along with Diesel and the others. There was no way he was on the other side of the door.

"I'm not able to open the door. If he needs something, he'll have to come and get it himself." Myla didn't want to let on

that she knew the guy was BSing her. She didn't know why he was trying to get into the room or his capabilities.

“Diesel's busy. He asked me to get his saddlebag. He needs something inside it. He won't be happy with you if you don't open the door and let me grab it.”

*He definitely wants to hurt me. He knows Diesel and a lot of the Insurgents have left.* Then the realization that *this* was the biker she'd seen at the clubhouse party in Pinewood Springs hit her. Diesel had questioned her about him. He was probably the one involved with Cano. *Oh shit, he's come to kill me. Cano told him to.* Panic clawed at her.

The doorknob shook violently.

“Open the fucking door. Diesel's going to beat your ass good if I come down empty-handed.”

“I can't open it right now. I'm going to call Diesel and tell him to come up himself.”

“Bitch!”

A large thud landed on the door, and Myla suspected he kicked it. The angry stomps of his footsteps pounded in her ears, and she slumped against the wall when they faded into nothingness.

Myla's first instinct was to call Diesel and tell him what happened, but what could he do? He basically told her he'd be indisposed and the reason he gave her Welder's phone number. *Welder. I'll call him. But ... should I? He's a prospect, and I remember Diesel telling me about them not being privy to everything that's going on with the club or the members.* She pulled a straight-back chair across the floor, wedged it under the knob for extra security, went over to the window, and perched on the back of a comfy chair to let the warm breeze wash over and calm her nerves. She sent a quick text to Welder, asking him if he could escort her from her room to the front porch and wait with her until her friend came by to pick her up. The response was immediate and contained one word — *Yes.*



Caitlyn would be by in five hours. *I just need to get through tonight, and then Diesel will be back home. I can do this.* Myla was glad to be going out. It would be a great distraction, and she'd be away from the club ... and from *him* for a while.

Myla focused her gaze on the ocean and lost herself in the water's ebb and flow.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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DIESEL HAD MADE contact with one of Cano's lackeys. Zach came through for him in a big way by hooking him up with the informant in Kearny Mesa. The contact information the dude gave him paid off, and the two grand Diesel paid for it was more than worth it. A bonus was that Myla never asked any questions about why they'd stopped in front of that piece of shit house, who the dirtbag was, or why Diesel was even there. He was sure she thought plenty, but she didn't ask him a word and acted like a good ol' lady was supposed to. *Wait ... what the fuck? An ol' lady?* Beads of perspiration formed along his hairline. He wasn't ready for anything like that, was he?

It was true that fucking her that morning was off the charts. They both needed each other and came together to ease their grief and feel something other than pain. But he knew that he'd been drawn to her ever since he'd received her letters three years before. When he met her, the connection, the pull was so damn strong. Of course, he fought it and probably still would have, but lying next to her, feeling her soft body, and knowing she needed more than a hug and some comforting words, tipped the scales.

*Shit.* He exhaled a long, steady breath. Myla's pull twisted him all up. He'd never felt an emotional bond with any woman before—it was as special as it was consuming. In the past, he'd fucked more chicks than he could count, and a lot of the hookups were great and some not so good, but they only brought him physical pleasure. Myla was the whole package: kickass sex and emotions he'd never experienced before, which made their coupling the best he'd ever had. And *that* was what had him all mixed up inside because he didn't know what to do with it. Diesel was in unexplored territory and wasn't sure he was ready for what it might bring.

“You think the asswipe has a clue?” Animal asked as he shoved a Glock into his waistband.

“Nope. The fucker’s too greedy to resist a big buy. He thinks he’s gonna make five million on this deal,” Diesel replied, buttoning up a long-sleeved dress shirt.

“You look pretty.” Rags chuckled.

Diesel gave him the middle finger and then resumed fastening the light blue shirt. He tucked it into a pair of gray slacks and slid his feet into black leather shoes.

“Where are you gonna stash your metal?” Throttle said. “Those shoes look like they hurt like hell.”

“They’re not bad,” Diesel replied as he picked up a dark blue jacket and slipped it on. He placed his Glock in the inside pocket of the blazer. “Does it bulge?” He looked over at Rags.

“No. You got something in those pants?”

“Pen gun and a Chaparral knife in each front pocket,” he replied.

“This fucker’s gonna have his goons around for sure, but I wouldn’t be surprised if a few Grim Henchmen are gonna be lurking around. There’s too much money with this deal”—Banger used air quotes around the word *deal*—“for those sonsofbitches not to be there.”

“Unless this fucker’s not telling them. Diesel said he’s a greedy asswipe, so he’s probably keeping this supposed transaction all to himself,” Smokey said.

“I’m with Smokey on this one,” Tank added.

“He’s probably right, but we gotta be prepared for rival outlaws showing up. When I went by with Panther and Jagger, we spotted an ideal place to see what was going on. Panther said they just closed a sweet deal with a dude at Camp Pendleton a few weeks ago. I’m gonna buy a few of the .338 sniper rifles off them and get hooked up with this dude. Anyway, we’re gonna have a lot of firepower if the Henchshits show up.” Banger said.

“There’s gonna be something happening. We’re good if it’s just the fucker and his lackey goons. If the asshole Henchmen show up, I’ll probably ruin my new clothes.” Diesel said with a deadpan face.

The bikers guffawed, then yelled out, “Insurgents Forever. Forever Insurgents.”

The plan was to meet Cano at a warehouse at eleven thirty that night. Diesel would bring a briefcase with a ton of money made at the club the day before. He had to admit, Willie and Iceman did a bang-up job with the counterfeit bills. He had no doubt that the douchebag would double-cross him, and when Cano called in the muscle, they’d be ready—all twenty of them. The bikers would place themselves around and inside the warehouse, and when shit hit the fan, as they knew it would, they’d be prepared. Insurgents were *always* prepared for clandestine operations. They made their attack plan and executed it with precision and stoicism. Diesel was sure he could play the part of the drug buyer without emotion, but once he got his hands on Cano, all bets were off. He’d kill the sonofabitch for what he did to Freddy.

“Do I look like an outlaw biker?” He smirked.

“You look like some fucking corporate jerk,” Demon replied.

“Then I’m good to go.” Diesel had put mousse in his hair and plastered it back, hating every second of it, but it would all be worth it in the end.

“Time to head out,” Tank said.

“I’ll be waiting a few blocks away until it gets close to the time.” He glanced at Shadow and Jax, who were both wearing navy blue monkey suits. They would act like Diesel’s bodyguards. “You guys ready?”

“Yeah,” Jax said, tugging at his collar. “Let’s get this over with so I can get outta this damn thing.”

They staggered their departure from the hotel so as not to draw undue attention. The bikers had driven up to Los Angeles

in cars. They would travel in small groups, depending on where they'd be stationed for the upcoming meeting. After arriving in LA, Diesel had rented a black Mercedes Benz. Jax slipped into the driver's seat, and Shadow and Diesel climbed into the back seat.

At eleven thirty to the minute, Diesel pulled up to the warehouse, flanked by Jax and Shadow. Jax pulled on the metal door, and the three men entered, their senses on high alert. The warehouse was rather small and consisted of a large room, an office with windows that faced into the large area, and a stairway and elevator leading to the second floor. The three men noticed a light in the office and treaded carefully toward it. Diesel knew several of his brothers were hiding behind large pillars, tall stacks of boxes, and in dark corners.

A man sat on the edge of a chair's cracked foam cushion in front of a metal desk. He glanced up when the men approached. A tight, terse smile twitched his pale lips. He stood up, his gaze snapping between the three men.

"Mr. Benson?" he said as he rose to his feet.

"Yeah, and you are ...?" Diesel let his voice trail away.

"Cano ... Peter Cano." He held out his hand, but Diesel didn't take it.

"I'm here for business, not niceties," he said.

"Of course," Cano answered, his brown eyes narrowing.

Diesel walked back out into the warehouse, not wanting to be confined in the office. It felt too much like mice caught in a cage for his liking. He took Cano in: tall and thin with a whip ponytail down the middle of his back. He looked older than his forty years, with deep lines fanning out from the corners of his eyes. The faint ones around his mouth, cheeks, and forehead indicated too much California sun.

"Do you have the goods?" Diesel asked, his voice echoing around the large room.

“Do you have the money?” A note of annoyance punctuated Cano’s words.

“Of course, this is a business deal. I see the goods first, then you get the money. It’s a simple transaction.”

“If you fuck me over, you’ll pay. No one ever fucks me over,” Cano said as two thugs walked out from the shadows, both looking like bodybuilders in the most grotesque way.

“You’re *threatening* me?” Diesel said through gritted teeth. It took every ounce of composure he could muster from jumping on the fucker and pummeling his face to a pulp.

“No, I’m just letting you know what the score is.”

“I know the score. I’m not a two-bit buyer, but it seems like that’s what you’re used to.” He turned to Jax and Shadow. “This is a loser’s deal. Let’s go.”

The men started to retreat when Cano yelled out, “No, wait, I didn’t mean to insult you. I’m used to a different caliber of customers. I have what you want. Let’s close this deal.”

Diesel hesitated just enough, then turned back around. He could see the light sweat stains on the front of Cano’s rust-colored silk shirt. A small sheen appeared above Cano’s upper lip, and he wiped his face with a tissue. *Yeah, fucker, you better be nervous.*

“Let me see the money, and then I’ll show you the merchandise.”

Diesel walked to a metal shelf and placed the briefcase on it. He opened it and pulled out a packet of one-hundred-dollar bills and handed it to him. Cano waved a hand at one of the goons, who walked over to a panel and switched on the overhead light. Cano pulled out one bill and held it up, turning it over and over, and then he took out a flashlight from his pants pocket and shined it on the bill.

“Looks good,” he murmured.

“It is,” Diesel said. “Now show me the dope.”

Cano snapped his fingers, and one of the flunkys went into the office, retrieved a large case, and brought it to him. Cano snapped open the closures, and the lid popped up, revealing pouches of white powder and small blue pills. He handed a pouch of pills to Diesel.

Diesel opened the pouch, took out a pill, held it up, and noticed one side was stamped with the letter *M* and the number *30* on the other side.

“Let me see the powder,” he said.

By now, Cano’s silk shirt clung flat to his thin shoulders. At each armpit was a dark half-moon. He handed a pouch to the biker.

“It’s good stuff.”

Without saying a word, Diesel took out several fentanyl testing strips and then pulled open the plastic bag.

“What’re you doing?” Cano asked, his arm wiping the moisture from his forehead.

“Making sure I’m getting the product I ordered.” From how the fucker was sweating, Diesel knew the asshole was pulling a fast one.

“You don’t trust me?”

The biker glanced up and gave Cano a hard stare. “No.”

“Give me the money,” Cano said in a low voice.

“You heard him,” a deep growl said from behind Diesel.

“Don’t reach for your weapons,” the voice said.

Diesel’s eyes darted to the two goons and then back to Cano, but neither of them moved. A satisfied smirk spread across Cano’s face.

“You double-crossing me, fucker?” Diesel said.

“Looks that way. Now hand me the briefcase nice and slow.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Animal said, coming out from behind a tower of boxes. “And if you try anything stupid, you’re all fucking dead.”

“Yeah,” Smokey said, joining him.

“I’m itching to try out my new piece, so go ahead and make a move,” Demon’s voice rang out.

Cano, wild-eyed, turned to the two bodybuilders who stood rooted to the floor. “Do something.” He pointed his finger to someone behind Diesel, Jax, and Shadow. “And what good are you?”

Diesel glanced over his shoulder and noticed one of the Grim Henchmen from the rally. A spark of recognition flashed in the rival’s eyes, and his face paled.

“Fuck you, Cano! You’re a damned dumbass. These aren’t buyers; they’re outlaw bikers. You set me up!”

Cano shook his head vehemently. “No, I didn’t. I thought this was a legitimate business deal.”

“With bullshit product? You were trying to cheat me, you motherfucker!” Diesel moved a few steps toward Cano.

“I don’t have any problem with your club. Why did you put on this charade? You never intended to buy anything from me. I know you have other connections.”

“How do you know so much about our club?” Demon asked, coming from behind.

The door burst open, and several Henchmen rushed in, followed by a slew of Insurgents.

“Fuck, how many of you are here?” the Grim Henchmen behind Diesel asked.

“More than enough to kick your asses.”

The click of guns cocking was deafening. A loud whistle rang out, and the room went silent. Panther and Banger, sniper rifles drawn, walked into the group of bikers.



“We got a shit load of weapons and these”—Banger lifted his rifle in the air, then nodded toward Panther’s—“will mow you all down before you can get out a shot. We counted seven of you to more than twenty of us. We’re not here for any grievance with the Grim Henchmen.”

“We settled the East Bay Dogs bullshit at the rally,” Panther said.

“So you got a choice—get the hell outta here and let us do our business or try and fight us,” Banger said.

One of the Grim Henchmen snorted. “You think we’re afraid of youse?”

