

Lucky

Storm



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Echo Location

Frozen Echo

Dedication

This one goes out to my girl, who graciously gives me all the time in the world to write books for all of you. She lets my Megamind run wild, and she creates a wonderful home filled with loving energy and laughter. After 15 years, she still thinks I'm cute...which is not easy when you see the action figure doll I have of myself, the animals she is constantly buying food for, and the computer games I often play. She loves me unconditionally and it is that kind of love and support that makes it easy to write as much as I do. I am incredibly fortunate to be loved by her.

Acknowledgments

This one is for my JUGs sisters...riding Lucky with all of you is one of my top three things to do in this life...so Lil G, Easy Breezy and Lolo, this one is definitely for you!

About the Author

Storm is the alter ego of the ever-changing-but-always-writing Linda Kay Silva, who, at 50, changed her name, got a full sleeve tattoo, went to Egypt, and jumped out of an airplane with her youngest daughter. Storm is a Sergeant of Arms of Just Us Girls (JUGs) motorcycle club. She is an avid and ferocious tennis player, a collector of swords and action figures, and yes, even had her own action figure doll made. Storm recently returned from a trip to Africa, where she intends on sending one of her characters. Unlike Linda Kay, who falls in love with her characters and thus, creates series, Storm writes stand alones and then moves on...much like she does when riding her Harley, letting no grass grow under her wheels.

Sleek, sexy and with more chrome on her than a parking lot full of hubcaps, she stopped me dead in my tracks. I mean I came to a complete standstill as if she had called my name like a whisper in the wind from a long-lost lover.

I wanted her.

“What are you doing?” Marla asked, running into me from behind as I stopped dead. Marla had been my best friend for the last thirty years, and the first person off the bench whenever I needed retail therapy.

Boy, did I need that.

“Look at her,” I whispered, stepping up to the row of Harleys parked in front of Oakland Harley like someone caught in a hypnotist’s trance. Sitting pristinely among the new motorcycles stood a 2003 Dyna Wide Glide, complete with yellow, red and orange flames on the tank and fenders. There was a slight glitter to the paint that made the sun jump off the tank. The paint job was amazing, but that wasn’t what caught my eye. Both sides of this gorgeous bike were almost entirely chrome; from the chrome pipes to its spokes, the bike was custom all the way and shone like a beacon into what had become a dark and dull life.

“Who?” Marla looked over the bikes at the salesgirl dressed like a Playboy Bunny and looking all of fifteen years old.

Kneeling down, I heard my fifty-year-old knees pop and crack as I gingerly ran my fingers over her cool, smooth pipes. Inscribed on the battery and manifold cover were a pair of dice rolling a seven. The top inscription read Lucky.

“Lucky,” I murmured, caressing her like a lover. “Her name is Lucky.”

"Please tell me you're kidding," Marla said, stepping away from the motorcycles as if they might bite her.

I barely heard her. My fingers were reading the engravings like braille, and I was hooked. Game. Set. Match.

"I want her."

"No, you don't."

I nodded, rising to look at her other side. Yep, there was just as much chrome here as well. Someone had really loved this bike. They'd built it from the bottom up. And it was gorgeous. "Yes, I do."

"Remember when I wanted that Maserati and you talked me down? This is *me*, talking *you* down. Come on. I thought you came in here for some badass boots, not a goddamned motorcycle you don't even remember how to ride." Marla took my arm, but I didn't budge.

"Parker Lee, you're having a midlife crisis your pocketbook can't afford."

The salesgirl was making her way over to us, and Marla's hand tightened on mine. "Don't be a fool, Parker," she growled under her breath. "It's been, what, twenty years since you crashed one of those damn things? You were lucky to get away with just a broken collarbone."

"Twenty-five," I said softly, never taking my eyes from the bike. Twenty-five years ago—half a lifetime, when my whole life lay ahead of me...and so had a Mercedes dead ahead. I'd had to lay the Sportster down on the harsh pavement with my girlfriend on the back. I never rode again; never thought I wanted to, but this wasn't a want; this was a *need*; the desperate need of a desperate woman stuck in a terrible rut who wanted some of that twenty-five years back.

Twenty-five years ago, I'd made a name for myself as an artist. I'd sold paintings to San Francisco's elite, to Hollywood's players, to music's divas. I'd made enough to open my own gallery in downtown San Francisco and successfully support my addiction to art and painting. For the last twenty-five years, I'd run through a dozen women, all of whom thought it *romantic* to be with an artist until they realized that painting is not a team sport. It's not even a spectator sport. It is a one-person play with

no audience and no sidekick. Once they fell out of love with the idea of being with an artist, the relationships unraveled. Three times I'd been left and didn't know it until I went to bed and found it empty. Along with closets and drawers, and sometimes, even the refrigerator.

Okay, so maybe I didn't pay close enough attention.

Twenty-five years ago, I had the world at my feet. Lately, my feet were stuck in dog crap, and I had no idea how I got here. Suddenly, I couldn't paint, had no love life, and was reduced to joining the rising number of antidepressant users. Where once I rocked, now I sucked, and sucked badly. Somewhere along the way, I left myself. I had forgotten who I was and what I wanted out of life. Maybe it was fifty, maybe it was menopause, but whatever it was, I needed my luck to turn around. I needed to see life with a fresh pair of eyes.

I needed Lucky.

"You've got great taste," the salesgirl said, flashing me her best salesgirl smile. I looked at her once and realized she probably had done a lot of things on a Harley except ride one.

Marla huffed. "We're just looking."

"I'll take her," I said before I could even think of those three words.

Both women stared at me.

"Don't you want to test ride her?" the salesgirl asked, pulling at her brown ponytail. I wondered how on earth she could sell anything. She looked about twenty-five, and I wondered if she knew what was ahead for her next twenty-five.

Stepping up to Lucky, I peered down at the odometer. "Only one thousand miles? Why is that?"

"The previous owner just likes working on bikes. He built it but seldom rode it."

Marla cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, but it seems my friend here has lost her mind."

Marla pulled me to her and spat, "*Stop* this right now. These days, you can barely afford gallery rent. Besides, do you have any idea how much Chase will light into you *and* me if I let you do this?"

Chase was my ultraconservative daughter who was the black

and white yin to her mother's psychedelic yang. She was always busting my chops about something that didn't fit into a neat little box in her OCD world. Looking into Marla's blue eyes, I whispered, "I *need* to do this, Mar. I *need* something to get me out of this quicksand. I...need this."

"Then join a book club...volunteer...grow a garden. Do something sensible, but stop this crazy talk about a motorcycle."

"In other words, succumb to my age and act old." I shook my head. "Conventionality has never been my way. Why start now?"

"Because they're dangerous and I'd like to see you live to sixty." As Marla studied my eyes, thirty years of unconditional love and support flowed between us. I knew what she would say even before she said it. "Just don't mention my name when Chase finds out or she'll kill us both."

This made me chuckle. "She still scares you, eh?"

"Not scares. Bores. I hate when she gets all sanctimonious and self-righteous. And I ask once more, are you sure she wasn't switched at birth?"

I mouthed *thank you* and turned back to Suzy the salesgirl who was about to make the easiest sale of her short-lived life. "I'll take her without the test ride. I'll also need a helmet and gloves."

"And this super nice leather jacket." Marla held the jacket up.

As we followed her back to her cubicle, Marla threaded her arm through mine. We were nearly the same height and build, but she had always had a high body temperature and I could feel the heat as she leaned into me. Menopause and its accompanying hot flashes would be the death of her.

"I should have bought that goddamned Maserati."

We both laughed. "Yes, you should have." I studied her eyes and long hair and thought she looked much younger than her fifty-two years. Plenty of younger men had thought so as well.

An hour later, I threw my leg over the saddle of my second steel horse, not knowing just how much she would change my life.

There's a saying riders have about riding a Harley: "If I have to explain it to you, you wouldn't understand." This is so true. From the moment I hit the start button and felt that rumbling vibrating thunder revving beneath me, I understood. Riding a Harley is an adventure, an experience that makes you one with the bike beneath you. It's not just a bike—it is an extension of you, of your personality. Like a beautiful lover, you are proud to be seen with a Harley, and when you ride, other riders acknowledge that you are sitting astride something special.

Out on the open road, you're as close to flying as you can be and still be on the ground. The freedom is infectious, the power intoxicating, and as Lucky roared down the freeway, I couldn't stop grinning and had to remind myself more than once to focus in.

When you're on a motorcycle, you can't think about your problems or daydream. You have to dial in, eyes scanning, back and forth, looking for anything that might be dangerous, and everything is. Dogs dart out into the street, cars slam on their brakes, pedestrians walk outside the crosswalk. Ever alert, your mind can only concentrate on the task at hand. Your life depends on it.

The time I'd had to lay my first bike down, a woman in a Mercedes had pulled out in front of us. I had been watching her front tires roll through the stop sign, and I knew we were toast. I drove the bike hard into the ground, meeting the pavement with my chin and losing my girlfriend off the back. The driver looked at me as I got out from under the bike, blood dripping from my chin—and then she did something I couldn't even believe. She started to drive away. Drive away! She was going to leave a downed bike, a bloody rider, and an unmoving passenger on the pavement as she made her getaway? She'd have made her ugly escape, too, had the accident not been seen by an enormous Samoan sitting across the street on *his* Harley. He pulled his huge, blue Road King in front of her car, stopping

her. Frantically rolling her windows up and locking the doors, the woman stared, bug-eyed, as he pounded on her window.

"You *caused* this, lady! If you try to drive away, I'll fucking pull you through the goddamned window!"

As my girlfriend lay in the street behind me and my chin dripped blood on my leather vest, I had no idea it would be the last time I'd ride for more than a quarter of a century.

"You're gonna be fine," the Samoan had said to me as I stared at my downed bike. "But you better check your passenger." There had been something comforting about his looming presence.

Such was the Harley community. The Samoan/Native American, named Tater, waited for the cops and was an amazing witness. Thanks to his eyewitness account of the whole accident, her insurance paid handsomely. I used that money to open my gallery, Bird's Eye, in downtown Oakland, California. So in a weird way, my first Harley had changed my life as well. I was hoping Lucky could give a repeat performance without the physical trauma.

Once the gallery had opened, making a name for myself in the art world happened fast, not because I'm that good but because Marla travels in the circles of the ultrarich and famous. Her hubby is a well-known plastic surgeon who was kind enough to hang my first works in his office. Before I knew it, I was no longer waiting tables to make artistic ends meet; I was a full-blown, self-supporting artist who'd sold paintings to Madonna, Michael Douglas and Ice-T. I'd made the big time professionally, often at the cost of my personal life, hence the revolving door on my bedroom that had slowed down of late.

But none of that mattered while I was on the bike. The only thing that mattered now was that I trusted Lucky. You have to trust a motorcycle when you're riding; trust it will take you around corners, that it will react when you pull the throttle. You and the bike have to become one, and by the time I pulled up to the gallery, Lucky was my new best friend.

I felt ten years younger. The wind in my hair seemed to refresh my spirit and revitalize me. As I locked her up, I stood back and grinned like I'd won the lottery. Not only was she a

beautiful ride, she was fast. Any touch of the throttle and she opened up like a horse wanting free rein. The vibration made her feel alive, and the heat from the pipes seconded that motion. She was perfect...and just what I needed.

Taking my helmet off, I shook out my gray hair and ran my fingers through it. Chase had been bugging me to color it, but I think hair is an extension of how we feel about ourselves. Short and punky usually was just that. Long and bland, same. For the last year, gray was pretty much how I felt. Reaching into the saddlebags, I pulled out my wallet, my iPhone and Lady Clairol. If I was going to pull myself out of this rut, I was going to do it all the way, starting with my appearance.

Once the bike was secure and I was done staring at her, I walked into the gallery and stashed my stuff in a brown paper shopping bag under the stairs. I lived above the gallery in a small loft with a huge deck where I painted. The lighting off the deck was perfect. This arrangement had its advantages and disadvantages. When I walked in, the place was quiet, as most galleries are, but I couldn't find my daughter anywhere. Her car was out in front, and I expected to find her dusting or straightening, as was her obsessive-compulsive nature, but she was not around.

"Chase?" I called up the stairs, wondering if she'd gone upstairs to snoop around. My apartment was off-limits, but that had never stopped her from snooping. Ever. "Chase, are you up there?" That was when I heard a noise from the storage room. Stepping quietly to its door, I listened. There were two people in there having a conversation. Grabbing a dowel, I held it over my head and whipped open the door. I stood face-to-face with my big-eyed granddaughter.

"Jackson? What are you doing here?" Jackson, my seventeen-year-old granddaughter, had that same deer-in-the-headlights look she had when I caught her at three years old eating my lipstick. Only now, her deep-set eyes held guilt. If she started playing with her long blond hair, I would know. It was her tell that she was not being truthful—a mannerism she'd had since she was a little girl.

"Umm...Mom had a nail emergency and asked me to cov—"

Looking past both her shoulder and the lie, I stared at the young man standing behind her who was clearly wishing there was a manhole to jump in. He was a handsome young African American who wore the same exact expression as my granddaughter.

"And who is this young man?" Pushing past Jacks, I cornered the boy, who looked like he might wet himself at any moment.

"I'm...um—"

"It's not a trick question, son. You're in *my* closet doing God knows what with *my* granddaughter. The least, the *very* least, you could do is introduce your sorry ass."

"My...Okay, ma'am. My name is Mikey."

"We're well beyond the ma'am stage, Mikey. Unless you want me to take you to the hospital to have this dowel removed from your—"

"Gramms—"

I whirled around. "What have I told you about that?"

She blushed and bowed her head. "Sorry. Parker, it's not what you think."

I crossed my arms. When did she get so tall? "Oh? What is it I'm thinking?"

To my surprise, she flicked the lights off, plunging us into complete darkness. "Turn around."

When I did, I saw my first glow-in-the-dark tattoo.

"He was showing me that."

I stepped closer. "Oh, now *that* is cool." I'd gotten three tattoos in my life, but I'd never seen anything like this. His whole face looked like a skeleton. "Ooh, I might have to get me one of these."

Jackson switched the light back on. "So, we're cool?"

I nodded. "We're cool until your negligence causes us all to get robbed." Stepping out of the closet, I motioned for them to do the same. "So, your mother had a *nail* emergency?" I could only shake my head. "She works here two days a week and still manages to find reasons not to come."

"I guess there's some big dinner at the country club tonight. You know how she gets."

I opened my mouth to say something nasty about her mother,

then thought better of it. Embarrassing my granddaughter wouldn't help anyone. "Say goodbye to Mikey, Jacks, then you can help me move the TransAmerica Pyramid out to the center."

As I watched them walk away, I wondered if having me for a grandmother was hard on her. Admittedly, I was not your average grandmother. First and foremost, I was gay. Thirty-two years ago, when I was her age, I didn't *want* to be gay. I *refused* to be. It was a hard path I didn't have the courage to live. Having grown up in the affluent bosom of the East Bay, I knew it as a rocky road to travel even if I lived in the shadow of San Francisco's Castro District. I'd grown up amid Republican disdain of anything slightly off-center. I mean, there was a *reason* the governor was a Republican. So, like too many other women like me, I tried to hide myself in hetero-land, hoping that maybe straightness would stick.

I was pretty naïve.

For a year, I tried to be straight. I went so far that I even managed to perfect the awful art of the blow job. While I was unsuccessful at *staying* straight, I was very successful at getting pregnant by a thirty-four-year-old investment banker who wasted no time in cutting me and my unborn fetus loose. Luckily, I was not some wilting flower willing to accept second-class status from a man willing to fuck me without a condom, so I blackmailed his rich ass into being financially responsible for Chase. Yeah. I thought I was hot shit until I realized, too late, that he had managed to adopt her and when his team of lawyers won him sole custody, he raised her in a lifestyle I'd never have and didn't want. He paid for her, all right. So did I. The currency was just different, that's all.

Unfortunately, and for different reasons, neither of us were very present in Chase's teenage years and she, like her mother, got pregnant too early in life. The only difference in our early pregnancies was that Chase kept Jackson, and they stayed with Chase's father until Chase married her current husband, Charles, a man twenty years her senior.

All that time, I was getting my groove on with various women, both gay and straight, and wondering how to make my own personal party last. I was as self-absorbed as a person can

get, but I called it being eccentric. It was what it was, and there's no denying the truth of it. I left my child to raise a child, and that child had been giving me fits ever since.

"Oh my God, Gramms. Is that yours?"

Looking up from my thoughts, I saw her pointing at Lucky and making her way to the driveway, with me right on her heels.

"You like her?"

"Like her? I love it!" Her green eyes grew wide with a childish delight I recognized. There are a few things our bizarre family all have in common. We're all left-handed with green eyes. We also come from a long line of women who choose our daughter's first names from our maiden names. My grandmother's maiden name was DuMont, so my mother's name is Dumont Lee Parker. My name is Parker Lee Chase. My daughter's name is Chase Lee Jackson, having been adopted by the investor, and my granddaughter's name is Jackson Lee Templeton, or "Jacks." This tradition apparently began back when our great great great-somebody hung out with the feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft back in the dark ages of feminism, before coming to America and starting the trend. I did not want to name my daughter Chase, but my mother is a force to be reckoned with and when the time came to sign all those birth certificate papers, she strong-armed me into it. Now, I'm glad I did. Chase is the perfect name for a woman who will forever be chasing her own happiness. Chase and Charles have, from the outside, a perfect marriage with all the right toys: summer house and expensive SUVs. They travel extensively and live in a fifty-five-hundred-square-foot home so they don't ever have to see each other.

The only good thing to come out of that marriage was Jackson, who was a little pill as a child and who often reminded me of myself. At the age of nine, she was caught smoking a joint she'd stolen from my house. At eleven, she stole a car, crashing it into a retaining wall. At fourteen, she had her first abortion and, at fifteen, she cut school more than she went. She was more than a handful to the two people who did everything they could to keep their looking-good on. She hated their wealth, hated her

father, and for the last two years, hated her life, so it surprised me she loved the bike.

“Mom’s gonna flip.”

I laughed. And there it was. She was more impressed by what the bike would do to her mother than the bike itself. “Yes, she is.” I watched Jackson staring at the bike and, in that moment, I somehow loved her more.

“It’s fucking awesome!” she said, caressing the tank. “I think it gave Mikey a boner.”

“As long as it wasn’t *you* giving Mikey a boner, it’s all good.” I walked over and gazed at my new bike. “She’s smokin’.”

“Can I sit on her?”

I shook my head. “It’s bad luck. I can give you a ride though, when I get a second helmet.”

Jacks shook her head. “Mom will crap her pants if you give me a ride. She’ll think you did it just to make her look bad.”

“Then we won’t tell her.”

“Good idea.”

We stood there quietly for a moment staring at Lucky. “She says you’re having a midlife crisis. Is that true?”

“No. I’m having *a* crisis, but it has nothing to do with my age. Remember when you were thirteen and you couldn’t figure out who you really wanted to be?”

She nodded. “Pretty sure I’m still in that phase.”

“Well, it’s like that.”

She turned to me, eyebrows furrowed like they did when she was five. “Then how come you always seem so together?”

I was thunderstruck she thought that. “Operative word in that sentence? *Seem*. The Lees are very, very astute. We can make everyone see whatever we want them to see.”

She nodded again. “Like how Chase and Charles want everyone to think they’re happily married?”

I tilted my head at her. She never missed a thing. “Exactly.”

“That’s fucked up. I want to live a more honest life than the plastic people.”

“Don’t we all. It’s important to live your life on your own terms.”

She nodded and inhaled deeply. "That's why I'm not going to college."

I looked at her, trying to keep my judgments to myself. She would get enough of those from her self-righteous mother. "Oh?"

"That's Mom's dream, not mine, and I wish she'd stop harping at me about it."

"They've saved a lot of money for college. They have big plans for you."

"Right. *Their* plans. I need a goddamn break from books and teachers and idiot students in stuffy classrooms. I need out from under Chase's thumb, you know?"

Boy did I.

"That's why this Harley came at the perfect time."

I chuckled. "A diversion?"

She chuffed. "Oh hell yeah. Chase won't bother me now for a couple of days at least!"

We left Lucky and moved paintings around for another twenty-five minutes before Chase came bursting through the door. Nail crisis averted!

"When will these Koreans learn to speak English?" she asked, blowing on her nails. "It's like you have to—" She paused before slowly turning around and looking out the window at Lucky gleaming at her. Still peering out the window, she slowly turned back to us, her face registering a mixture of emotions—all of them bad. "Where's your *car*?"

"At Marla's. We went shopping."

Jackson snorted a repressed laugh before letting go of the last painting we were moving. "I'm out," she said, grabbing her backpack. "You're on your own, Gra—Parker."

"Coward."

She waved goodbye to Chase before pushing out the door.

"Please don't tell me—"

"Yep. She's all mine."

Closing her eyes, she slowly shook her head, exasperation written all over her face.

"Ain't she a beaut?"

Opening her eyes, Chase still shook her head,

disappointment etched on her Botoxed face. “You’ve done some crazy things, Mother, but buying a motorcycle just landed on the top of the list. What goes on in that juvenile mind of yours, anyway? You’re fifty, not fifteen!” She always laid hard on the word *mother*, as if it were a swear word.

“Lucky is not a motorcycle, Chase. She’s a Harley. There’s a big difference.”

“I don’t think the doctors in the emergency rooms around the country note that subtle difference.” She blew on her nails once more. “Couldn’t you have a regular midlife crisis like everyone else?”

“I didn’t know there was a manual. Besides, since when did I do *anything* like anyone else?”

“Never. That’s the problem. I just don’t like Jackson thinking your way is ever an option for her. We have plans.”

“Oh, *we* do? So Jacks is part of that ‘we’?”

“Of course she is. Don’t change the subject. We’re talking about you and that...that—”

“Lucky. The bike’s name is Lucky.”

Eye roll, like she used to do when she was Jackson’s age. “Since when do you name your vehicles?”

I looked at my watch. “Since four hours ago. What’s the big deal?”

“The deal, *Mother*, is that you’re fifty. Your reflexes aren’t what they once were. You aren’t as young as you think you are. You aren’t safe. There are a million reasons why you should take that bike back right now.”

I laughed. “And a million more why I shouldn’t.”

Chase blew on her nails once more, her full lips puckered with over-the-top expensive lipstick she had flown in from Paris. If she didn’t sport our genetically engineered cleft chin, green eyes and left-handedness, I’d be certain she was not from my loins. Her father and stepmother had certainly infused her with the snobbishness that seemed inbred in the ultrarich.

“Fine. Risk your own life, but I swear to God, if you *ever* take Jackson out on it, I will never speak to you again.”

“Promise?”

She glared at me once more. "I mean it, Mother. I'll never forgive you. She has things to accomplish in this life."

I set the painting where it would have the most favorable light and wiped my hands on my jeans. "About that."

"Save your breath. I told you, we have plans. Charles is thinking Stanford or UC Davis in order to keep her close to home."

"Chase—"

"I think she can get into Harvard if she really put her—"

"Chase, Jacks doesn't have the grades to get into either of those schools."

She looked at me as if I was stupid. "She won't *need* good grades. Charles *knows* people. Nowadays, getting into college is like getting a job; it's all about who you know, and Charles knows everyone."

"What if..." I started, pulling out the latest canvas that seemed to be defeating me. It was the TransAmerica Pyramid commissioned by a broker who had looked at it from his office window for the last thirty years. He was retiring and wanted a painting of it for his house. I don't know why, the subject couldn't have been simpler, but the damned thing was giving me fits. "What if she doesn't *want* to go to college right now?"

Chase walked over to me and took hold of my wrist. "I *expect* you to support me and Charles on this, *Mother*."

I hated when she called me that. Again, I could thank her father and his wife, who insisted she call me mother and not Parker. I'd never felt like a mother, and even less like a grandmother. I had not one maternal bone in my body. Hell, I didn't even have any pets.

Looking at her hand on my wrist, I locked eyes with her and she immediately let go. "Chase, I want what's best for Jacks, whether or not that's college."

"If you say *look at me I came out all right*, I will scream. As always, Mother, you prove the exception to the rule. Jackson is going to college. End of story."

"Whether she wants to or not? You two *do* understand she'll be eighteen in a couple of months, right?"

"Please tell me you haven't been filling her head with stupid ideas like traveling or, God forbid, *finding herself*?"

"Of course not. Any ideas like that she came up with on her own. You've never given the kid enough credit, and you spend entirely too much time on who you know instead of what you know. Kids who don't *know*, don't make it through Ivy League Schools. She's a bright kid who will do well regardless of where she goes as long as it's her choice."

"And you've always given her too much credit. She's almost eighteen. Neither of us knew our butt from a hole in the ground at eighteen, and Jacks is no smarter. Just promise me you won't let her ride that thing."

Gazing into her deep green eyes, I wondered how a child from my womb could live such a frightened existence. She'd always been afraid. If you took her to the beach, she was afraid of sharks. If you took her hiking, it was rattlesnakes or cougars. Danger lurked around every corner in Chase's life, and no matter how I tried I'd never been able to change that.

"I can't promise you that, Chase. I'm sorry."

She stared at me, disbelief shrouding her eyes.

"I don't have a passenger helmet, so she's safe for the time being. That's as good as I can do."

She shook her head once more. "If you do, Charles will forbid her from coming here anymore. Is that what you want?"

I shrugged. "Like I said, once she turns eighteen, your sphere of control vanishes."

"Not as long as we hold the purse strings."

Now it was my turn to shake my head. "If you believe that, you don't know your kid nearly as well as you think."

"Mark my words, Mother. If she gets on the back of that bike—" Whatever she said trailed out the door with her new manicure.

I sat for thirty minutes in front of the evil painting stymying my creative juices and just stared at it. I couldn't get to that place where I am at peace, where the spirits move my brush, and the painting and I become one. My mind was racing through the events of my day, and as I glanced around me, I realized

what it was I really needed: a change of scenery. I needed fresh air, a completely different environment. I needed out of the city.

Picking up my cell, I called Marla, who picked up, laughing.

"What you laughing at?"

"You. I put the motorcycle sound in for your ringtone."

"Vroom, vroom."

"Chase done busting your chops? I'm pretty sure I could hear her all the way over here."

"For the moment. You got a minute?"

"For you? Take two. They're small."

"I need to get out of town for a bit."

"Did you rob a bank?"

"For a couple of months."

"Whoa, wait a minute. You serious?"

I looked at the painting mocking me. "I am. I have painter's block. Maybe a change of scenery will help."

"Ah. You need a travel enema."

This made me chuckle. "Exactly. Any of Harrison's properties available?"

"Let me check and get back to you."

"See if you can carve a moment out of your social calendar for me. I'll need some help transporting my canvases."

"What's wrong with my Lexus?"

I looked out the window and grinned. "Nothing's wrong with it. I'm going on a road trip and I'm taking Lucky."

With the Lexus loaded, Marla and I stood next to it, going over the checklist.

"Make sure you hydrate. June is the hot season in Tahoe."

Marla had property all over the world, and after some discussion, we'd decided that I ought not to leave the gallery for longer than a month. I needed to be able to return should I get any more commissions or invites to do shows. Therefore, we decided one of her homes in South Lake Tahoe, right on the lake in a gorgeous little cove with four other homes, would be quiet and large enough for some of my larger canvases.

"I have two bottles of water in my bags. Stop worrying, will you?"

"Far be it from me to ever agree with Chase, but hon, it's been a lot of years since you rode a bike, and this thing is... well...a helluvalot bigger than that little Sportster. I am allowed to worry. It's my job."

Latching my saddlebags, I pulled on my fingerless leather gloves and opened and closed my hand. The sound of leather creaking made me giddy.

Marla watched me and smiled softly. "You do realize you're totally butch dressed like that, right?"

I looked down at the black leather chaps, steel-toed boots and Harley jacket, and laughed. "And the problem with that is?"

She shook her head. "How soon you forget. *That's* the look that pulls the straight women to you like flies to honey. Be careful, Parker. The last thing you need right now is a romantic complication with some straight chick who thinks it *romantic* being with a painter."

"Pulled. Past tense, like my animal magnetism. It dematerialized at fifty. The only people I turn on anymore are the blind and the demented."

"We'll see. I don't think you're quite ready to put out to pasture yet, Parker. You still got a bit of livin' and lovin' to do. Just don't do it with the heteros. It's oil and vinegar, and you need calm now. Balance."

"Maybe love is what I need."

She laughed loudly. "Yeah, like that's really working for you. Love has never been your friend."

"No shit."

"Speaking of love, have you heard from Alyssa lately?"

God, I was so hoping she wouldn't ask that. Marla and Aly hated each other's guts, and for good reason: their kids played ball against each other. Little League mentality knows no bounds, and they were both your typical Little League parent.

"Actually, I asked her to work a few days a week at the shop while I'm gone."

Loud groan and forehead smack. "Are you mental? You don't

want that nag back. *We* don't want her back. Good riddance, I say."

"Mar, *she* left me. She doesn't want back."

Marla turned and started for the car.

"Oh no you don't," I said, running around in front of her.

"You *know* something."

"Do not."

I folded my arms and waited.