“Not one bit. I’m sure we’re all gonna have the chance to flex our muscles at each other another time, but if you wanna go at it, let’s go.” Banger raised his weapon at the man’s head.

A tense silence fell over the warehouse.

“You’re not buying into this, are you?” Cano’s whiny voice cut through the quiet.

The Henchmen behind Diesel lowered his gun. “This isn’t our fight, man.” He turned to his members. “Let’s go.”

The men began shuffling out of the warehouse when Banger said, “And don’t try anything stupid. We got this place and beyond surrounded.”

The rival bikers retreated without saying a word.

“Come back! Are you crazy? We had a deal.” The vein in Cano’s temple pulsed visibly, and Diesel could smell his fear, and it stank.

“Take your money and go. We’re done,” he said.

Diesel shook his head. “No, I’m not gonna do that ’cause I’m not done with *you*. I’m just getting started.”

“What’re you talking about? I don’t know you. I’ve never seen you.”

“The rally. Remember, dumbass?” Jax said.

“There were a lot of bikers in leather. I don’t remember seeing any of you. I’ve never had a problem with you guys.”

“Who’s the Insurgent you’re dealing with? And if you lie, you’ll die a slow death,” Panther said.

“I-I don’t know his name. He never told me. He just went by ‘Butch.’ I swear on my mother’s grave. I don’t know. I’ll never deal with him again.” He looked over at the two bodyguards. “Do *something!*”

One of the men went for his piece, and the bullet from Demon’s gun took him out instantly. He fell to the ground with a *thud*. Fear streaked across the other bodyguard’s face.

“Why are you doing this? If you want this shit, take it. We’ll call it even. I won’t deal with Butch again. The pills are legit.” Cano pushed the case toward Diesel.

“You’re a lying sack of shit,” Diesel said as he kicked the case away.

“What do you want from me? I’ll give you anything. I don’t have any problem with you guys. Don’t hurt me. I have a family—two kids and a wife. Please,” Cano pleaded.

“I’m not here for anything but *you*.” Diesel slowly shook off his jacket.

“Why?”

“One word: Freddy.”

Cano’s eyes bulged. “I don’t know anyone named Freddy.”

“I wouldn’t waste your last breaths on trying to convince me of that. I’m his brother, and in my world, fuckers gotta pay for their wrongs.”

“He killed my brother! Do you think that’s right?”

“I don’t know the circumstances, but you did what you thought was right to avenge your brother’s death, and now I’m doing the very same thing.”

“No. I have a family.”

“Everyone has a family.”

Diesel put his hand in his pocket and pulled out his Chaparral knife. *Click*. The blade extended. Cano reached inside his front pocket and pulled out a switchblade. The Insurgents made a circle around the two men and let Diesel seek justice for his brother’s death on his own.

“You asshole! You think you’re better than me because you’re in a fucking motorcycle gang? You’re nothing!” Cano said, rushing toward him, the blade gleaming under the overhead lights.

Diesel crouched down, and right before Cano was up on him, he held his knife’s blade straight and stabbed the asshole in the knees. Cano screamed in pain and dropped down to the floor. Diesel kicked the switchblade out of his hand and then stabbed him in the side. Cano writhed on the floor and grabbed wildly at the biker’s leg. He caught it with both hands, throwing Diesel off-balance, and he landed on his knees, cursing on the way down. Cano slashed wildly until the rigid blade sliced Diesel’s hard flesh. He clutched his arm and felt warm blood streaming over his fingers; his shirt sleeve had morphed from blue to deep red.

“You sonofabitch!” Diesel pushed up to his feet. A hot rush of anger propelled him toward Cano. He could hear his teeth grind, the rush of blood roaring like a freight train in his head. He kicked Cano savagely in his bloody shins, and the man crumpled down to the ground again. Diesel pounced on him and slammed the asshole’s face against the concrete until it was a bloody pulp. “Now you know what it feels like to be scared shitless, don’t you?” He shoved his knee into the jerk’s groin for good measure.

“I didn’t mean to kill him. He’s the one who started it. I liked Freddy. He was like a brother to me.”

“Bullshit! You manipulated and used him, then cheated him.”

“Fuck you! You’re wrong. You were never around, so you don’t know shit,” Cano said as he sat up, his hand wiping the blood from under his nose.

Diesel punched him in the face, and he fell on his back. He straddled the cursing dirtbag, grasped each side of his head, and smashed it against the floor. The sound of bone hitting concrete silenced Cano as blood spilled out from his cracked skull.

“You fuckin’ bastard. You killed my brother!” Rage and anguish came from deep in Diesel’s throat. He tightened his fingers against Cano’s shoulders, and again, the murderer’s skull cracked hard against the surface. A guttural moan ripped through his lips, then he went limp. Diesel gazed into his brother’s killer’s eyes and noticed they were open and glazed over. A thin line of blood trickled from his left eye and the corner of his mouth. Diesel stood up, then kicked the lifeless body hard before spitting on it.

Banger came over to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll take care of the body.”

Diesel nodded and grasped his president’s shoulder in gratitude. Smokey, Tank, and Jax had already taken care of the bodyguard; there could be no witnesses.

He shrugged off his shirt and tied it tight around the wound. Diesel figured he would need stitches for that cut. He’d call Viking and see if the Angry Disciples’ doctor could look at him. A sense of relief and satisfaction spread through him. He’d honored Freddy by taking care of the person who snuffed out his young life. *An eye for an eye, little brother.*

“You better get that cut checked out,” Shadow said.

“I’m gonna see if Viking can get a doc over to their clubhouse and stitch me up,” he answered.

“I’ll go with you, buddy.”

Diesel bumped fists with Shadow, and then the two of them walked out of the warehouse and into the night.



THE EARLY MORNING darkness still lingered when Diesel and Shadow entered the clubhouse. A few of the brothers were passed out on the couches, but for the most part, it was quiet inside the main room.

Diesel looked down at his phone and opened a text. It was Banger saying that everything was taken care of. He responded with a “thumbs up” icon, then deleted the message.

“Everything’s cool,” he said.

“That was fast,” Shadow replied. “You want a shot?” he asked, moving toward the bar.

“Nah, I’m beat.” He ambled toward the staircase, then paused and turned to Shadow. “Thanks, buddy. I appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it, brother.” Shadow poured a shot of whiskey in a plastic cup and downed it. “I’m going to hit the sack too.”

“Are you getting anxious to get back home?”

“Yeah. I’m missing my ol’ lady and the kids. I’d like to bring the family here for vacation. Brock would love playing in the water.”

“And Disneyland’s not too far away.”

“I know, but all that happy shit in full force would drive me fucking crazy.” He shook his head and chuckled. “But the kids would love it. I know it’s on Scarlett’s list of places to go with them. Layla’s too young, so probably in a couple of years. Damn, me at Disneyland ... never could’ve predicted *that* one.”

Diesel chuckled. “When you got a brood of kids, you’re gonna be doing a lot of shit you never thought you’d do.”

“That’s for damn sure, but I get a kick outta how excited Brock gets doing stuff. And Layla’s just too fucking cute all the time.”

“Yeah.”

“You guys back already?”

Startled by a voice, the two bikers turned around and saw Crutch standing behind them. Easy was next to him, leaning against the bar.

“Where the fuck did you two come from?” Diesel asked.

“We were outside having a smoke,” Easy replied. “Are you the only ones back?”

“Yeah,” Shadow said.

“When are the others coming home?” Crutch asked.

Diesel shrugged. “They’ll be back when they want.”

“How’d it go?” Easy said.

“Fine. I’m fuckin’ spent. We can talk later. I’m gonna crash.”

“Me too,” Shadow added.

“Sure, we’ll talk later,” Easy said.

Crutch lifted his chin, then poured a shot into a glass on the bar.

Diesel and Shadow climbed the stairs in silence. When they got to the third floor corridor, Shadow said, “Why the fuck were they asking all those questions?”

“Why the hell were they lurking around, listening to our conversation? Maybe they’re just nosy or too high to sleep.”

“I guess. If Panther wants to fill his members in on what happened, that’s on him, not us.”

Diesel nodded. “I agree. They know that, too. I was against Panther telling anyone anything about the operation but the brothers who came with us to LA, but he’s the prez, and you know how that goes.”

“Yep. Maybe one of them is the snitch.” Shadow shook his head and ran a hand over his face. “But I don’t really believe that. Easy and Crutch have been Insurgents for years. They

fought alongside us during the turf wars with the fucking Deadly Demons.”

Diesel nodded. “Yeah. Those were brutal times. I don’t wanna think one of them is the shit rat. Damn, that would fucking suck. Easy got cut up pretty bad at the rally, and Crutch was knocking heads with the Henchmen and the East Bay Dogs. I can’t see it. We’re just tired and being paranoid because of all the shit that went down tonight.”

“You’re right. I’m so beat I can barely see straight.”

Diesel stopped in front of his door. “Have a good sleep. I’m sure we’ll have church at some point today.”

“Yeah. Rest well, brother,” Shadow said as he walked down the hall.

A SIZZLE OF anticipation ran through Diesel at the thought of seeing Myla. He fit the key in the lock, then turned the doorknob. The door didn’t move; it was like something barricaded it. *What the fuck?* He tried again and had no luck.

“You need help?”

Diesel turned around and saw Welder. “What the hell are you doing up here?”

“I heard you and Shadow were back. I wanted to know if you needed anything.”

“I would’ve called if I did,” he growled. “Did Myla come back okay tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“Anything unusual happen, or was it all cool?”

“She sent me a text asking me to come up to the room at six-thirty, then go with her to the porch and wait until her friend came. I did it and did the same when she came back like you told me to.”

*I wonder why the hell she wanted Welder to be her bodyguard earlier in the evening.*

“Do you need me for anything?”

“No, I’m good.”

The prospect quickly walked away, and Diesel tried the door again. Nothing. *Fuck!* He rapped lightly on the door, but there was no answer. *She’s probably sleeping.* He knocked harder, but still nothing, and then he pounded like hell on the door, and he heard a small yelp.

“Myla, it’s me. Open up. I’m back.”

A couple of minutes passed before he heard, “Tell me something that you and I know to prove it’s you.”

A smile crossed his face. “You got the cutest pink heart-shaped birthmark on your lower back.”

Then he heard the drag of chair legs across the floor. The door flung open, and he saw her standing there in a flimsy nightshirt, her hair tousled and wild about her face and down her back.

“Diesel!” She threw herself into his arms, hugged him tight, and buried her face against the fabric of his T-shirt. Her tits pressed against him, and her lower body settled into the cradle of his hips.

He dropped the saddlebag on the ground and wrapped his arms around her, drawing her even closer. She tilted her head back and arched up while he bent down, and she kissed him. It was a sweet, gentle kiss, but it went through him like lightening.

“Let’s go inside,” he said as he scooped her up in his arms and carried her into the room. He planted her on the bed then went back to retrieve the saddlebag.

The light from the lamp on the nightstand cast a golden glow on the room. Myla sat against the headboard, her gaze fixed on his bandaged arm.

“What happened?” she said, pointing at his right forearm.



“I cut myself. It’s no big deal,” he said. With the toe of his boot, he pushed his bag into the closet then shrugged off his cut.

“What is it with you? Every time you go out with your club, you come back with bandages on you.”

He laughed. “I guess I’m clumsy.”

Wrinkling her brow, she said, “No, you’re not. What happened?”

Shoving his hands into the front pockets of his jeans, he said, “It’s club business.”

Throwing her hands up, she replied, “I know, but that doesn’t make me feel any less anxious.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. It’s just the way it is, but I can take care of myself. I’m here, aren’t I?” He chuckled but stopped when she glared at him. “I know what I’m doing, okay? Don’t make a big deal about this”—he pointed to the gauze—“it’s just a scrape.”

“It doesn’t look like that to me. What’s under there ... stitches?”

“Yeah.”

“If you keep up like this, you’re going to give Frankenstein some serious competition.”

Diesel walked over, perched on the edge of the bed, and tugged her to him. “I promise that won’t happen. Now tell me why you had the chair up under the door.”

She explained what had happened after he’d left, and as she told him the details, anger zinged through him, but he kept it inside. Myla was nervous enough about his injury, he didn’t want to pull her farther into the darkness of his world, but he was convinced the fucking snitch was the one who came up to her room. Whoever the fucker was had known he was heading up to see Cano. Maybe the rat was afraid Cano would squeal and tell them who he was, but Diesel actually believed the asswipe when he’d said he didn’t know the name of the traitor.

“I’m positive it’s the guy I saw at the club party. You know, the one I told you about?”

“Yeah, I’m sure it was.”

“The weird thing is that I haven’t seen him at all since I got here.”

“He’s keeping a low profile.”

“I was freaked out, but Welder was great.”

“Yeah, he told me you’d asked for some help.”

“I didn’t tell him why or anything because I’ve caught on that ‘mum’s the word’ in the outlaw world.”

“That’s right, and you did great. Did you have a good time?”