"Fine. I guess it didn't work out with that boy toy she found in her backyard. She's been...making inquiries about your...status."

I nodded. Alyssa and I had met when she came to the studio to commission a piece. She ended up getting a piece of me as well, and though we saw each other exclusively for almost a year, she couldn't ever really get over the whole "This is great, but I'm not gay" thing that ninety-nine percent of straight-but-curious women tattoo on their foreheads. The funny thing is, when you're in a relationship, does anyone really give a shit what label you wear?

Straight women do.

I'm not gay. I'm only in love with you.

If I had a dollar...did they miss the fact that I am dickless? Let's see, you're going down on a woman you sleep with every night. You make out with me in the car. You engage in sexting with me, and you love shower sex. Call it what you will or what you need to in order to be okay with yourself, but in *my* world, that makes you a rug muncher. Does being a *selective* rug muncher make you less gay? To the straights it does. That's one reason why most of my gay and lesbian friends have sworn off straights: way too problematic. Way too hung up on *not* being one of us. Way too...straight.

Alyssa had been that way. She'd wanted to be all closeted and shit, when I was like, Hello? Have you looked at me? At five feet ten inches, I am not what you'd call small or petite. I have short gray hair (soon to be brown) that's spiked on top. Once a seriously dykey haircut, it's now all the rave, so I pull it off quite well. If my size and haircut don't tip you off, my clothing sure as hell will. No matter how hard Marla tries to improve me and

my image, my standard uniform is jeans and a tank top under a black leather jacket.

"What kind of inquiries?" I asked, getting back to the issue at hand.

"You know. Are you seeing anyone? Are you happy? What are you doing? You, you, you. It's always about you." She smiled to let me know there was more.

"No way. She asked *you*? You hate her."

"She's too dense to realize that. She asked Brandon."

"She asked *your son* about me?" Marla had had a child later in life, having conceived Brandon at a wild New Year's party with a man who may or may not have been her husband. She was never sure. So, at the age of thirty-six, she had Brandon, her only child and the apple of my eye. I adored that kid.

"Yeah. That's the mark of a desperate woman. You're desperate, too, Parker, you just don't *do* desperate."

"Funny."

"Do not even think about going back there. I abhor that woman and she loathes herself. Nothing more pathetic than a self-loathing, overly reconstructed, yoga-addicted lady who lunches. Ugh. Uh-uh. We are so not going back there."

Nodding, I strapped on my helmet. "If it makes you feel any better, she did not sound desperate, but just really happy to help me out while I am gone."

"Self-loathing martyr. Beware, Parker."

Throwing my leg over the bike, I posed for a shot I knew she'd take. She did.

"Are you carrying any weapons?"

I moved my earpiece to hear her. "Did you say weapons?"

Marla reached into her car and pulled out a can of mace. "Lone woman on a bike? That's no good. Here."

"I'm not taking your mace."

She stuffed it in my pocket. "Yes, you are. Now, you're taking all back roads, right?"

I nodded. "Don't expect me up there until later this evening. I just want to take Lucky out on the twisties and see how she handles."

"Harrison got Harley-envy when he saw the picture you sent."

"That happens."

"So you'll be giving guys hard-ons and straight chicks will swoon. Good luck with that."

"Like you said, the last thing I need in my life right now is the complication a relationship brings with it. No thank you. I'm fine by myself for now."

Marla shook her head. "I wish I could hit a replay button for your life."

"Why?"

"Because every time you say that, it has been the exact time some cute, blond complication comes strolling into your life." Getting into the Lexus SUV she loved, Marla gave me a quick finger wave before pulling out.

Pressing the start button on Lucky, I sat on her while she warmed up. I didn't need cute or blonde. What I needed was to get out of this funk I was in, and Lucky was the only female capable of making that happen.

The moment we pulled off the freeway, I felt my life's stresses melt off my shoulders and fall onto the pavement behind me. Lucky handled like a dream; fast, smooth, eager to take the turns as low as she could without scratching bottom. I rode for the first two hours with my chaps and leather Harley jacket on, but when it got too hot, I had to pull over for gas and a quick change of clothes.

I pulled into the tiny gas station in the middle of nowhere, that reminded me of the gas station in the movie *Deliverance*: creepy, old, the kind of horror movie gas station Hollywood churns out. After paying for the gas, I took off my jacket and was in the process of bungee-cording it up when a beat-up yellow Ford pickup pulled into the island next to me. Normally, I wouldn't have given it a thought, but I was a stranger in these parts and my spider senses started tingling.

"Nice ride," one of the boys said. They could have been

eighteen or twenty-eight. The older you get, the harder it is to tell.

"Thank you," I replied, finishing up with the bungeeing of my chaps and jacket and wishing Marla's mace wasn't securely tied in my jacket.

"Fuck. Is that a chick?" one of the Jethros asked his buddies before jumping out of the back of the truck.

Fuck was right. Why didn't I take that mace out?

"Goddamn, I thought you were a dude," Billy Bob said, walking to the front of my bike. My heart started racing now. The funny thing was, I wasn't afraid for me; I was afraid they would do something to Lucky. I guess that's when I became a true-to-the-teeth Harley rider; I cared more about my bike's health than my own. Was there something really bizarre about that?

I shrugged, not knowing what to say or do. I thought getting on the bike was a bad decision that would leave me more vulnerable, so I stood there with my hands in my vest pockets, gripping my keys like I thought someone was going to take them from me.

I felt the other Jethros move in behind me. "You one-a-them dykes on a bike?"

I weighed my response along with my options. I knew I wouldn't leave Lucky, so running was out of the question. For better or worse, I was going down with my bike. "I prefer female rider."

"Is that a yes?" Bubba said.

"Duh, dumb-ass. Look at her. Fucking clit licker."

My eyes scanned the ground, looking for anything I could use as a weapon.

"Dykes on bikes oughtta burn in hell. Ain't natural."

Just then, I heard the distinctive sound of a Harley coming around the bend.

Please, please, please, I thought.

"Look, I don't want any trouble."

"You and your kind *are* trouble, lesbo. You ain't right."

They all stopped when the Harley rode by, then turned their attention back to me. It was taking everything I had not to

run away. I was scared to death and could feel my heart trying to come through my chest. I had no idea what to do.

“Pussy got your tongue?” Jethro asked. His buddies guffawed. In the middle of their laughter, the same Harley that had thundered by was now coming back down the mountain pass toward us. When all the hillbillies turned, so did I, and I thought I’d faint when I saw him roaring into the gas station without so much as braking. He was enormous.

“What the fuck?”

Bearing down on us was an enormous rider on a metallic blue Road King. He wasn’t slowing down, but I didn’t care; I was so damn glad someone was going to save me from whatever these rednecks had in mind, I almost hoped he’d run someone over.

The blue Harley came to an abrupt stop between me and the rednecks. When the rider rolled off the seat, it took forever. He was *that* big. Sporting Ray-Bans, an illegal beanie helmet, and an orange bandana around his neck, he stood next to his bike, towering close to seven feet tall. He reached for something on his forks and, at this point, time slowed down for me. What the giant Samoan withdrew from his front forks was a baseball bat that looked like it had seen its share of action. I didn’t want to know if the red stains were from blood or ink.

The four hicks behind me took off running, but the first Jethro tried unsuccessfully to back away, and ended up pinned to my bike.

“You weren’t hassling my friend here, were you, asswipe?”

I wanted to answer this obviously rhetorical question, but all I could do was nod.

“We...we weren’t gonna do nuthin’,” Jethro stammered, trying to move so Lucky was between him and Goliath.

“So you were just fuckin’ around.” His eyes bored holes into Jethro as he moved closer, bat resting on his shoulder.

“Yeah, that’s right. Just fuckin’ around.”

Goliath looked at me for the first time. I saw gray in his goatee and strands of it running through his shoulder length hair. He looked familiar somehow. “That their truck?”

I nodded. My tongue had fainted.

Walking over to the truck, Goliath said to Jethro, "Your truck?"

"No, my brother's. He's...he's in the john."

"Well, when he gets out of the john, you can tell him why this happened," and with speed that defied his size, Goliath smashed one of the headlights on the truck. "Because you were *fuckin' around*."

Jethro took one step toward Goliath, then thought better of it.

Turning back to us, Goliath stuck the tip of the bat against Jethro's chest. "Get your brother, get your buddies, and get the hell out of here in thirty seconds, or I'll bust the rest of that piece of shit truck up so bad even the junkyard won't want it."

Jethro DD'd out of there, grabbed his brother, shoved him in the cab of the truck, and sped off, leaving the other four yahoos to fend for themselves.

"You okay?" Goliath asked, lowering his bat, but keeping an eye on the other four.

I nodded, feeling my legs turn to rubber. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

Goliath slowly took his sunglasses off. "Nah. No need to thank me. Hog riders stick together. Fuckin' punks." When the glasses were off, he looked at me and blinked. I did the same.

"Tater?"

A big grin spread across his enormous face. "I remember you! You were the little gal who laid that Sportster down without getting a fuckin' scratch on the bike! What was that? Twenty some years ago?"

"Twenty-five. Time flies. I can't believe it's you!"

He looked at Lucky. "I see you moved up in the world. She's sweet." He walked around the bike like a man did a horse he was going to buy.

"Thank you. I just bought her."

He shook his head. "I've told that story about how you laid her down a thousand times. Never seen anything like it before or since. Boot looked like shit, but the bike? Pure genius."

All those years ago, I laid the Sporty down and crawled out from under it, I asked Tater to help me get my bike back up. He

had lifted it like it was a Schwinn ten-speed...and we had both just stared at it.

Not one scratch.

My girlfriend ended up bruised and sore, but that was about it. Only my boot took the licking.

Tater had turned from the Sporty to me and we both looked me over, wondering how I could have laid that bike down without a broken bone. Bloody chin, yes, but no broken bones.

Then we saw it. My steel-toed boot was scraped down to the last layer of steel. *It* had taken the full weight of me, my partner, and the Sporty, scooting along for fifty feet as I wrestled her into the ground. The lay down had been the buzz of the biking community: legendary.

It was a legend I preferred not to remember. "That was a long time ago."

"Damn straight it was. And you're still riding? Without any weapons? Girl, are you nuts?"

I didn't want to tell him I was still a rookie, though not having a weapon was a total rookie move.

"Don't matter. Come here." Tater motioned me toward his bike.

I followed Tater to his gorgeous bike with its extraordinary Native American-stylized paint job. All that time, I'd thought he was Samoan. Opening his saddlebag, he withdrew an enormous buck knife and handed it to me. "Strap that to your front fork and keep it there. Single female riders...strike that...single Harley riders of any gender should never ride without some sorta protection."

I took it and nodded. "Thank you."

"Even a big Samoan like me has weapons."

I looked at the Native American on the tank, slightly confused. "But—"

He laughed a genuinely infectious laugh. "My mama is Cherokee, but I get my size from my pa. I belong to a national group of Natives called 'IF.' It stands for Indigenous Folks, and we use the acronym as a play on words at times." He showed me the patch on the back of his vest. It had a map of the US with red pins stuck in it like a travel map.

“Where you off to?”

“Heading up to a party in Reno. You?”

“Just getting away.” I strapped the knife to the front right fork and rose. “That’s twice you’ve saved my bacon. I owe you.”

He placed the bat back in its holder. “Pay it forward. You see a brother in need, pull over. It’s what we do.”

“You got it. Well, thank you, again.”

“No problem...” He hesitated.

“Parker,” I said, extending a hand that disappeared into his big mitt.

“Yeah, yeah. I remembered you had a cool name.”

“Not as cool as Tater.”

“Cool name, but not how I got it. Tell you over a drink sometime.” He threw one leg over the saddle and the shocks compressed.

“You’re on. Can I at least buy you a beer?”

He shook his head. “I don’t drink and drive; but next time, okay?”

I nodded. “Thanks for the knife.”

“Pull that bad boy out anytime you feel threatened and it’ll get people’s attention, I guaran-damn-tee-it.” He started up the loudest Harley I’ve ever heard. It sounded like a magnified lion roar. “Stay safe, Parker.”

“You too, Tater.” I watched him thunder away, glasses on, pipes roaring—my hero on the back of his fine steel horse.

The back roads were gorgeous, and once I got over my run-in with the punks, I settled back in the saddle and just got in the groove of the curves. It was almost noon when I felt my stomach growling. There weren’t a lot of places to stop for food, so I decided the first restaurant I came to I’d grab a bite to eat.

There’s something else magical about being on a Harley that transcends even religious experiences. The wind in your face carries with it the scents of pine, eucalyptus, freshly mowed grass, and any number of smells in a given area; scents you just don’t get from inside a car. The magnificence of the back roads

leading to Tahoe cannot be overestimated. The pine trees send their scent out in the air, the creeks and riverbeds gurgle loudly enough you can hear them over the roar of the pipes. It truly is one of the most magical places in the country, and the higher up I went, the fresher the air got. I imagined the people in those convertibles I passed felt the same way.

People's reactions to a Harley like mine are fun to watch. Little kids hang out of the windows to get a closer look. Men of all races and ages rubberneck. Women are a little slyer about gawking, preferring to glance out of the corner of their eye. I think they're afraid of making eye contact with a presumed bad boy on a bike. Several times, when I caught a female passenger staring, I smiled. Oh my God, it was priceless. Usually, they turned away, mortified by whatever fantasy they'd been having. I mean, come on, doesn't everyone want to have sex on a Harley, just once?

When I came to a stop, I looked over at the deep green Jaguar next to me. A good-looking brunette was gazing unabashedly and so hard at Lucky, she lowered her Gucci sunglasses to the tip of her nose. I let her look for a moment, then turned back to find her gaze had shifted to me. Now was the time to throw water on her bad boy fantasy and smile at her, which I did. To my surprise, she completely removed her sunglasses and smiled flirtatiously back. For a moment, I thought she was going to say something, but the gray-haired guy driving pulled out and took a left, leaving me sitting there.

Such was the chick magnet called Lucky. She turned heads everywhere we went. It was fun. I call it temporary anonymous fame. For a split second, you share something with someone, and then it's over, leaving you both feeling satisfied. God, if only sex could be as brief and uncomplicated, we'd all be happier people.

As I turned in and out of dangerous curves, I thought about Tater. I subscribe to the phenomenon known as *The Secret*, or law of attraction. This is a way of living your life as if. It is the notion that thoughts are powerful enough to create. If we agree that everything ever created by man was a thought first, then we ought to be able to agree that thoughts are incredibly powerful.

I had just been thinking about Tater and there he was. It was no coincidence. I don't believe in coincidences. I do believe that everything that happens in our lives is a result of thought, whether ours or someone else's. I needed to be careful about my chick magnet...or some chick would find her way to the back of my bike.

As we swayed in and out of the curves like two dancers, I passed a rider on the side of the road. I gave him the thumbs-up signal, which he returned. Had he given me the thumbs-down, I'd have pulled over to see if I could help. Pay it forward. That was part of *The Secret* as well. The idea was the more you gave away, the more you got. This had proven true in my life as well. For every benefit or fundraiser I let people have in the gallery for free, I'd either made a friend, made a connection, or made a sale. Such was the law of attraction.

Lucky was now part of that attraction. People were drawn to her for a variety of reasons, none they could really articulate. "Nice bike" was the typical, if off the mark response from head-turners. She wasn't nice. She was BAD, just like her owner; "Bad to the Bone."

Why was I bad?

Artists, musicians, writers, we're not like everyone else. Don't take my word for it, studies have shown we think differently, we see the world differently. This is even more so when we're left-handed. I'll never forget an interview I saw with Martina Navratilova, where she said left-handers see the tennis court completely differently, and until righties knew what she saw, she'd always have the advantage.

So, being with an artist meant agreeing to take a backseat to the art. This is harder than it appears, and so far I'd been unsuccessful at making a relationship last beyond the two-year mark.

As Lucky and I rounded a corner, there was a big cabin-like restaurant called The Rusty Skillet. Four Harleys were parked out front, so I figured this was as good a place as any to eat, even if the name was a bit off-putting. Copper Skillet I could see, but rusty?

Bikers, like long-haul truckers, know the best places to

eat, the biker-friendly bars, and the cheapest gas. Pulling in, I carefully backed Lucky into the spot next to a black lowrider with a ghost painted on the tank and a haunted house on the fenders. The front fender said "Ghostman," which was probably the owner's street name.

Almost every rider has a street name, and at that moment, mine popped into my head. "Da Vinci," I muttered aloud to no one. It was perfect for me, Da Vinci being a true Renaissance man and believer of the law of attraction before it even had a name.

The bikers and their women were at the second table, and gave me the requisite head nod. "Great paint job," one said to me. "Did you lock her up?"

I hadn't. Another rookie maneuver. Shaking my head, I turned around and returned to the parking lot. As I walked toward the row of bikes, I saw the woman from the green Jag kneeling down next to Lucky. I quickly cut my eyes to the Jag. It was empty, so I silently approached her from behind, before realizing she could see me in the many chrome reflections. "See something you like?" I asked.

Slowly rising, she turned completely around and flashed me a smile that almost knocked me off my feet. She'd paid handsomely for the pearly white veneers she was showing beneath eyes that were a deep Mediterranean blue. "I believe I do," she purred, making my knees go weak. She was intoxicating; her whole air was calm and poised, as if she knew exactly who she was and what she was about.

Turning back to Lucky, she blew out a deep breath. "I'm sure you've been told how incredibly hot you look on this incredibly hot bike."

I blinked, glad her back was to me. I was pretty sure telling her my best friend had just warned me about women like her was a bad plan, so I managed a "Thank you. It's always nice to be appreciated."

She half-turned. "Appreciated? Oh, hon, my eyes have done more than appreciate you. For several miles now, they have rewarded me with amazing fantasies." She wore her brown hair short, almost like Dorothy Hamill or Katie Couric. Standing

about five-four, she was a diminutive thing with small hands that sported a diamond the size of a chunk of coal. It nearly blinded me.

“Oh they have?” I asked. “Was I any good?”

Her back still to me, she whispered, “You have no idea.”

I stood next to her now, our arms touching. I caught my breath as electricity flowed between us.

“Would you like to give me an idea?” I said softly. We were both staring at Lucky, arms touching, breathing in unison.

I had no idea what she was thinking, but I was suddenly hoping for some uncomplicated stranger sex. It had been a while since I’d just fucked someone for the fun of it. For me, sex had always been fun, like rock climbing or getting high. It was fun as long as no one expected anything when it was over. But most women expect something. I could only hope this had the potential not to be one of those times.

“Tricia?”

The spell was broken. Mr. Jaguar poked his head out the door of the restaurant.

“Be right in,” she answered over her shoulder.

I turned to look at him and smiled. Immediately, his look of concern relaxed into something less threatened. Silly man. Apparently, only another dick threatened his masculinity. If he only knew.

“The ball and chain calls,” she said apologetically. “Rain check?”

“Sure.”

She made eye contact with me that lasted a lifetime. I could have fallen into those amazing blue eyes and never come back. “And you are?”

I was a lot of things, but I knew what she wanted. “Da Vinci.”

She tossed her head back and laughed. “Of course you are. Well, Leo, enjoy your ride and be safe.”

Filled with a sense of wonder and awe, I watched her walk back into the restaurant.

Lucky was my puppy, my own personal chick magnet. It appeared that maybe Marla was right. Maybe I hadn’t lost it.

And if I had, at least now I had a pinch hitter; at least now I was back in the game.

The question remained...could I still play in the Big Leagues?

After locking Lucky, I headed back into the restaurant and chose a seat facing Tricia, the Jaguar mistress. If this made her uncomfortable, she gave no indication. I ordered a French dip and occasionally caught her staring at me. Let's just say I've never eaten a sandwich more seductively than I did sitting at that bar.

When I finished, one of the biker chicks came to the bar and ordered three more *cervezas*. As she waited, she turned to me and said in a low voice, "You two oughtta just do each other and get it over with so the rest of us can eat in peace."

My mouth dropped open. "Is it that obvious?"

"To everyone but the silver fox sitting with her. But then, he's been on his cell since he came in, rude motherfucker." Taking her three bottles, she turned to me and winked. "Life's not a dress rehearsal. Grab the brass ring any time it's offered to you." With that, she walked back to her booth, leaving me to ponder her biker wisdom.

I didn't ponder long. Pushing my plate away, I looked over at Tricia full on, only to find her doing the same. No casual flirting. She cut her eyes in the direction of the ladies' room, so I tossed down a twenty and went into the bathroom. I quickly wiped the road grime off my face, popped in a mint, and ran my fingers through my hair, wishing like hell I'd dyed it already. My heart was racing, my palms clammy, and for a moment I wondered if I could pull this off. I was fifty, after all, not twenty-five. During my softball years, I'd banged plenty of opponents in locker rooms and restrooms of dyke bars, but I'd never done it in a restaurant bathroom. Could I still pull the trigger at my age? I was about to find out.

When she came through that door, a powerful energy followed her, and in two steps, our lips were locked, our hands

in each other's hair and our bodies pressed tightly together. For her size she was very strong, and pinned me against the wall before turning and locking the door. Her mouth found mine in a nanosecond, and we kissed long and hard, as if we'd been doing so our whole lives. Her body just melted into mine, and her hands moved from my hair to my shirt buttons.

"Uh-huh," I said, taking her hands off my shirt and pushing her bra up so I could get my hands on her breasts. As soon as my thumbs stroked her hard nipples, I knew I had to have her. Quickly pushing her dress up, I lifted her to the sink, pulled her thong off, spread her legs, and dove in to the sounds of her whispering "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God" over and over. When I had her in my mouth, her fingers worked through my hair to a chorus of "Please...God...yes...please..."

Pleasing her was exactly what I was doing, sucking her into my mouth, while my fingers toyed with her ever-hardening nipples.

"My...God...Leo..."

Her god could not help her. I was now teasing her clit as it grew beneath my artful tongue. She was hard all over.

"Yes...God, yes. Right there."

I have no idea how long I was down there, but when she came, she moaned into her arm while pressing my face against her clit and holding my head there.

"Oh my God, Leo, oh...God..."

And she came a second time, only this time my mouth was clamped to her nipple and my fingers were inside her, stroking her wetness while pressing my palm into her heat. She arched her back and moaned softly.

"Tricia, you okay in there?" It was the silver fox.

"Stomach...ache. Give me a few."

Her orgasms came in waves and with each set, her fingers dug into my hair, pushing me against her. The last one, she pulled my whole body between her legs and pressed me to her with one hand on my neck, and we kissed and kissed until her body finally relaxed in my arms.

When I slowly eased away, she was breathing rapidly and whispering, "Oh my God...what in the hell...was *that*?"

I brushed a stray hair from her sweaty forehead. "It was my pleasure."

She studied my face with both eyes and fingertips. "Are you for real?"

Before I could answer, there came another knock at the door. "Tricia? Want me to call a doctor?"

She never took her eyes from mine as she whispered, "A doctor can't cure whatever this is." Laying her hand on my chest, she never took her eyes from mine. "You are amazing."

I pulled her off the sink and helped straighten her dress.

"Coming out in one minute," she called. To me, "Doesn't seem quite fair."

"Oh, it's fair," I said softly, kissing her once more...softly, tenderly. "It is what it is."

She cocked her head. "And what is it?"

I kissed her and gently pushed her toward the door. "Uncomplicated sex with a stranger who really enjoyed it. You better go before he hails a doctor or breaks down the door."

"Oh, he's back on the phone wheeling and dealing." She stood at the door a second before blowing me a kiss. "I owe you, Leo," she said softly. "Sometimes, it feels as if he never sees me."

"Well, I see you, Tricia. I saw you on the street, and I am seeing you now. Trust me when I tell you that you're hard to miss."

"Wish he thought that."

"He will. Just pay it forward," I replied, retreating into the stall.

When I was certain I was alone, I walked out and stared at myself in the mirror. "Jesus," I muttered, splashing water on my face. "Chase might be right. Lucky's gonna kill me one way or the other."

I waited a while before walking out, and when I reached Lucky, the Jaguar was gone, but the bikers were just getting suited up.

"Where you headed, sugar?" a heavysset biker chick asked as

she donned her pink helmet. She was wearing pink chaps as well as a pink vest, which clashed with the bike's maroon paint job.

"South Lake. You?"

"Rio Nido for a little bonfire and partying. Wanna ride with us for a bit? You look like you could use the company."

I looked over at the alpha male in the group, who nodded once.

"I'd like that. I had a little...uh...trouble earlier today."

"Someone messed with you carrying *that* thing?" She pointed to my new knife.

"I didn't have it then."

She nodded. "Gotcha."

I saddled up and pulled in behind the last bike, feeling energized and slightly giddy. What had happened at The Rusty Skillet was something out of a drunken fantasy. It had been amazingly hot and fulfilling, and a great way to begin my summer hiatus.

I needed this time and space, and was thankful to Marla for giving me a place to escape to. I hadn't really painted anything spectacular in over six months. Yeah, I could churn out my usual cityscapes and nature paintings, but I was getting bored with those. I wanted something I could *feel*; something that woke me up in the middle of the night and demanded to be painted. I was perilously close to becoming one of those artists going through the motions just to get a paycheck. I abhor painters who do that. Once you lost your edge as an artist, it was over. I didn't want it to be over. I wanted to keep the love alive, and if a change of scenery could do that, so be it.

And we drove through some pretty amazing scenery as we wound our way up the mountain. More pine trees, ferns the size of cars, rocks that came from the Paleolithic era. It was so calm and peaceful, and afforded me a cooler ride than I expected.

Then it came time for me to cut off, so with a wave, I zoomed off, back on my own once more. I rode for another hour before needing to stop for gas and some water.

As I gassed her up, I opened my saddlebag for water and saw what looked like a business card lying on top. Sure enough, that's what it was. *Patricia Billingsley, Esq., Attorney for the Defense.*

I turned it over and saw she had scrawled her cell number. It was a Bay Area phone number. She must have slid it in when she was kneeling down by the bike.

A married attorney was exactly the kind of complication I didn't need, but I tossed it back in the saddlebag, even though my senses were screaming at me to throw it away.

After getting my gas and water, I started back to the bike when I saw the Jaguar again. It came to a stoplight by the gas station. I turned and looked at her—a knowing glance that was received very differently than what I was expecting.

She was staring out at me. With an intense gaze of a woman who'd had her first and only taste of Parker crack. I grinned slightly and tipped my head toward her. She responded by a small grin of her own before the Jaguar took off in the same direction I was heading.

Back on the bike, I rode for a few more hours before pulling into Marla's rental property driveway next to her Lexus. The two-car garage opened and I drove in.

"About time," Marla said, meeting me at the back door. "I was getting worried."

After locking the bike, I followed her into a gorgeous lake house overlooking a cove smattered with pine trees, large rocks and a community campfire.

"Wow, Mar, this place is—"

"Stunning, isn't it? Harrison fell in love with it when we rented it a few years ago, so he offered them a pretty penny for it. Nice, eh?"

I walked into the living room. A twenty-foot plate glass window overlooking the cove framed water gently lapping against the beachfront in a soft rhythm I knew would help me work. The house was tastefully decorated in a more art nouveau fashion, with tight lines and muted colors. Because there were windows in every wall, the lighting was perfect for painting.

"Check this out." Marla walked out to the deck, and I followed. Sunlight streamed through the pine trees onto the extra deep deck.

"Oh man. This...this is perfect, Mar."

"I thought so. You can set up your easel here, that way you

can see the lake all the time. The lighting ought to be perfect. There's food in the fridge, and beer."

"Food?"

She walked back into the living room. "You didn't think I'd let you starve? I've tasted your cooking, remember? I bought a bunch of freezer food, diet soda, chips, et cetera. It should last you until you finish your first painting. I brought all the canvases in, but your paints are still in the Lexus. You tired?"

"A little. Why?"

"There's a hot tub on the deck. Let it warm up a little before you get in. It's nice when the weather cools off and you sit in there all warm and cozy."

"Sounds heavenly." I looked out at the other houses. "What about those other places?"

"The four other homes are all rentals, so I can't vouch for them. They could all have...ugh...teenagers in them for all I know."

"I'll be fine. It's really perfect, thank you."

"I hope so, Park. You need to get your mojo back. If you paint another naturescape, I am going to scream. I mean it, Park. I will scream."

"No need. I came here for a reason, and if this place doesn't get me fired up to paint, I don't know what will."

After I got my paints out and set the easels and canvases up, I took the cosmopolitan Marla offered me and sipped it. "God, this is good."

"No drinking and driving on that bike, you hear?"

"Yes, Mom."

"I mean it, Parker. Those bikers drink a lot. Don't get sucked in."

"I won't. Will you be staying tonight? I hate to see you driving all the way back."

Marla yawned and stretched. "Mmm...I could use a soak in the hot tub."

That sounded great to me. My body was already getting sore from the ride, not to mention my other exertion, so I watched Marla turn on the jets, get undressed and take her second cosmopolitan into the bubbles as only the extremely rich can do.

"Think your neighbors might appreciate some clothes?"

"Let 'em look."

I wasn't about to be in the buff in front of four other decks and neighbors, so I slipped into a bikini, made a second cosmopolitan, and eased my achy body into the bubbles next to her. "Ahh, now this is the life."