“I did. I was so glad I had something to do because I would’ve been paranoid about every creak I’d heard outside the door or the window. It was good to get away, have a few drinks, and talk about nothing. I didn’t tell Caitlyn about Freddy. I met him after Caitlyn moved from Denver. Speaking about all that, have you gone to the police yet to let them know you’re his brother?”

“No, I will tomorrow. Fuckin’ badges and me don’t get along.”

“I know. Did you tell your parents?”

“Nah. They didn’t give a fuck when’s he was missing, so fuck them. If you wanna tell them, go ahead.”

“I know you’re angry at them, but they have a right to know, even if you don’t think so. I’ll tell them.”

“If the damn badges get a hold of them, which they will, they’re gonna tell them all about you. You’re gonna get pulled into the clusterfuck. I don’t want that to happen.”

“The cops will contact your parents whether or not I do, and they’ll still know about me. I’ll just have to deal with it

the best way I can. They might not even go that far, especially if you contact them first.”

“True. I’ll go first thing in the morning, then we’ll have some time to ourselves.”

“Sounds good.”

“I missed you,” he said.

“Me too. Do you feel weird about all this?”

“Not now. We’ve had an ache for each other for a while now. If Freddy wasn’t my brother, I’d have had you in my bed weeks ago. You told me you and Freddy were through. I get that you were upset about him disappearing and now about his death. You can’t erase memories of three years, even if some of them were shitty. If you tell me you love him and still yearn for him, I’ll respect that and back off, but I got the message that you’d had enough.”

She swept her fingers lightly over his good arm. “Freddy and I weren’t connecting for over six months. He started sleeping in one of the guest bedrooms months ago. He started mistreating me, and I stayed because I thought it was a phase and he was stressed. The abuse only escalated, and I feel guilty for thinking about *that* now that he’s dead.”

“You shouldn’t. The good and bad things people do make them who they are. What he did to you was inexcusable. It made me see red, but I still wanted to find him and help him outta the mess he got into. It’s okay to have conflicting feelings. I’m stuck on you, woman. It’s that simple, but if you think this is too much for you right now, I’ll back away.”

“I don’t want you to. I’m crazy about you. I didn’t plan this. The last thing I thought I’d feel was something for you when I came to Pinewood Springs to tell you about Freddy. I feel guilty because I don’t feel guilty. Pretty crazy, huh?”

“No. Freddy will always be a part of your history. He’ll always be my brother who deserved to have more years living life than he had. There’s shit I feel bad about, like not being more attentive. Hell, maybe if I had been, he’d still be here.

Who the fuck knows? Life is here today and gone tomorrow, so we gotta live in the present because tomorrow isn't guaranteed. Feeling guilt and worrying about *not* feeling it is wasted time that we can't have back."

"You're right. I love being with you and getting to know you better each day."

"Then let's take it day by day. Today is what's important in life."

Diesel cupped her chin in his hands and kissed her gently. Her lips were warm and full. He pulled her closer and gathered the silky fabric of her nightshirt into his hands. With his tongue, he teased Myla's lips, exploring her, tasting her, softly at first, and then deeply and fervently as if the world was about to end. Their tongues tangled and slid over teeth, lips, and each other.

"Take your top off, woman," he said while peppering her neck with feathery nips.

Myla leaned back slightly and pulled the nightshirt over her head. Her full tits bounced as she flung the nightie to the floor. He rose to his feet and yanked off his T-shirt. When he kicked off his boots and threw off his jeans and boxers, he stared at her, loving how her body quivered as she gazed at his cock.

"Lie down," he said gruffly.

Everything stilled inside him as he licked his lips slowly and drank her in, lying against the mattress, her hair spreading around her like spilled ink, and only wearing a tiny scrap of pink fabric that barely covered her pussy. She was breathtaking. His gaze roamed over every inch of her, landing on her tits and those sweet hard rosy nipples begging to be sucked. Diesel climbed onto the bed and straddled her, brushing the tips of his fingers across the hardened buds. Damn, he loved the sight of hard nipples on tits, and hers were so sexy. He ran his fingertips over them once more and then

seized them roughly, squeezing and pinching them as she moaned and thrashed underneath him.

Dipping his head down, he pulled one pretty bud into his mouth and sucked on it, his tongue swirling around it while his teeth lightly grazed the skin.

“Diesel,” she moaned.

“I love your tits, darlin’,” he grunted.

As he alternated tugging each nipple into his mouth, he massaged those soft sexy breasts, loving how they felt in his hands. Normally, he would spend time admiring every inch of her delectable body, curves and all, but at that moment, all he wanted was to feel their skin fused together.

As he slid one hand down the side of her smooth body, fingers curling around the thin lace straps of her panties, a sting of pain and pleasure coursed through his body. He released one of her buds and glanced up. Myla smiled wickedly at him as she bit the top of his shoulder again. “You like rough fucking.”

“A little rough.”

“Fuck, darlin’, I’m gonna blow before I get into your pussy.”

“Then get in there.” A stain of light red brushed across her cheeks, and he thought it was the sexiest thing he’d ever seen.

“Don’t you like me taking time with you?”

“I do, but I also like this”—she ran her fingers down his chest—“and this”—she squeezed his taut biceps, then traced the tattoos with a fingernail.

“Anything else,” he said in a thick voice.

“And I love this.” She wrapped her hand around his hard-as-hell cock.

“Fuck, woman. Shit like that’s gonna get you a hard banging.”

“Is it?” she asked, her eyes widening in jest.

“Turn around. Now. I wanna see that sexy ass.”

Myla rolled over, got onto all fours, and wiggled that sweet ass at him. He tore open the foil, sheathed the condom on his dick, then rubbed her firm ass cheeks. He dug the fingers of his hand into one of the globes while his other one cupped and massaged her pussy.

“Oh, shit,” she groaned, dipping her shoulders and arching her behind in the air.

“You’re fuckin’ hot and wet as hell,” he said as he ran an index finger through her slick folds. “I love it.” He bent over and kissed each of her ass cheeks tenderly, then bit them.

“Ouch!” she yelped.

“Sorry, darlin’, you’re making me horny as fuck.” He licked the red spot then sprinkled soft kisses and nips across her butt while thrusting his finger in and out of her sopping pussy.

Myla glanced over her shoulder at him, excitement and hunger brimming in her emerald gaze. “That feels so good. I want to feel you inside me.”

“You don’t have to ask twice, woman.” Straightening, he grabbed her hips and pushed inside slowly. “You good?”

“It feels amazing,” she said on a hitched breath.

He stayed inside her and played with her clit while she whimpered and backed her sweet ass up against him to take even more of his dick. He pulled out of her, covered his cock in her arousal, and slammed back into her.

“Oh crap!”

“You good?” he said.

“Oh yeah. Don’t stop.”

Leaning over, Diesel kissed the nape of her neck, cupped her swaying tits, then plunged into her. He rode her faster and

faster, pistoning in and out of her slippery pussy, his balls smacking against her thigh. Myla moaned, and he grunted as the wet sounds of their slapping bodies filled the room. Bringing one hand to her pussy, he slid his finger between the folds and played with her sweet spot while thrusting into her harder.

“Oh shit,” she moaned, stiffening. Then Myla let out a yell which bounced off the walls and filled his ears, his cock, and his body.

Myla’s spasms clutched his dick as she exploded, and he couldn’t hold back any longer. He threw his head back, his ass and legs clenching, and grabbed her butt as he shot his wad inside her. “Fuck, Myla,” he growled.

He kissed the back of her neck and crashed on the bed, rolling onto his back and taking her with him. He tucked her against him, loving the feel of her soft body.

“That was fuckin’ hot.” Diesel kissed the side of her head.

“It was wild. I feel so good right now.” Her warm sigh washed over him.

*Damn ... I’m hooked.*

And then exhaustion claimed him.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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CURLING WISPS OF steam followed Diesel as he emerged from the bathroom with a white towel wrapped around his waist. Drops of water clung to the well-defined muscles of his arms and chest.

“Do you want one?” Myla said, lifting her bottle of caramel latte.

“Nah, I don’t go for stuff like that.”

“I can run down and get you a fresh cup of coffee with a splash of cream—your favorite non-alcoholic drink.”

He laughed. “Thanks, but I’ll grab a cup when I get downstairs. I’m giving the fuckin’ badges just one hour, then I’m outta there. I hate this shit.”

“I don’t blame you.”

She sat back in the cushy chair, took a sip of her coffee drink, and watched him dress, loving how his muscles flexed with each movement. As usual, her gaze fell onto his taut, rounded ass, remembering how smooth and firm the skin felt under her fingers as they came together just an hour before. *Everything about him is so damn sexy! Even how he buttons his shirt.* His long, nimble fingers worked quickly, and she smiled, knowing exactly how deft and nasty those digits could be.

“I hate wearing long sleeves when it’s hot as hell outside,” he grumbled.

Diesel had explained to her earlier that he wanted to cover up his tattoos because he didn’t want the cops to dwell on them. There was no way they wouldn’t know he was a member of the Insurgents MC because it was all over his rap



sheet, but keeping the visuals away from law enforcement made for a smoother encounter.

He bent over to pull up his biker boots, wiped his damp hair back from his face, and ran his fingers through it.

“Are you nervous?” she said.

“Bout what?”

“Going to the police station?”

Diesel snapped his head back. “Fuck no. I don’t give a shit about the damn badges. The whole thing’s just a pain in my ass. I’d rather be riding with your tits pressed against my back than wasting time on this shit.” He slid his wallet into the front pocket of his black jeans.

“I love your confidence. Actually, that’s one of the many things I like about you. You always seem so sure of yourself, so grounded in your independence.”

He glanced over at her. “That’s the only way to be. You can’t let all the bullshit of life or crap that goes around twenty-four-seven pull you down. Living life on *my* terms is the only way I know how.”

“I like that. You look handsome. You still have that bad-boy edge, but I suspect that’s inborn.” She giggled.

“Damn straight, darlin’. I don’t want the fuckin’ badges to focus on shit that doesn’t matter. You know, they’re all about that. I want to claim Freddy, arrange for him to be sent home, and get out of there.” He looked over her head and stared into the distance.

She pushed up from the chair and walked over to him. “I know this is hard for you.” She wrapped her arms tightly around him. The scent of clean soap and pine wound around her. “It feels surreal that he’s not here. Whenever I think of it, it’s like a punch to my stomach.”

Diesel pressed her closer to him. “Yeah ... like being gutted. Fuck.”

They stood in silence, lost in their own memories of Freddy, deriving comfort from one another.

“I better go. The sooner I’m done with this shit, the better,” he murmured against the top of her head.

Myla tilted her head back, he melded his mouth to hers, and then they were kissing like two drowning people trying to breathe. It was as if they’d discovered something that had never been so real, so connected, so perfect before that moment.

“Damn, Myla ... the taste of your mouth, the feel of your body, the fuckin’ scent of your perfume, your pussy, *you* ... have gotten inside me. Fuck, darlin’,” he rasped as he squeezed her tight.

Tears sprang to her eyes, and she blinked them away. Myla wanted to tell him that when his lips touched hers, when his mouth, fingers, and tongue grazed her body, it was like the ground below her melted away and time stopped. But before she could get the words out, he released her and patted her behind.

“Be back soon,” he said, swiping his lips across her forehead.

“I’ll be here.” She smiled.

And then he was gone.

Myla stayed by the window, waiting to catch a glimpse of him before he left. Diesel had told her he borrowed one of the member’s Chevy sedan so he could get in and out of the police station as quick as possible. If he rode up in his gleaming motorcycle embedded with skulls, daggers, and drips of blood, she was sure the detectives would make a mountain out of a molehill.

The truth was that even though Diesel was an outlaw biker and probably instilled fear in most people, especially when he’d throw them his death stare, to her, he was a perfect tough-sweet combination. She’d always thought that guys who rode motorcycles had more than a dash of testosterone running

through them, but Diesel had it gushing through him, and she loved his manliness and even *some* of his machismo. He exuded confidence, fearlessness, self-reliance, and an I-don't-give-a-damn attitude that was sexy and alluring. But his tough side was balanced by his compassion, kindness, and generosity. Even though he would rather die than admit it, he was sweet, gentle, and big-hearted. A lot of the Insurgents Myla got to know came off as gruff and uncaring. Still, she noticed how they rallied around Diesel during his time of grief, and she witnessed how Hawk—one of the scariest and grumpiest of the group—cherished his ol' lady, Cara, and adored his children. The numerous charity events the club was involved with blew her mind, and it made them well-rounded humans rather than stereotypes of bad-ass, hate-filled outlaws.

She also loved how Diesel made her feel like the most beautiful and desirable woman on earth. Myla felt protected and relieved that she could put her trust in his strong hands and let go of all the burden that came with being on her own. It might sound old-fashioned, but it was everything in the world to her.