"Yes it is." She sipped her cosmo. "How was the ride?"

I told her all about Tater and the hillbillies, but I omitted the stranger sex part. She'd really think I'd lost it, and I didn't want to worry her needlessly. Besides, she'd only pepper with me a million questions.

"You're hiding something."

I turned. "No I'm not." Damn.

She leaned forward and studied me. "Out with it. What have you done?"

So I told her. Everything.

"Get out! You banged some straight chick in a restroom and it's the *last* thing you tell me? I oughtta kick your ass! I'm supposed to be your best friend, and you tell me the juiciest part only after I badger you?"

"Marla—"

"No, no. Go on with your wild life without me. I'm just part of your boring past." She looked over the side of the tub, her attention deficit overcoming her. "Looks like your neighbors are home. You'll have to go over and introduce yourself tomorrow."

"I'm not here to socialize."

"I can see that. Banging some chick in the bathroom is so antisocial. Hanging with bikers you've never met is isolating and lonely. It can get pretty lonely up here in all the quiet, so it's a good thing you've made that deal with yourself."

I waited for more.

"I'll feel better knowing someone knows you up here if you meet the neighbors, but please, just meet them. Don't fuck them. I have a reputation to think of."

"Maybe they're hatchet murderers. Maybe they'll chop me up and steal my bike." I was beginning to feel the effects of my cosmo.

"Maybe you're buzzed."

“Buzzed? Do they even say that anymore? Is that like foxy, or rad?”

“I don’t know. Ask Jacks. How’s she doing, anyway?”

I finished my drink and set it on the side of the tub. “She’d be fine if Chase just left her alone. God, that woman is a nag. Why can’t she just see that Jacks is a good kid?”

“Because your daughter was born with the judge-you gene.”

I laughed. “Good one.”

“I can’t take credit for that. Brandon was talking about this Christian clique at school the other kids call the ‘Judge-yous’.” Marla played with the bubbles.

“Very funny.”

“I’m sure they don’t think so. Chase will never see Jacks for what she is until they no longer live together.”

“Which will be sooner than later if Chase keeps trying to run her life. At some point, you have to trust your kid to do what’s right for *them*.” I said, feeling the jets caress my lower back.

“I plan on doing that when Brands is twenty-five. When did DuMont trust you?”

I chuckled. “I think she trusted me until I was five. Then she saw me for the troublemaking little stinker I was. After that, all bets were off.”

“Well, Jacks is lucky to have you. Have you thought about inviting her up here for a few days? She’d love it.”

“Bite your tongue. The last thing I need is to have to worry about what sort of trouble that kid is into.” I told Marla about finding her with her tattooed friend in the closet at the gallery.

“My God. She’s more like you than you want to admit, or did you forget getting caught smooching some girl in that dressing room?”

I *had* forgotten. “Oh my God, I can’t believe you remember that. DuMont was getting me new school clothes for college.”

“And you whisked that salesgirl into the dressing room and would have had your way with her if DuMont hadn’t whipped open the curtain.”

I laughed. “Yeah. Pretty awkward. The look on her face was worth the price I had to pay. Thousands of dollars of therapy

that couldn't straighten me out. She might as well have used it to start a bonfire."

"Millions would be needed. Anyway, you should think about it. Jackson is at the crossroads in her life, and maybe a little guidance from her grandmother would be nice."

I glared at her. "You know I *hate* that word!"

Marla chuffed, and I was really beginning to feel the effects of the cosmos. "No you don't. You hate that you're old enough to *be* one. Maybe you should just embrace it and wear the mantle proudly."

"Never."

"Suit yourself. Just know I'll be thrilled the day I become a grandmother."

"You have fun with that."

We sat in the hot tub until we were shriveled. I watched the old man next door open the blinds and then all the windows and doors. Then, he came out and talked on his cell phone for about fifteen minutes before Marla announced she was pickled and needed to retire.

I watched her naked ass as it disappeared into the house. Pilates had been good for her. I looked around at the beautiful home she had so kindly let me use. Harrison had been good to her. This place was unbelievable and suited my needs perfectly. He was a good man, and she deserved all he gave her. It was a rare marriage they had and a part of me envied them for it.

Laying my head back, I closed my eyes and began taking stock of my life. I was well enough off financially, but I was alone, and I didn't do alone well. As a serial monogamist, I'd traipsed from one heart to the next, always searching for that one woman who could handle being with me and my many eccentricities. My longest relationship had lasted four years, and we were apart for three of those while my partner attended college a couple of miles away. I wondered if maybe I was just easier to be with if you weren't really with me.

DuMont had always told me I was a feral creature who didn't need a tamer, but just another feral creature. Problem was, there are far more feral tamers than female ferals, and I didn't want to be tamed. I wanted to run freely on my own agenda. I thought

nothing of picking up and flying to Mexico for a week or Hawaii for a weekend. I loved spontaneity. Unfortunately, people my age think spontaneity is only for the young, so when someone like me up and goes, it's considered irresponsible, and that, I'm not. Case in point, Lucky.

Scared as I'd been, I'd have fought to the death to protect her from those rednecks. She was my responsibility. Sure, I could have tried to run away, but at the end of the day could I have looked at myself in the mirror? That was how I judged the merit of every single day. When I looked at myself at the end of every day, was I proud of how I'd lived that day?

Smiling inwardly, I opened my eyes and watched my neighbor go back inside. The crickets were starting up, and I could hear the water from the lake gently licking the sand.

"What's *this* about?"

Focusing my eyes toward the door, I saw Marla holding up my box of Lady Clairol. "Just 'cause I'm fifty doesn't mean I have to look the part."

"Oh God, Park, finally! Come to Mama and let me help. You're likely to blind yourself."

Getting out of the hot tub, I wrapped up in a big beach towel, turned the tub jets off, and started back into the house, intent on continuing the transformation of Parker Lee Chase.

The next morning, when Marla was gone, I set up several canvases, putting one on the deck so I could paint the way the water came onto the shore. Several times, I caught my reflection in the mirror and had to stop to look. I looked ten years younger with my hair dyed brown. Marla had convinced me to leave the hair around my ears gray so I looked a little bit like Reed Richards from *The Fantastic Four*. She thought it made me more "handsome." I don't know about that, but I *did* look younger.

Once my canvases were set up, I grabbed some brown sugar cinnamon Pop-Tarts, a cup of coffee, and headed for the deck where my next masterpiece awaited. The sun poked its morning rays through the pine trees and the air was fresh and warm. It

was going to be a hot one, for sure. As I set my brushes up, the old guy walked out on his deck and raised his coffee mug at me. “Morning.”

I nodded back. “Morning.”

“An artist, eh?”

I nodded.

“Always wished I had the aptitude. Unfortunately, numbers are what I’m good at.”

I smiled again, unsure of what to say without prolonging the small talk. I was itching to paint.

“So, this must be a working vacation for you, too.”

I nodded. “Always.”

He held up his cell. “Yeah, me too. The wife never understands.”

Boy did I know *that* feeling.

“Well, I won’t keep you. Have a great day.”

“You, too,” I replied, sitting down and facing the blank canvas. Closing my eyes, I took several deep cleansing breaths and opened my mind to the images stored in my mind’s eye, and waited for them to flood on in.

Pencil in hand, I waited for the images I saw as I roared by the trees on the way up here. Sure enough, there they were:

Old gas station signs

Old pumps

Yellow Ford

Broken windows

Olive eyes

Tater’s bat

Blue eyes

Dead deer

Cosmo

Blue eyes

I opened mine and looked at the canvas. I had drawn a rough of blue eyes hovering over a gas station pump.

“Goddamn it,” I said, erasing it with my huge yellow eraser. I didn’t want to see her. I wanted something magical, wonderful, not bathroom babe.

I tried again.

Lucky
 Blue eyes
 French dip
 Ghostman tank
 Blue eyes
 Battered bat
 Buck knife
 Blue eyes

Opening mine again, there were her eyes staring back at me.

“No, no, no.” I said, erasing them once more. This time, I loaded up a brush with blue paint and concentrated on my breathing as my brush flew across the canvas.

When I opened my eyes again, I’d painted a bonfire with smoke twisting up into blue eyes...her eyes.

The painting was already seriously cool. Eyes hovered over a bonfire in the desert; in the background stood Lucky, as if she was overlooking the entire scene. It was all in the same blue color...call it a painter’s outline if you will.

Standing, I stared at it, lifted it off the tripod and stashed it in the spare bedroom. That was more like mental diarrhea than anything artistic I could use. Apparently, the muses hadn’t jumped on the back of the bike before I left the city, damn bitches.

In the kitchen, after staring at the bounty of frozen food Marla had brought, I opted for a handful of peanuts and a Diet Pepsi. Me and my people aren’t known to eat well...artists have faster running metabolisms and you seldom see any obese painters.

It was a little after one, and I thought a walk would be fun...or at least around the cove. Donning my sunglasses, and a ball cap, and wearing a tank top and cargo pants, I headed out to the lake to see if the sun couldn’t jog my artist’s cells back into line. I’d never felt further away from my artistic side than I did at that moment, and it was more frustrating than depressing me. It made me sad.

Inhaling the fresh pine air, I walked along the lake, feeling both the sadness and frustration dissipate. That’s the power and beauty of nature. It can take whatever stresses you’re carrying

and melt them away. I needed them to melt away. I needed the cleansing air of Lake Tahoe.

Seeing a large flat boulder perched over the alpine blue water, I climbed out to it and sat, watching the way the sun and slight breeze played off the water.

Five years ago, I would have run back to the house to paint this image, but nothing was coming up for me. No emotions. No magic. I just observed it as if I were some heartless zombie who couldn't appreciate it for the true beauty it was.

I watched a young couple walk hand-in-hand toward me. They had that "we-are-in-love" air about them that both attracted and repulsed observers. At the moment, I was attracted because I wondered if I would ever have that, and repulsed because of the notion that I even *wanted* that.

"Beautiful day, eh?" the gentleman asked. He looked like he was Mexican or of some other Latin American descent.

"Very."

"You staying in that green house?" the woman asked. "The one with the awesome deck?"

I nodded and turned to face them. "I am."

"I'm Laura, and this is my husband, Tony. We're staying in the yellow house, kitty-corner from you."

I smiled at her misuse of the term catty and glanced in the direction she pointed and nodded.

"You're the painter, huh?" Tony said, his eyebrows bobbing up and down as he spoke.

"How'd you know?"

"Saw you this morning. Always wished I could paint or draw, but I'm analytical. No artistic talent to speak of."

Laura laughed. "He can barely draw stick men."

Smiling, I caught Laura gazing at my necklace. I still wear Alyssa's mizpah as a way of letting women know I might be half of a whole. Right about now, I felt like an eighth of a whole. "I came to paint, relax, catch some fresh air."

"Excellent. Have you been invited to the cove party this weekend?"

"Cove party?"

They both nodded. "Most of us are staying at least a month, so we thought it would be fun to get to know each other."

I'd never gone to a block party, let alone a cove party. I had discovered long ago, that for me, at least, familiarity breeds virtually instant contempt. My pretend friendly had a shelf life of approximately two hours. After that, I was ready to put it out to pasture. It's not that I don't like people. I do. I just abhor small talk and I am no good at it. I mean...I'm really no good.

"Oh. I...uh—"

"It's Sunday afternoon. Bring whatever you want to barbecue."

"Just cove mates?"

"Oh no, cove residents, friends of coveys, cove neighbors in other coves, you know—"

"Anyone nearby?"

Laura laughed, "Exactly. It'll be a nice party with a bonfire and good food. Consider yourself invited."

"Thank you."

They looked at each other and in typical style of lovers who needn't always speak, agreed they'd tarried long enough with the eccentric painter, said their goodbyes. I waited for them to get far away before moving off my rock. The lake lapped at my feet, the sound soft and soothing. I'd enjoyed my walk immensely and had been gone longer than I had planned on. The sun was hot on my back, the air fresh and clean, and by the time I started back to the rock stairway leading to the house, I felt invigorated and...

Then I saw her.

Getting out of the green Jaguar in the driveway next to mine was Tricia. She didn't see me, and if she had, I doubt she would have recognized me since I was wearing dark glasses and a ball cap, which I pulled further down over my eyes as I scooted around the bushes near the front door, getting inside before she could see me.

I leaned against the door. "No, no, no," I said under my breath, throwing the cap on a side table. I so did not need this. How did this happen? I needed this like I needed a bat to my head.

Okay, okay. Deep breath. She didn't see me. Maybe they were only staying the week. Maybe they would be leaving before the weekend. Maybe...

"Goddamn it." Shaking my head, I walked through the house, closing all of the blinds facing their place. When I came to the deck, I saw my blank canvas sitting there and cursed my luck. I suppose I deserved this for not keeping it in my pants. I shouldn't have been so careless or free with my sexuality, and now, here she was.

Wait.

Maybe she got enough and would be as mortified to see me as I was to see her. Of course, she would be a little embarrassed! She was with her husband for God's sake! Maybe she'd ignore the whole thing and pretend we'd never met.

One could only hope.

Peeking through the miniblinds, I was glad to see their lights were out on that side of the house. Maybe I was overreacting. Maybe I didn't need to—

There came a knock on the door.

"Shit, shit, shit!" I said, moving back to the front door. My heart was banging against my chest as I slowly moved to the peephole. How did this happen? Why did I jump all over the first woman showing an interest? What a fool. When my eye reached the peephole, it was covered up. Whoever was on the other side had their fingers over it. There was only one thing left to do.

Grabbing the doorknob, I tried to steady my nerves before swinging the door open as nonchalantly as possible. When my eyes hit hers, my eyebrows rose.

"What in the hell are you doing here?"

"Aw, Gramms, what kind of greeting is that?" Jackson asked, lowering her enormous backpack to the floor. She tried giving me her sweetest smile—like she used to when she was a baby with her hand in the cookie jar.

All I could do was shake my head. She wore Daisy Duke shorts three sizes too small for her and a tank top that could barely contain her more than perky breasts.

I stared at the door, torn between irritation and relief.

Looking over her shoulder, I didn't see a car, and instantly stiffened. "How did you get here?"

"I hitched."

"What?" My voice rose the way Chase's did whenever I had pushed her buttons.

She laughed. "Kidding. Julie's parents were driving up to Reno. I rode with them and then took a bus."

"Thank God." Relief gone, I was now irritated. "Have you lost your mind? Your mother is going to kill you first, ask questions last."

"She thinks I'm staying in Reno with Julie."

I put my hand out. "Give me your phone."

"Gramms—"

I glared at her.

"Parker, come on. Can't I stay just till the weekend? I just can't stand listening to her harp at me about college every single day. I need a break. I need a summer. I promise I won't get in the way. I'll be as quiet as a church mouse. I'll—"

"The phone."

She reached for her phone. When she handed it to me, there were tears in her eyes. Jackson never cried. Ever. It was another character trait we all shared; the inability to produce tears when needed or called for.

I took the phone and stared at it for a minute trying to decide what I ought to do here. I could completely understand her need to escape from my daughter's prattling. Chase could beat any subject into the ground. Then there were my own selfish motivations. I'd come up here to be alone, to work, to allow my mind to settle and my spirit to soar. I needed this time alone.

Apparently, so did my granddaughter.

Looking up at her, I handed the phone back. "Call your mother and tell her you're staying with me, and that you'll take the bus home from Reno on Saturday. Not a day later. Saturday you go home."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," she said, throwing her arms around my neck. She smelled of patchouli and mint gum.

When had she gotten so tall? It seemed like yesterday we

used to steal Chase's expensive underwear to make flags for pretend countries Jackson made up for her fort.

Even at a young age, she had an overactive imagination. She would build a fort out of anything, retreating to it to color in one of the many coloring books I'd bought for her. That girl could color like nobody's business and would sit quietly in a roomful of other kids just coloring away. I could barely keep up with the crayon buying, she blew through them so fast.

I remembered the first time I opened her first box of forty-eight. She had neatly rearranged all the colors by hue, from light to dark, so her blue box had sky blue, baby blue, navy, dark blue, lavender, and purple. Every box had this pattern. By the age of four, I knew she had an artist in her.

"Don't thank me yet. I have some conditions," I said, stepping out of the hug.

She nodded. "Name 'em."

"I don't want to see your stuff lying around. You keep everything in your room, you clean your own dirty dishes, and you use headphones for your music. It needs to appear as if there is no one here but me."

She nodded. "Deal."

I held my hand up. "Not done. Leave notes when you leave, call if you're going to be late, and if I smell booze or pot on you, I'll call your mother and have her come get you. If you argue with me, the next call I'll make will be to the cops."

Jackson thought for a moment. I gave her credit for not answering so quickly this time. She was seventeen and on summer break; of course she was going to party. I understood that. She just couldn't do it around me. "I can handle that for a week."

I cocked my head. "You sure? Because I'm not playing around. You know how sensitive my sense of smell is."

She nodded. "I'm sure. I just need a break Gra—Parker. Some time to still all the voices in my head trying to tell me what to do and how to live my life."

Stepping aside, I motioned for her to come in, and not a moment too soon. Just as I was closing the door, Tricia walked by on her deck.

“Put your things in the last bedroom on the right.”

When Jackson returned, she was wearing a bathing suit. “Marla has incredible taste. This place is awesome!”

I looked around, seeing it through the eyes of a teenager. “Yes it is. One last thing. You need to work for your keep. I’d like you to set up my canvases.” I’d taught Jackson from a very young age how to stretch a canvas and ready it for painting. It was a great skill to have, and she was outstanding at it.

“It’s been a while.”

“Like riding a bike. I’m good for now, but I have a big piece in mind and I’ll need you to get it ready.”

“Just tell me when.” She opened the refrigerator door and then the freezer. “Can you say preservatives, anyone? Did Marla shop for you?”

I chuckled. “Yes.”

“I volunteer to cook then. Is there a barbecue?”

I nodded toward the deck.

“Oh, awesome.” She walked over to the French doors leading to the expansive deck. “God, I could live out there forever.” Walking out to the hot tub, she peered inside before uncovering the barbecue and lifting the propane tank. “Cool. It’s good to go.” Coming back inside, she opened her hand for money. “Let me go down to that little store and buy some real food. I’ll cook tonight. How do hamburgers sound?”

My mouth watered at the idea. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was. “Sounds wonderful. While you’re out, call your mother.”

Once we made a grocery list, I gave her money and watched her throw on a pair of sweats over her shorts and a tank top. She had grown into such a pretty young girl, with long blond hair that hung loosely past her shoulders. She must have had a growth spurt I never noticed, because we were almost eye-to-eye. One more inch and we’d be the same height. It was just a matter of time.

Time.

It seemed like just yesterday when I stood next to Chase telling her to push. When Jackson popped out, wide-eyed and already curious about the world, I knew what real love felt like. I adored her. She was perfect in every way, and so very much a

Lee, with her cleft chin and her eyes surveying the room around her, she melted my heart—it was so not like that when I had had Chase.

Her tiny eyes never rested. Right out of the gate it was like she was looking for something; something she'd yet to find, because her eyes today could still scan a room over and over, taking in every little thing. She was so good, I'd beaten her at the card game *Concentration* only once; the first time I showed her how to play. She was only eight, and in over hundreds of games since, I'd never won again. Ever.

This was why Chase wanted her to go to college next year—the kid was that bright. School had been a bore to her until middle school when she started joining clubs. Unlike her grandmother, Jackson was a typical Leo joiner, and if a club she wanted to go to didn't exist like that, she'd start one. She was the kind of kid who would sit in the back of a calculus class coloring and would still produce the right answer when called upon.

I remembered watching her color one of those intricate posters of a castle and knight when she was fifteen. She was completely into it, but I knew better. Jackson, like her grandmother, didn't need to concentrate to color. She colored in order to be still, to quiet her mind. She would go somewhere only art could take her. It was the artist in her...the artist that must have skipped a generation because Chase had no such leanings.

I remembered asking her one morning, "What do you think about when you're coloring?"

She didn't even look up from the unicorn she was working on. "I don't. That's why I like it so much. I'm just there. I'm a color or a space needing color. It's the only time my mind rests."

That I understood. An artist's mind is filtering images, ideas, words and feelings, twenty-four seven. It is a never-ending filmstrip rushing through the mind's eye at breakneck speed, never quiet, never mute. One way we silence the ceaseless inundation of ideas and thoughts is to do our art and process some of what we see, think or feel onto paper, or in class, or in whatever medium works best for us. In this way, writers have to write, artists have to paint or draw or sculpt, and musicians have

to do music in order to stay sane, in order to, as Jackson had put it, *still the voices within*.

As I reached for my brushes, my phone rang. I had no doubt who it was or what she wanted, and I dreaded her shrill voice yammering at me about being so irresponsible.

"Before you get your panties in a wad, Jacks is fine and I have no problem with her staying with me until the weekend," I said when I answered. I never had to look at caller ID because the ring tone I used for Chase was the red alert ring tone that sounded like a fire alarm.

"Have you lost your mind? She can't be up there unsupervised."

"Chase, she's seventeen, not seven. She doesn't need supervision. Besides, what am I, chopped liver?"

"When it comes to watching her, yes. You get all involved in your work and forget she's there. Don't make me remind you about the time she was six and she walked all the way down to the store and back and you never knew she was gone. So forgive me, Mother, if trusting your babysitting skills doesn't come naturally to me."

"Babysitting? She's *seventeen*!"

"Charles is coming up to get her. What's the address there?"

Licking my lips, I peeked out the window to see if the all clear was a go next door. I figured if I could position the canvas right, I could paint and they couldn't see me. I so did not need a sexual complication up here, especially with Jacks in tow.

"Mother, are you still there?"

AAD. Artist's attention deficit. I can tune Chase out like nobody's business. "She's staying up here with me, Chase. The kid needs a break. Give her one."

"She needs that summer school college prep course I signed her up for. Did she bother telling you that?"

"Of course," I lied. Now I knew what Jackson was running from. It made total sense. "I'll call you Friday night with the address. He can come and get her then."

"Are you kidding me? I want her home *tonight*, Mother."

"And I want to own the Hope Diamond. Listen, Jacks is smart enough to make up a week in any college course. She's

asked to stay and I am going to let her. There's no more discussion."

"Goddamn it, Mother, this is no time to play games. I am one month shy of keeping her a virgin until the age of eighteen, and I'm not going to have your lack of discretion ruin that goal."

I heard Jackson's voice down on the shore. Jamming on a ball cap and glasses, I crept out and peered over the edge. Sure enough, there she was, yakking it up with two boys carrying an ice chest.

I had never burst Chase's bubble about Jackson's virginity or the fact that I took her for her first abortion. That was the teenage moment that bonded the kid to me. She'd been so afraid—afraid of Chase finding out—afraid of it hurting. It was, perhaps, the most adult moment of my life as I stood there holding her hand being brave enough for the two of us. I never told Chase. Some things are better left for later. Or never. Whichever came last.

"While that's an admirable goal, Jackson is safe with me and I will call you on Friday with the address. Not a second before."

"Mother, I am not—"

I hung up from my call with Chase and called Marla, who answered on one ring. "Any particular reason you wanted to ruin my alone time?" I asked.

"She begged."

"And you couldn't find the word 'No' in your vocabulary?"

"Parker, did it ever occur to you that you two *need* each other right now? She's searching for something you might be able to give her. You can't suck it up for five days? For Christ's sake, you've got all summer to sequester yourself away. Don't be so narcissistic."

I could see I would get nowhere with this. "Fine, but if you give Chase the address, I'm taking Brandon for that tattoo he wants when I get back."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Try me."

"Fine. You know I'd never rat you out. Look, Jackson was desperate; practically said the same words as you about needing time away. I'm sorry. I folded."

I couldn't even stay pretend mad. "I'm surprised you didn't just drive her yourself."

"I would have but she was already on her way up there. She is so you in so many ways. What could I do? Hope she found it on her own?"

This made me grin. It was something I would have done at her age. "I told her she could stay the week but she has to go home on Saturday. I'm calling Chase Friday night with the address."

"I'm glad you're letting her stay. You know how I worry about the reclusive nature of your family."

"Oh, don't worry. I'll never be like DuMont."

"Good."

"Want to hear something funny, though? You're going to get a good laugh out of this one."

"Absolutely."

"My stranger sex is renting the place next door."

Marla burst into a guffaw. "Oh my goodness, Parker. You sure know how to pick 'em! What are you going to do?"

"Hide?"

"No, really."

"*Really*. Hide. I don't know what else to do. I think I rocked her world."

"Eww. In a bathroom? Tell her to raise her bar a little higher. Jesus."

"Well, you straighties will do anything for the reclusive orgasm, and I happened to deliver."

"Double eww. Let me see who has it rented, and I'll get back to you about how long you'll need deep cover."

"Perfect. Thanks."

"And Parker? Don't shit where you eat. Stay away from the married women, okay? They've never done you any favors."

"Roger that."

When I hung up, I peered out to the deck to see if the coast was clear. The silver fox was on his deck drink in one hand, cell phone in the other. I was trapped until nightfall.

Grabbing plates and utensils, I set the table, almost glad to have the company. When Jackson returned, we made hamburger

patties and cut the tomatoes, singing to the classic rock blaring on the radio station. I'd taught her how to appreciate fine music as well, and, with butter knives in hand as microphones, we rocked out to Tom Petty and Journey as we prepared dinner.

Once she fired up the barbecue, we cooked, inhaled the burgers, and then cleaned up before she asked, "Want to hot tub?"

I thought about Tricia. "Maybe tomorrow night, kiddo. I have a book calling my name and a pillow wanting my head."

Nodding, she yanked her shirt over her head in a tomboyish way and opened the French doors. "Thanks for letting me stay."

I smiled, wondering when my beautiful grandchild had grown into such a beautiful young woman. "Thanks for coming up uninvited."

Her eyes grinned before her mouth. "Really?"

I nodded, tossing her a beach towel. "Really."

I dreamed of wild horses and giant paintbrushes chasing me down the street. When I woke, I smelled the fresh pine air and cuddled myself in the thousand thread count Egyptian cotton sheets. Marla had given me a set one Christmas and I promptly gave them back. Give a homeless man a New York steak and he'll not eat another hot dog again.

As I lay there contemplating the blank canvas that was my day, I heard Jackson rattling around in the kitchen. Rolling out of bed, I threw on a T-shirt and shorts before sliding my feet into a pair of flip-flops. The smell of coffee lingered in the air, and she was cooking something. When had she learned to cook? Making my way down the hall, I smelled toast and bacon.

"Morning," I said, hoisting my butt up onto a barstool. "Sleep well?"

"Like a corpse. Aunt Marla sure knows how to pick a bed. It was heaven."

I couldn't disagree. "You're up early."

"Going fishing."

I looked at the clock. It was seven fifteen. "You don't know how to fish."

She slid a cup of coffee to me. "Men do it all the time. How hard can it be?"

I laughed, remembering the two boys with the ice chest. As usual, she wasn't here ten minutes before making friends. "Point taken. You meeting those two kids you met?"

"Not unless I had a lobotomy last night. Meeting two strange teenage boys anywhere would be stupid. No, I met two girls at the store. Twins. They are meeting me at the store again this morning."

I nodded, glad she had such a good head on her shoulders. "Sounds like fun."

"I've been invited to the cove party."

"That's Sunday. You won't be here." I sipped the coffee. It was Peet's, and really strong, but delicious.

She said nothing, but slid a plate with three pieces of bacon, watermelon and toast to me. "Yummy, but you didn't have to. I am unbribeable."

"We'll see. I'm going to be out of your hair most of the day, and I figured you wouldn't eat, so I got a jump on it."

The bacon was crispy, the way I like it. "You're not fishing all day?"

"Nope. I'm going to shoot." She held up the expensive Nikon I'd given her for her sixteenth birthday. She loved that camera but seldom shared any of the thousands of pictures she'd taken.

"Oh. Good. Well, how about meeting me back here for dinner, say, six o'clock? We'll cook up your fish."

"Perfect." She snagged one of my pieces of bacon and ate it. "What about you? What are you doing?"

"I'm going to try to paint today."

"Still blocked?"

I nodded. "I'm just not feeling it. Hopefully, I can make something happen today."

Grabbing her backpack, she slung it over her shoulder. "Good luck with that. I'll see you later."

"Thanks for the breakfast."

"Aunt Marla told me to look out for you or she'd kick my ass."

"I'll be sure to send a good report back."

I took my time finishing my breakfast and coffee. The coffee was so good I needed a second cup.

As I drank that cup, I peered out the French doors, wondering if Tricia was up and about. I was going to paint whether or not she was next door. Determined not to let one minor indiscretion ruin my hiatus, I jammed a hat on my head, put on my dark glasses, and headed for the deck.

She wasn't out there, but he was.

"Top o' the mornin' to ye," he said, in false Irish brogue.

"It is very lovely," I replied, sitting behind the canvas.

"So, what do you paint?"

Nothing, at the moment. "Whatever the muse calls for," I answered, hoping to end the conversation.

"Do you paint for fun, or professionally?"

"Both. My motto is, why do it if it isn't any fun?"

He chuckled. "Now that's a—" His phone rang and he returned to the phone world in which he belonged.