A dose of marijuana smoke wafted to the open window, making her cough so hard that tears streamed down her face. “Shit,” she croaked, clutching her throat with one hand and grasping the caramel latte bottle with the other. She downed several gulps of the flavored coffee until her breathing returned to normal. *That was the worst! It smelled just like a skunk was in the room with me.*

As she closed the window, she caught sight of Diesel walking to the parking lot with two men in tow. She couldn't make out who they were, but one of them had a hand clasped on Diesel's shoulder. They spoke at the dark green sedan for a few minutes, then Diesel slipped into the car. A few seconds later, she watched him drive away. All at once, loneliness filled her. Not wanting to stay in the room and relive memories of her relationship with Freddy, Myla meandered over to the closet and pulled out a lightweight sundress and a pair of pale yellow thong sandals.

Half an hour later, she'd showered, applied a touch of make-up, and lightly blow-dried her hair. She swiped her lips with a favorite peach-colored lipstick, spritzed her favorite vanilla body spray, and walked out the door.

The fresh smell of the ocean and the sweet fragrance of bougainvillea and hibiscus flowers floated on the soft breeze. Myla strolled around the back of the clubhouse, soon disappearing among the lush vegetation and forest of blossoming plumeria and palm trees. She continued to be amazed at the juxtaposition of the landscape's serenity and the clubhouse's rowdiness.

After a half hour of wandering around the grounds and admiring the various colorful clay pots filled with shrubs and vibrant flowers in red, yellow, and orange, she spied a wrought iron bench nestled among the pots. She sat down and enjoyed the warm breeze playing through her hair and the feel of the sun on her skin. Leaning her head back, she closed her eyes and basked in the golden light.

Myla's eyelids snapped open at the sound of rustling and the soft thud of ... footsteps?

"Diesel?" she said.

There was nothing but the song of the hummingbirds' wings, the buzzing of honey bees, and the sound of her own breathing. She glanced around and over her shoulder but everything seemed normal except for the tiny frisson of fear niggling at her. *This is ridiculous.* Myla pushed it away and refused to let it take hold. *But what if Cano's here, watching me? No, it can't be. I know Diesel took care of him and that's how he got that nasty cut on his arm. I'm being silly and paranoid. I'll just head back to—*

Then she heard rapid footsteps, and the scent of musk mixed with sweat rose above the floral aromas. *Someone is here. I know it. I feel it.* Her throat closed on a silent scream. Above her, plumeria blossoms shivered, and she saw a shadow fall across the stone pathway in front of her.

Myla leaped up from the bench and whirled around, her gaze crashing into the cold eyes of the biker she'd seen at the party back in Pinewood Springs.

"You," she said and took a few steps backward.

"Yeah, me," he snarled.

"What are you doing out here?"

"I live here. You're on *my* property." He came around the bench.

"It's beautiful here." She hoped she sounded sincere and nonchalant even though her heart was like a train pounding down the tracks. Again, she took a few steps away from him.

"Did you tell Diesel you knew me?" His voice dripped ice.

"No, why would I? I mean, I don't really know you. I've only seen you a couple of times."

"I don't believe one fucking word you're saying, bitch."

The way he said *bitch* triggered a memory from the day before when he came to her door after Diesel had left. *This isn't good.*

"Why would I lie?" she asked.

"Because you're a bitch and a whore."

"Strong words from someone I don't know and who doesn't know me." Myla turned to leave, but he gripped her wrist and yanked her closer to him.

"Quit the fucking bullshit. You're a loose thread, but I'll take care of that. Your pathetic boyfriend was a stupid, weak pussy who got what he deserved. He thought he could control Cano? He was a little fucking wimp trying to play in the big league."

"Were you the one who killed him?" she whispered.

"No, but I would have if Cano gave me the word."

"Freddy never did anything to you."

“He was a weak piece of shit who should’ve stayed out of my business. He threatened to tell Diesel about me. That’s when I found out he had a brother who was an Insurgent. I told Cano, and that’s why his brother went over to Freddy’s house that night.”

“He was going to kill him. So it *was* self-defense.”

“I was shocked when Cano told me your weak asshole offed his brother. I chalked it up to beginner’s dumb luck.”

“Freddy’s gone now. Let him rest in peace.”

“You sanctimonious slut. You act like you’re all broken up about losing him, and all the while, you’ve been fucking his brother. If Freddy had any real balls, he would’ve beaten you to a pulp and put a damn bullet through Diesel’s head.”

“You shut up! You don’t know anything about Diesel, Freddy, or me. You’re the pathetic jerk who has to hide in the shadows. I wouldn’t put it past you to stab your club members in their backs.”

“You fucking *cunt!*” He raised his hand and backhanded her hard across the face, the blow sent her staggering backward. “I’m gonna take care of you, but not before I get a piece of what you’ve been giving Diesel. You’re nothing but a tramp who thinks her shit doesn’t stink, but it does. You need to be taught some respect, *bitch!*” Another strike made her head fall back while flashes of light danced in front of her eyes.

Myla put her hand to her cheek; her face began to hurt from the two blows. She ran her tongue over her lips and tasted blood. Her head started to spin, and she forced herself to focus so she wouldn’t pass out. *I have to get the hell away from him.*

“Oh shit,” she said, pretending to stumble. “My foot. A bee stung me.” She slipped off her shoes, bent down, rubbed her foot, then leaped up and slammed the heel of her sandal onto his head as hard as she could.

“Fuck!”

Without waiting for his next move, she kicked him with all her strength in the groin. Cursing, he clutched his crotch and fell to his knees. Myla threw the other sandal at him, and knowing she couldn't pull *that* off twice, she took off running like the hounds of hell were snapping at her heels.

*Run, run, run!*

Panic clawing at her, she raced barefoot through the foliage, dodging trees that blocked her way and pushing aside leaves and branches with her hands. Prickly branches scratched her legs. Leaves and broken stems smacked her face. Gulps of breaths seared her aching lungs, but she kept moving, adrenaline firing her blood. The sound of footsteps slamming on the ground thundered in her ears; he was fast approaching.

Suddenly, her bare foot tripped over a root. *Shit!* She fell, hands and knees scraping on the sharp stones and uneven ground. *He's catching up. He'll get me!* Fear sizzled down her spine. *Hurry! Hurry!* She pushed up then spurred herself to hide; she'd never be able to outrun him.

Ignoring the blood sliding down her shins, she dived into a hedgerow, clapping a hand over her mouth as every muscle in her body screamed in pain. Swallowing her whimpers as creepy crawlers scurried over her skin, she tried to regulate her breathing.

Less than a minute later, the biker ran past, uttering a string of obscenities that faded into the distance. Tears of relief welled in her eyes, and she let her hand drop. Fishing out her cell, she switched it to Mute and sent a short text to Welder.

Within five minutes, she heard the crunch of boots on the terrain, and she held her breath.

“Myla, are you here?”

*Welder!* “I'm behind the hedge,” she said as she pulled herself up to her feet. She looked at her hands and knees. Dirt, small rocks, and streaks of blood covered them. She wiped off the soil and such from her hands and figured she'd deal with her knees when she returned to the room.

Welder's gaze took her in, and he glanced away without asking her any questions.

"Walk beside me," he said, then was silent for the rest of the way back to the clubhouse.

Myla followed him through the main room, ignoring the looks of the bikers and the club girls. Welder stopped at the bar, poured her a glass of white wine, a shot of whiskey, and then escorted her to her room.

Once securely locked in, Myla cleaned up her cuts and bruises, spread some antibiotic cream over her banged-up knees, and placed a bandage over each one. She freshened up, stuffed her dirtied sundress into a laundry bag, and slipped on a pair of white cropped jeans and an apricot midriff. She eased into the comfy chair, threw back the shot Welder had thoughtfully given her, and then nursed her wine while keeping her gaze glued on the door. It was luck that helped her get away from the biker. She didn't even know his name. Sighing, Myla brought the wineglass to her lips and savored its dryness.

*The sooner we get back to Pinewood Springs, the better.* She stretched out her legs and waited for Diesel to come back.



"WHAT THE HELL happened?" Diesel said as he burst into the room. "Welder said you had some trouble on the property." His eyes landed on her scratched arms and swollen face. "What the fuck?"

Myla flipped her hair back over her shoulder and met his gaze. "That biker who I recognized at the party attacked me."

He was by her side in three long strides, his protective, solid arm wrapped around her shoulders. He kissed her right temple then the side of her face gingerly.

"Who is he?"

"I don't know his name, but he's one of the members here. He knows Cano and ... Freddy, of course. He said awful



things about Freddy. He hated him.” A few tears slipped from her eyes.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Diesel said in a soft voice as he held her tighter.

“I asked if he killed Freddy, but he said he didn’t. He said Cano didn’t ask him to. I think he’s a traitor to the club.” She felt him tense.

“What makes you say that?”

“He said Freddy threatened to tell you about him. Said that was when he found out Freddy had a brother in the Insurgents, he told Cano. Peter Cano sent his brother over to kill Freddy.” She paused. “I guess Freddy told me the truth when he said it was self-defense.”

“Yeah, he did. The videos of the incident showed Freddy going beyond self-defense, but now I understand why he needed to get rid of the fucker. Damn, I wish he would’ve just reached out to me.”

“He would still be with us if he had. Neither of us will ever know for sure why he didn’t. Anyway, when I accused the guy of backstabbing his club, he went ballistic on me. He said I was the loose thread, and he had to get rid of me.”

“I’m fuckin’ pissed you had to go through this. I didn’t think the shit rat would come after you this soon after ...” His voice trailed off.

“After what?”

“The other night when he came to your door.”

She knew that wasn’t what he meant. She suspected it had something to do with Cano and Diesel’s out-of-town trip.

“How’d you get away from him?”

“A powerful kick in the groin, and then I took off running. He started catching up, so I hid until I could text Welder.”

Pride painted his face as he grinned at her. “Sexy and *tough*. I like that.”

“The asshole owes me a pair of sandals.”

“The asshole’s gonna owe more than that. What did he look like? What was he wearing?”

“Tall and thin with shoulder-length dark brown hair, almost black eyes, and a long, narrow face. He didn’t have any facial hair and wore what everyone does around here: blue jeans, a black T-shirt, and black biker boots. No, wait ... he wasn’t wearing boots, he had on navy blue athletic shoes that had a green, almost a neon green, stripe on each side. Does that help?”

Diesel placed two fingers under her chin and tipped her head back. “A lot. You’re amazing, darlin’.” He pressed his lips to hers and kissed her gently.

“What’s going to happen? He’s probably long gone.”

“Maybe. If he is, we’ll find him.”

“How did it go with the cops?”

“Bunch of bullshit. They’re fuckin’ jerks and always wanna get you on something. Freddy’s body will be back in Denver at the end of the week.”

“Did they already know who he was?”

“No. Didn’t find a wallet or a cell phone.”

“I’m glad you went in to identify him. He wasn’t a nobody; he was somebody. He was a brother, a son, and a boyfriend, at least for a while.”

“When I got back to the car, I called my people. My mom actually cried. My old man was on the road, but she’ll tell him. He got along with Freddy better than with me. She wants him to come home so the funeral will be in Hayes.”

She squeezed his hand. “I’m glad you called your parents. When is the funeral?”

“Probably next week. I gotta wrap up a couple of things; then we’ll head back home.”

“I’m looking forward to getting back.”

“Me too.” He pushed himself upright. Anger skittered across his face as he looked at her. “I hate that this sorry-ass brother hurt you. He’s gonna pay.”

A shiver slid down her spine at his words. “I’m good now ... you’re here.”

“I have to go downstairs and talk with the others.”

“I’m coming too. I don’t want to be up here alone. I’ll sit in the corner and not ask any questions.”

He smiled. “I was gonna have you come down with me. Maybe the jerk will be in the main room, but I doubt it. We’ll be talking club business, but I’ll keep my eye on you.”

When they entered the main room, everyone looked over at her. The bikers quickly averted their eyes, but the club women kept staring at her, some shaking their heads in disbelief and others with concern.

Diesel walked her over to one of the tables near the bar, then joined a group of men leaning against the bar counter. She overheard one of them say, “We got the bastard. Welder told us what was going on before he went to get your woman. When Crutch came back, all sweaty and pissed, we figured he was the one giving your woman trouble.”

“Crutch?” Diesel said. “I’ll be damned. I wondered about him, but didn’t *really* think he’d be the turncoat. He as good as put the hit on my brother. Crutch was in real deep with Cano.”

“That’s why the Grim Henchmen kept swooping up our deals from under us,” Demon said.

“And Cano was working with the Henchmen,” Diesel said. “Where’s the fucker?”

“In the dungeon,” Demon said.

“Give me fifteen minutes, and then he’s all yours.” She saw the muscles in his jaw clenched as he pounded a fist into the palm of his other hand.

“You got it, brother.”

Banger clasped Diesel’s shoulder. “You finish your business with the fucker. I told Panther his club can deal with this motherfucking rat how they see fit. We’ll head back to Pinewood Springs tomorrow.”

Then Rags looked at her and whispered something to Banger. The president glanced over, and she pretended to be interested in the scratch patterns on the table. After that, the group of men moved to the other side of the room, and the club girls scurried outside. From then on, she only heard the occasional, “Fuck, that snitch!” or “The fucker’s backpack’s gonna burn along with him!” She shuddered at those words and wouldn’t let her mind imagine what a group of angry outlaw bikers would do to one of their own who betrayed the club.