I readied my paints and then stared back at the big, blank canvas facing me, willing something to come to me. Something. Anything.

"Bill, can't you at least finish your breakfast before starting all that?"

I heard the sliding glass door open from next door.

"I'll be right in," he said. I shouldn't have been able to hear them so clearly, but where I sat, I could hear both of them as if they were on my deck.

"That's what you always say. Breakfast is getting cold."

I tried to block out their conversation, but it was impossible.

"Have you met our neighbor, the artist?" he asked, trying to pawn her off (again) on me.

"No, he's obviously busy."

I waited for him to correct her and held my breath. My palms were sweaty at the thought of seeing her again.

"I hope my husband's constant phone calls don't bother you," she said from behind the canvas.

I waved a brush in the air but kept my face down. “Nope,” was all I could say. I waited for more, but the only sound I heard was the sliding glass door closing. I stared at the blank canvas.

That canvas was still blank when Jackson came back from fishing with three trout on a stick.

“At least one of us was successful,” I said, admiring the fish.

“No luck with the block?”

“None. It’s like I’ve gone deaf. I can’t hear anything.”

Setting the fish in the sink, she looked at the blank canvas and shook her head. “That sucks.” Reaching into her bag, she pulled out her camera. “Mind if I take some pictures of the house? I like the color combination she has in these two rooms.”

I nodded. “Go ahead,” then I looked at the fish. Grabbing a knife, I gutted them and cleaned them out, tossing the innards into a Ziploc bag before wrapping the fish up and putting them in the refrigerator.

As Jackson snapped away, I peeked out the side window to see if there was any activity next door. I could see Tricia talking on the phone, so I closed the blinds again. Opening the French doors, Jackson took a few more photos. Then she stopped near where I sat and cocked her head. “You know,” she whispered, “if you stand just right you can hear what people are saying.”

“Jacks, that’s rude.”

“Gram—Parker, it’s human nature. You ought to try some.”

I stared at her. “What does *that* mean?”

Jackson fiddled with her camera before handing it to me. When I took it, I looked at the three-inch screen and saw a painting I’d finished last month. It was a painting of the Golden Gate Bridge melting.

“And?”

She shrugged. “It’s a great painting, but it lacks...emotion, passion.”

I lowered the camera. “Excuse me? When did you become an art critic?”

She pushed the camera back to me. “Look at it again.”

I did. She was right. There was something missing. It felt like the painter was detached or something.

"That's the painting of a woman who has spent too much time in her artist's mind and not enough out in the real world."

"You think you know anything about the real world?"

"I know enough to know that you're in some kinda rut, and if you look at your last few paintings...well...myeah."

"Myeah?"

She chuckled. "I've spent my whole life looking at your paintings, watching you change, seeing how you've used color differently. I've been around art my whole life, Gramms. You've taught me a lot."

I studied her a moment before responding. "That I have." I looked at the photo she'd taken and nodded slowly. "I lack passion. I'm just going through the motions."

"Not you, your work. There's a difference. Your earlier works practically moved when you looked at them. There was an energy about them, as if they were...what's the word I'm looking for?"

"Tangible?"

"Yeah, that's it. Here, let me find one." Jackson took the camera back and ran through more photos before handing it back. "See?"

Taking the camera again, I looked at a picture I'd painted of the Castro. You could almost touch the people walking down the streets and the flags waving above. "You're right, kiddo. Big difference."

"Maybe painting isn't what you ought to be doing up here. Maybe you ought to just live for a few days. Re-energize your spirit."

Handing the camera back, I asked, "When did you get to be so smart?"

She grinned. "I got really smart the day I turned down Stanford."

I opened my mouth, then realized Chase would have jumped out, so I remained silent on the subject.

"Look, I know not many students turn down Stanford, but I got in because Dad is an alum, not because I'm bright. I don't want someone to throw me a bone that others have to earn. No thanks."

She was so like her grandmother. I would have thought the same thing. "But you are that bright, Jacks."

She shook her head. "I'm bright, but not Stanford bright. Besides, I don't want that for my life."

"That?"

"That all-consuming education. That studying twenty-four seven, and students who grade grub and kiss ass. If I *were* to go to college, it would be someplace where I could also do other things and not become a collegiate drone."

I understood exactly what she meant. "Have you explained it this way to your mother?"

"Would she listen?"

We both knew the answer.

"Stanford's loss."

She shrugged. "I'm just not that kind of student." She motioned to the empty canvas, "And you're not that kind of artist." Looking at her watch, she stuffed the camera back into her bag. "On to my next social event."

"You're having a great time, aren't you?"

"You know, I really am. It's funny. I came up here thinking I needed to get away from myself, and then I meet people who think I'm pretty cool."

"The twins were fun?"

"Tons. Very funny. We laughed a lot. They're identical, and spent the morning telling stories about growing up that way. Fascinating stories, really. Now *they* are bright."

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself. It's good to get away every now and then."

She nodded and started for the door. "Take your own advice. Take that Hog out and get away from yourself for a while. I'll see you for dinner."

I thought about everything she'd said. Maybe I *was* pushing too hard. It seemed like the more commissioned pieces I did, the less creative I'd become. Maybe I'd allowed money to cloud my artistic senses to the point of being incapable of seeing the raw beauty of art and the emotions of life. Maybe I had become too involved with making capital and not done enough of making love.

Maybe I needed to take Lucky out and let her uncloud my artistic senses.

After eating Jackson's fish, we decided a hot tub was in order, so I put the ball cap back on, got into my swimsuit, and turned the light to the deck off.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I prefer dark if you don't mind."

Climbing into the hot tub, I waited for Jackson before turning the jets on.

"Did you take the bike out?"

I shook my head. "Too hot. I'll take her out in the morning."

"You really love that bike, huh?"

"Like you read about," I said, tossing one of her sayings back at her. "There's nothing like being on a Harley."

She peered at me, the light from the hot tub casting mask-like shadows on her face. "Nothing?"

Tossing my head back, I laughed. "Oh no you don't. You're not pulling me into a sex discussion." We'd been playing that game since she was ten. She'd subtly move any conversation toward sex. It wasn't that she wanted to know; she just liked knowing she could.

"Know how I know? Your eyes light up whenever you talk about it. You say 'Lucky' as if it was a real person."

"It's just—" I shook my head. "The wind in your face, there's this incredible power flowing through your body when you wrench on the throttle. You're riding the edge of a razor, where one wrong move and it's over."

"It's an adrenaline rush."

"Sort of. The rush comes from being one with the bike and hanging in there together. You have to trust the bike."

"Odd, seeing as you barely trust people."

"People, I trust, female people, not so much."

"I never quite got that. How can a feminist like yourself have such distrust for your own kind?"

"Try loving a dozen or so of them and then you'll know. It

has been the bane of my existence that I like men but don't love them, and I love women but don't always like them."

"That's messed up."

"Tell me about it. Makes having a relationship a bit difficult, especially since so many of them che—" I stopped, watching a huge smirk spread across her face. "Damn you, you rotten stinker!"

Laughing, she turned the bubbles up more. "You're getting soft. That time was too easy."

Before she could respond, a voice came over from the other deck.

"You two are having entirely too much fun." It was Tricia.

Quickly, I submerged up to my nose, hoping like hell I was as masked by the shadows as Jackson was. Jackson waited for me to reply. Then she took over. "Are we being too loud?"

"Not in the least. Laughter is always a welcome sound. I'm Tricia Billingsley."

"I'm Jackson," she said, turning to me and waiting.

Nothing came out.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch that."

Jackson looked at me as if I was crazy. I felt crazy. The sound of Tricia's voice buzzed through my system like a cocaine high.

"Lee," I said, my lips barely above water level.

"Nice meeting you. Will you be going to the cove party?"

I shook my head, but by this time, I'd freaked Jacks out so much that she turned her back to me. "*Lee* might, but I've got to return home for summer school."

I was like a coma patient who could only move her crazy eyes.

"Summer school?" Tricia said, her voice up an octave. "You sure don't look like a high school student."

"Thank you. I'm tall for my age."

Tricia chuckled lightly. "Well, I won't keep you two. Enjoy your evening."

When I heard the sliding glass door close, I sat up so the water was at my chin.

"What the hell was *that*?" Jackson asked in a whisper. "Lee?"

"Nothing." I tried submerging, but Jackson pulled me back to the surface.

"Oh no you don't. You just acted like some nutcase. Lee? Since when do you introduce yourself to some hot toddy using your middle name?"

"I just didn't feel like talking."

She eyed me dubiously. "You know I don't believe you, right?"

I nodded. "I know."

"You know her, don't you? Was she a bad customer or something?"

I waited a moment before muttering, "Or something."

Jackson waited, but that was all she was going to get from me.

As Jackson climbed from the hot tub and wrapped her long torso with a beach towel she said, "I'm starting to really worry about you, Gramms."

"Call me that again and I'll take you home myself."

Shaking her head, she started for the door. "Can you say *therapy*?"

I yelled after her, "Can you say *ass-kicking*?"

She peeked her head back out the open doors. "Any time, old lady!" Laughing, she ran back to her room, leaving me alone in the bubbles contemplating whether or not she was that far off about me needing therapy.

I got up earlier than usual, put my leathers on, drank a quick cup of coffee and scrawled Jacks a note telling her I was taking Lucky out for a long ride. With my leather jacket, fingerless gloves and biker boots on, I threw my leg over the saddle and quietly backed her out of the garage.

I was afraid that starting her up might wake Tricia or prompt her to look out the window. I didn't need that. No, what I needed was a different place to stay for the summer. Maybe if I rode around, I could find a place nearby. It was worth a try. I

knew I couldn't avoid Tricia forever, and the stress of hiding was making me look and feel like a crazy lady.

Pushing Lucky to the edge of the driveway, she came to a bump I couldn't get over no matter how hard I tried. Cursing my luck, I pulled the choke, started her up, and took off before anyone could see me.

God, it felt good being on the back of Lucky. Winding through the mountains, I felt better with every passing mile. We got into the rhythms of the twisties and for almost two hours I took so many side roads, I knew I was completely lost, and I didn't care. Being lost on Lucky was preferable to knowing where I was; especially since I had acted like such a horse's ass.

When the road came to an end, I made a U-turn and decided I needed to get directions from someone. As Lucky wound her way back up the mountain, there was a biker and his biker chick on the side of the road. He was kneeling down looking at his bike; she stood in the limited shade and held her leather jacket. She gave me the thumbs-down. I slowly pulled over, flipped the kickstand, and walked back to them. "You guys okay?" I asked.

The rider rose. He was shorter than me, maybe five-six, with a gray ponytail and matching goatee. His worn and creased jacket lay across the saddle with his helmet on top.

"Busted chain," he said, pointing to his chain. Older Harleys are chain-driven. Lucky had a belt made of Kevlar. He stuck his hand out to me. "Bingo," he said. "This is my girl, Grits."

I tipped my head as I took his hand. "Da Vinci. Is there anything I can do for you?"

That was when I saw Grits's little belly pooch. She was pregnant.

"I called for a tow, but I sure would appreciate it if you could take her back into town. Anywhere where it's cool and she can get off her feet."

Oh God, I thought. The last time I had a passenger, I'd laid the bike down. I instantly broke into a sweat. "Oh. Sure," I said, not so sure. What could I do? They needed help, and I couldn't turn down a pregnant girl in a bind.

"That would be so cool, man. Two other dudes came by, but

one didn't have a P-pad, and the other said his old lady would cut his balls off if another woman rode with him."

I nodded, feeling my heart race and my palms sweat. "I'm gay," I blurted out for no apparent reason. God, it was like I had Tourette's.

They both looked at each other.

"I'm sorry," I explained. "It's just that some guys would have issue with their women having me between her legs."

They both laughed, and I'm pretty sure it was *at* me. "She needs a ride into town, Da Vinci. I'm pretty sure you're not planning on jumping her pregnant bones. Besides, if you did, she'd drop you like that." He snapped his fingers.

"In other words," Grits said, "we couldn't give two shits. My ankles are swollen, my back aches, I have to pee like a racehorse and I'd give anything for some water."

"That, I have," I said, motioning to Lucky and my provision. She gulped down the whole bottle, said goodbye to Bingo, and grabbed her pink helmet with the sticker "Pro Choice—I Choose to Think Pro Lifers are Assholes."

I felt a little like a virgin on her first night of sex. I was perspiring everywhere, my mind was racing even faster than my heart, and I was sure I was going to do this wrong. Throwing my leg over the saddle, my right foot caught some gravel, scaring the crap out of me, so my foot slid a bit.

I would have turned the bike on, but I'd left it on; on is not the same as running. I had sense enough to turn it off. Pressing the start button, Lucky fired right up.

Grits lightly touched my wrist. "You might want to put your helmet on."

Rookie.

Putting the bike in neutral, I took my helmet from her and put it on before remembering to also lower her foot pegs. Once back on the bike, I put it in first and nodded, the universal "Get on, bitch" all Harley riders give their passengers. It wasn't an insult, and we never said it out loud. Being a passenger is known as *riding bitch*. I waited to feel her weight settle on the bike before saying over my shoulder, "Let me know if you need to stop for any reason."

She leaned forward. "I'll be better once you get some wind in my face. I'm not afraid of speed."

Nodding, I felt her fold her jacket over her lap, covering up her belly.

Pulling onto the road, I almost stalled it, but once we started taking the twisties, I didn't even know she was there. A consummate and experienced passenger, she became one with me and the bike, leaning when we leaned, remaining still, and virtually making her presence unfelt.

When we got back to the Village Center, my butterflies had long since disappeared and I'd forgotten I had precious cargo on the back. Pulling into the Garden Café, I parked and nodded once more, signaling for her to get off, which she did. When I shut the bike off and placed my helmet on the sissy bar, I looked over to find Grits smiling.

"Wow. That was really different," she said, taking her helmet off.

"I'm sorry."

"No, no. It was awesome. I never thought I'd feel safe with a female rider, but you drive so different from Bingo. Less aggressive, less...testosterone, I suppose. It was very pleasant."

A blush crept onto my cheeks. "Well, precious cargo and all."

She giggled. "She's kicking. She always kicks whenever I get off the bike. I think she loves the vibration; a true Harley baby. Want to feel?"

I let her place my hand on her belly, and we stood together, our hands on her belly, as Tricia's green Jaguar rolled on by. I couldn't tell if she was driving it or not, and I was done hiding anyway. So we'd had sex. So what? I needed to pretend it never happened. Let *her* feel uncomfortable with my presence next door. I was done sneaking quietly around.

The baby kicked hard. "Wow. How cool is that?"

"Very. I take shit from people for riding, as if being in a car is safe, so I usually cover my belly."

I nodded, removing my hand. "Your first?"

"Yes. We're naming her Harley." Grits opened her cell and told Bingo where we were. He was still waiting for the tow.

"I can't think you enough, Da Vinci. Can I buy you a drink, or lunch or something?"

Looking at my watch, I shook my head. I needed to get back and get some work done. "Thanks, but I need to get to work."

"Work? What do you do?"

"I'm a painter."

"A house painter?"

I shook my head. "An artist. I have a gallery in San Francisco." Pulling out a business card, I handed it to her.

"This must be kismet," she said, reading the card. "I've been looking for someone to paint Bingo's bike."

My eyes grew wide. "Oh. I couldn't paint a bike."

Rookie. Seems I must have left most of my brain cells in the city.

She giggled. "Not *on* his bike, *of* his bike. I know it's a total rat bike, but it's been with him for twenty-one years. I even offered to buy him a new one, but he doesn't want one. He loves that ugly-ass bike."

I didn't know what to say. I was pretty sure I was out of her price range, but you don't just say that to someone. "I don't think I'm—"

"How much for a four by four?"

I blinked. "Feet?"

Another giggle. "Inches would be silly, don't you think?"

I thought about it for about a second. I could do this, right? I mean, it was a painting of a bike, right? Surely I could pull it together enough to do something as simple as that.

"How much do you know about art?" I asked.

"Enough to know that a painting of that size will run me close to ten grand."

This surprised me. Normally, it would cost that much, but since it was another Harley rider and I had never done one, I cut my price in half. "Tell you what—let me paint it for a deposit of one grand. You like it, you pay me four more. You don't, I give you half your grand back. Call it a present to baby Harley."

She blinked, tears coming to her eyes. "That's...I don't know what to say."

Smiling, I asked if she had a photo. She did. It was a picture

of the two of them on the bike. She also handed me her card. She was a masseuse in Oakland. I made no judgments about where a masseuse could come up with that kind of cash.

“Okay,” I said. “Buy me a soda and then tell me about Bingo and his bike.”

As I followed her into the Garden Café, I felt eyes staring hard at me. Sure enough, when I turned around, I saw the green Jag drive away.

After a nice meal with Grits, I got back in the saddle with more than enough info about Bingo to be able to paint something I thought he’d like. Taking Lucky out on the road, I rode around for another hour before finding my way back to my lake house. As I drove by Tricia’s, the Jag was parked out front. I was going to have to deal with her sooner than later, so I pulled up to the driveway, opened the garage door, and drove in.

I hadn’t taken my helmet off when there she was, standing in the garage doorway, looking as gorgeous as anything Renoir had painted. Her hair was shiny. She wore no makeup, and still, she was mesmerizing.

“You could have worn a wig and donned blackface, but I would have known that Harley anywhere.”

I reached up and touched my now brown hair. “I wasn’t—”

She held up her hand. “Let me talk, please. Let’s both just pretend nothing happened, okay? I’m going to be in and out all summer, and there’s no reason for you to hide or dye your hair, or—”

“I dyed it for me.”

She tilted her head. “None of my business, really. You don’t need to push your bike out of the driveway or hide behind your paintings. Let’s be adults about this, okay?”

I nodded, stepping up to her. The electricity was tangible, and it took everything I had not to reach out and touch her face.

“Adults. Sure. Like it never happened.” I’d done that plenty of times before.

She took one step back but didn't leave. "Exactly. Like it never happened. Shouldn't be too hard for you."

I blinked a couple of times, then she was gone.

Gone.

I thought...I shook my head. Whatever I thought had happened between us was only in my mind. She wanted nothing more from me, that much was obvious, and I suppose I should have been glad for it. Turning back to Lucky, I wiped her down before heading out to the deck to start my newest commission.

I was glad we'd cleared the air. It needed to be done and maybe now that goddamned Jag would stop following me. Maybe now I could get some work done and stop wearing ball caps. Maybe it was just what it was: a wham, bam, thank you ma'am moment.

Once I got to my seat, I prepared my paint and closed my eyes. Visions of the rat bike rushed to my mind's eye, along with...yep...*her* blue eyes. Opening my eyes, I stood and paced across the deck. How could that not have meant even a little something? How could I have been so off in my emotional radar? I thought I'd moved her, or at least impressed her. But now, I realized I got played by a bored housewife who had nothing better to do than to bang the dyke.

I was a fool.

Rookie.

Pacing back and forth, I pulled out the fish, looked at them, then decided to leave them to Jackson to fix up. I couldn't sit still, and I couldn't concentrate. All I could do was pace back and forth. Finally, when I couldn't stand it, I picked up my cell. Twenty-one missed calls from Chase and one from Marla.

I called Marla. "It's me. Busy?"

"Getting a mani-pedi for Harrison's office party tomorrow. You okay? You sound stressed."

I switched ears with the phone and kept pacing. "The stranger-sex woman just totally blew me off."

"Tricia Billingsley?" Marla laughed. "Of course she did!"

"How the hell do you know her last name?"

"I have connections, girlfriend, that you only know the half of. I checked with Morris about who he rented to. We cove

owners watch out for each other, you know? I nearly fell off my pedicured beauties when I realized you'd rug munched that Lady Who Lunches."

"Don't be so crass."

"And don't be so naïve, Parker. She's a socialite...and clearly a bored one who happened upon a horny dyke. Call it what it was and move on."

"Well, she said we ought to be adults about it and pretend it never happened."

"Then what's the problem? It's not like you want her or can even have her."

I started to answer, then stopped. Peeking through the blinds, I watched her making dinner. Why didn't they close their damned blinds?

"Parker? Please tell me you didn't fall for this woman."

"Of course not."

"Then why are you upset?"

"I don't know."

"Parker Lee—"

"Because she totally played me and I *hate* being played."

"Sounds like you both got something out of it. It was stranger-sex. So what if she happens to be living next door?"

"Well, trust me, whatever happened meant diddly to her."

"Oh my God, you idiot, you *did* feel something for her! Well, good thing one of you has the sense God gave a goose and bailed. That would be nothing but a go-nowhere situation. Bill Billingsley is a well-known partner at one of the top law firms in the city, and she works in a downtown law firm. Power couple plus. You don't need their kind of drama. They spit out people like you and use the bones for toothpicks."

I nodded. "I know. You're right." Wishing, for some reason, that she wasn't.

"Parker, it was just a momentary diversion for both of you. Leave it at that and call it a day. Go back to your painting and relax, okay? Remember why you are up there."

I nodded.

"Are you nodding?"

"Yes. Sorry."

"Your daughter has left no less than ten messages wanting the address. That woman is worse than a dog on a bone."

"Call screening?"

"Oh *hell* yeah. I'm not talking to her. She's *your* problem, not mine. Speaking of problems, how's Jackson doing, anyway?"

"Making friends and having a blast. You know how she is. The life of every party."

"You ought to let her stay."

"Shush."

"No, really, Park. Don't make her go back this weekend. Take this bonding time as a gift. She's not going to be around much longer, and who knows what that hard head is likely to do when she turns eighteen?"

"I know, but I can't paint and worry about her at the same time."

"Then don't. Just *be* for a few days. Unwind."

"That's what Jacks said."

"She's a smart girl. You should listen to her. And I'm a smart woman; you should listen to me: stay away from Patricia Billingsley. You were two ships passing and all that, but even if one of you felt something, it's a go-nowhere moment. Her husband could crush you like a bug. Keep that in mind."

We chatted about Brandon's latest baseball game (I seldom missed any) and whether or not Harrison was going to start buying up property in recession-mangled Arizona. By the time I hung up, Jacks was back, her cheeks red from the sun, her eyes bright from something else.

"Hey Gr—Parker! You're home. How was your day?"

Not as good as hers, I thought. "It was okay. Why are you out of breath?"

"The twins' dad has a boat, and they're taking it out to see this one area on the lake where you can see the sunset. Would you mind if I bag dinner and go?"

Who could say no to the pure joy of her request? She was positively beaming. "Sunset has you this fired up?"

She grinned sheepishly. "Not just that. I got some awesome shots today. God, it's pretty up here. I should come up here more often."

"You still can." I studied her face as I said that. I'd known this kid her whole life and knew when she was keeping something from me. "Jacks?"

She looked away. "I don't want to talk about it right now."

"It?"

She barely nodded. "My plans. What I think I want to do with my life. Please, can't we just let it rest for a couple of days?"

I swallowed back all my questions and comments, not wanting to push her away like Chase had always done to me. "We can discuss it any time you like. Right now, you have a boat to catch."

"Really? You don't mind?"

"Go. Have a wonderful time."

Dropping her backpack on a leopard print ottoman, she grabbed a hooded sweatshirt from the room and ran out of the house.

Jackson was a runner. She ran before she walked. Those roving eyes would lock onto something and away her little legs would take her. They had locked onto something she wasn't ready to share, but that didn't mean I had to sit around waiting for her. I wasn't a rule follower. Some would say going through her backpack was a violation of trust, of her privacy. I say nonsense. If you want to know what a teenager is doing, you have to be diligent and sneaky in finding out.

I was nothing if not sneaky.

Opening her bag, I rummaged through it, not surprised to find a set of sixty-four color felt pens and three different coloring books. She'd always taken coloring books wherever she went. Other than clothes and a trashy novel, the only things in there were a beat-up comic book and her camera. Pulling out the camera, I looked at all the buttons. For ten minutes I tried to bring up her pictures but couldn't figure out how. I preferred my one click iPhone.

I hadn't realized that I had wandered out to the deck with the camera in hand until I smelled the barbecue next door. Glancing up, I caught Tricia's eye, but quickly looked away. Sitting on one of the chairs, I pushed every button until I'd jacked it so far up, she'd know I had been snooping.

Rookie.

"Damn it," I growled, setting it on the table. The scent of steak cooking tickled my nose.

"Trouble with your camera?" she called over.

I nodded. "I just want to see the pictures on it, but apparently it is smarter than I am."

"What kind is it?"

I rose and walked to the railing. She was wearing this gorgeous teal kimono that fluttered about her in the slightest breeze. "Nikon 236."

"Those can be tricky. Press the left arrow at the same time you press the control button. That should do it."

I tried it and it worked. "Excellent. Thank you." I hesitated a moment, hoping for more, but that was it, so I wandered back into the house to better see the photos.

They were amazing.

The kid really had an eye. There's a difference between taking photos and really *seeing* what no one else sees. Jacks had the whole package. She had a picture of a hubcap on a "classic" car reflecting the sign across the street that read "classic." She had photos of children playing, of nature, of the grime in the streets; all of which were captured with emotion and passion.

She had the golden eye.

This was her secret. This was her private calling she was afraid to share with anyone. Who could blame her? Chase would have shot down photography school in a minute, but Jacks was good. *Really* good.

There was a photo of a shadow of two little black girls holding hands beneath a statue of Martin Luther King. The very fact that you knew they were black even in a shadow attested to how good she was.

"Oh Jacks," I whispered, flipping through more pictures. "You have *it*, and I'm going to have to help convince your mother to let you follow your bliss."

I was nearly to the end of the roll when I came upon a photo she'd taken of Tricia. My breath caught. She was on her cell phone in the kitchen. I found it odd that Jacks would take a picture through two windows, but the blinds gave the shot an air

of invasion, of secrecy. It made you wonder. That was the great thing about her photos; you either felt something or thought something when you looked at them long enough.

I put her camera back, and before unwrapping two cold Pop-Tarts, I made a note to call Chase in the morning. I went to the deck and stood across from the canvas. I tried to envision the rat bike. I had plenty of information on Bingo and Grits, but nothing was coming to my—

“You’re seriously not eating Pop-Tarts for dinner, are you?”

Looking up, I saw Tricia leaning on the railing, watching me with those blue, penetrating eyes. I looked at the half-eaten Pop-Tart in my hand. “Umm...no?”

She smiled. “Looks like my husband is planning on working through dinner, and I have two gorgeous New York strip steaks sitting here. Why don’t you join me?”

Because we had sex in a bathroom? Because there’s still some sort of attraction? Because it’s just a really bad idea? Because, because, because, because...because of the wonderful things she does. The song flicked my brain like DuMont used to flick my ears whenever I had a fresh mouth.

“Sure. I’d love to. Let me wash up.”

“Don’t take too long, they’re just about ready.”

I tossed my sad little Pop-Tart on the counter, washed my hands, ran them through my hair, and left Jacks a note. Then, I grabbed one of Marla’s expensive bottles of wine off the rack and headed next door.

She was waiting at the door. “Come on in.”

I entered an enormous great room that looked as if no one lived in it. A huge brown leather sectional sat in the middle, facing out over part of the lake. This home, unlike Marla’s, was reaching toward cabinesque and nearly succeeded with its river rock fireplace, hardwood planks and pine tree decor. It bordered on tacky.

Handing her the bottle of wine, I noted her surprise. “Ooh, good choice.”

“I may eat like shit, but I do know my wines.”

She led me to the kitchen and pulled out a stool for me. “Bill

is in the office, and who knows when he'll be done." Picking up a knife, she cut salad fixings.

"Anything I can do to help?"

She looked up at me from under her eyebrows. "I'm pretty sure letting a Pop-Tart diner make dinner would be a bad idea."

I grinned. "Yeah. If it wasn't for Jacks, I'd already have starved."

"It's sweet she takes care of you."

"Yeah, Jackson's a good kid."

She raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"So, you vacation while your husband works?"

"Workaholic." She shook her head. "The man's never been able to just light."

"How long have you been married?"

"Eight years. It's my second, his third."

"So much for the sanctity of marriage."

She looked hard into my eyes. "I voted for gay marriage."

This prompted a slight grin. "Good to know. So, what do you do all day up here?"

"Read, walk around the cove, hike."

Have sex with strangers.

"Alone?"

"Sometimes. I get enough of a people fix at work. I enjoy the solitude. You?"

"I'm trying to paint. Seems I've hit a roadblock. Either that or the muses are mad at me."

"Why would they be mad?"

I smiled sardonically. "Because I break rules in life. I run with scissors, I don't play well with others, and my Golden Rule is 'what's in it for me?'"

She laughed. "I don't believe that last one. You appear to be a very...giving person."

I let that one go. Too easy. Too dangerous with Bill in the next room. "Well, I understand that need for solitude."

"Yet you brought Jackson up here?"

"She followed me. I'm sending her home Saturday."

She kept cutting tomatoes with a very sharp knife. "Followed you, huh?"

“Yeah. Popped in unannounced and unexpected, sort of putting a dent in my carefully laid plan-less existence.”

“I see.”

Bill yelled from the library but Tricia ignored it. “You didn’t have to go as far as dyeing your hair, you know?”

I reached up subconsciously and touched it. “This? Oh, I didn’t, not because of *that*. I turned fifty this year and it was one of the things I really wanted to do. You know, defy age, blah blah blah.”

“The silver was very handsome, but it sure appears as if you are hiding from me.”

I appreciated her choice of color. “Well, when you get to the bucket list age, you do things to reverse time or at least make it appear as though you have.” I looked at her, trying to determine her age. She saw right through me.

“I’m old enough to know better, *Lee*.”

Bowing my head, I shrugged. In for a penny. “It’s Parker.”

She stopped cutting and stared at me. “Oh my God. You’re not...Parker Lee Chase, are you?” Her hand went to her mouth.

Uh-oh. “No?”

She stared at me a second before we both laughed.

“Oh my God, you *are*!”

I held my hands up. My world was getting smaller by the second. “I didn’t do it, I swear!”

Her right eyebrow rose. “Yes, you did, but that’s beside the point. I *love* your work! Bill has three of your pieces hanging in his law offices.”

And my world just shrank, as “It’s a Small World” started playing in the background of my head. I’m thinking maybe I watched too much TV as a kid. “Which ones?”

“Let’s see...he has the Three Bridges, the TransAmerica Pyramid blasting off, and...” She thought hard. “That one of the Castro. He says it’s responsible for his gay clientele.” She resumed chopping, then stopped and locked eyes with me. “You’re an amazing artist.”

Why oh why had I wanted that last word to be *lover*?

“Thank you. I’m here to kind of re-energize my silent muse. I was hoping the fresh air and nice scenery would help.”

“Is it?”

“Not yet.”

“It will. I come up here all the time when I need to quiet all the voices.”

I stared at her, mouth open.

“What?” she was puzzled by my reaction.

“Nothing. It’s just...that’s what both Jacks and I said the other day.”

Finished with her chopped salad, she went to the barbecue and turned it off before moving the steaks to the top rack. The outside table was set for two, and she set out the salad and wine before dropping two delicious looking steaks on white plates.

“This is heaven,” I said, inhaling the aroma.

“I beg to differ. I was recently there and it looks nothing like this.”

I let that one go as well. Why had she asked to pretend it never happened, then drop little lines about it? I may be a woman, but I can’t say I ever understand them.

I poured the wine, and we sat down and dug in. My steak was cooked to perfection and I told her so.

“Thank you. My family loved camping, and as a kid, barbecuing was always my chore. You either have it or you don’t.”

“You do.”

She put her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her folded hands. “Do I now?”

I changed the subject. “So, you’re a defense attorney.”

She resumed eating her salad. “Much to Bill’s chagrin. He’d prefer I joined his firm, but corporate law is a bore. I like the challenge of defense.”

“These days it must be very challenging.”

“Oh, it can be. I have several of your people on retainer.”

“My people?” Did lesbians run around committing crimes I didn’t know about?

The look on her face told me mine had revealed my confusion.

“Bikers. Hells Angels. Devil Dolls. You know, *gang* members.”

I nearly choked on my steak. “Oh, *those* people.”

“That’s why I can appreciate a bike such as yours. I’ve had my fair share offered to me as payment. I’ve defended some guys whose bikes cost more than their houses.”

“Fascinating. How did you ever find yourself defending outlaw bikers?”

“It just takes one, you know. You know how the biker community is, tightknit. Do one a favor and suddenly you have a thousand and one more clients or friends.” She shrugged. “So, in they came.”

“How have you fared?”

“I’m forty-three and one.”

“Wow, not bad.”

“The biker community lost me the one. He came to the trial high and admitted he did the crime. Rat bastard ruined my perfect score.”

I didn’t want to be fascinated by her, but I was. I didn’t want to be drawn to her like a spaceship in a tractor beam, but I was. I didn’t want to want her, but I did.

“You okay?”

I nodded, forcing myself to hear Marla’s words, *Straight, married women have never done you any favors*. “It’s delicious.”

“Frankly, I’m surprised you came. I thought you were going to hide all summer.”

“A girl’s gotta eat,” I said nonchalantly, immediately regretting my words when her face fell. “Wait. That’s not how I meant to say that.”

“No, it’s okay. No harm done.”

“I just—”

“Let it go, Parker. I have. Why don’t you tell me about your bike? About riding. Tell me what it’s like to have so much power between your legs?”

Was she still referring to the bike?

We chatted about Harleys, riding, Lake Tahoe, artwork and everything in between until we finished the bottle and Bill came out.

“Honey, this here is Parker Lee Chase. The artist who—”

“Well, I’ll be damned!” Bill’s light blue eyes lit up as he

vigorously shook my hand. He was wearing plaid walking shorts and a green polo short. His tan looked manufactured, and he had perfectly manicured nails. Total metrosexual. "I get more inquiries about those paintings. You bring any business cards with you?"

"I think I—"

"Damn fine painter you are. Damn fine." To Tricia he said, "I've got a meeting in Tokyo, so keep the music down tonight, okay?"

She nodded, he kissed the top of her head, told me he was glad to meet such a talent, and disappeared, not once allowing either of us to finish a sentence.

"Fart in a whirlwind," Tricia said, sounding slightly tipsy. "Invite me to hot tub some night. I can be part of a stable."

A what?

It didn't matter. I needed to beat a hasty retreat. Curious married women who were drunk were just too easy. "Jacks'll be home," I said, helping clear the table. "Thank you so much for a delicious dinner."

"No dessert?"

Arrgh! What was she talking about now? "Not tonight. I really have to go."

Tricia rose and opened the front door. Okay, she wasn't drunk, just feeling good. "You tell Jackson she is very lucky."

I lowered my head and nodded. "Sure thing. Thank you again."

Jackson arrived shortly after I returned. She made a beeline to my blank canvas and shook her head sadly. "Gramms, you *need* to see that sunset. That alone will make you paint with more feeling. It was incredible."

I inhaled deeply and took a plunge I wasn't sure I'd have taken if I hadn't had half a bottle of wine. "Speaking of incredible...I want to discuss your photographs."

"Which ones?"

"The ones on your camera."

"You looked at those?" She sounded slightly hurt but not defensive.

"I did, and Jacks, you have what it takes. I've seen good photos and yours are fantastic. I mean they are that good."

A small smile curled the corners of her mouth. "You really think so?"

"I do. And I can help get you into a photography program, either in LA or New York. Your choice. Just name it."

"Oh, man, I'd love New York."

I was pacing again. "First off, you'll need a portfolio. Every ph—"

"I have one."

I stopped and cocked my head. "You *do*?"

"I took photo last spring. We had to."

Nodding, I resumed pacing. "Is this why you didn't want Stanford? Why didn't you say something?"

Her only answer was a shrug.

"No problem. Jacks, honey, you're good enough to get in anywhere. Why don't you show these?"

She shrugged again. "'Cause I take them for me. For the colors, or lack of color. Sometimes, the picture itself is secondary to the feeling it evokes."

I stared at her. "You even *sound* like a photographer! Where is your portfolio?"

"In my closet back home. I'll show it to you when you come back."

"Fair enough. Remember what I told you about thick skin?"

She nodded.

"You'll need it when I'm going through it, okay?"

"Sure thing." Rising, she grabbed her backpack. "Is it okay with you if I switch rooms? The neighbors on that side have a lot of loud sex outside."

I groaned. Laura and Tony. "Not a problem. Get some sleep. We'll talk about this more in the morning."

Watching her walk down the hall, I was vaguely aware what that wine had done to me; it kept me from seeing who I had become in Jacks's eyes.

In that moment, I'd become Chase. I had stopped listening to what Jacks wanted and instead, inserted what I wanted for her. I was no better than my hard-headed daughter, and had I

not fallen right to sleep, I might have understood just how much that bothered me.

I woke up from a dream about Harleys and DuMont.

If you wanted to know about the Lees, DuMont was the best place to start. She was the standing matriarch of our family; solid, graceful, all-powerful. She was a woman you admired one moment and feared the next. I did both all the time.

DuMont may have borne me, but she did not create me. I was a nightmare injected into her perfectly constructed world; the wild child, the rebel, her own personal albatross. I was so not what she wanted, but she loved me anyway. She had stuck with me even when I didn't deserve it. DuMont was that kind of mother, and there had been many a time in my life I wished I had been better for her and not such a rebellious twit.

Picking up the phone, I called her. She answered on the fifth ring.

"Hello, Parker," she said. While not a cell user, she did enjoy her caller ID.

"Hey, Ma, how are you?"

"Rhetorical?" That summed up DuMont in a nutshell. Her one-word questions, as if she'd been vocabulary-rationed at birth, made you speak concisely and to the point.

"Yes. I have a little problem I need help with."

"Jackson?"

I cursed Chase, the little tattletale, for running to her grandmother for help. "Yes, I'm afraid she needs some guidance but I don't know how to give it to her without sounding like Chase."

"I see."

I waited for more, but it wasn't coming. "She has mad photography skills, Ma. As an artist, she may be even better than me."

"Better?"

"She has the eye, but it's untrained. She needs classes. She needs a professional. She needs—"

“You to listen.”

I stopped talking.

“With Chase and Charles yakking at her, her friends pulling her in all directions, her teachers being disappointed that she didn’t take Stanford, the poor girl needs an ear, Parker. She needs someone who will just shut their yap and *hear* her.”

The woman never ceased to amaze me. “Damn it. You’re right.”

“Of course I am. Your granddaughter came to you because you are what she needs right now. She *chose* you, Parker. The least you can do is be what she needs you to be right now. It is, after all, what we Lee women do for each other.”

“Thanks, Ma. I appreciate the advice.”

“Parker?”

“Yes?”

“When were you going to tell me about the motorcycle?”

“Never?”

She chuckled. “Of course. Well, be careful on your own personal rebellion, will you?”

“Talk to you later, Ma.”

I hung up feeling better than I expected; you never knew how a conversation with DuMont would wind up.

“Who were you talking to so early in the morning?” Jacks asked, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“My mom.”

“Really? How was the General?”

I nearly spit out my coffee. The General was what all my mom’s progeny and descendants called her behind her back, but I seldom heard Jackson refer to her like that.

“She’s great. She’s heading some sort of fundraiser for the schools in the Ninth Ward.” After Hurricane Katrina, DuMont had come out of retirement to run fundraising campaigns for hurricane and tsunami victims around the world. She was very good at it and had made some very influential friends.

“That woman is amazing,” Jacks said, sliding onto the barstool next to me.

“That she is. What’s on your agenda for today?” I poured her a cup of coffee and slid it over to her.

"There's a sandcastle building competition up the shore, and the twins and I want to go, too, but we have no way of getting there."

"Hmm. That does pose a problem. Can you get there by boat or Jet Ski?"

She thought for a moment. "The twins are little enough. Yeah, I think we could all squeeze onto a Jet Ski." Her eyes lit up. "Does Aunt Marla have one?"

I shook my head. "No, but I think I know who might. Finish your coffee and we'll see if they'll let you borrow it."

"Umm, Gramms, people don't let teenagers 'borrow' things like Jet Skis."

I shrugged. "It'll never hurt to ask."

She chugged her coffee, called the twins and verified they hadn't found a ride either. Once she threw on her swimsuit and grabbed a beach towel, she nodded. "Ready."

With Jackson and her backpack in tow, we headed next door to Tricia's, where I was certain there was either a Jet Ski or boat somewhere nearby.

When the door opened, Tricia's face flashed shock for a moment, then she recovered quickly. "Well, good morning you two, you're up early."

"I apologize for knocking so early, but we have a bit of a dilemma. Jacks wants to go to the sandcastle building competition on the shore, but, well, as you know, I only have the motorcycle."

"And no passenger helmet?" There was a hint of something in her voice I couldn't pick up.

I shook my head. "Right. I was wondering—"

"If I'd drive you and your—"

"I have two friends, too."

Tricia raised an eyebrow. "I was planning on going over there myself. I'd love the company. Besides, it seems that Parker prefers the more the merrier. Give me fifteen and I'll honk when I'm ready."

"Thank you so much!" Jacks said, scurrying back to our place, leaving Tricia and me alone.

"I can't thank you enough," I said softly.

“She’s incredibly sweet. Very young, but sweet.” She looked at me as if waiting for some explanation. When it didn’t come, she said, “I’ll be out in a bit.”

As I made my way back, something kept niggling at the base of my skull, but I couldn’t name it.

“She’s so nice,” Jackson said, hanging up the phone. “The twins are stoked and ready. How fun! Girls’ day out!”

It tickled me to see her so happy, and I thought about what DuMont had said. Why had I been in such a hurry to kick Jackson to the curb? The kid had jumped through hoops, willing to incur the wrath of her nagging mother in order to hang out with me. The least I could do was to let her. I mean, it’s not like she was bothering me here. Quite the contrary. I was really enjoying her company.

Fifteen minutes later we were in the Jag, happy for the air con and comfort. Jackson talked non-stop to Tricia, asking her all sorts of questions about being an attorney, about the Hells Angels. Jacks was fascinated.

So was I; by every syllable Tricia uttered. I had a hard time not just staring at her lips as they moved. This woman was simply captivating.

And married. That was an important piece to remember.

When we picked up the twins, the three girls chatted like magpies in the back while Tricia and I sat in silence for a few minutes.

“You never had kids?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I chose career. I’m not one of those women who could handle someone else raising her kids. That’s what caused the first divorce. He wanted them, I didn’t.”

“And Bill?”

“Is much older, and he has three. How about you?”

“I have one. Had her when I was too young to know better.”

“Were you married?”

“Never. That’s never been my path. I knew who I was early on. The pregnancy came as a result of trying to disprove that fact.”

“Ah...gotcha. You tried to screw yourself straight?”

Slight grin. “Something like that.”

The girls became quiet in the back, so I changed the subject, and we chatted about restaurants I needed to go to while I was here.

When we arrived at the shore for the event, the parking lot was full, so we parked on the side of Highway 50, kicking up dust as we stopped.

Turning to face the girls, Tricia said, "How does three hours sound?"

"Perfect," Jackson said. "And thank you so much, Mrs. Billingsley. You rock!"

The twins tumbled out, two tiny Asian girls who were polite, thoughtful, and from their conversation, of above average intelligence. Jacks had chosen well.

I handed Jacks a twenty. "Stay hydrated. It's going to get hot out here."

Jackson nodded and slung her backpack over her shoulder. "Roger that. Thanks again, Mrs. Billingsley." The girls took about ten steps before Jackson turned and smiled at me. "And thanks for the money, Gramms."

Tricia stared at me. "Gramms?" Then she laughed. And laughed. The kind of laugh that makes you grab your belly.

That was when I could name the niggling. "Oh my God, you thought...Jackson and I—"

When she stopped laughing, she was just shaking her head. "Oh man...oh...I thought—"

"Eww! You thought I was *doing* her?"

She stopped laughing and looked at me with a slight frown. "Don't act like that is such a stretch, Leo. You *do* seem to have your hands full."

I looked at my hands. "Of what?"

She shook her head. "Apparently, of women."

That's when I realized how my world appeared through her eyes and what all she had seen since I arrived at the cove. "Whoa. Wait."

"It's okay. I'm not judging. You obviously love what you do." She started walking toward the competition. "And you do it so well."

"Wait. Please." I stepped in front of her. "The redhead in

the hot tub is my best friend of thirty years, and the pregnant woman was someone whose bike had broken down. I was giving her a lift into town to get her out of the sun. I wasn't *doing* any of them."

Something akin to relief spread across her face, or maybe I was reading too much into it. "That's what I get for assuming, huh? I just figured—"

"That I'm some kind of gigolo who beds strange women all the time? Hardly. You...you were an exception."

She slowly shook her head. "You do not want to know what I thought seeing that pregnant woman on the bike. You two seemed so cozy."

"The baby was kicking, and she wanted me to feel it. I realize how it all must look, but really, I don't run around having stranger-sex...well...I haven't *lately*."

She brought her blue eyes up to mine and looked hard, searching for something. "I know I said we weren't going to talk about...what happened, but I'm incredibly relieved to know you haven't had sex with a bunch of other women after me. That...well...it hurt."

"I'll bet. I...I feel this energy between us that has nowhere to go. You're an incredibly attractive woman, counselor, but you're married. That doesn't dampen my attraction to you, however."

She blushed, her eyes smiling more than her mouth. "I'm glad to hear it. How weird is it that we ended up being summer neighbors or that my husband has bought some of your paintings?"

"Well, since I don't believe in coincidences, it was meant to be."

Reaching out, she brushed something off my shirt. "Well, I, for one, am glad. You're a fascinating woman, Parker Lee. Oh...and your granddaughter?"

"Yes?"

"Is amazing."

Watching Jackson take pictures of the sand sculptures, I nodded. "She certainly is."

I can't remember a more perfect first date. Walking along the beach, commenting on all the extraordinary sand sculptures we'd found, it took everything I had not to hold her hand. It was that kind of time where you were comfortable in each other's silence, where I could act silly and not apologize. She was easy time, both fun and serious, able to pitch as well as catch. She listened when I explained why Jacks had come up, and asked questions when I told her about my painter's block.

In turn, I peppered her with questions about the Hells Angels, her love of bikes, and how she intended on spending the rest of her summer. She was one of the easiest women to talk to, good at both sharing and listening.

"I'm hoping to spend my summer getting to know you, Leo," she whispered, giving my hand a quick squeeze. "If you're amenable to that."

I looked into those haunting blue eyes and nodded, hearing Marla's warning fade like a mist. "I'd like that very much."

Three hours later, we met the girls back at the car. They weren't nearly ready to go, so we agreed to come back in an hour, which suited me just fine. I was having a wonderful time.

Tricia and I decided to grab a drink at a makeshift bar overlooking several of the sculptures.

"Which was your favorite?" she asked me after we ordered a cosmo for me and a margarita for her.

"I loved the mermaid devouring that ship. Very creative, very funny, yet kind of angry. You?"

"I liked the scene from *Finding Nemo*. I have a soft spot for loaded turtles."

"Do you, now?"

She laughed knowingly. "And Harley riders."

We touched glasses. "To an interesting summer."

"And beyond," she added softly, sipping her drink. "Just so *you* know, I've never done anything like that in my whole life."

I looked at her and watched her avert her eyes. "I know that, Tricia. I also know your husband is a workaholic, he doesn't understand your work, and you're dying of boredom. That

being said, you need to be very careful of playing with me. I've been told I'm addicting."

She chuckled. "Are you?"

I nodded, sipping my cosmo. "Absolutely. That's why you can't stop thinking of me, why you looked for me in town, why you see my face at night."

She looked around. "Where are the cameras?"

I laughed. "None needed. I know I wasn't the only one who felt the energy between us. There's just one problem."

"I'm married."

"Bingo."

She gazed down at a sculpture depicting Hell. "I imagine lesbians are not in the habit of seeing married women."

"I don't know about 'lesbians,' but *I'd* rather not. I don't like messy, and there's no place to go with married women *except* messy. Too complicated. I can't do complicated right now. I came here to simplify my life, so if you want to get to know me, it's going to have to be Parker Lee Chase, artist. Anything other than that and it fucks things up for everyone."

Tricia laid her hand in mine and leaned closer, revealing a mile-deep cleavage line. "What if you could have what you wanted with no strings, no expectations and no complications? What would you say then?"

Sipping my cosmo, I locked eyes with her. "I'd say when did I die and go to heaven?"

Taking her hand off mine, she brushed a stray hair from my face. Her hand was warm and her fingertips burned me. "No complications, Leo, I swear. Just you, me and the rest of the summer."

It's amazing how we deceive ourselves into believing the impossible can happen. At that moment, drink in one hand, Patricia in the other, I truly believed in miracles. At that moment, there was no greater fool on the planet than Parker Lee Chase.

“Gramms, was it me, or does Mrs. B seem to be flirting with you?”

We were in the kitchen having a small bagel and cream cheese breakfast. I hid behind my coffee cup and hoped she couldn’t see through the steam. “She’s just overly friendly, I think.”

“I think she wants you.”

“She’s married.”

She poured herself a cup and leaned on the counter across from me. “Has that ever stopped you, really?”

Well, there you have it. Do I lie? Tell the truth? Tell the half-truth? I’d never really lied to Jacks, except that one time when she was five and she asked me if those two doggies were wrestling.

“Actually, no. It never stopped me. It’s not my job to mind someone else’s marriage vows.”

“That’s a cop-out.”

“Is it?” Oh God, I sounded just like DuMont. “I mean, why do you think it’s a cop-out?”

“You don’t mind being the *other* woman?”

I lowered my mug. “I’m *never* the other woman, Jacks. I’m always just me, Parker Lee Chase. I eschew labels of any kind.”

“Still a cop-out.”

I shrugged. “I swore off married women ten years ago. Nothing but trouble.”

“But you agree she’s coming on to you?”

I shrugged. “Straight women come on to me a lot. Well... not a lot. It’s just—”

She waited.

“Okay, look, this is the thing. Most women want to be wanted. Doesn’t matter if it’s a man or a woman. If straight women know you’re gay, they often assume you’ll be attracted to them.”

“Nuh-uh.”

I chuckled. “It happens more than you know.”

“That’s fucked up.”

I nodded. “Not really. I think we all like to be appreciated by others.”

“So, Mrs. B just wants your attention but not your body?”

Here came the lie. “Exactly. She wants what she can’t really have.”

She thought for a moment and sipped her coffee. “Okay. I can see that. I’ve seen lots of women flirt with you. Is that what it is?”

“That, and my incredible charm.”

We laughed, and I realized at that moment that Jacks and I were becoming friends. She was more than my granddaughter now, and as if by magic, we had found an even deeper meaning to our relationship. Suddenly, I was so glad she had come up, “What are you doing today?”

“I’m going to go lay out on the deck. I want to get to work on that skin cancer Chase is always in my grill about. The twins have something to do this morning, and then they’re meeting me.”

“They seem nice.”

“They are. One is going to Cal, the other to Stanford, majoring in computer science. They play the cello and violin, are setters on the volleyball team, and write for the school newspaper. *They* are Stanford material, not me.”

“Can we agree on something about college?”

She nodded, looking dubious. “We can try.”

“I will support whatever decision you want to make about school. Do go or don’t go. All I ask is that you have a plan.”

She studied me with suspicion. “That’s it? A *plan*.”

I nodded. “That’s it. I don’t want to see you foundering and changing jobs like underwear. I want you to at least know the direction you’re going. Is that too much to ask?”

“Not at all. I think I can come up with a plan.”

“Good. When you get one, I’d love to hear it. No judgment, no advice, just me listening.”

Jackson looked in my coffee mug. “Are you okay?”

I chuckled. “I really am. I trust you, Jacks. You have a really good head on your shoulders, and you sure as hell don’t need all of us meddling in your life. You’ll do what’s best for your life.”

She came around the counter and hugged me tightly.

"Thank you so much. You don't know how much I needed to hear that."

But I did, and when she pulled away, I held her hands in mine. "You have an incredible gift, Jacks. Just promise me you won't waste your talent. Promise me you won't settle in life."

"I'll promise, on one condition."

I stood back and cocked my head at her. "*You* have a condition?"

Nodding, she walked back to her room and came back with the outline of the painting I'd stashed back there. "What's this?"

"Crap." I waved my hand in the air. "Nothing but a brain fart."

"No it isn't. *This* has life to it, Gramms. Look at those eyes. They're intense and fiery, and they draw you right in. You come to this painting because of those eyes, and *then* you find your way around the rest of it. *This* is how you should be painting."

I looked from the painting to Jackson and back. She was right about the eyes. They told a story the viewer wanted to hear. They were commanding and powerful.

"You said that lady commissioned a painting of her man's bike, right?"

I nodded.

"You need to feel the same way about painting that you do about riding the bike. You love the freedom the bike gives you. You love the power beneath you. Translate all of that back to your painting, and you'll paint the hottest painting ever."

Finishing her coffee, Jackson retreated to her room to get ready for her day, while I stared at the painting I thought was no good.

Paint like I ride? The kid had something there.

Jumping up, I went to the deck. No Bill or Tricia, just the quiet of morning. Pulling out the photo of the rat bike, I held it to my heart before staring at it. God, it was a rat bike, but this bike had saved someone from certain death at the end of a needle.

When Grits had told me about Bingo and the bike, she said he had been a heroin addict as a young man. Deep into it, he did jail time for theft to support his habit, only to go right back

to the needle when he got out. One day, some guy offered to give him the rat bike for a needleful. Bingo traded. The guy did a header off a building, and Bingo was left with a bike he fell in love with riding. The wind in his face, the sun on his back, the roar of the thundering pipes replaced the euphoria he found with a deadly drug. In short, the bike saved him. That was why he would never own another. It was his bike. His salvation. It was also a great story.

Clipping the photo to my easel, I grabbed my brushes and paint, closed my eyes, and there it was, like a filmstrip in my head. I could see it all so clearly. Brush in hand, I started on the rat bike, never hearing Jackson leave, never hearing another of Bill's phone conversations on the other deck, never hearing anything except the sound of Tater's roaring pipes and the vibration of Lucky between my legs.

Like many an artist, musician or writer who gets in the zone, time means nothing. I don't stop for food, to go to the bathroom, or to even smoke cigarettes. My art consumes me, and I willingly let it. A sort of artistic tunnel vision happens where all I can see is my work. All I feel running through my veins is my creative juices on fire. It is intense, it is magical, it is life-breathing. It is also almost impossible to explain.

It was a little after dinnertime when Jacks finally laid her hand on my shoulder. "You need to eat, Gramms. It's...holy shit, that is awesome! *That's* what I'm talkin' about!"

Blinking, I backed away and rubbed my aching neck and shoulders. The painting was, in a word, amazing. It had everything my paintings of late lacked; fire, passion, movement. It was evocative and transporting. It was me making a valiant return to my craft, to my life.

Rising, I flexed my neck, never taking my eyes off the painting. It was magical. "What time is it?" I called out to Jacks in the kitchen.

"Almost eight. I let you paint for as long as I could, then Mrs. B came over with a plateful of food saying you needed to eat. She said you hadn't taken a break all day."

I rubbed the back of my neck with one hand. "Tricia was here?"

She nodded. "She's got it bad for you. Really bad. Helen Keller could see how into you she is."

I chuckled. "How could you tell?"

"Her eyes." She pointed to the canvas. "Those eyes. They never left you the whole time she was here."

"How long was that?"

"Fifteen, twenty minutes." She shrugged. "Hard to say, but she fixed a nice plate of food, and I think she's right. You should eat something." Jackson pushed the plate at me.

I stepped away from the painting, grinning all over my body. I hadn't done anything this good in a long, long time.

"You're back," Jackson said, high-fiving me.

She was right. I was.

An hour later, Jacks went to the movies in town with a group of kids she'd met on the pier while out sunning herself. I made myself a smoothie for dessert and climbed into the hot tub. For five minutes I lay with my lower back on a jet, just reflecting on how incredible it felt to paint like that again. It had been too long since I'd been transported into a world of color and emotions, and it was the best high ever. My arm worked independently of the rest of my body—like it was on a mission to fire up the rest of my lagging spirit with a piece that would signal my return. It was amazing and I felt...invigorated.

"Psst."

Opening my eyes, I saw Tricia standing in front of the hot tub with a long coat on.

A coat?

Raising my head, I stared at her. "How'd you get in here?"

"Front door unlocked. I can go if you'd rather be alone."

Sitting up, I wiped my sweaty face. "No, no. But, um, this is a clothing-is-not-an-option tub."

Smiling, she dropped her coat to the floor, revealing firm breasts and a Pilates-hardened belly that led to a shaved pussy with a lavender rose tattoo next to it. "I've always wanted to do that ever since I saw *Play Misty for Me*."

I remembered that movie. Jessica Walters was the crazed stalker of Clint Eastwood. A tiny part of me shuddered at the analogy, and I hoped like hell I wasn't getting into something I couldn't easily get out of. In the movie, Clint had to kill Jessica.

"Uh, sure. Come on in," I said, pushing the movie out of my mind. "I'd offer you a drink but I don't drink when I'm painting."

"Or eat, or hear people talking, or—" She stepped into the tub and slid silently into the water, sitting opposite me, her breasts lightly bobbing on the water. She was magnificent.

"Bill?"

"Went to Reno for a meeting. Won't be back until tomorrow afternoon sometime. Besides, even if he *were* home, all he'd see is two gals enjoying a tub together."

"Every man's wet dream," I said, finishing my smoothie and setting the glass on the edge before again rubbing the knots in my neck.

Scooting over to my side, Tricia put her hands on my shoulders and positioned me almost between her legs. "Here, let me."

I know I should have at least hesitated, but come on. Naked lady, hot tub, and shoulder massage? Who would really turn that down? Closing my eyes, I let my chin hit my chest as her hands kneaded and worked my knots and tension away.

"You're good," I muttered, melting beneath her touch.

"So I've been told. Hush now and just relax. You put in a really long day."

"It's been so—"

"Shhh."

I quieted, letting her fingers dissolve my tightness. Between her and the hot water, I was quickly turning to jelly. "Tricia—"

"Shhh," she whispered into my ear. "I don't want anything from you, Leo. I've watched you all day—intense, possessed even. If it wasn't so damned provocative, it'd be frightening."