After a half hour of hushed conversation, several shots of whiskey, and a wave of grim faces, the men trudged out of the room and disappeared down one of the hallways. Welder sauntered over and perched on a bar stool. She knew Diesel had designated him to be her sentry while he was occupied doing something she never wanted to know about. At that moment, she understood and appreciated why *club business* wasn’t discussed outside the membership.

“Could I please have a glass of water?” she said to Welder.

He pushed off the stool and went behind the bar. He put a water bottle in front of her and then resumed sitting on the stool.

Myla took a sip and stared out the large picture window. The club girls lounged on the couches and chairs that decorated the veranda. A small, tight knot of anxiety twisted in her stomach. *What am I going to do now? I can’t live in the clubhouse. What’s going to happen between Diesel and me?* She couldn’t help but wonder whether what they had was just a fling, two people coming together out of grief to comfort one another. *If I stay in Pinewood Springs, I’ll find a job and get an apartment. Maybe take some art classes at the junior*

*college*. Once again, she found herself having to pull up stakes and reinvent her life. She'd done it numerous times and would do so again, but it was beginning to get old. A stable life with a home of her own, a job she loved, and a solid man she could lean on who loved and respected her from his core was what she yearned for and ... always had; it seemed like it wasn't in the cards for her.

Half an hour later, several Pinewood Springs Insurgents entered the room and went to the bar. Welder didn't move from the stool, but the prospects from the San Diego club handed out drinks to the men. Myla didn't notice any of the men from the chapter club nor did she see Diesel. A few minutes later, he walked into the room. That brought a smidgen of relief against the worry curling around her nerves. She noticed he'd changed his jeans and shirt, and his knuckles appeared bruised and slightly swollen.

"You ready to go for a ride?"

Smiling, she nodded.

"You need anything upstairs?"

"My purse."

"I'll get it; then we'll go."

"I can go," she said, but her words were lost against his retreating back.

Soon, Myla was walking toward his motorcycle, her hand in his, and enjoying the feel of the soft breeze through her hair.

"Are you going to be okay riding?" she said, pointing at his knuckles.

"This isn't shit," he replied. "We'll go for a long ride up the coast. We'll take it easy, have some chow, watch the sunset over the ocean because I know you love that, then come back and fuck like crazy."

Excitement mixed with love tingled through her. "Sounds like a perfect day."

“Tomorrow we’re heading home.”

“I want to go back with you on your bike.”

He shook his head. “It’ll be too hard with the heat and the miles. We’ll do it sometime when you’re more accustomed to riding and when it’s cooler. Nevada’s heat is a fuckin’ beast. I’ll have Welder go back with you like before.”

“I’m glad we’re going home. I love it here, but going home is always nice.” *But where is home exactly?* She didn’t want to bring that point up because she didn’t want *anything* to ruin their day together.

“I’m anxious to get back to the business. Wheelie’s been slammed with work even though Bones and Puck are helping him out.”

He held out his hand, and she climbed on board. After she was settled, he jumped on the bike and brought it to life. Myla folded her arms around his waist and melded her body into his, dusting her lips across the back of his neck. Diesel looked over his shoulder at her, their eyes locked.

“Come here,” he growled as he turned sideways and looped an arm around her waist.

He seized her mouth in a furious, possessive kiss, sending needles of pleasure to every nerve in her body.

“You’re awesome, woman,” he smothered against her lips.

Then he pulled away, righted himself, and gripped the handlebars again. The heat of their kiss still throbbed on Myla’s lips as he backed out of the parking space. Holding tight, she leaned with him as the motorcycle turned onto the street and roared away.

The rushing air on her face was warm, and she breathed in its briny scent. They rode along the coast with the ocean to their right—glimmering blue white-foam crests at the top of small waves—and above, the sky was clear blue, a perfect blue, like Diesel’s eyes. The rugged cliffs, beautiful and distant, shimmered in the afternoon sun.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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*Ten days later*

*Hayes, CO*

THE FUNERAL BELL tolled, its sound muffled as it spoke of sobs, mourning, and lamentations. The black hearse drove slowly and steadily east of Custer Street, making its way to the town cemetery two blocks away.

Diesel sat in the back of the black limousine, which followed the hearse, his fingers laced with Myla's. He stared out the window as they passed the Dollar Store, the drugstore where he used to buy milkshakes for Freddy when they were kids, Ralph's Butcher Shop, and the diner where he spent a lot of Saturday nights with his newest squeeze in high school. It was years since he'd been in Hayes, but it seemed like a lifetime for him. *Nothing's changed. Not one fuckin' thing.*

Diesel's parents hadn't wanted to ride in the limousine and told Myla they'd meet them at the cemetery. He had no idea why they didn't want to drive with him—not Myla—but he didn't give one damn. He figured they were probably feeling like crap since they hadn't given a rat's ass about Freddy's disappearance, and if they were, he was glad.

"Are you doing okay?" He glanced at Myla. Her face was pale, and her eyes were red from crying during the service.

"Yes," she whispered as she leaned against him.

They rode in silence the rest of the way to the cemetery. The limousine wound around narrow roads, passing rows of marble and granite tombstones, all surrounded by patches of dying grass and limp plants.

"Water must be hard to come by," Myla said, her head resting on his shoulder.

“The land on the Eastern Plains is always parched. Droughts are common in this part of the state. I remember the wind always blowing dust around all summer, and the town looked like it was dying ... decaying during those long, hot, brown days. Looks like that hasn't changed either.”

The limousine parked, and the driver switched off the engine. A few people surrounded the grave in a semi-circle and spoke in hushed voices. Behind them stood his Insurgents brothers. They wore black leather jackets, and black bandanas covered the tops of their heads to show support for Diesel. The chrome from fifteen Harleys glared under the afternoon sun. Diesel noticed his mother talking with the minister and his father off to the side, smoking a cigarette.

He helped Myla out of the car and glanced over at the hearse. Six men varying in age from sixteen to around forty stood on each side of the coffin. The pallbearers were relations on his mother's and father's side of the family. He probably met the older ones years ago when he was growing up, but he didn't recognize them or care to know them now. There were no plans to hang around the town; he was heading back home the next day.

Staring straight ahead, he walked with Myla; her arm looped through his. The minister came up to him, shook his hand, and then murmured some words to them that meant nothing to Diesel. His brother was dead. What could anyone say beyond that?

More mourners approached the gravesite, their shoes crackling under the dry grass. The minister motioned for Myla and Diesel to sit in one of the four chairs parallel to the grave. The smell of fresh dirt filled his nostrils, and he darted his gaze from the open grave to the coffin and back to the dark, dank hole.

Myla sat on the canvas folding chair and Diesel stood behind her. His mother walked over slowly and sat down while his father leaned against the back of her chair. Time didn't do any wonders for his father: his face was tanned like old



leather, the skin dried and creased by the sun. His old man's hooded eyes skidded across Diesel's face as though he couldn't look his son in the eye. Time had been kinder to his mother, with only a few lines around her clear blue eyes and a couple of deep creases beside her mouth. She still had bleached blonde hair, bright orange-red lipstick, and powder blue eye shadow—a favorite of hers. As she spoke with the minister, she jabbed his arm with her hand, and her zillion bracelets jingled like crazy. He couldn't remember his mom not wearing bracelets and blue eye shadow. She maintained her figure, whereas his dad had developed a distinct pot belly that resembled a bowling ball under his shirt.

“Are you ready to begin?” the minister asked Diesel's mother.

She nodded, and her multi-looped earrings tinkled.

The minister's gaze scanned over the mourners before he began reciting a prayer. Diesel's mouth twisted as grief tore through his chest muscles. *You didn't deserve this. I'll miss you, little buddy.* Anger welled inside him for a life cut too damn short. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his mother dab her eyes with a tissue and swipe another under her nose. His father stared stone-faced at the silver-blue coffin.

A strangled sob escaped Myla's lips, and he glimpsed tears sliding down her cheeks. He slipped into the seat next to her and put his arm around her, holding her tightly.

The minister closed the prayer book, said a few comforting words to the family, and then announced that the reception would be held at the parents' house. He went over to the family, murmured his condolences, and shook Diesel's and his father's hands. A woman started singing “Amazing Grace,” and many people joined. Diesel stood there mute, staring at the coffin and thinking about Freddy's corpse lying inside it.

After the hymn, he led Myla back to the funeral car. The roar of motorcycles filled the air, and Diesel lifted his chin at his brothers, who held their fists high, showing solidarity for a

grieving brother. He swallowed the lump in his throat and helped Myla into the limousine.

When the door shut, he wrapped his arm around her. She buried her face in his shoulder and sobbed. He swept his lips on the top of her head and held her close as she let out her sorrow.

By the time they arrived at his parents' house, her sobs had turned to sniffles. They sat in the car in front of the wood-framed two-story house he and Freddy had grown up in.

“Are you sure you wanna do this? We don't have to, you know.”

“I want to. I want to say something to your parents. I need to be surrounded by people who will miss Freddy. I think it's good for you to be there too.”

“We won't stay long.”

“That's okay.” She blew her nose and tucked the spent tissue into a small trash bag hanging by the door. “They think of everything.”

“That's what they get paid for.” Diesel gave her a half-smile then stepped out of the car.

They walked up the sidewalk toward the house. He heard the rumble of a train upon distant tracks and the chatter of the people inside the house, their voices spilling out of the open windows.

Myla slipped her hand into his, and they stepped up on the porch. Without warning, Diesel was catapulted back fifteen years to their old porch with the squeaky swing. In his memory, he could hear Freddy's gabbing about the baseball mitt he'd found at the park and him pretending to care. Freddy had been so earnest that he'd relented and played catch with his brother until the sun dipped down into the horizon.

Standing on the porch and entering his childhood home brought a deluge of memories he hadn't expected. All around

him, he could hear the voices of people from his past as they echoed through his recollections.

“It’s nice seeing you, Trenton. It’s been a long time since you came home,” a woman around his mother’s age said. He had no clue who she was, but she shared the same eyes and hooked nose as his father.

A slew of people came up to him, shaking his hand, hugging him, kissing his cheeks, and he thought he would lose it. Myla had been whisked away by a white-haired woman who he thought may have been one of Freddy’s high school teachers; she looked vaguely familiar.

Escaping the noise and questions put to him relentlessly, Diesel sneaked away to his favorite room—the study. It wasn’t a traditional study. It was more like a TV room that his dad liked to hang out in when he returned from a long truck driving haul. The room had the same feel even though the furniture, drapes, flooring, and TV set had been replaced.

“I’m glad you’re home, Trenton.”

His mother’s voice startled him. He whirled around.

“Hey, how’ve you been?”

“Before this horrible thing, pretty good. I can’t believe Freddy’s dead. The police don’t have any suspects. Do you know what happened to him?”

“Not really. He didn’t let me in on his life, but I wish he had. I would’ve been able to help him out. I think he got in over his head, but I’m just guessing. I suppose he’s at peace right now.”

“When you called and said he’d disappeared, I thought he just needed some time alone. I didn’t think *this* would happen.” She sniffled. “I hope you come home more often now that ... he’s not able to.”

“I’m pretty busy, but we’ll see.”

“You seem pretty friendly with Myla.” A slight frown crossed her brow.

“Yeah. We got thrown together when this shit went down with Freddy.”

“Are you two dating?”

Diesel jerked his head. “I don’t date.”

“She’s a wonderful girl. I didn’t think she and Freddy made a very good match. Freddy needed someone less ... independent. He needed to feel that he was adored and needed.”

“She’s cool.” *I need to change this conversation right the fuck now.* “You look good, but Dad looks older. Is he feeling okay?”

“He has a multitude of problems like”—she tapped the side of her head with her index finger—“high cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes two, acid reflux, and one other thing but I always forget what it is. He doesn’t listen to me at all, but you’d think he’d listen to his doctor. Nope, he doesn’t. He’s still smoking, drinking several beers a night, and I won’t even get into what a bad diet he has.”

“Do you cook for him?”

Shock skated across her face. “Cook? You know I only do the holidays.”

“Well, then, there you go. Dad doesn’t cook either.”

The frown on her forehead deepened. “You’ve always been difficult. I thought that would’ve changed.”

“Apparently not. I’m gonna take off. Tell Dad to bring you to Pinewood Springs sometime.”

“Your dad misses you. I know he was more with Freddy, and maybe I was too, but Freddy was more giving, and he needed us more. You understand, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do, and no worries.”

“Your dad’s like you—a man of few words.”

“That’s me. Take care.”

He walked out of the room and searched for Myla. She was surrounded by a group of people. She had a dazed, slightly anxious look plastered across her face.

He pushed through the people and went up to her. “Let’s take off,” he whispered in her ear.

“I thought you’d never ask.” She smiled politely and mumbled some things to the guests while he tugged her out of the house.

“That’s something I don’t wanna ever repeat,” he said as he walked to the SUV.

“I’m glad that we’re staying at the motel. At first, I thought it would be rude, but now I’m grateful you insisted.”

“I know my people and this town.”

“Are any of your friends staying here tonight?”

“Nope. They already took off for home. It’s just you and me, darlin’.”

The drive to the motel was a short one. The place consisted of fifteen cabins and a kidney-shaped pool—the abode’s claim to fame.

The minute they entered the room, Diesel drew her to him, and his mouth feathered over her brow, nose, cheek, and lips. His teeth nipped her bottom lip and tugged.

“Myla,” he said hoarsely.

“Diesel,” she moaned.

Unable to resist, he crushed his mouth to hers, delving into her sweetness while his blood pounded in his ears and his hands drew her body tight to his. She moaned, snaked her arms around him, and kissed him back fervently. He skimmed his hands down her sides and cupped her ass. His fingers dug into the delicious flesh of her cheeks while he rubbed against her, feeling her shiver in his embrace.

When Diesel slipped one hand under her black skirt, Myla tensed slightly under his touch.

“What’s wrong?” he whispered as his mouth trailed down the right side of her neck.

“I ... can we just cuddle tonight? I just want you to hold me. Is that okay?” She glanced up at him, tentativeness etched on her face.

“It’s more than okay.” He brushed his lips across hers.

“It’s not that I don’t want to ... it’s ...” her voice trailed off.

“Shh,” he soothed as a wave of protectiveness washed over him. He held her closer and felt a deep flush of warmth spreading through him that was unexpected.

Myla tipped her head back, and the ghost of a smile played over her features. “You’re a very special man,” she said.

Stepping back, he turned away, struggling with unaccustomed feelings of joy, pleasure, anxiety, and *hope* regarding a woman. He’d fucked a ton of women in his lifetime, and his whole interaction with chicks had been about screwing and then moving on to the next. With Myla, it wasn’t just about the sex; he had a connection that transcended all that. He felt so strong for her, and she’d become a *part* of his life. All she had to do was give him a look, a kiss, and he was overcome. How the hell had she done that to him? Myla had somehow touched a vulnerable piece of his heart and soul. It was unexpectedly overwhelming, and he didn’t know how to deal with it. She did things that blew his mind. Being with her was like nothing he’d ever experienced.

Hearing a couple of *thuds*, he glanced over his shoulder—Myla’s black leather pumps laid on the floor.

“It feels *so* good to get out of those high heels. You don’t know how lucky you are that you don’t have to wear stilettos.” She giggled. “That came out weird, didn’t it?”

“Sort of. Go ahead and use the bathroom first.”

“Thanks.” She rushed past him.

Diesel poured a generous slug of Jack and stepped outside. The air was hot and dry even though the sun had set over an hour before. A barrage of images blurred through his mind: His years in Hayes, Freddy and him swimming in Rider River, his fist landing in one of many of his mom's lovers, his dad stumbling home drunk and broke after a night of pool with the guys. He thought of Myla's flowing handwriting on the scented stationery, her curvy body, the flash of anger in her green gaze, and how her head tipped back when she laughed. *Fuck*. He shut his eyes tight, forcing the pictures back into their dark corners in his mind.

Looking up at the carpet of stars, he held up his glass. "I killed that fucker for you." He tipped the glass back, savoring the burn. "You took a piece of me when you died. Rest in peace, little brother."

Sighing deeply, he went back inside and shut the door.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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*Pinewood Springs, CO*

EVERYONE AT THE clubhouse fell into a sense of contentment since San Diego. The fact that there was a snitch among the Insurgents MC had weighed heavily on every member of the mother club and the other chapters. Once Crutch was eliminated, all was right again within the Insurgents' world. Each of the brothers, who'd been in San Diego, had five minutes with Crutch and then the actual punishment was handed off to Panther. Banger felt that although he was the national president, each chapter should handle severe offenses in its own ways.

Two weeks after the members returned to Pinewood Springs, Panther informed them that the snitch was no more. The dark cloud lifted over the club, each member, and even the club girls, who could sense the moods of the brothers and adopted them as if by osmosis.

A large party was planned for that night, and a buzz of excitement was in the air. The club girls had been preparing for it for the last two days, waxing, shaving, and plucking everything in sight on their tight bodies. The clubhouse gleamed from all their hard work, and they were practically bursting at the seams as they waited for the big night.

Insurgents from all the chapters were coming to the big event. Support clubs from Colorado—Night Rebels MC and Black Pistons MC—as well as the Red Devils from Taos, New Mexico, would arrive within the hour. Some of the members, including Viking from the Angry Disciples, had already arrived early that morning.

When Diesel walked into the room after work, he was surprised to see Myla in jean shorts and a baggy T-shirt sitting at the desk in front of the computer.



“How come you’re not ready?” He pulled his work shirt over his head. “Everyone’s started to pile in.”

“I’m going to pass on the party. I’ve never been a big party-goer, and the ones your club has are over the top. I’ll just hang out here and read a book.”

“That’s crazy. I want you there by my side.”

“Why? I mean, the women are basically invisible unless one of the guys wants an itch scratched. I’d be thrumming my fingers on the bar listening to deafening music while you catch up with your buddies.” A small grimace crossed her face. “Not my scene, but I know you’ll have a good time.”

“I thought you told me this morning you wanted to go.”

“No, you told me about it, and I said I’d think about it. I’m just not up to it.” Her eyes darted around the room. “This is getting kind of old.”

Diesel sucked in a breath. “What is?”

“Living at the club in one room, not having a job, and ... not having a life.” She bit her bottom lip as anxious eyes locked with his.

“What’re you saying?”

Myla pushed away from the desk and stood up. Folding her arms across her chest, she said, “Now isn’t the time to talk about this. You should be downstairs talking biker stuff with your friends.” A soft smile curved her lips.

“I want to know what you’re talking about. Don’t tell me that something’s getting old, then change the fuckin’ subject.”

Lips turned downward, she shook her head. “I didn’t mean to make you mad.”

Diesel sighed heavily and pushed a hand through his hair. “I’m not mad. Just tell me what’s going on in your head.”

“Okay.” Her gaze locked on his. “I feel like I’m living in limbo waiting for something that never comes.”

“What do you want to come?”

“A normal life. I’d like a job and to take a few art classes at the community college.”

He shrugged. “What’s stopping you? *Me?*”

Shaking her head vehemently, she said, “No, not you. Not at all. It’s the situation. I mean, I can’t live here anymore. I want a place of my own and more than one room and a bathroom.” She laughed. “I already did two years in a studio apartment when I got my first good-paying job.”

“So you want an apartment. I get it. I didn’t expect you to live here forever.”

“What did you expect?”

“Whaddya mean?”

“With us ... with me?”

Sticking his hands into his pockets, he flinched his head back slightly. *How the fuck did she change the conversation like that?* “I ... yeah, I mean, keep going like it is.”

“The status quo.”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Well, I want something more in life than the status quo. I deserve it.”

*What the fuck is she talking about?* “You deserve everything, darlin’.”

“And what’s *everything?*”

Before he could think of an answer, several loud knocks sounded in quick succession on the door.

“Diesel, get your ass downstairs. Banger’s waiting for you,” Smokey said.

He glanced over at Myla, who motioned for him to answer the door.

“I gotta change. I’ll be down in a few.”

“Just hurry your sorry ass up.”

He heard his buddy’s footsteps clomping down the stairs.

“Saved by the knock,” she said.

“The prez wants me. I gotta go, you know that.”

“I didn’t say anything. Have a good time.”

After a quick shower, a faster shave, and a set of clean clothes, he stepped over to Myla. She sat in a chair with her feet tucked under her, holding a book in her hands. Diesel dipped his head, she raised her gaze to meet his, and he kissed her deeply. The book dropped out of her hands and landed with a *thump* on the floor.

He straightened up as he smiled at her. “I won’t be very late,” he said as he strode to the door. After a quick wink, he closed the door and locked it.

Diesel rushed down the stairs and burst into the crowded-as-hell great room. Metal music blasted from the ceiling speakers. He waved his hands back and forth trying to dissipate the smoke as he searched for Banger.

“You finally got your ass down here.” Smokey shoved a tumbler of whiskey at him.

“Where’s Banger?”

“I dunno. Last time I saw him, he was with Panther and Steel. Why’re you asking?”

“You said he wanted me.”

Smokey guffawed. “You bought that shit? I just wanted your ass down here to team up with me in a couple rounds of pool. Demon and Iceman think they’re gonna beat us, and they got a wad of cash I’m aiming to win.”

“You asshole.” Diesel chuckled. “When do they wanna play?”

“After they get some of the ribs the ol’ ladies made for the party. You hungry?”

“Nah. Go ahead. I’ll just hang by the bar.”

As Diesel leaned against the counter, listening to Immortal Sÿnn over the Bose speakers, he thought of Myla. The funny thing was that he’d been thinking about buying some land and building a house for them. It was an idea that had been niggling in the back of his mind since they’d returned from San Diego. He hadn’t been sure she’d go for it, but after saying she wanted her own pad, he was cool with that if it included him.

Diesel had never felt anything like he did with Myla. The one thing he knew was that Myla filled up a deep void inside him that had been gnawing at him for the past six months or so. He also knew he wanted their lives to stretch into forever, to be so entangled that there’d be no separating them. Hell, he couldn’t stop thinking about her. She was on his mind when he first woke up in the morning when he showered, and when he was at work—even at the damn grocery store buying some shit to eat, he’d wonder what she’d like. She’d become his everything, and he was more than okay with that.

“Demon said he’ll be ready in about an hour. He wants to see the show Nina, Wendy, and Tania are gonna put on. His cock’s already hard just thinking about it.” Smokey laughed then took a chunk out of a barbecue rib.

Suddenly, Diesel didn’t want to be there, he wanted to be with Myla. He wanted her on the back of his bike, hugging him and never letting him go.

“Sorry, dude. I can’t make it.”

“What the fuck does that mean? What else do you have going?”

“Myla.”

“I fuckin’ knew it! Rags!” Smokey turned his head around, searching for the biker.

“He’s not gonna hear you, dude. It’s loud as hell in here. Why don’t you get him to partner with you?”

“He’s not as good a player as you. I want that dough, brother.”

“Then get Muerto. I heard he’s really gotten skilled since hitching with his ol’ lady.”

“Yeah, you’re right. She’s the pool shark. Fuck, I gotta go get him before someone else does. See ya.”

Diesel watched Smokey disappear into the crowd. He threw back the rest of his drink and then headed up the staircase.

When he entered the room, Myla looked up from her book and smiled at him—a warm, sexy smile. The corner of his mouth lifted as he took in her long dark hair, her killer green eyes, and how just looking at her was a kick to the gut *and* the groin.

“Did you forget something?” she said.

“Yeah ... you.”

“I told you I didn’t—”

“I’m taking you for dinner and a ride.”

Her face flushed and her orbs sparkled with excitement. “What about the party?”

“There’re always gonna be parties. I want to spend time with you. Close your book and get ready.”

She stood and hurried to the closet, delving inside. He heard the squeak and scrape of hangers against the apparel bar, then she came out holding a pair of black jeans and two tops.

“Which one do you like best?” She held up a low-cut red tank with tiny flowers all over it. “Or this one?” The other one was lavender with short sleeves and a scoop neck. It looked shorter than the red one, but her tits would stay better hidden in this one.

Pointing at the purple one, he said, “That one.”

“I like it better too. I’ll freshen up and change.”

He playfully smacked her booty as she rushed by. Laughing, she darted into the bathroom and shut the door. Switching on the TV, he plopped in the chair and waited for Myla.

Less than twenty minutes later, she emerged looking ravishing as usual. The jeans hugged her in all the right places, and the top molded over her tits perfectly.

“Beautiful and sexy. That’s a good combo, darlin’.”

“Thanks. You don’t look too shabby yourself. I’d tell you you’re handsome, but you already know it, and I’m sure hundreds of women have told you that before.”

“The only one I wanna hear it from is you, woman.” He pushed up from the chair.

“You’re more than handsome.” She sashayed over to him and ran her index finger along his jawline. “You’re gorgeous and damn sexy.”

“You keep looking at me like that and we’re gonna stay in and fuck all night.”

“That wouldn’t be bad, would it?” She threw him the sweetest and sexiest smile.

Laughing, he caught her hand and brought it to his lips. “Not at all.”

“But going for a ride is pretty tempting too.”

“We can do both. Ride and then get it on.”

“Are we going to town? Maybe West Pinewood Springs?”

“Around the back roads. You’re gonna love it.”

“I know I will.” She bent down and tugged on a pair of short black boots. “I’m super excited.” Her gaze lifted and met his.

In a heartbeat, Diesel was at her side, pulling her up then drawing her to him. He kissed her gently on the lips.

“You’re different from any woman I’ve known.”

“How many have you been with?” She leaned closer into him.

“A lot. They all mix together, and there was nothing there but lust and some fun times. It’s nothing like what we have going on. No chick can ever compare to you.”