I was melting.

"Did you eat the ribs?" Her disembodied voice held hands with the steam.

I nodded.

“Did you even smell them cooking?”

“No. I guess I—”

“Shhh.”

Suddenly, I felt her lips on my shoulder, on the nape of my neck, under my ear, over my ear. Even in the hot tub, I got goosebumps. “Leo, Leo, Leo, what have you done to me? I look at you and the world becomes open with possibilities. I feel like I can breathe again when I’m with you. I’m not going to complicate your life. I promise. Just know, you’ve touched me in places I didn’t know I had.”

Ten years ago, I would have turned around and taken her, right then and there, but at fifty, and after a whole day of painting, I just didn’t have it in me. Painting uses more than just physical energy. It takes the triad of mind, body and spirit to make great artwork. I had used every ounce from all three and was exhausted.

I don’t know when she got out and grabbed a towel, but suddenly, I was standing on the deck wrapped in it and she was leading me by the hand to the bedroom. I would have balked, but I didn’t have that in me, either. If I were a man, she would have been disappointed by a flaccid penis.

Once she put me in the bed, she sat on the edge, running her fingers through my wet hair. I closed my eyes and felt the softness of her touch even as the last remnants of energy left me.

“You just rest now, sweet Leo. Rest and know you’ve overcome whatever obstacle was in your way. Know you are doing the right thing by your granddaughter, and know this: you touch people’s lives even when you don’t know you’re doing it.”

If she said more, I didn’t hear it because I fell asleep hard and fast, sleeping a dreamless sleep without moving, without drooling, and when I woke up, my eyes popped open, and I saw the rest of the painting. Jumping out of bed, I threw on my robe before running to the canvas leaning just inside the French doors. I was afraid I’d dreamed it—afraid it wasn’t as good as I thought it was.

Sure enough, there it was. So was Jackson, sitting at the counter drinking coffee.

"Have a good sleep?"

Suddenly, I remembered Tricia's visit and looked around. "Umm. Yeah. Sure. You?"

"You were dead when I got home, so I just let you sleep. It was a shitty movie. Can't Hollywood come up with anything original anymore?"

"Doesn't seem so."

Jacks joined me at the painting. "It's awesome. Tell me about it."

I pointed to the eyes first. "These are what I see, these eyes looking at the canvas, burning with intensity, with fire. They see the rat bike flying in the air, being lifted by the wings."

"Why wings?"

"Bingo has a thing for Pegasus. See, the wings lift the Harley out of the fiery pit, reminiscent of hell...*his* hell. Bingo was a heroin addict until he got the bike. He became addicted to riding the bike and stopped using when he realized he couldn't do both."

"So the bike saved him."

I nodded. "So, we have the fire, the wings and the blue eyes balancing color and hue. Somewhere in the painting is his name."

Jackson looked and looked, but couldn't find it.

"Here," I said, pointing to one of the forks.

"Gr—Parker, this is really something. You've totally scored on this one. It's mesmerizing."

"It's not done, of course. I have a lot more work on the flames and sky, but I like where it's headed. For the first time in a long time, I like where it's going."

"Speaking of going, I better get a move on. Tonight's my last night with the twins and they want to canoe around the lake. I was wondering if you'd mind if I stayed over there tonight after we have dinner."

"Not at all. Just be smart and keep your phone with you."

"Thanks. I really have enjoyed hanging with them. What are your plans?" She shot a glance toward Tricia's place.

"Oh, I have some visiting of my own to do. See you for dinner, and then you can go hang with your new pals."

“You’re on.”

Once Jacks left, I picked up my cell phone and called Chase.

“I can’t believe you!” she practically roared into it before I could manage a hello. “I have left a thousand messages. The least you could do was return one call. One call! Is that asking too much? I *cannot* believe you—”

“Meet me in Auburn at one o’clock and bring Jackson’s portfolio.”

“Her what?” That seemed to grab her right away.

“Her portfolio. It’s the big case in her closet with her work in it. Bring it with you. You can yell at me there.”

“Where?”

“Starbucks. The one near McDonald’s. One o’clock. See you there.” I dressed in my leathers and hopped on Lucky. My granddaughter had helped me find the spark I needed in my life. It was time I returned the favor.

I could tell by the flush in her cheeks that Chase was loaded for bear. In *her* mind, I was undermining all of her carefully laid-out plans. I understood that. I also understood her fear that her only child would flop around in life without direction, without a concrete goal, without a college education. I was about to shift gears in both these lives and hoped like hell Chase would, for once, stop trying to control her own life by micromanaging Jackson’s.

One could only hope.

Plopping down on the chair across from me, she slid the portfolio over. She was wearing a lavender Armani pantsuit, clutching a Louis Vuitton handbag. Her green eyes were ablaze with an anger I was pretty sure she reserved for me, and her ever-changing hair color was now an odd shade of blond. “I am not happy with you right now, *Mother*. With either of you. How could you? Of all the—”

I held my hand up. “Does Jacks need this summer school class?”

She stopped, blinked and then continued on her rant.

"That is irrelevant. It is what she needs to be doing and, thanks to you, she is now behind. I can't believe you can't see how wrong this was. You singlehandedly—" Chase shook her head, disappointment oozing from her pores.

I nodded and waited for more.

"Charles is so angry, he can barely speak. How could you be so unsupportive?"

"Are you through?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. I am so angry I could spit fire."

I leaned across the table. "I *am* being supportive—of Jacks. You and Chuck need to pull your heads out of your asses or you're going to lose Jacks completely. Is *that* what you want? Is that how you want all of this to play out? Because if you're not careful, that's exactly what's going to happen."

"Don't be so melodramatic, Mother. Of course we aren't going to lose her. If you'd just mind your own business, she would eventually fall in line like she always does."

Shaking my head, I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Can you even *hear* what you just said? *Fall in line*? When did you and Chuck start this boot camp of yours?"

"You know what I meant."

Reaching for the portfolio, I asked, "Let me ask you this. Did you even *look* in here?"

She looked away. "No."

"Why not?"

"They're irrelevant."

"Not to *her*! Goddammit, Chase, the kid has real talent. She has a passion for this stuff! She spends hours doing something she loves. She has—"

"Is *that* what this is all about for you? Turning her into a mini-Parker?"

I stared at her, hoping she didn't go on. She did.

"You're successful *now*, Mother, but you struggled. You failed more than you succeeded at first. The artist's way isn't an easy one, and so few can make the kind of money you make. I can't even believe you'd want that life for her. Have you forgotten how hard it was?"

"What life? Have you *looked* at my life?"

“Have *you*?”

“Chase, this isn’t about me.”

“Isn’t it? You hold my daughter hostage all week, keep her from going to summer school, ply her with ideas of making it big as an artist, and you don’t think this is about you? If you had Jackson’s *best* interests at heart, you’d have sent her home immediately. I can’t believe you don’t see that.”

Opening the portfolio, I pulled out several photographs and flipped through them. Like the ones in her camera, these were amazing. Close-ups of a bumblebee and dragonfly sitting together on a yellow flower. A black and white of an elderly couple sitting on a park bench holding hands. In every photo, the feeling shot through you as you looked at it.

“Look at these,” I said, forcing them on her. “Look at how very talented your kid is and *then* tell me I’m not looking out for *her* best interest. Operative word: *her*. And don’t tell me they aren’t relevant, whatever the hell that *means*. Jackson’s opinions are relevant. Her desires are relevant. Her goals are relevant, and her God-given talent is relevant.”

Chase barely gave them a cursory glance. This pissed me off more than anything else she could have done. She might as well have spit on them. Hell, she might as well have spit on me.

“Give me the address, Mother. We’re never going to agree on what’s best for Jackson, so before one of us says something we can’t take back, just tell me where you’re staying so Charles can come and get her. We’re done playing around with you.”

I heard DuMont in the back of my head as I slid the photos back into the portfolio. “No.”

She leaned forward, the vein in her forehead popping, her cheeks becoming as rosy as her lipstick. “No? What do you mean *no*?”

Rising, I took the portfolio and tucked it under my arm. “I mean, Jacks is staying with me for the rest of the summer. You had your chance, but you blew it, Chase. You’ve stopped listening to your daughter, and I almost *fell in line* right along with you. But the kid came to me because she needs to be heard. I heard her, and I am not turning my back on her. She’s staying

with me.” Turning on my heel, I started out of the Starbucks with Chase sputtering after me.

“Goddammit, Mother, don’t you dare do this! You have no idea what you’re doing here. This is my daughter we’re talking about, not some summer project of yours!”

Grabbing bungee cords from my saddlebags, I bungeed the portfolio to the passenger pad while she foamed at the mouth.

“I swear to God, Charles will come looking for you. He won’t rest until we find where you’re staying. And if Marla won’t tell us, Harrison will.”

Turning around, I shook my head. “No, he won’t.”

“You don’t know my husband.”

I leaned into her face and played the ace I’d been holding. “And you don’t know that I am aware of your little...indiscretion last January with Chuck’s accountant.”

The look on her face was priceless.

“You...wouldn’t.” The blood drained from her face.

“You don’t know your mother very well if you think that.” I put my helmet on and clicked it closed. “You don’t want to play hardball with me, Chase. Jacks is staying with me. Period. End of story.” Throwing my leg over the saddle, I waited for her final word.

“That’s low, even for you, Mother.”

“Chase, listen to me. My granddaughter lied to you, got a ride to Reno, and took a bus to get to me. If she didn’t need whatever I have to give her, she’d never have made such an effort. I know you want to make me the bad guy in this scenario, but one day you’ll see just how wrong you are. Jacks reached out to me. I have no intention of letting her down.” Starting the Harley, I let her warm up, Chase standing there with big tears in her eyes.

“She means the world to me.”

I nodded, adjusting my glasses. “She means no less to me, Chase. For once, just once, trust me.”

I looked in the mirror when I got to the end of the parking lot and saw Chase sobbing in her hands. My heart hurt for her, but not enough to turn my back on my granddaughter.

DuMont had been right all along.

Jackson had come to the one place she felt safe while she sorted through her many life choices, and I would protect that kid at all costs.

Even if it cost me my own daughter.

When I finally got home, I left the portfolio on the dryer in the garage and found Jackson sitting on the deck reading a thick tome about Cleopatra. She had always been a big reader.

"I'm surprised to find the gadabout sitting at home."

She looked up and I followed her glance to her packed backpack. "Had to pack and get my gear ready."

"About that—"

"I understand, Gramms, really, I do. As it is, you're gonna have to deal with Mom and that is never a pleasant experience, and she is going to be so pissed."

I nodded. "I am not afraid of your mother, and I don't give two shits if she's pissed. She is just going to have to rub her sore spot. Besides, I already saw her."

She sat up now, putting a bookmark in her book and setting it aside. "When? Is she here? I haven't said goodbye to the twins yet."

"Relax. She's not here. She's not going to be coming here, either."

Jacks cocked her head at me, her eyes filling with hope she couldn't yet trust. "You mean—"

"I mean you better get your ass down to the lake and find out what we need to bring to that damned cove party."

Her arms were around my neck in an instant. "Thank you so much! Thank you, thank you, Gram—" She stopped, pulled away and caught herself. "Does she know?"

"Oh yes. And she is none too thrilled with either of us at the moment."

"Oh God, I'll bet. Where is she?"

"Home by now. I met her in Auburn. We can discuss that later. Right now, I have a headache from her busting my chops, and a painting I am dying to get to."

Nodding, Jackson started for the door when she went back for her book and withdrew an envelope. "Your stalker came by and gave you this."

I laughed. "Behave."

"She's married."

"She's just a friend."

She looked dubiously at me once more. "Uh-huh. And Mom is sane and rational."

When she was gone, I opened the envelope. Inside, there was a frangipani-scented card with five simple words: *Go out with me tonight.*

I declined her offer of "going out," whatever that looked like, because I really wanted to work on the painting.

I kept working into the night, dragging four lights out onto the deck, illuminating the whole thing. I'm sure the neighborhood hated me.

Tricia left me alone, which I appreciated, until about one in the morning. Jackson was in bed, finishing her book after helping the twins organize a fund-raising event at the cove party.

"Quick question," Tricia asked over the railing. "You coming to the party?"

I stopped, rolled my shoulders, and nodded. "We both are."

"You're letting her stay, eh? Softie."

I nodded. "Shh, you'll ruin my carefully constructed bad girl reputation."

"Your secret is safe with me."

I rose and stood opposite her on my deck. "Bill home?"

"Nope. He's staying another night for fun."

We stood in silence for a few minutes before I said, "We have to stop meeting like this."

To which she immediately responded. "You're right." Before disappearing into the house.

"Tricia, I was—" my voice faded. "...only kidding." I turned all the lights off and was bringing the easel in when Tricia came through my front door, and in five steps had me in her arms, her lips pressing hard against mine, her hands in my hair. If I wasn't so much bigger than her, she might have knocked me over.

We kissed like lovers who had been doing it a lifetime, our

hands all over each other, our bodies pressed together as if melding two metals. God, that woman could kiss. Our tongues made love as our mouths devoured each other without stopping for a breath, without pausing to consider the ramifications of all of this.

When I finally needed a breath, my head was all floaty and my hair all messed up, but I managed to unlock my lips from hers and inhale. “Jesus.”

“He can’t help you right now,” Tricia said, tracing my jawline with her fingertips. “Have you any idea how gorgeous you are?”

Now, I’m many things, but gorgeous, as subjective a word as it is, does not really apply to me. At best, I’m handsome, maybe boyishly cute, but gorgeous? Not a chance. “Thank you,” was all I could think of as my knees weakened.

“You don’t believe it, but it’s true. From your smoldering green eyes to this incredibly sexy cleft, you are fucking hot.” She ran her fingertips over my chin several times before sliding her hand around my neck and pulling me into another wet kiss.

We kissed for another couple of minutes before she eased away and ran a hand through my hair. “Leo, everywhere I go, you’re there. Everything I do, I take you with me. I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Oh God. Cue Marla. I could hear her tscking me. Danger, danger, Will Robinson! Married woman infatuation alert! She was getting ready to boldly go where no married woman ought to.

Funny thing was, normally I would have let her, but I really liked Tricia. A lot. More than I should, but that didn’t change a thing. This had no place to go except down. I also had an obligation not to be the worst possible role model for my granddaughter. “You think you can see me all summer and then go back to your cozy married life without remnants of this following you around?”

“Cozy married life? Have you *looked* at my relationship with Bill? He is as absent as a husband can be and still be alive. I have to check his pulse whenever he isn’t on the phone.”

I took her hands in mine. I’d been here before. The definition of crazy in our family was doing the same thing over and over

and expecting different results. I'd done crazy. "Is that what this is for you, then? A *diversion* from an unhappy marriage? I'm just trying to figure out what it is you want here."

Her intense attorney eyes locked onto mine. "You. I want *you*, Leo. I want as much of you as you're willing to give me."

This was that moment where you stand at the crossroads between doing what's right and what's best. Problem was I didn't know which was which, so I decided not to decide and let the chips fall where they may.

"Let's just take her as she comes," I said, quoting one of DuMont's oft-quoted lines. "There's no hurry, is there?"

She looked hard into my eyes. I was sure she was a fierce competitor in the courtroom and wasn't used to not getting her way outside of it.

"No, there's no hurry. I just wanted you to know how much I desire you. Not just sexually, either, but time with you. I find you captivating, Leo. Simply captivating."

Kissing my hands, she brushed her fingertips across my cheek before leaving as quickly as she'd come, leaving me with my mouth hanging open.

"There's a fine line between captivate and capture, Gramms. You better be really careful with that one. She's carrying a bear trap in her Louie."

My heart leapt into my throat when I saw Jacks standing in the dark hallway. "Jacks..."

"I only heard the last part, but it was enough. She's in love with you, you know?"

I nodded, turning the lights off. "I know."

I never really expected to open the door the next morning to find Charles standing there.

"Shit." The word fairly plopped out of my mouth.

"That's one way of looking at it," Charles said in that uptight Harvard manner of his. Who comes to Tahoe in a suit and tie?

"I can't believe she told you where I was."

"She didn't. Harrison did. I made it pretty clear he didn't

want to be on my D List.” Charles studied me. “Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

Instead of doing that, I scooted around him and closed the door behind me leaving us both outside. “I’d rather not. Look, Charles—”

He held up his hand. “Don’t waste our time, Parker. As it is, I have had to rearrange my entire day to come up here to retrieve my daughter, who should be sitting in summer school right now.”

“You could have sent Chase.”

He smirked. “Hardly. She is too upset to be driving those winding roads. Besides, I figured I could talk more sense into you than she could. You two spend so much time at loggerheads, you’d never get anything done. No. This is far easier.”

I crossed my hands over my chest. “I think you underestimate me, Charles.”

He chuckled. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

I stared at him. “You really want to come at me like this?”

“Parker, you are under the assumption that you have a card to play here. You do not. My daughter is going home with me. End of the story.”

Oh now he was just pissing me off. “The hell she is.”

Pulling out his cell, he pressed one button. “It’s me. Here she is.” Handing me the cell, he leaned against the house.

“Yes?” I don’t know what I was expecting, but it sure as hell wasn’t a call from Jackson’s summer school teacher telling me he would be forced to fail her if she wasn’t in school the next day, ruining any chance she had at going to any college.

I said nothing and merely hung up. “You’re a prick,” I said to Charles.

“And you are an irresponsible hippie who hasn’t a clue what it takes to raise a child. Now if you’ll please go get—”

Suddenly, the door whipped open and there stood Jackson, her face shut off in anger. “I cannot believe you’re doing this!”

“Get in the car, Jackson Lee.”

“No.”

“Young lady, that was not a request. Now, unless you wish for me to turn my dogs on your grandmother, I strongly suggest—”

Dogs? “Whoa. Whoa, there big guy. Are you threatening me?” I stepped up to him, and though he was slightly taller, he stepped back a bit.

“Not yet, Parker, but I can make your life very unpleasant.”

The lightbulb popped up over my head. “*That’s* why you didn’t send Chase. You came to throw down the gauntlet.”

“I knew talking sense into either of you would be a waste of time, and I was right.” To Jackson he ordered, “The car. Now.”

It took everything I had not to make an even bigger scene, so instead of dealing with him, I looked at Jackson and nodded sadly. “We can do this another time, Jacks. I promise. Just go to school, finish up and turn eighteen.” To Charles I finished, “After that, all bets are off.”

Jackson did not take her portfolio, her bag, or anything else. She just pushed by Charles, giving him a shoulder as she did, and nearly tore the hinges off the Infiniti when she ripped it open.

“Good decision,” Charles said to Jackson’s back. When he turned back to me, he practically snarled in my face. “At least one of you can make the right call.” Charles turned to leave but I reached out and grabbed his arm.

“I know my daughter is bitter that I didn’t raise her. I know you both think I am a complete dolt where kids are concerned, but mark my words...if you take Jackson home, you will lose her completely. If that’s your goal, *you* are making the right call.”

“Give it a rest, Parker. You have no idea what you are doing.” Tearing his arm from my grasp, Charles got in the car.

When the back window rolled down, Jackson stuck her tear-streaked face out of it. “I’m so sorry, Gramms. I never meant to cause you any trouble.”

“We’ll do it again next year. The whole summer. I promise.”

As I watched the Infiniti drive away, I cursed myself. I thought I could protect her...instead, I had been partly responsible for putting her head on the chopping block.

Shaking my head, I walked back into the house and shed some tears of my own.

For a minute. Then I threw my shoulders back and made the decision to fight for my granddaughter like I promised I

would. God knows, I didn't keep many promises in this life, but she certainly deserved for me to.

So I called Marla.

"Parker, I had no idea—"

"Not important. Look, do you have any connections at the university?"

"Which one?"

"Any one. There has to be an online summer school program somewhere. Jackson needs trigonometry to graduate. I need her in an online school as quickly as we can make it happen."

"If I do this, will you forgive Harrison? He feels awful."

"Absolutely. But I have to run."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going after Jackson."

The morning of the cove party everyone was busy with the setup of tables and getting wood for the bonfire. Jackson was up and out early, giving me time to put the finishing touches on my painting.

When she came out to the deck, she offered me my second cup of coffee.

"You sleep okay?" I asked.

"Once I finally fell asleep. I just laid there thinking about you driving up at that Starbucks. The look on Charles's face was fucking dope!"

I chuckled thinking about how I'd called Jackson right after I'd hung up from Marla and told her to get her dad to stop at the first Starbucks they came to. He did, and seven minutes later, so did I...in Tricia's Lexus. Jackson was right. The look on Charles's face was priceless. It never changed as I stood there and told him to do his damndest where I was concerned. I wasn't afraid. Jackson had come to me for something they had been unable or incapable of providing, just as I had done once with DuMont, and just as Chase had done with me. It was time to break that cycle and step up.

So I did.

And I told Charles that I would take care of summer school, take care of Jackson, and take care of business, and if he ever threatened me again, I would plaster his secrets all over the city.

That shut him up, and when Jackson got in the Lexus, she had the sense of mind not to ask what those were...which was a good thing because I didn't have any. I was bluffing.

"Well, it won't be easy going home to Chase, but at least you have some time to regroup and figure a few things out before then."

Jackson nodded as she looked at the painting. "Looks like you figured some things out, Gramms. That painting rocks."

It did, and I loved it. Everything about it. And I was pretty sure Bingo would love it as well. It looked exactly like his bike, even down to the nick on the front fender.

Once I signed it, I called Grits and told her it was ready for a preview. She agreed to meet me in an hour, and when she arrived, I barely recognized her out of her biker gear.

"I clean up well," she laughed, seeing my surprise.

"Come on in." I peeked outside. She was driving a Mazda.

"Nice place."

"It belongs to a friend of mine," I said softly. "Can I get you something to drink?"

She was already on the deck, gazing at the painting. I let her look for what seemed like forever. Finally, she whispered, "Oh my God, Da Vinci...it's...I'm speechless. This will make Bingo cry, and he never cries."

"Yes?" I beamed at her reaction. She was riveted. I had learned a great deal in my time as an artist, and one of those things was to be quiet when someone was studying a painting.

"It's...perfect. This is so much cooler than I ever envisioned. The detail of the wings. Even the chain is realistic. And the fire below." She turned to me, tears in her eyes. "It's absolutely wonderful." She hugged me, her belly pressing into mine. "He is going to die when he sees it."

I grinned, happy she loved it as much as I did. "I'm so glad you think so."

Easing away, she stared back at the painting. "You know what makes it? Those eyes. There's something about them that pulls

you to them.” She looked at the eyes, then at mine. “They’re not yours, though. Whose are they?”

“My muse. The inspiration for this piece.”

“He is soooo gonna shit green Twinkies. You better give me tons of your business cards, ’cause his buddies are all gonna want one. Mark my words, Da Vinci; you are going to get a ton of business from this piece.”

I remembered what Tricia had said about befriending one and another thousand and one follow. “I have plenty of cards, and that would be great. I had a wonderful time painting it.”

“When can I have it?”

“A couple of days. It needs to dry, then it’ll be good to go.”

“Awesome. Can I get a picture of it to show the girls?”

“What girls?”

“My sister rides with a women’s motorcycle group called the Sirens. A couple of them want portraits taken of them and their bikes, but I think this is way cooler. You know, you ought to think about air brushing. You’d make bank doing bikes.”

I smiled as she took a picture. When she put her camera away, she handed me a check for four thousand dollars. For some reason, I hesitated taking it.

“What’s wrong?”

I hadn’t done it for the money. I’d done it to get unstuck. Now I was. She’d done me a favor. “How about a trade instead?”

She lowered the check. “Trade?”

“How much do you charge for an hour-long massage?”

“Fifty.”

I did some quick math in my head. “How about a massage once a week for a year?”

“Are you kidding me? That’s not even three grand.”

“I know. Put that check toward a college fund for your daughter. I’d rather have the massage.”

“Fuck, yeah. Oh my God, you are amazing!” She hugged me again. “I don’t know what to say!”

I extended my hand. “Just say it’s a deal.”

After shaking my hand, she pulled out another business card. “Call today and set whatever time works for you. God, Bingo is

going to think he died and went to heaven. I can't thank you enough."

"You don't need to. I've always bartered. I prefer it, actually. No taxes."

She smiled through more tears. Pregnancy hormones were getting to her. "You are incredible. Thank you."

When Grits left, I stood in front of the painting, admiring my handiwork. I felt good about the trade.

"She loved it," came Tricia's voice from her deck.

I nodded, feeling the elation I used to feel when I finished a piece I really liked. "Yes, she did."

"I couldn't help but overhear you mention your muse. I was looking at the painting the other night when I put you to bed. If I didn't know better, I'd say those were my eyes."

"Oh would you?"

"Are they?"

Before I could answer, Bill came out. "Hey there resident *artiste*! You coming down to the cove party? I understand all the workaholics are required to attend."

"I got that memo, and yes, I'll be joining you. We made our family's special Southwest black bean salad and brownies."

"Pot brownies?"

The question so shocked me all I could do was laugh nervously.

"Bill!"

"She's a Harley-riding artist, darling. Do the math."

"I guess you'll have to eat one and find out," I said, winking at Tricia.

"Well, we'll see you down there. Thanks for keeping Tricia occupied while I was in Reno."

"How'd you do?"

"Lost the deal, won at baccarat. It all evens out in the end, doesn't it?"

When he was gone, Tricia leaned over the railing and said, "They're my eyes, aren't they?"

Remembering everyone's admonishments, I smiled enigmatically and said, "I'll never tell."

She smiled back. "Oh yes you will. I have my ways."

I shivered. I'll just bet she did.

When I got down to the lake, I was immediately impressed by the preparations for the cove party. It was a little after five when I got there, and I had the pleasure of watching Jacks whirling and twirling, taking pictures one moment and getting tables set up the next. The girl fit in everywhere, and I realized that I was truly a fan.

As I watched her, my cell rang. It was Marla.

"What are you doing?" She asked. Marla never said hello.

"We're at the cove party."

"Fun! Wait—*We?*"

I told her about my conversation with Charles and that I was letting Jacks stay the summer.

"Wait. You *blackmailed* your own son-in-law?" She laughed right into the phone. "Brava!"

"Well, yeah. He asked for it."

"Oh Christ, Park, you *are* bad, but I do so love you for stepping up for Jackson. She needed that more than you realize."

I moved away from the noise to a rocky area that was much quieter. "How's the gallery? Everything going okay?"

"Slow, but we got a call from a new boutique hotel going in the city, and they're interested in prints. Several dozen to be exact."

"Excellent. Well, that's some good news." I told her about Bingo's painting, and she listened with her typical enthusiasm that I adored.

"Well, Harrison would be the first to tell you to diversify. Brandon says he missed you at his game, and I...I just miss you. I can't believe we're going to do this for the entire summer. One week has felt like forever."

"Come on up, then. I'm out of my rut and would love to spend some down time with you. It's so beautiful up here, and I need a diversion from my diversion."

"I'll think about it. I'm just so glad you feel better. You

sound better. Please tell me it's all because of your art and not your heart."

"You worry too much."

"Because I know you so well. You can't help yourself. Given the opportunity to dip one toe into forbidden waters, you'll do it every time."

"Every time?"

"Every. Single. Time. Is she stalking you yet?"

I chuckled. My life patterns ran deep. "She's made her intentions clear, yes. I wouldn't call it stalking, but I'm pretty sure I know what it is she wants."

She groaned. "What about what you want? What are your intentions, Park?"

"I don't have any."

She laughed. "Liar. You *always* have one eye on the prize and one foot out the door." Then she said, "Go to a gay bar. Get this woman out of your sights. Pronto. The next time we talk, I want to hear about the dyke you're banging."

We chatted a little more before hanging up. I hadn't been to a gay bar in years. It would do me good to kick up my heels and let loose.

Leaning against the rock, out of sight of the festivities, I closed my eyes and tried not to think about those lips on mine, or her hands in my hair. God, she was ho—

"I just got back." The voice came from the other side of the rock. It was Bill.

I started to wave at him, thinking he was with Tricia, but he was alone. He was on the phone, his back to me.

"She's a bright woman, baby. Tricia's not going to keep believing I'm going to Reno for work. She didn't get to be the killer attorney by not focusing in on small details."

Oh shit.

Ducking back behind the rock, I prayed he wouldn't walk over to my little hiding place. I was trapped and there was no place to go.

"I know, baby, I miss you, too, but I don't think I can get back for a few days. She's made a friend, which is good. It's

keeping her busy. I'll see what I can do, okay? You just have fun at the casinos and win Big Daddy some money."

Big Daddy? I think I vomited a little in my mouth.

When he finished kissing and smooching the phone, I counted to one hundred and then peeked around the rock. He was gone.

He may have been gone, but his words lingered in the air like a day-old fart.

"Goddammit," I growled, stepping out from my hiding place. This was the *exact* complication I didn't want or need. Marla was right. I needed to get my ass back over to my own team before it was too late.

There must have been a hundred people at the cove party, all mingling, eating, drinking beer and just hanging out. Some I recognized, others, not so much, but it was a great turnout and Jacks was in her element. There were long tables with green tablecloths, all full of an assortment of delicious food. Someone had hired a DJ, who was spinning songs from the seventies and eighties. The evening was cool enough to be comfortable and warm enough to remind us why we lived on this side of the country.