“I like hearing that.” She licked the top of his ear then drew his earlobe in her mouth and sucked gently.

“Fuck ...” He pushed into her, his hard dick poking at her soft flesh. “I don’t know what the hell you’re doing to me, but you’re on my mind all the time. I can’t get enough of you, darlin’.”

“And I can’t get enough of you,” Myla whispered breathlessly.

“I like knowing that.” He moved the hair from the side of her neck and lavished the spot with slow, wet kisses.

“You do?” She moved her head further to the side, giving him access to all the sensitive spots that he knew drove her wild.

“Fuck yeah.” He pulled down the strap on her top, exposing her shoulder. Then he kissed it over and over before his mouth trailed up her neck, over her jawline, and landed on her soft lips.

She groaned in pleasure, her fingers running through his hair, then pulled away and stepped back. “We better get going.”

“What the fuck, woman? Are you gonna leave me like this?” He cupped his erection in his hand.

“We can pick up with that later.” She threw him an innocent smile, collected her sunglasses, walked over to the door, and opened it. “Are you coming?”

Shaking his head, he strolled over, lowered his head, and kissed her hard as his hand tweaked her nipples. A small gasp followed by a moan escaped from her parted lips, and she

moved closer to him, but he brushed past her and stepped into the corridor. Glancing at her, he said, “You coming?”

Nodding, she smoothed down her top and locked the door behind her. “All set.” She flashed one of her smiles that melted his heart, but he didn’t bite; instead, he snagged her hand and led her down the stairs.

Before heading out, he went behind the bar and snatched several mini-bottles of Jack and a regular-sized bottle of white wine. With his stash under his arm and in one hand, and Myla in tow, he walked out of the clubhouse.

Music and chatter from the partygoers drifted out across the parking lot. The dry wind carried the smell of fresh cannabis, alcohol, tobacco, and body sweat.

“I can’t believe how many people rode in for this party,” she said as she settled on the leather seat.

“Bikers love an excuse to ride and party.” He put the drinks inside a saddlebag then swung his leg over the seat and sat down. He switched on the ignition and the Harley roared to life. He revved the powerful engine, and with her arms grasping him tightly, he blasted off.

Twenty minutes later, they left the noises of the town behind them and rode one-lane backroads through verdant valleys in wildflower country. Palettes of colors, from the indigo-and-white columbine to the fiery oranges of Indian paintbrush bordered both sides of the road. The bike continued its climb into aspen groves and densely wooded areas complemented by rocky mesas and lush pine trees. After crossing over one of the higher passes, a patchwork of small ranches opened up in a yawning valley beneath them. Cows and horses sprinkled the landscape, munching in pastures, and daisies and violet sage dotted the hills and valleys while the smell of fresh-turned earth curled around them.

Diesel hung a sharp left and followed the narrow road around a couple of curves as he headed toward Crystal Lake. He knew how Myla loved the water, and he wanted to share



one of his favored lakes in the area with her. It was one of his favorite destinations when he needed to get away from everything and spend some quiet time amid the splendor of the great outdoors. He'd never taken anyone there before, and it seemed like the right time to share his special place with her.

Diesel pulled into a small alcove and killed the engine. Twisting his torso, he extended his hand to help her dismount then he got off the bike.

“That was a fantastic ride! The scenery was breathtaking.” A light red color tinged her cheeks. “Where are we?”

“Crystal Lake. I know how you love watching the water. This is one of my go-to spots when I want to get rid of all the crap knocking around in my head. I wanted you to experience it with me.”

Myla blinked a few times and leaned into him. “Thank you for bringing me here. It’s beautiful.”

A grin broke out across his face. “You haven’t seen nothing yet.” He opened the saddlebag and took out the libations, a couple of plastic cups, and a buffalo check blanket. He stuffed all the items in a cotton bag then took her hand and walked down a pebbly dirt path.

After a couple of minutes, a crystalline alpine lake surrounded by stellar scenery appeared in front of them.

“Oh, my God, this is gorgeous,” she murmured.

“Let’s go over here.” He steered them toward a grassy area next to the lake and spread the blanket under a large tree, making sure it was half in the shade and half out.

“I can’t believe how beautiful it is here. And it’s so quiet. I’m surprised there aren’t a bunch of tourists mingling around here.”

“They go to Glacier Lake. It’s another thirty or forty miles from here. There’s a huge campground with RV hookups, barbecue grills, a store, and a ton of other shit. The lake’s big enough for kayaking and speedboating. Crystal Lake gets

overlooked, which suits me just fine. It's much more private and less trafficked."

"I love it. I'm going to the water."

"Knock yourself out. I'll set up shop here."

Dropping to his haunches, he took out the mini bottles of whiskey and the green wine bottle then placed the plastic cups upside down on the blanket. Standing up, he watched as Myla walked to the lake's edge. She dropped low and ran her hand through the clear water.

"It's cold," she said, glancing at him over her shoulder.

"So not good skinny-dipping temperature," he replied.

"No way." She straightened up and strolled toward him.

"Alpine lakes are usually cool to freezing-ass cold. I sometimes take a dip on hot-as-hell days. The cool water kicks my ass each time at first, but then it feels good."

Pointing at a big wooden sign saying No Swimming, she laughed. "I figured this wouldn't deter you."

"No fuckin' way. You know me."

He took her in his arms and crushed her into his powerful chest as his hands cupped her behind. Bending low, he closed his mouth over hers as she circled her arms around his neck, pushing herself even closer to his body. His dick rubbed against her as she moaned into his mouth.

"You taste sweet," he said against her lips. Diesel eased her down on the blanket, sitting side by side, and held her head as it fit comfortably in the crook of his arm.

"It's so serene here. I can see why this is your favorite," Myla said as her gaze scanned the natural surroundings.

"It's definitely the place I go most often when I need to decompress." Diesel kissed the top of Myla's head, and she snuggled deeper into him.

They sat in silence as they looked at the mountains' rugged precipices and polished faces of rocks reflected onto the placid and crystalline lake. Every so often, a speckled trout slapped the surface, hoping to catch one of the army of flies that buzzed slightly above the water. Behind them, humming bees flitted from flower to flower while a medley of birds echoed through the ponderosa pine trees circling a good portion of the shoreline.

Myla tilted her head up and met Diesel's stare. Cupping her chin in his hand, he brought her face toward his and brushed his tongue over her full lips. His gaze lingered on her mouth as his thumb caressed her bottom lip. As she licked his thumb with the tip of her tongue, he moved it in her mouth, and her lips captured it, sucking and biting it. Burying his face into her hair, a deep heat built up in his body. Myla's orange vanilla scent, her feminine curves, and her hot mouth on his thumb heightened all of his nerves.

"You're making me so fuckin' horny," he rasped.

"Me too, but I'm not that adventurous to do it outside with bees and other insects buzzing and crawling around."

Diesel laughed. "Talk about a cockblocker, darlin', that's it." He reached over and picked up the plastic cups, handed one to Myla, then poured her a generous portion of wine before he unscrewed one of the mini bottles of Jack.

"Here's to us." He touched the plastic bottle to her cup then threw back the shot.

"To us," she whispered before taking a sip of wine.

"Speaking of that, I wanted to talk to you about something I've been thinking about for a couple of weeks. It's about us." He noticed her hand trembled slightly and the muscles in her face tensed.

"Go on." She placed the cup on the blanket, her fingers still wrapped around it.

"I want to buy some land and build a house for us. It'd be kickass, and we could hire Baylee to design it."

“Baylee?”

“She’s an architect and Axe’s ol’ lady. She’s only working part-time ’cause they got two little boys, but she’s one of the best in town. She’s originally from Denver, like you.”

“I’ll have to meet her. But wait, you want to *build* a house for us?” She rose to a sitting position.

“Yeah. It’s better than buying one. We can design it how we want and put in all the security stuff. Hawk can help with that.”

“Building a house could take a long time.”

Diesel blew out a breath. “I know, and I also know staying at the clubhouse isn’t an option, so let’s rent a townhouse. I don’t want to live in an apartment with a bunch of assholes above and below me to get on my nerves.”

“You realize you already live in an apartment with a bunch of ... *people* around you.”

“Smartass.” He leaned over and gave her a quick kiss. “The brothers are different even though we can all be assholes some of the time. I was talking ’bout citizens. You know ... strangers.”

“A townhouse has people around you.”

“But you got somewhat of your own space, and we can get a corner unit. I’d prefer a house, but they’re hard to come by nowadays since these fuckers from other states have come in and bought or rented a ton of properties.”

Myla sniggered. “A townhouse is good. I was just giving you a hard time.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less from you, darlin’.” Diesel winked at her.

“So you want to live together?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Okay.” Her voice was hesitant, and it made his heart skip a few beats.

“You don’t want to?”

“I ... I do, but ... I don’t want to drift along without more of a commitment.”

Diesel ran his hands over his face. “I hear you.” He took her hands in his. “I’ve never been hooked on a chick. Never thought or wanted any part of it. I saw the shitty relationship my people had, and it soured me. But then I met you, first, through the letters we wrote, then when you needed my help. I’ve felt a connection to you for a long time. The letter stuff, I brushed off. You were my brother’s girl, and I figured I was just horny ’cause I was in the slammer without any pussy, but when I saw you for the first time at Ruthie’s Diner, I felt that connection again, only it was stronger.”

“I felt it too.”

“What I’m saying is that I’ve never been in love with any woman. There hasn’t even been a glimmer of it, but I love you, and if we’re honest with each other, it scares the fuckin’ shit outta me.”

“I love you so much, Diesel. At first I wrestled with it because of you being Freddy’s brother, but I’ve resolved all that within myself. I’m scared too because, unlike you, I fall in love too fast, and that’s why none of my past relationships have worked out. I came from parents who never paid attention to any of us. We were on our own, and I guess I needed the attention, so I ended up in relationships way sooner than I should have.”

“We’re both fucked up from our past, but I know you’re the one who fills all the little dark places in my heart.”

“And with your love, I can rise out of the rubble of my life and piece it back together. I can’t imagine not having you in my life. I wasn’t sure how you felt.”

“I’m all in, darlin’. I love you. It’s simple and complicated as fuck.”

“So what do we do?”

“Take it slow. Get to know each other better and see where we are in six months. I know I’ll be by your side, but I wanna make sure you will too. Being hitched isn’t anything to take lightly. When I give you a cut and ask you to be my ol’ lady, it’s for life.”

“I want to be sure you’ll be there for the long haul too. I couldn’t handle a breakup if we’re ‘hitched.’ I think I need something more than words, though.”

“Like what? In the biker world it’s the cut.”

“What about one of your favorite rings? The skull one with the ruby eyes and diamond tooth.”

“My ring I got when I was patched in?”

“Yes.” Her gaze bore into him.

“You got it, darlin’. I want us to be a couple, to have a life together, and not to have regrets, so I’m all fuckin’ in.”

“Me too. The ring will be a symbol of our love.”

“Until I give you my property patch and see it on you. If Freddy hadn’t been in the equation, maybe we wouldn’t be as guarded. I don’t know, but I wanna make sure you’re all in for life.”

“I do too, and I want you to be a-million-plus-infinity-percent sure about sharing a life with me.”

“But even though you’re not wearing my patch, you’re my woman. We belong to each other.”

“I don’t cheat. I saw the destruction of my parents’ relationship and each of my mom’s marriages. I expect you to be true to me. I won’t tolerate it if you’re not. I let some things pass when I was with Freddy and a couple of other men, but I’m done with all that. I deserve better.”

“I’m not the cheating type. I feel the same as you. My people didn’t know how not to hurt each other.”

“Then we’re going steady. That’s what it’s called in my world.”

“Whatever you wanna call it is fine by me. When we get back to the room, I’ll give you the ring.”

“I’ll wear it around my neck since it’ll be too big and I don’t want to lose it.”

“I can get you another ring that’ll fit you.”

“No, I want the skull one because it’s a sacrifice for you to give it to me.” She flung herself into his arms. “I love you.”

“I love you too, darlin’.” He kissed her hard.

“Let’s pick up a pizza and go back to the room.”

“Now you’re talking.”

Diesel jumped up and gathered the booze while Myla folded the blanket. They couldn’t walk fast enough to the motorcycle. He stuffed everything in the saddlebag and then hauled ass back to the clubhouse.

They walked through the great room, and many brothers accosted him. He gave his due respect to the visiting members, but the fire he had burning inside kept getting stronger. Myla hung on to his arm, and her touch was scorching his skin. All he wanted was to be alone with her, feel himself inside her, and hear her sweet cries of ecstasy.

After what seemed like a lifetime, Diesel said his goodbyes and slowly backed out of the room.

“I thought we’d never get the fuck outta there,” he said as they dashed up the stairs.

When they arrived at the room, Myla scratched his back and squeezed his ass while he tried to open the door. The lock unclicked, Diesel swung open the door and then kicked it shut. She pressed her mouth against his, and he kissed her back, licking, sucking, and memorizing the very taste of her. He slid his hands over her ass, gripped her luscious cheeks hard, and slammed her against the wall.

He ripped his lips away. Her arousal mixed with his created a tangy, musky scent, which drove him crazy. "I've been wanting to fuck you since before we left for Crystal Lake," he growled.

"Me too." She scraped her nails over the back of his neck. "Make me feel it tomorrow."

He pressed into her, his erection pushing against her. His teeth grabbed her bottom lip, sucking it before his mouth covered hers, his tongue darting in and out. In frantic moves, they tore off each other's clothes, touching, grabbing, kissing, and biting as if it were the last time they'd ever taste and feel each other again.

Diesel lifted Myla's leg, and she wrapped it around him. He ran his finger up and down her soaking wet opening before sliding a finger in and rubbing her wet nub.

"You like that?" he rasped.

"Fuck, yes," she moaned, her body writhing in his strong arms.

"And this ..." The side of his thumb stroked her sweet spot, and he loved how she clawed at his neck and then pulled his hair. He swallowed her gasps while he kept stroking and finger-fucking her.

"I want you inside me. *Now!*"

He slipped his finger out, and she put her other leg around him, hugging him close as he held her up, his hands squeezing her ass cheeks.

"Bring your tits up to me," he demanded.

Squeezing them together, she pushed them up, and he lowered his head, sucking one hard bud into his mouth and then the other one.

"Diesel. Oh, Diesel ..." Reaching out, she scratched his chest and then down over the tattoos on his arms.

"Fuck, woman."



Their eyes locked, and he pushed into her. He was mesmerized by her beauty, by being inside her. The intensity of *her* jolted his senses like a power surge, and he knew he was forever hooked.

He pulled out slowly then shoved into her fiercely, her back against the wall, his mouth on hers as he banged her hard and fast.

“It feels so damn good,” she groaned as she pushed back and met his thrusts.

The sound of her wetness mixed with his slapping balls at each thrust.

“You’re mine,” he grunted out, pumping into her. “Mine. Now come for me,” he snarled.

The combination of his mouth, dick, and tongue crashing together brought Myla to the edge of intense pleasure. Their grunts and moans filled the room, and he felt spasms erupt in her while she cried out his name. He watched her lose herself while he continued thrusting until a bolt of pure pleasure rode up his spine. He threw his head back and grunted out her name.

They slid to the floor, panting in each other’s ears, their bodies sated.

After the wave of rapture faded, he helped her up, and they lay on the bed with her tucked beside him.

“That was so damn intense,” she said, running her fingers lightly over his chest.

“Fuck, darlin’, we’re good together. I love you from every corner of my dark, fucked-up heart.”

She tilted her head back and caught his gaze. “I love you, fucked up or not. Besides, I’m not exactly put together, but with each other we become whole. I love how you make me feel safe. Knowing you’re in my life makes the bad times bearable and the past forgettable.”

“I’ll always be there for you. I’m here for you to lean on. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

“So, you’ll order us a pizza?” she said as her stomach growled.

He guffawed and held her tight. “Yeah, with extra cheese, pepperoni, and jalapeños, just the way you like it, darlin’.”

A sweet comfortable silence fell between them. For the first time in his life he felt like nothing was missing. He never expected to have a relationship with a woman. But Myla had gotten into his heart when he wasn’t looking, and he knew—six months or not—that they would be hitched for the rest of his life.

*It can’t get any better than that.*

Diesel reached over, snagged his cell, and tapped the phone icon for their favorite pizzeria.

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## EPILOGUE

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*Four months later ...*

LEAVES SKITTERED DOWN the pavement, and the aroma of cinnamon and warm spices rode on the breeze, curling around Myla and whispering of warm winter fires yet to come. With a bundle of mail in one hand, she fished through her pocket for the house key as she climbed the brick steps to the porch. She pushed open the front door and entered into the foyer of their house.

The thrill of owning a house hadn't yet dissipated, and she still couldn't believe that the nearly five-thousand-square-foot home was theirs. Unlike the enormous house she'd lived in with Freddy in Denver, this one was cozy and felt like home. Diesel had insisted on putting both their names on the title, which made her love for him deepen even more.

Myla put the mail down on the granite kitchen counter and leafed through it quickly; it was mostly junk that would end up in the recycle bin. She opened the refrigerator and took out a bottle of caramel latte that Diesel had bought for her on his way home from work the night before. He was so thoughtful, always putting her needs first before his, even when they made love. She figured that might have changed the longer they were together, but it hadn't.

Glancing at the clock, she put the cap on the bottle and placed it back in the refrigerator. She was supposed to pick up Diesel from work. His bike was at Hawk's shop getting repaired, so he'd been sulking about it for the past couple of days. It was like he'd lost his best friend or something, but to a biker, his motorcycle *was* one of his dearest buddies.

She dashed up to the master bedroom, pulled out a new fuzzy sweater she'd just received from Nordstrom's the day before, and replaced the top she wore with the new purchase.

A quick freshen up of her makeup and hair, and she was ready to go.

“Hiya, Myla,” Jada said when she walked into the carwash.

“Hi. How’s school going for you?”

“Okay. It’s getting harder, but it’s also more interesting now that I’ve moved past required courses and can take classes in my major.”

“That’s always fun. Is Diesel in the back?”

“He’s in the office. Wheelie had to leave. Sofia had a doctor’s appointment.” The young cashier rolled her eyes. “It’s not like this is their first kid. I’m sure he’s driving Sofia nuts.”

Myla laughed. “No matter how many you’ve had, I’d think every pregnancy is a little bit nerve wracking, but I’m sure it gets easier.”

“Especially for the girl. My mom told me that my dad was crazed with Animal’s and my birth. It’s too funny. Animal was like that too when he and Olivia had Ava. He would’ve been that way with Lucy, but he didn’t know he was a daddy until she was older.”

“Are you talking or working?” Diesel teased.

“Both. I can multi-task real well.” Jada glanced at the computer screen.

Turning to Myla, he said, “Hi.” His gaze traveled over her, taking in every bit of her.

Each time he *really* looked at her, a shiver of golden light raced down her spine.

“Hi,” she replied softly.

“Come on back. I’m in the office.”

“That’s what Jada said.” She trailed behind him.

The minute Diesel shut the door, he pulled her to him and pressed his mouth on hers.

“How’s my wife doing?”

Myla giggled. Every time he said “wife” it made her skin tingle and her core throb. “Fantastic, now that I’m in your arms.”

He kissed her again while his hands slid lower until he cupped her behind and squeezed. “I’m fuckin’ great too with your tits pressed against me, my hands on your ass, and our lips nearly fused together,” he rasped in her ear.

Myla couldn’t believe they hadn’t been able to follow through the full six months upon which they’d agreed. At the time they entered their arrangement, it made sense, but after almost three months of living together, they both knew another three months wouldn’t make any difference at all. They were meant to be together. So, when he asked her to be his ol’ lady and handed her a leather cut, which proudly displayed “Property of Diesel” embroidered on the back, she didn’t think she could be happier than she was at that moment. But then came the wedding, the honeymoon in Carmel, the endless days and nights of lovemaking, watching movies, riding through the countryside on the weekends, and so much more. The simple truth was that he made her happy. Even when they’d have a disagreement, neither of them stayed mad for long. She couldn’t imagine her life without him, and each day she was grateful that they had found each other.

“I’m here with a raging boner, and you’re off in la-la land.”

A surge of heat rushed to her face, and she knew her cheeks were blooming. “I’m sorry, honey. I was just remembering when you gave me the cut with your patch.”

“I love seeing you wear it, especially without anything else on.”

“I love you so much. I keep wondering if it’s okay to be this happy.”

“Fuck yeah, especially when you’ve had to deal with a lot of shit along the way. I love you too, darlin’. Life can be good,

but it can be real tough. Still, we've taken the risk and made the commitment to see life through the great times and the shitty ones." He lifted up his left hand, and a gold band shined under the fluorescent light. Tapping the ring against hers, he said, "We told one another to hold on tight. The ride we're taking is a long one, but the kickass part is we've got each other."

"And we're doing it together."

"All the fuckin' way, darlin'."

Myla circled her arms around his waist and buried her head against his chest. The scent of minty air freshener, car exhaust, sandalwood, and leather filled her nostrils as she breathed in his scent.

"Now, we're gonna close shop, and then I'm gonna make you squirm and scream on the top of my desk."

"And then?" Glancing up at him, she held his heated gaze.

"Whatever you want, darlin'."

Planting a small kiss on his chin, she said, "Lasagna at Little Pepina's."

Diesel threw his head back and laughed. "Damn, I love you, woman. After I make you feel good all over, we'll get some lasagna. Lemme lock up."

When he left the room, Myla cleared off his desk then stripped down to her lacey red bikini panties and bra, keeping her three-inch heels on. She hopped up on the desk and sat like a pinup girl: knees bent, breasts thrusting upward. The pair of black high heels accentuated her calves.

"Everything's locked. Now we—" Diesel stopped mid-sentence and gawked. A wicked grin slowly spread across his face. "Fuck, darlin', you're tempting as hell. I can see a wet spot on those tiny panties you're wearing."

With the tip of her finger, she slowly licked her lips as her gaze dipped to his stiff dick, bobbing while he got rid of his

clothes. He came toward her, his prize possession standing ramrod straight.

“Damn, woman, I can’t wait to get inside you. I can smell your desire—sweet and wet.”

In two strides, her husband hovered over her and was touching, licking, tasting, and doing wonderfully wicked things to her, fueling the fire burning inside her.

And when he slipped off her red panties, she lay back and closed her eyes. *He’s perfect, and he’s all mine.*

Her husband was the ache between her legs, the shivers on her skin, and the desire in her body. She loved him with a fire that could never be extinguished.

Diesel was her lifeline forever, and she had finally found her home safely in his arms after all this time.



Dear Readers,

Thank you for reading my book. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed writing Diesel and Myla’s story. This gritty and rough motorcycle club has a lot more to say, so look for the upcoming books in the series.

If you enjoyed the book, please consider leaving a review on Amazon. I read all of them and appreciate the time taken out of busy schedules to do that.

Have you read [Hawk’s Property](#) yet? It’s the first book that launched the [Insurgents MC Romance Series](#).

One of the Insurgents MC charter clubs is the [Night Rebels MC](#). The club hails from Southwestern Colorado. Ready book one by clicking [STEEL](#). It’s a great way to get to know the president and the other MC members.

I love hearing from my fans, so if you have any comments or questions, please email me at [chiahwilder@gmail.com](mailto:chiahwilder@gmail.com) or visit my [facebook](#) page.

Want to find out about all my **new releases**, **special sales**, **ARC opportunities** and receive a **free copy of my novella**, *Summer Heat*? You can get on my VIP reader list by clicking [HERE](#) or going to <http://eepurl.com/bACCL1>.

Happy Reading,

*Chiah*



# Rags's Awakening: Insurgents MC

Coming October 2023

**Two broken souls collide amidst the cracks of fear and love to emerge from life's broken places.**

A member of one of the **largest MCs in Colorado**, Rags is an **Insurgent** all the way. The **outlaw** is a free-loving biker loyal to the brotherhood and its lifestyle: fast Harleys, easy women, and hard-hitting brawls. It's a simple life and that's the way he likes it.

He'd given his heart to two different women in his life, each of them shredding it, so he's *not* interested in another round. Now a barbed wire protects his heart and that suits him just fine.

Then he sees *her* and his simple life suddenly becomes complicated. **Wild black hair tumbling down her back, curves just the way he likes them, and a defiant look in her dark brown eyes.** Yeah ... she's just the type of woman to **stir up his libido** *and* cause a lot of **trouble**.

Casey Reece is juggling three jobs to pay off debts her ex stuck her with as a parting gift. She once gave her heart to a man in leather, and he rode right over it. Now, she has sworn off *anyone* who even *thinks* about a *motorcycle* or whose wardrobe includes more leather than hers. She's had her fill of bikers, their clubs, and their endless chatter about their beloved Harleys. Her only focus is picking up her life from the wreckage of her marriage.

When the rugged biker comes into the store acting like he knows *everything* about her job, anger rushes through her. So what if he's **lean, tall, and wickedly handsome** and his **swagger** and **bad boy** attitude are **sexy**? He's obviously an outlaw biker, and she's not interested, even though the intensity of his gaze makes her stomach twist. But ... one heartache is enough for a lifetime.

Fate seems to be messing with her because she keeps bumping into the sexy outlaw, and when his hazel gaze locks onto her

brown one, **an undeniable desire sizzles between them.**

And in the midst of all this, a serial killer is roaming around the area, leaving a trail of bodies in his wake. All of a sudden, Casey is pulled into **a terrifying nightmare** and the only one who can help her is the sexy biker with the infuriating swagger.

Can Rags and Casey swallow their pride and rise from the ashes of their broken pasts to discover that the deepest scars are the ones that lead to the most profound and healing love?

**The Insurgents MC series are standalone romance novels. This book describes the life and actions of an outlaw motorcycle club. HEA. No cliffhangers.**