I watched Jackson from a distance, laughing with everyone as if she knew them all, playing hostess to a bunch of strangers as if they were family and making them all feel at home. I don't think I have ever been prouder of her, all poised and calm.

"You're positively beaming, Leo."

I turned around and there she was. She looked gorgeous in her gray Donna Karan silk suit. "Am I?"

"You *should* be proud of her, Leo. She's a neat kid. Everyone is talking about her. Come join the festivities. There's enough food for an army."

Following her into the crowd, I was suddenly awash in people who wanted to know all about the "resident artist." Apparently, Bill had been gushing.

An hour into it and I'd eaten my share of ribs, chicken, cole

slaw, corn on the cob and peach cobbler. I was stuffed, and I felt as if my tongue was bleeding from talking so much. My social clock had two hours on it. Hour one was warm-up, hour two was finding my way out. I was on hour two.

Just when I thought it was over, I heard the familiar loud roar of Harleys. Lots of them. And they had pulled into the parking area next to the cove.

“Oh shit, Leo. What did you do?”

“Me? Why is this my fault?”

We both went tearing around the corner, and there was Jackson, taking photos of these enormous men sitting on their bikes, while the rest of the bikers were proudly showing off their tattoos and paint jobs to the rest of the interested cove dwellers.

“What the fuck is going on?” I whispered to Tricia.

“Hell if I know. Looks like your grandkid follows in your footsteps.”

I took one step before Tricia stopped me. “You want to steal her thunder?”

“No, but—”

“Let’s just watch her a moment. They’re eating out of the palm of her hand.”

She was right. Jackson was cajoling, teasing, as she looked to get the shots she wanted, and flicking shit to men who probably hadn’t been ordered around like that in...well...*ever*.

“She’s a natural,” Tricia whispered.

I watched my granddaughter take a shot of an enormous tattooed guy wearing a silver beanie. She had him leaning all the way back on the passenger backrest with his feet hanging over the handlebars. It was an awesome shot. After the shot, she turned the camera around and showed him the photo.

“They’re lining up in droves,” Tricia said softly. “Look at her working the room.”

After a couple more bikes, Jacks looked up and saw me, waving me over. “Gra—Parker, over here. Come see!” Her enthusiasm was infectious.

Tricia and I walked over to her, where several bikers were gathered around her, looking over her shoulder at the photos.

“What you got going here, kiddo?”

"Remember the other day when we were at the sand sculptures? I took a photo of a guy on his bike. He asked to see it. I showed him and told him I'd e-mail it to him."

"And you did. How did they find you?"

"I told them about the cove party. I never imagined—"

When I looked at all the activity around us, little kids being hoisted up to sit on expensive Harleys, mothers admiring tattoos, and men salivating over bikes they could only dream of having, I could only shake my head in wonderment. Jacks had managed to bring together two completely different groups of people and show them how to coexist without fear or judgment. It was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen.

"So they came for more pictures? Are they paying for them?"

"I'm posting them on my website, and they can buy them from there."

"Your...web—"

"She's got a gift," Tony said from across the way.

I nodded and felt myself fill with pride. If only her mother could see her through my eyes. "Yes, she does."

I let Jacks go back to work and Tricia and I helped clear up the food and get the fire started. We had s'mores for the kids and alcoholic beverages for the adults, most of whom gathered around the fire once it became too dark for photos.

While Jackson was inputting names and numbers in her phone, Tricia sat leaning against my legs in front of the fire. It was almost too cozy, but I didn't have the heart to brush her off twice in one day. Even I wasn't that cruel.

"All in all, I'd say this party was quite a success," she said to me over her shoulder. "Thanks to your granddaughter."

"You guys should come up every summer," Laura said as she opened a bag of marshmallows and pelted Tony with one. "That was the coolest. Who knew bikers could be so nice?"

Tricia and I smiled secretly to each other. Yeah, who knew?

After the kids grabbed their s'mores and settled in for some camp songs, Tricia and I escaped to the relative darkness of the lake.

Walking side by side in the dark, out of view of the partiers, we allowed ourselves to just be.

"I have to head to the city to get some work done, but I should be back Tuesday or Wednesday," she said as we walked beneath the eye of a watchful moon. "Is there anything you need me to bring up here?"

I thought for a moment before shaking my head. "I'm pretty good. Got paints, my canvases and Lucky. I'm good to go."

"Will you take me on a ride?"

I walked a few steps before answering. "No. No helmet, and even if I did, I still don't give rides."

She grinned. "We'll see about that."

I stopped walking and gently pulled her to me. The answer to her question wasn't that I *could* fall in love with her if all things were equal. The answer was, I *was* falling in love with her and no matter what I said or did, I couldn't seem to stop myself.

And I needed to stop. Right now.

Touching her eyebrow, her cheek, her lips, I held her face in my hands as my lips caressed hers. She returned my kiss, gently licking my bottom lip with her tongue, as we stood beneath the beautiful moonlight like two women deeply in love. Marla would kill me.

"Be careful on your trip."

"And you be safe on that bike, Leo. Don't forget to eat. Not Pop-Tarts, either. They are not a food group."

We stood there a long time, holding each other, until I pulled away and she brushed stray hair from my forehead. "Things just got complicated, didn't they?"

"Oh *hell* yes," I said, taking her hand to walk back to the party. She didn't know the half of it.

I was wearing black jeans, a tight-fitting gray shirt and my Harley jacket when the doorbell rang. I knew it wasn't Tricia. She'd gone back to the Bay Area earlier in the day. Jacks never rang, and besides that, was spending the evening with the twins, so I was curious who was at my door at eight o'clock at night.

“Surprise!”

It was Alyssa, my latest ex, and yes, it *was* a surprise, and I cursed Marla and her buttinski ways. This had all the earmarks of a Marla Maneuver.

“What are *you* doing here?”

She blew right by me into the house, and I smelled her Chanel waft behind her.

“Sometimes, love, your manners leave me wanting.” She quickly surveyed the room before doing the same to my hair. “Love the color, but then I can’t call you Silver Fox anymore.”

I wondered what *else* she wanted in order to make the four-hour drive up from the Bay Area. “Sorry, I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Oh? Who were you expecting?” She cut her eyes next door, and I wanted to strangle Marla. I made a mental note to kill her the next time I saw her.

“No one.” Closing the door, I let my eyes linger too long on her shapely legs. Alyssa is five foot eight, all legs, small waist, and the poster girl for lipstick lesbians everywhere. She was beautiful and lit up any room she entered.

Twenty years younger than me, she met me when I was forty-seven and she was twenty-seven, looking like a girl from a Budweiser ad. I didn’t think she was gay, so I avoided her continual advances, which only made her press harder. When she finally caught me, the sex was so amazing, I quickly gave in.

Big mistake.

After two years together, I figured out that I needed more... intellectual stimulation. The woman could stimulate every part of me but that.

“Nice place Marla has here.”

Marla. Damn her. In her effort to save me from myself, she sent the only cavalry she had handy; the great sex machine, Alyssa Lundy.

“I can’t believe Marla sent you.”

Alyssa turned, her long blond hair flowing with her. “Sent me? No, silly, she just gave me the address and told me you were lonely.”

Alyssa was the worst liar on the planet. I waited for her to prove it.

"Well, she called for something unimportant and mentioned you were a little lonely up here and that you might enjoy some company for a few days." She looked around the family room. "You going out, or just coming in?"

"Going out."

She looked around some more. "Alone?" She may as well have dropped on all fours and started sniffing around.

"Alone."

She stepped up to me and played with the cartouche I was wearing around my neck. "Not anymore. My bag is in the car."

During our relationship, I did all of the blue jobs; mowed the lawn, took out the garbage, changed the oil, all the jobs that required dirty hands. She felt more comfortable in traditional female roles.

"Why don't you bring it in while I finish getting ready," I said, refusing to fall back into old patterns with her.

Then she did the one thing I hated: she pouted.

Choosing to ignore the lower lip part, I returned to the bathroom and finished gelling my hair. When I came out, her bag was in my bedroom and she was sprawled seductively across the bed. "I'm sure you wouldn't mind sharing this big bed with me."

"Oh no you don't. The guest room is in there," I said, pointing across the hall. "You can stay the night in there, but you need to go back tomorrow."

"Why? I'll be really quiet. You'll never know I'm here. I swear."

I laughed. Alyssa was the kind of woman who could survive on attention alone. I'd painted fewer pieces in our two years together than in the previous six months. She didn't do quiet or alone very well. She needed to be entertained, and I wasn't playing.

"Hon, unless you've done a one-eighty, I seriously doubt that. Besides, what happened to Betty?"

"It was Becky, and I dumped her. Too needy."

"Sorry to hear that." I averted my eyes from her store-bought chest. I was a huge fan of cleavage, regardless of where it came from.

"Give me five minutes to freshen up and I'll go with you."

Shaking my head, I said, "Can't. No passenger helmet."

She dangled her keys. "We'll take mine."

Against my better judgment, I agreed, and the next thing I knew, we were dirty dancing on the dance floor of the local gay bar that was still playing eighties disco. I was not surprised I was having a good time, but having Alyssa with me defeated the purpose of going out. There were a couple of women I'd have liked to have chatted up, but Alyssa was like a dog on a bone, and I needed to shake myself free.

I knew if I watched her long enough, Alyssa's eyes would roam to the one woman she thought was hot. It was her way; always lining up a Plan B. In the last case, Plan B had been Betty, or Becky. She'd already had her in her sights before I let go.

True to form, I followed her gaze to a woman wearing a cowboy hat and boots. Not my taste, but she was ring-free and more...manly than most men. I watched her for a moment and decided she was a single woman on the prowl. Perfect.

When the cowboy dyke went to the restroom, I excused myself and followed her in.

"Hey," she said with a boyish tip of the chin.

I went to the sink and washed my hands. "Hey. You see the girl I'm with?"

"Who could miss her? Hot. Lucky bitch."

I grinned inside. "She's an ex I need to shake loose of for a few dances. I was wondering if you could help me out?"

"You want me to take that babe off your hands?"

"Something like that. Just...don't say anything to her about this. It would hurt her to think—"

"That you were passing her off? No problem. How ex of an ex is she?"

"A year...give or take."

She nodded, took her cowboy hat off to reveal a shock of jet black hair. If she wasn't so butch, she'd have been pretty. "Cool."

"Cut in the next slow dance?"

She shook her head. "Not my style. I'll send her a drink. What's she drinking?"

"Mojito." I offered her a fifty for the drinks. She declined.

“Oh no. The pleasure’s all mine.”

“I appreciate it.”

When we got out, the drink arrived ten minutes later. Alyssa accepted it with a finger wave to Butch, who tipped her hat. When Alyssa finished the drink, Butch strolled over and asked her to dance.

“Do you mind?” Alyssa asked me. That right there was the difference between us. I would never have accepted a drink from another woman if I was there with someone, nor would I have even entertained the idea of dancing with someone else. Alyssa always did. Always.

Prettiest girl in the room syndrome was what Marla called it. PGITRS.

“Knock yourself out. Have fun, kids.”

Once they were out on the dance floor, I made my move to the woman in the red dress who was there with friends. I’d watched her for nearly an hour and it appeared as if she was there under duress. Drinking a Coke, sitting quietly in the booth, she watched her friends laughing and dancing. My guess was that she was recently single and her friends thought she needed a night out. She was the perfect target for me; a woman not really ready for a new relationship but willing to entertain the rebound woman. Enter Parker Lee Chase, who needed something to keep her from making the dumbest mistake in the Lesbian Handbook: getting involved with a married woman.

“Friends drag you out by your heels?” I asked, standing at her table.

Her eyes traveled up and down me, possibly trying to guess my age. I was probably fifteen years older. I must have passed muster, because she smiled. “Is it that obvious?”

I shrugged. “I’ve been there, that’s all. Parker Lee,” I said, extending my hand.

“Holly. Nice meeting you. Care to join me? It appears you have some hiding of your own to do.” Her eyes lingered on Alyssa for a moment before returning to mine.

I glanced over my shoulder at Alyssa. “You have no idea.” Sitting down next to her, I waved the waitress over and ordered two Cokes.

Holly waited for the waitress to leave before leaning over to me. "How did you know there was no rum in it?"

"Let's see...recently single, beautiful woman dragged to a bar by well-meaning friends is wise not to drink. Strange women might come up to you and introduce themselves to you."

She smiled warmly. "It's the charming ones you have to watch out for. They sneak in under the radar and get you when you're not looking."

"Good to know. Are you not looking?" I studied her eyes that were almost the same color of her hair, a light chocolate color. She had Brooke Shields-like eyebrows, high cheekbones and Gina Gershon's mouth. The combination was lethal. She wouldn't remain single very long.

"Should I be?"

I groaned inside. Beautiful and quick. That was what I needed to get Tricia out of my system.

"That depends. If a Harley-riding, eccentric artist who is complicated and independent doesn't scare you off, then look all you want."

Our Cokes arrived, and Holly let me pay. We watched the dancers for a moment before she leaned over to me. "You left out hot."

I looked at her. "Excuse me?"

"Well, I looked and you failed to mention hot. Would you like to slip out for some fresh air?"

We stepped out to the veranda where it was quieter and cooler. Holly was a few inches shorter than me and when we stood next to each other, I could smell her vanilla mint shampoo. I noticed a clothing tag sticking out from the back of her shirt.

"Much better," she said, leaning on the railing. "I'm not much of a bar goer. Can't stand screaming a conversation. Now, where were we? Oh, right. What's the story with you and the blonde? She's gorgeous."

"An ex who barged in on my solitude. I came up here to paint."

"And she came up here to—"

I nodded. "Do what exes do, I suppose."

"You pawned her off on Cowboy Bob, didn't you?"

I nearly spit my Coke out. "How did you know?"

"I was...um...looking. I watched you follow her into the bathroom. I watched the whole thing unfold like a scene in a movie. Fascinating."

This made me smile. "Is that horrible of me?"

"Not at all. She looks like she's having a great time."

"She does, doesn't she?"

"Are you?"

I looked at her and slowly reached out to tuck her tag back into her shirt. "Absolutely. You are a very pleasant surprise. How about you?"

"Can I let you know when the evening ends? I have a bad tendency of calling a movie great before the ending."

I studied her. "Two movie references in a row. Let me guess. You're a writer?"

"Yes, actually. I'm a movie critic in Reno. I write for the *Reno Times*. I love it."

"So you live up here."

"Actually, I live in Carson City. You?"

"San Francisco."

"I love that city. I've been all over the world and it's one of the greatest cities in the world. So clean and easy to get around in. You're very lucky. What do you do there?"

"I paint. I'm an artist with a gallery." I handed her my card.

Her left eyebrow rose as she examined it. "Oh God. Add successful to your résumé and I might need to back away slowly."

She took one step back and I found myself following her, bridging the distance.

She grinned. "Persistent. Admirable."

"Dance with me." It flew right out of my mouth.

"Uh. Sure." When she started for the dance floor, I gently took her arm to stop her.

"How about right here? I don't need the ex creating a scene."

She looked around, pushed some of the chairs out of the way and said, "Right here works great."

Taking her around the waist with one hand, I took her left hand in my right and gently pulled her to me. We slow danced

in silence for a few minutes before I felt her arm tighten around my neck.

"You are a dangerous elixir, Ms. Lee. You are either too charming for your own good, or the best phony I've met in a long time."

Pulling her closer, I whispered, "Neither. I'm just me—a very flawed, very egocentric woman looking for an uncomplicated time with an independent woman who neither wants nor needs a relationship at this time in her life."

She leaned back and looked deep into my eyes. "Well, that pretty much sums it up, doesn't it?"

I smiled softly. "Cutting to the chase prevents huge time-wasting moments. I don't want or need a relationship right now, and since you're on the mend, I suspect you don't, either."

"Perceptive to boot. Suppose I fall for you here and now?"

"Then you'd be making the first mistake on your comeback trail. I make a good rebound, not a great partner. Trust me. The jury is not out on that one."

She cocked her head to study me. "You are unlike anyone I've ever met."

Before I could reply, Cowboy Butch hurried over and tapped me on the shoulder.

"Your friend is puking in the bathroom. I thought you'd like to know."

"Oh crap. What did she drink?"

"I ordered her an Ocean Breeze."

"Fuck! She's allergic to vodka. I'll be right there." Turning to Holly, I explained, "Duty calls. I'll be right back." As I started to step away, she pulled me to her and kissed me long and deeply, sending electric pulses down my legs and out my toes. It was the kind of kiss that would normally lead to tearing off clothing and energetic sex where you stood.

Barely catching my breath, I nodded for no apparent reason and followed Butch to the bathroom.

I smelled Alyssa before I saw her.

"Sorry, man," Cowboy said. "One minute she was dancing like a dervish, the next, she was puking."

That she was throwing up at least meant I didn't need to call

the paramedics. I thanked Butch, told her I would take care of it, and hauled Alyssa to her feet.

"Here she ish," she slurred, vomit dripping off her chin. "I thought you dished me."

"You drank vodka, Aly. You know how it hates you."

I'd seen her like this twice, before we finally figured out the vodka piece.

"Oh fuck a duck, Parker Lee, that goddamned cowboy poisoned me." Her eyes were at half-mast and she reeked.

"Not her fault," I replied. "Hold onto the sink."

She did and I washed her off as best I could and then helped her to the car. "Stay in there, you hear me? I'll take you home in a minute."

I ran back inside, but before I could get three steps in, a woman walked over and handed me a napkin. "The hot little number you were dancing with asked me to give this to you."

Opening the napkin, there was a note printed neatly in block letters.

Parker Lee—

Another life, another time, and I'd easily fall for you. Alas, you were right. I am in rebound mode and you deserve better than that from me. Thank you for a lovely evening. You made me feel beautiful again.

Holly

I tucked the napkin in my jacket pocket and ran back out to the car, where Alyssa was already passed out. Looking over the hood of the car, I scanned the parking lot for any sign of Holly, but she was long gone. I pulled out the napkin and read it again, wondering what might have been had Alyssa not gone toilet diving.

The whole way back to the lake house, I couldn't stop thinking about that kiss. Unlike my kiss with Tricia, this one rattled my soul, along with the marrow of my bones. It was a searing white heat that burned long after our lips parted. It was fiery because it was a goodbye kiss before we even got started. I

was ready to *be* the rebound woman, but Holly nixed that right out of the gate. She wanted more.

And at the moment, I didn't have more to give.

As I wound our way back to the house, I wondered if maybe I hadn't just let someone very special walk out of my life.

It took me a half an hour to get Alyssa out of the car, to the guest room, and undressed, and in the shower. Ugh. Apparently, her first barf was all over her clothes, her second on her shoes, and the third in her car. She stank even after the shower. Once I got her in bed, I took my own shower, and then checked my messages. Marla had left one asking if I was still talking to her. Chase left a message telling me she wasn't speaking to me, and Jacks called, asking if I'd spoken to some kid named David. I erased them all. A part of me was disappointed I hadn't heard from Tricia.

How dumb was that? I meet a woman who plays on my team and I lose her before I even have a chance to start something, and yet, not hearing from Tricia bothered me?

I needed a reassessment of my summer romances. I'd come up here to get my painting mojo back, and it looked like I was on my way. What was I doing letting women and emotions muddy the artistic waters?

I needed to reel it in, and the best way to avoid complications was to stay out of the lioness' den. Not only did I keep walking in, I kept sticking my hand in their mouths. To keep from sticking it in further, I slept with my door locked just in case.

When morning came, Jackson could only shake her head at me as she finished her smoothie before grabbing her backpack. Apparently, she was at a loss for words. "Be sweet to Alyssa, okay? She's a good person."

I stared at her back as she left the house. She was a better woman than her grandmother.

On Jackson's way out, Grits came in. I gave her the painting, and she handed me a flyer.

“The IFs are having a biker pow-wow this Friday night. I’d love you to come as our guest.”

I took the flyer. It had the patch I’d seen on Tater’s jacket. “Oh, I don’t know, Grits. I’m not really a hard-core biker. I just got—”

“Presence is everything in business, Da Vinci. By this time Friday, everyone is going to want to meet the artist who did this piece. Come on. It’s the least I can do for such an amazing painting.”

I nodded. “Do you know Tater?”

Her eyes widened. “Do *you*?”

Chuckling, I told her the story of Tater and the bat.

“Oh God, those boys are lucky to have escaped with their lives! I’ve seen that big Samoan take that bat to a Hummer that cut him off. Let’s just say: Tater, one; Hummer, zero.” She shook her head. “The guy bleeds Harley oil, I’m sure, but he’s the sweetest thing...when you’re on his side. I’m sure he’d love to see you again. You owe him the story.”

I looked at her.

“The *story*. The Indies are of...what’s it called...verbal tradition?”

“Oral tradition.”

“Yeah. That’s it. Good stories increase the strength of a person’s spirit. You need to be the one to tell the story so it strengthens his soul.”

I watched her as she spoke, somewhat baffled by her. “How do you know all of this?”

She blushed slightly. “I’m a masseuse, hon. We don’t just listen to all that woo-woo music. The Indies are all about the mind, body, spirit connection, maybe more than anyone else.”

I grabbed my cell and took a picture of the painting before wrapping it up for the journey and helping her out to the car with it. “You ride a lot with those guys? The Indies, I mean?”

“We do. Some groups like to party, some like to ride. This pow-wow is all party, though. You really should come. It’s a closed party. Only people we invite will be there. I’d really like it if you’d come.”

“I might be there, you never know.”

Grits turned and hugged me when we got the painting in her car. “Thank you for this. It’s going to be the highlight of his year.”

Watching her drive away, I went back in the house and read the flyer. As much as I loved riding, I was pretty darned sure these people were way out of my league. Tossing it in the trash, I pulled out a three-by-three canvas on which I’d already painted a midnight blue sky and a desert-like background. I was almost trembling with the anticipation of this next painting. This would be the new centerpiece in part of the gallery I would soon be changing. This would be the beginning of a new road I knew would take me places.

This painting was going to be of Lucky.

Using Jackson’s camera, I snapped a dozen or so pictures of my bike from every conceivable angle. The chrome was probably the best feature and would be the hardest aspect to paint. Reflections are tough because you have to let the viewer know it’s a reflection and not some other picture within a picture. Once I finished, I turned the camera around and flipped through the photos.

“Damn,” I grumbled, going way beyond my photos. Scrolling through, I saw a cute picture of the twins, a photo of Jackson and that David kid. I stifled a growl. There were several she’d taken of me painting. I looked at those and smiled to myself. You could tell I was transported in that moment; at one with the brush, the paint, the canvas, and my subject. I thought it would look good hanging under the sign in the gallery. I’d talk to Jacks about it, maybe see if she’d like to do a show of her own in the gallery.

As I scrolled through more fun photos of her and the twins, I came across a handful of Tricia. The first was another shot of her on the deck talking on the cell. Cocking my head, I wondered what prompted Jacks to shoot this particular shot. There was nothing “artful” about it.

The last shot of Tricia was the most fascinating one, and

it sent all sorts of alarms straight through my head. Tricia on the deck, looking through a pair of binoculars. But it wasn't the fact she had binoculars that was odd. It was the angle. Jacks made sure she shot it showing I was not painting. My chair was empty and the rat bike nearly completed. I knew what Jacks was insinuating with the photo, and a part of me wondered if she wasn't right. There was a *reason* she had taken these mundane photos of Tricia, and we were going to have to talk about what that reason was. I'd have Jacks print up some copies when she got back. In the meantime, there was much to paint before I even started on Lucky.

First, though, I had to check on Alyssa and see if she was okay.

Sitting on the edge of the bed and looking down at her, I felt incredibly guilty. This was my fault. If I hadn't been so preoccupied with returning to my own team this never would have happened. Pawning someone off on someone else was a shitty thing to do regardless of the reason.

She stirred and opened her eyes.

"Morning," I said softly.

"Am I dead?"

I brushed her hair from her face. "No, but I bet you feel like it."

"What happened?"

"Vodka happened."

"No shit? Damn it. The cowboy?"

"The cowboy. I'm so sorry, Al."

She groaned and rolled over facing me. "Don't be. She was a lot of fun until that moment. You have fun?"

I thought of Holly, the deserter, and nodded. "We both had a nice time."

"My head is pounding."

"I'm sure it is. I'll get you some aspirin then I'm going to grab a shower and make you some breakfast."

"You can't cook."

"I can fix toast."

She closed her eyes and smiled. "I'd like that."

I kissed her temple then grabbed a nice long shower. I hate

bar smells. I hate cigarette smoke even more, and even though I had showered the night before, it still lingered. I dressed in black cargo shorts, a red tank top and matching tennis shoes. When I got to the kitchen, Alyssa was sitting at the counter in nothing but a bathroom towel. A large package sat on the counter in front of her.

“What’s that?”

She shrugged. “Your neighbor came over and dropped this off. She said it looked like you could use one.”

“My...neighbor?” Oh God.

“What was her name?”

“She didn’t say. Drove a sweet-ass Jag, though.”

I closed my eyes. Let’s see...Alyssa in just a towel answering my door on a morning Tricia was supposed to be gone...yeah...I was screwed. No matter how you cut this, it looked bad.

I sat on the stool next to her.

“Aren’t you going to open it?”

I shrugged. “You.”

Alyssa tore into the package like a five-year-old at Christmas. Out of the box she withdrew a beanie helmet with the word *Da Vinci* painted on the front, and *Leo* on the back. Paintbrushes lined both sides of a helmet she’d had professionally painted. “Must be the wrong house,” she said, putting it back in the box.

I stopped her. “No. It’s the right house.” I stared at the helmet, feeling about an inch tall.

“Whose...you’re not Da Vinci, are you?”

I nodded. “I am.”

She thought for a moment, her pickled synapses slow to spark. “A woman in a Jag brought you a personalized helmet...and...”

I waited for her to connect the dots with her big red pencil.

“You’re *doing* her, aren’t you?”

“That’s a quantum leap, don’t you think?”

“Not when you consider the way she practically threw the box at me and bolted out the door because you know she thought the same thing about me.”

“What on earth possessed you to open the door dressed like that in the first place?”

“Well, first she rang. I ignored it. Then she knocked. I ignored that. Then she tried the handle and I thought maybe it was Jacks.” She studied me. “You *are* fucking her, aren’t you?”

“No. None of your business. Doesn’t really matter anymore. *You’re* sort of hard to explain in that towel.” I shook my head. What happened to uncomplicated?

“She’s cute in a straight sort of way. Is she married?”

“Stay out of it.”

“You like her, and she is.”

“I mean it, Aly.”

She set the helmet back on her lap and fingered the name on the helmet. “She went to a lot of trouble to make something special for you. You have to be more than friends.”

I put the helmet in the box and took it out to the garage to set it next to Lucky. As I stood there admiring the bike, Alyssa came up behind me. “What is it about this thing that’s changed you so?”

I looked at her. “Changed me?”

“Yeah. You’re more...I don’t know...at peace. Happier, maybe. You just have a different vibe. Maybe it’s not the bike, but the hottie married lady.”

I knelt down to wipe some grime off one of the pipes. “It’s hard to explain. Something happens when you’re on a Harley. It’s transformative in a way that is hard to imagine. It’s peaceful and powerful, strong yet serene, scary yet comforting. All I can really tell you is that I dig it.”

“Jesus, Parker, if you ever talked about me like you just did this bike, I’d marry you.”

Rising, I turned to the door and gave her a little shove. “No marriages for this girl. Now, let’s get some breakfast in you and get you on your way.”

Alyssa sat back on the stool while I made toast and coffee. I only felt slightly bad for sending her home with a hangover. I had a fence to mend and it wasn’t going to be easy, especially since I was combining that with the one-two punch of “I’m sorry, and I can’t do this.”

It was time to uncomplicate everything before it was too late.

Around noon, Alyssa was finally gone. I made my way over to Tricia's house, but found only Bill home.

"She hasn't come home yet," he said when I inquired after her.

Damn. She must have dropped the helmet off and took off like a jackrabbit, her heart slowly cracking.

"I'd invite you to stay, Parker, but I've got my hands full of a merger today."

I knew his hands were full, and he was probably merging, but not about business.

With Tricia and Jackson both gone, I grabbed my jacket and, in ten minutes, was out on the open road.

Fresh air in my face, sun on my back, I just rode and rode. I don't know how many miles I put on her before my stomach reminded me I needed to eat, so I looked for any place where bikes were parked out front. It didn't take long for me to find Trinity's Café, where about thirty bikes were all lined up.

After locking Lucky, I put my key in my pocket and felt something in it. Pulling out Holly's napkin, I chuckled. Then I stopped. Seems my "vibe" was pulling women to me rather than driving them away. I really had a good time with her and would be lying if I said I wasn't bummed to see she'd made her great escape. Maybe Alyssa had saved me from becoming the rebound player. Who knows?

I went in. The place was packed, so I sat at the bar. Lone rider. That was me.

"Be right with you, hon," the thirty-something waitress said on her way by with two carafes of coffee, one decaf.

As I waited, I spied a used newspaper, and so I snagged it and looked for Holly's byline. Sure enough, there it was. She used three rating symbols: a sun, a cloud and a raining cloud. Cute. Her writing was crisp, funny and concise. I'd go see the two suns, based on her review of the two movies, but not the other two. She had such a fluid, lyrical style I wondered why she was just doing movie reviews.

She had one very interesting section called “audience reaction.” It was a paragraph about what the audience around her said or did. She said you could tell a great movie by the lack of movement or noise; when viewers were riveted, when they were so engrossed, even the munching of popcorn ceased.

It was a brilliant way to describe the effects of a movie. She had the writing chops, that’s for sure. I wondered if her column was also online. I would love to read that as well.

“Excuse me for bothering you, but is that badass ’03 Dyna yours?”

I turned quickly to find a short, maybe five-foot tall, dark-skinned woman in full leathers. She had one long braid down her back, and I couldn’t tell if she was Middle Eastern, Latina or Native American, but she was the cutest little rider. She looked like a garden gnome.

“Yes, is something wrong?”

“No, no. Nothing. We just noticed from your license plate frame that you’re from the Bay Area. So are we.” She motioned to a table of four women.

“As a matter of fact, I am.”

“Nice ride. Great paint job. And all that chrome? Whoee!”

“Thank you.” I glanced over at the table of women who were not talking amongst themselves, but staring at me.

“We were wondering if you were doing the Cathouse Ride this evening?”

“Cathouse Ride? No, I’m not.”

She blinked and appeared puzzled. “Oh. So you’re not on your way to the poker run?”

“I didn’t know there was one.”

Reaching into her back pocket, she pulled out a flyer and handed it to me. “There’s a poker run/triathlon starting at the restaurant, Bridges, in an hour. Big fun. Great prizes. They’re raising money for the family of those two Reno police officers gunned down last month.”

I looked over the flyer. There were, as there always seemed to be in the biker world, two big-titted women holding a banner that read, *Cathouse Fundraiser*.

Bikers are a largely misunderstood breed. Yeah, we look

scary and bad, but the truth is, most of those “bad boys” are white-collar workers. We’re doctors, attorneys, policemen, professors. A Harley is not a cheap toy. It and all of its accessories are expensive, and many of us have disposable income that enables us to not only own one, but ride in fundraising activities for others. It is estimated that Harley fundraising rides donate nearly five million dollars to charities each year. I mean, with that figure, how bad could we really be?

Rides give us a chance to hang out, play some games, look at bikes, and enjoy each other’s company. For example, this Cathouse Ride. We would all meet at the starting point, register, and pay twenty-five bucks. For that money, we get a pin that has some cool design for our vests. Often, you get a T-shirt. In turn, they hand you an envelope with directions for whatever game you’re playing. In this instance, it’s a poker run. The envelope has the numbers one to fifty-two on the edges. We would ride to five different locations. At each location, that envelope will be hole-punched on whatever numbers we chose. Inside the envelope, the holes punched correspond to a card in the deck. At the end of the five destinations, you have a complete poker hand once you open your envelope. First prize wins something cool, usually donated by the local Harley dealership. At the five locations, bikers visit with each other, have a drink, or play other games on the ride, such as raffles and whatnot. Sometimes there are local bands playing, but always the food is good, the company is fun, and the prizes are worth the time. In the end, the money made from the registration pays for the ride, and the rest is donated to a specific charity. Everyone wins.

In this instance, there’s also a triathlon. This means at one bar you’ll play a round of darts, at a second, a few balls of pool, and at the third, shuffleboard. You add up your scores, and again, the winner gets a cool biker prize like a ball cap or gloves. In this case, the entrance fee will go to the families of the Reno cops slain in the line of duty. One of the guys was a rider, so they are also raffling off his motorcycle for fifty bucks a ticket. According to the flyer, the money was needed because one of the officers has a special needs kid and the local Harley riders decided it was time to donate locally.

So, when you see a long line of Harleys on the freeway, know they're probably doing something good for someone somewhere. Not everyone knows this and they make the erroneous assumption we are all somehow connected to the outlaw biker gangs of days past.

Lowering the flyer, I looked at her. "You sponsoring this or something?"

She turned back to the group who appeared to be egging her on. "Well...we're needing a sixth rider for the run because it's a paired event. One of our girls couldn't make it, so now there's one of us without a partner. We were just wondering if a lone wolf would like to join our pack today?" She pulled out a business card. It had a buxom female warrior on the front holding a sword, and wearing Harley wings and headband. She was badass. It was a great card, but the name caught me off guard and I had to laugh. *JUGs*—stood for *Just Us Girls*.

Before I could say anything, she turned around and showed me her club patch on her jacket. It was like the business card, only colorful and bright. It immediately grabbed the artist in me.

Tucking the card in my pocket, I looked over at the table. Not being a joiner by nature, I was tempted to just thank her and be on my way. But, to ride and be a part of a group that didn't want anything sexually from me? Now *that* sounded like something I could really sink my teeth into. "You know what? I'd love to."

Her big brown eyes lit up. "Really?"

"Sure." I extended my hand to her. "Da Vinci."

She shook it and said, "Lil G. Come meet the others."

I motioned to the waitress that I'd take a burger and to send it over to Lil G's table. I was greeted with warm smiles from a table of women who looked like they could be anything but bikers. There was a tall blond woman with the bluest eyes I'd ever seen, named Viper. She wore the same vest as Lil G, but hers had various snakes on it. She wore a red bandana and her vest had a patch that said she was the treasurer. I wondered what that meant. Then there was Easy Breezy, a towering Amazon of a woman with a great laugh and a big smile. Then there was

Ace, who had a Middle Eastern accent. She was not a Harley rider, but was dressed in the colorful suits of rider who rode rice rockets like Kawasakis. She was stunning. Actually, they all were incredibly good-looking women who were immediately warm and inviting. Finally, there was an Asian-looking woman decked out in full leathers, still wearing her fingerless gloves, even as she cut into what looked like salmon. Her name was Wizard. She was going to be my partner for the day.

They all scooted over to make space, chattering amiably amongst themselves. Lil G told me a bit about each woman as they were introduced. Lil G worked at Bloomingdale's, managing the denim department. Easy Breezy was a bigwig at Kaiser. Viper was an accountant, Ace worked for Estée Lauder, and Wizard was a professor at Berkeley. They all produced business cards, which I took and slipped into my side vest pocket. When I told them I was an artist, they peppered me with questions and seemed to be pleased to have a creative sort in their midst. They were so easygoing, not like some groups of women who tend to eye newcomers with suspicion. They genuinely seemed to like each other and laughed often. I liked that about them.

Lil G was the president of the gang and was married to a cop who also rode. Because of this, the girls seldom rode to Hells Angel-sponsored events or any "thug rides." For whatever reason, I was happy to hear that.

After we all finished eating, Lil G explained the run. "The stops are all at whorehouses, so it's a huge run. Tons of bikers are gonna be there." She had a slight accent, and before I could ask, Wizard leaned over and whispered, "Persian."

"The whorehouses will be giving...um...tours for all the bikers, and they'll have the games set up in tents outside in the parking lots."

I wondered, briefly, at the irony of hookers hosting an event for fallen cops until I remembered prostitution was legal in Nevada, and a victimless crime everywhere else.

"Sounds fun," I said.

"One thing you need to know about us," Lil G said, "is that

we don't do D's—no drinking, drugs or drama. We like to ride in harmony with each other.”

I nodded. “Works for me.”

We paid our bill and headed for the row of bikes. I don't know what I expected from a girl gang, but their bikes made mine look like it should have had training wheels.

Lil G's bike was lowered to suit her diminutive stature. It had about a seven thousand dollar paint job of bright red with gray and black skulls painted all over it: tank, fenders, saddlebags. She had two huge speakers mounted on her handlebars, and no passenger seat. Her saddle had her name engraved on it, and every piece that could be chrome, was. Everything, down to the chrome bolts, was top of the line. It was the coolest bike I had ever seen.

Easy's bike was the only bike with a passenger pad. Her bike was a Heritage with an extra large tank that was painted a bright, sparkly blue as was the entire bike, and her license read *I'm Easy*.

I smiled because she was. She laughed easily and often, and I liked her right off the bat.

Ace did not ride a Harley. Her bike was a sleek and comfortable-looking BMW that was probably incredibly fast compared to the slower Harleys.

Viper's bike was painted in flat black paint that gave it a retro badass appearance. She had snakes everywhere on her bike, including the wheel rims. She had spoken very little at the table, but it was pretty clear she carried a big stick. She looked like Easy's sister, both of them close to six feet tall with long blond hair and quick smiles.

Finally, I came to Wizard's bike. All I could do was stare with my mouth open. “Wow.” Wow was not even close. The bike was completely made out of chrome. Gas tank, fenders, engine. Everything. It was hard to look at because the sunlight reflected off everything—every single thing. It was almost as if the bike was made from the sun.

“Sweet, huh?” she said, strapping on a chrome helmet.

“Very.”

The Berkeley professor leaned over and adjusted something on the foot peg. “I believe bikes are an extension of our

personality. Some of us are out there loudly, some of us quietly displaying ourselves, but you can tell a lot about a person by their bike; how it's painted, how clean it is."

I cocked my head, glancing over at my bike. "And what can you tell me about mine?"

"Ah, young grasshopper, you test the Wizard's wisdom. Show me."

I liked her right then and there, her reference to the TV show *Kung Fu* endearing her to me immediately.

"This is Lucky," I said, walking up to Lucky like a proud parent.

She walked around the bike, bending over to look at specific elements. "Uh-huh," she mumbled. "Hmm."

"Hmm?"

She stopped, knelt down and ran her fingertips over the engraving of the dice. She looked at me, her brown eyes sparkling. I liked her vibe. "You are an obsessive-compulsive neatnik who doesn't do group activities well or often, preferring your own company. Although your street name obviously hints at artistry, you are more than that. But your partners don't get that." She got to her feet. "I'll bet you go through them like hot-cakes, huh?" She held up her hand. "Don't answer. I hate to pry."

My mouth hung open. She hadn't missed a beat about me. "Wait. How can you tell all that?"

Her eyes lit up and I realized they had tiny yellow flecks in them. "Easy. This bike is a chick magnet. It screams seduction. Shall I go on?"

"Sure."

She looked back at the bike. "You need your alone time and prefer riding solo. Last thing, you're a control freak."

This last one made me laugh. "Damn, you're really good."

"Been riding for twenty years, since I was eighteen. I love people-watching."

"Don't tell me. You teach psychology at Cal."

This surprised her. "Excellent, grasshopper. I see we're going to get along famously. One more thing...I like to win, so I hope you don't mind playing for keeps."

"I'll give it my best."

“You any good at pool?”

“Not pool, but I’m pretty good at darts.”

She smiled. “Perfect.” Throwing her leg over her saddle, she started her bike. Her pipes drowned mine out, and as we all pulled into traffic I couldn’t help but grin. I was going on my first big run to whorehouses.

Chase would crap her pants if she knew.

How fun was that?

There were hundreds of motorcycles on this ride, and we were on the twisties near Highway 50 for a little while, then we got out on the freeway where we rode in staggered formation, the safest way for groups to ride. I brought up the rear because the JUGs weren’t used to riding with me and it was safer that way. As we drove on the freeway, I put my feet on the highway pegs and settled into a long ride to our first whorehouse. It was the first of many different stops listed on the flyer. I was looking forward to seeing what a whorehouse was like, never having been in one.

As I rode, I thought about my helmet and Tricia’s little visit with Alyssa. I knew what Tricia thought, but I didn’t have the energy to explain my life or my choices. The truth was I was a little annoyed that I felt defensive. Alyssa was a friend now; I didn’t want to have to explain her away. Maybe Tricia and I hadn’t adequately defined what the hell we were doing. Was this a summer fling? Something more? Something less? Nothing at all? She was married. The fact that her husband was cheating on her was neither here nor there, and whatever the hell she was doing in the photo was also none of my business.

Kicking Lucky into gear, I stopped thinking and paid attention to the road as we headed to Reno on all sorts of great side roads. I loved the feeling of the ride as my wheels spun faster and Lucky and I got into a rhythm. The JUGs were good riders; safe, always signaling, always staying in formation. The male riders did not treat us any differently, and that really surprised me. Pleasantly. I hadn’t realized how much more fun

it was riding with a group than riding solo, and made a mental note to check into some clubs when I got back home.

The first stop was a titty bar where we had to shoot pool. There were only three balls and you and your partner had just three shots each to sink all three balls.

As I stood with Wizard watching two guys play, she leaned over and thanked me for coming.

"I needed a diversion," I said.

"Ahh. Harley as the great escape."

I nodded. "Something like that. Thanks for the offer. I really needed this."

"It's a fun ride for a good cause, with great people. You can't ask for more than that on a beautiful summer afternoon."

She was right about that. Since getting on the open road, I felt pounds lighter emotionally. I hadn't thought about Tricia or Alyssa for miles, and suddenly, none of that felt important. I wanted to be present in this moment.

When it came our time to shoot, Wizard went first, sinking one ball in the break.

"Nice," one guy said, holding a pool stick.

She handed me her stick. "Use this one. It's the only semi-straight one in the bunch."

I took it and weighed my options. I was feeling a little pressure after her *I like to win* comment, and the truth was, I sucked at pool. I looked at the table, then at Wizard, who barely nodded, her eyes traveling to the orange five.

Suddenly, I saw that pool, like life, was a game about choices and chances. Smart people, like Wizard, scan the table for the choice that has the highest chance for success. People who shoot at the nearest ball, instead of weighing their options, seldom win at the game of pool.

Like I'd been doing for the last year.

Leaning over the table, I eyed the cue ball, then the five, then the cue ball, the metaphor still running in my head. So, once you make your choice, it all depends on how you execute it as to whether or not you can sink it. It's all about how and where you hit the cue ball.

I'd been in a rut because I'd stopped thinking about the cue

ball and focused more on the pocket. You'll never sink a ball if you are looking at where it's going or supposed to go. You need to focus on what's in front of your face.

I hit the cue ball left of center, spinning it clockwise. When it hit the five, it caromed off the five, which slowly rolled into the corner pocket, leaving the cue ball in the perfect position for Wizard to sink the eight ball.

I saw that you don't make choices in a vacuum. There's a domino effect to everything we do. Too often, I let life happen to me. That was the kind of pool player I was. Just hit the ball closest to the pocket, or better yet, ram 'em all and see who stays. Yeah. How was that working for me?

Wizard high-fived me before wasting no time sinking the eight ball. Three shots, in order of number, we got the highest score you could get. Suddenly, I felt pressure I wasn't used to. I wasn't a competitor at all. I was a spectator, an artist who drew her perceptions of life. This...this pressure cooker was more than I was ready for.

After pool, we grabbed a Coke, but instead of lingering like the other riders, we sucked 'em down and continued on our run, Lil G leading us on to the next stop.

So far, we led our gang in points, followed by Ace and Lil G. They'd scored well, but not like us. Our poker card was a king of spades, which made Wizard high-five me again. Did straight women high-five? I know *my* team did, but had no idea if straights did.

Our next two stops were small, lesser known whorehouses than either the infamous Mustang or television-popular Bunny Ranch.

We played shuffleboard in the first one, a game of soft touch and defensive strategy. I supposed playing with a Berkeley professor had its advantages. She was all about strategy. Another game reminding me of life. You are supposed to slide your puck as close as possible to the far end without going off the board. It was just like riding a Harley. We live on the edge without going over. In life, living on the edge is far more satisfying...unless some asshole bumps into us, sending us plummeting.

I'd been that asshole. Being with me in a relationship was

riding the edge...like a roller-coaster ride of emotional highs and lows for the rider. Too often, I'd pushed some woman over, like Wizard just did as she slid her blue puck into some guy's red one, sending him off the board. Now, we had two of her blues in the kill zone and one on a lesser point zone.

"I can do this," Wizard said. "She'll hit my defense guy out in front, taking one of hers out of play. Now, she has two shots to get mine off the board. My guess is she'll miss both."

The woman did what Wizard suggested only she didn't miss both. She hit one, sending it off the board and replacing it with hers.

"Damn," Wizard muttered. We were tied. Over her shoulder, she said, "I'm going for points."

She looked at the leader board and nodded. My first puck made it just beyond the first line into the ten pointer. My second went past that, but no further than the eight pointer. It wasn't good enough to get to the leader board.

"I'm going to hit her," she said.

I looked up from my soda. "*Hit* her?"

She nodded. "I'm going to go for it."

Resuming her aim, she looked up at me and grinned.

I felt clammy. No wonder I'd never liked competition. This pressure ruined everything. *This* was fun? I shook my head, held my breath, and watched as she sent her third and final shot down the board. Like slow motion, it crept by the first line, the second, picking up speed until it made a beeline for the red puck clinging to the board. Her blue disk slid into the red puck, knocking it clean off the board.

"Yes!" Wizard threw her arms first in the air, then around my neck. We hugged and jumped up and down like two little girls.

"Sweet shot, Wiz!"

We celebrated with another Coke, got our third card, and we now had a king and a pair of threes, which also thrilled my competitive little partner in crime whom I was really beginning to like.

After our soda, we saddled up and waited for the others to finish.

"You're all right, Leo, you know that? I was just going to bow out of the run today. Normally, I don't get along with strange women, so you are quite a surprise."

"Thank you. And I know exactly what you mean. Trust is hard to come by these days."

"Well, I get a good feeling from you. Has G spoken to you about joining our group?"

I shook my head.

"She will. She only recruits women who fit in and aren't bitches."

"So G is married to a cop. What about everyone else?"

"Well, Easy is married with two kids, and Viper and Ace are divorced singles."

I waited for her to offer up info on herself, but she didn't. I was smart and didn't pry. Neither did she, so I offered, hoping to entice her into opening up.

"I'm gay," I blurted out. What in the hell was wrong with me?

She tilted her head slightly. "What an odd thing to say. Are you testing the waters?"

"Not at all."

"Good, because I live in Berkeley. We do gays better than anyone."

We both laughed.

When we got to the Bunny Ranch, there were hundreds of motorcycles in the parking lot. Hundreds. I'd never seen a parking lot so full of bikes.

"Geez," I murmured.

"There are a couple of other runs going on at the same time, Leo. They're not all here with us. The Ranch gives tours when they know we're out in force, and today is for a really good cause."

What most people don't know is that the majority of time they see a large group of riders on the road, we are usually riding for charity. Harley riders donate millions every year and have one of the best Toys for Tots donation stats in the country. I was honored to be a part of such giving people.

I stared at the front door. "I want a tour."

Wizard raised her eyebrows at me. "Oh do you?"

I locked my bike and joined her at hers. "Sure. When else am I ever going to have the chance to tour a whorehouse?"

"When, indeed. Well, you knock your socks off, Leo. I'm going to grab our card and hang out in the tents. Take your time."

I walked into the pink Bunny House amazed by how many people were crammed into every nook and cranny. Bikers sat on long, red velvet couches talking to scantily clad women who were, to my surprise, quite pretty. I guess I thought they would look like some of the bone-thin strippers I'd seen. After seeing some of the women in the lesser-known whorehouses, I was amazed by how professional and beautiful these women were.

The owner of the Bunny Ranch was in the foyer having his picture taken with anyone wanting him in it. Some of the bikers' women sat close to their men, insecurities flaring up at being in such an environment. Some men did not bother hiding their slobber marks, and stared openly at the women as they pranced by. Apparently, they were giving free tours, and only the single men were biting.

The decor was dark red, but the main rooms were lighter than I expected—less dark than the previous houses. Women in short shorts and halter tops handed out menus, which made me do a double take when I realized they weren't menus from the bar, but for their services. Standing at the bar, I opened the menu and read down the long list of attractions, some positions or sexual maneuvers I'd never heard of, not surprising for a lesbian, I suppose. I was fascinated by the notion of a sex menu, but there were no prices. What good was a menu without prices?

"Have any questions?" a tall, buxom blonde asked standing next to me at the bar. She was wearing a little red midriff T-shirt with a bunny on it and short shorts the size of a postage stamp. There was not an ounce of fat on her body. Her long, blond hair hung loosely around her shoulders, framing a soft face and sapphire-blue eyes too blue to be real. I put her age at around twenty-four or twenty-five.

"Actually, I do," I said, turning to her, menu in hand.

"I'm Bailey." She reached out and gave me a firm handshake.

Right away, I liked her. She felt down-to-earth even for a woman wearing blue contacts and Daisy Dukes.

“Leo,” I said, looking into her eyes for a response that didn’t come.

“Well, Leo, welcome to the Bunny Ranch. Would you like a tour?”

Funny thing was I didn’t. I had sort of seen enough. “I was just wondering what you guys charge for a blow job.” I said more softly, “Not that I want one, of course.”

She laughed slightly and looked around. “I can’t really say. We each negotiate for our services. Some of us like it and charge less. Some of us hate it and charge more. It all depends.”

I nodded sagely. “Ah, of course. I was just curious. Whenever I’m in a new place, my little artist synapses start rocket firing, and I have lots of questions.”

She moved a little closer. “You’re an artist? What kind?”

“I paint.”

Licking her lips, Bailey looked around the bar before offering up a “What the hell?” She took three steps from me, turned and offered me her hand. “Come on, hon.”

Uh-oh.

Wait.

What?

Remembering my mini-bucket list to try anything new that presents itself, I reached for her hand. The moment our palms met, I swear to God the place went silent. Hundreds of guys stopped talking to stare at the dyke and the prostitute. I heard one guy say, “You fucking kidding me? The dyke’s in here two minutes and she scores a chick? What the fuck?”

Bailey must have heard it, because she stopped, leaned over and whispered to me, “Let them eat their hearts out.”

To which I whispered, “But I *am* a dyke.”

She shook her head, opened the door to her room and motioned me in. “In here, you can be whatever you want to be.”

I immediately noticed the queen-size mirror on the ceiling above the bed. With the exception of the jumbotron mirror, the room could have been any girl’s bedroom anywhere. There was a sink, a vanity, a queen bed with a maroon comforter, and

typical items found in a girl's bedroom; brush, magazines, books, a stuffed teddy bear in the corner that had a tag on it that read *Papa Bear*. It was so normal I was slightly taken aback.

"Not what you expected, huh?" she said, sitting on the bed.

"I'm not sure what I expected." My eyes scanned the room looking for a place to sit.

She patted the bed. "Come. Sit. You have questions, I have answers."

I wondered if I was being naïve. Did she really just want to talk with me? What was I getting myself into?

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I folded my hands in my lap and looked at the photo posters on the wall of the other girls in various sexy positions. All were clothed. They were almost like the pictures you see of women on or near a motorcycle on a calendar.

"Okay, the blow job. I charge three hundred, but that's because I like it. Dixie charges four hundred because it's not her favorite thing to do."

"Three hundred...*dollars*? How much time do you take?"

She laughed. "Wow. You *are* gay. Ten, fifteen minutes, tops." Man, I was in the wrong business.

I blushed. "I never realized—"

"You have to remember, hon, we pay taxes here. We are also disease-free, and have a physician-check every week and blood drawn once a month. You're also in a safe, *legal* environment that's clean and well-maintained. All of that costs money."

I marveled at her business mind and she astutely read mine.

"It's a business transaction, Leo. Nothing more than that. I provide a service people want, they pay for it and leave happy."

I caught the word *people*. "People. Do you—"

"I have several lesbian clients, yes."

Now *that* was fascinating. "You're kidding."

She flipped her hair over her shoulder, and softly laughed. "Nope. You know how women want romance and foreplay and—" She paused and laughed. "I suppose you know, of course."

"You have no idea. Sometimes we just want to fuck."

"Right. No emotional bullshit, no complications, just a good old romp. Lesbian sex can be....well...tedious."

I understood completely. “Wow. It never really occurred to me that a lesbian would come to a whorehouse for that service.” I studied her. “Is that a rude term?”

She threw her head back and laughed. “That’s what it is, so no. But thank you for caring enough to ask.”

“Well, this is my first rodeo, and I don’t want to fall off the horse.”

“My female clients just want sexual release without all the baggage, romance or complications. They just want to fuck.”

“Couldn’t you say the same for men?”

“Actually, no. Many men I see spend half the time talking. It’s sad how many women don’t listen to their husbands. I have three guys who come to cuddle and tell me about their week.”

I noted the time. “I don’t want to keep you from...um... making money.”

“No problem. I take most of mine by appointment. I’m not here for bikers today, just for the tour. So, go on and ask your questions, Leo, then it’s my turn.”

I nodded. For the next twenty minutes, she explained how the ranch worked, how she fell into the job, and how the panic button, a small intercom-like button on the wall, worked, so I asked her about it.

“Trust me, sweetie, if you were a guy in a room where the panic button went on, you’d be begging to go to jail after thirty pissed off women came at you with stilettos in hand. My friends would be here before the burly-ass security out there, and trust me, those guys are not someone you want to mess with.” She leaned over to me. “So, what do you paint?”

“Just about anything. I am currently painting bikes.”

“Ever do portraits?”

I looked at her. “Not many.”

“Got a website?”

“I do.”

Reaching under the bed, she pulled out a laptop, an ultra-thin, expensive MacBook.

Once my website loaded, she flipped through my online portfolio, making all sorts of appreciative sounds. When she came to the one and only boudoir portrait I’d ever painted, she

stopped and oohed. "That's exactly what I want." Turning to me, she nodded. "All the girls have posters, but I want something... classier...richer...more permanent. Would you...do you do portraits like that?"

I usually don't, but there was something about the way she asked that made me want to do one for her. She was right characterizing their job as being salesgirls. I was pretty sure she could have sold me the clothes I was wearing.

"Maybe. Tell me what you'd like."

She looked at me for a moment before shaking her head. "I'd rather you let your artistic energy flow."

"You want one to hang over your headboard?"

She nodded, a big grin on her lips.

"Paper and pen?"

Bailey hopped up and found some in a drawer. I sketched out the room, noting colors and textures. Then I did a quick sketch of her. "I'll need a photo."

She provided that as well.

By the time I had everything I needed, I knew the exact portrait I was going to paint of her. It would be something classy, yet fun and punky, like her.

"Do I pay for it all now?"

"Just a down payment. Say, five hundred bucks?"

Nodding, she walked out of the room and returned with five Ben Franklins. "How much will this cost me?"

I looked at the clock again. I'd been there for three blow jobs' worth. "Usually, portraits are over five grand, but you've been so incredibly nice. Let's call it three grand."

"Oh wow. Are you sure? My parents paid about twelve thousand for theirs."

"Tell you what. If any other bunnies want one, tell them the price is seventy-five hundred, and then we're even."

She nodded. "This is so exciting! I always wanted one done, but the guys I know who paint always wanted me to be nude and laying all sprawled out. Too crass for my taste."

This was the third word she had used that belied any assumption about her intellect level. This woman was either a

reader or she had had some higher education. “Don’t you worry. This will be sexy and tasteful, and very you.”

We chatted a little more before I realized my poker partner might be wondering what I was up to. At the open door, I started for my wallet, thinking I needed to tip her, but Bailey stopped me. “No, no, hon. The pleasure was all mine.”

I put a twenty in her hand, just for appearance sake. The place was like a morgue when she took the money. The lesbian had finally come out from the prostitute’s room and was now tipping her. Too funny.

“I’ll be back in two weeks,” I said, winking. Bailey laughed before surprising me with a heartfelt hug.

“I look forward to seeing you again, Leo. Be safe out there.”

When I walked outside, the girls were all kicking back in the drink tent. Upon seeing me, they broke into applause that rose to a standing ovation.

“Why are you clapping?” I asked, sitting next to Wizard, who had an enigmatic grin on her face.

“You’re a legend now!” Viper said. “All the guys in there came out talking about ‘that lesbian who walked right up to the bar, pointed at the menu, and was pulled into the hooker’s room.’ Is that how it happened? We want the details.”

“Yeah, we want the dirt.”

“Wait,” I said, holding my hand up. “It’s not—”

“Every single guy is like, ‘she’s my idol, man...walked right in and got the girl, no hesitation at all.’”

“I wasn’t—”

“One group of guys stood out here talking about whether or not these women *do* other chicks. God, men can be so dumb.”

I looked to Wizard for help. She merely shook her head.

“Look, I wasn’t getting...serviced,” I said a little too loudly. “I’m painting a boudoir portrait for her.” Pulling out my sketch, I showed it to them.

“We’re just fuckin’ with you,” Lil G said, with a big grin. “But, God, it was so funny listening to those men rave on and on about how lucky you were to have the balls to just do that.”

When I realized how it appeared, I relaxed a bit, glad they hadn’t really thought I was paying for sex. “I’m sure it looked

like the lesbo was scoring; and I did, in a way.” Pulling out the Ben Franklins, I laid them side by side on the table. “‘Cause I guaran-damn-tee-you I was the *only* person in there who walked *out* with more money than I went *in* with.”

After some hooting and hollering, we were saddled up and ready to head to the Mustang Ranch for our final leg of the triathlon.

Before I got on my bike, Wizard sauntered over to me, that weird grin still on her face. “Just so you know, we’re currently in third. You said you’re good at darts?”

I nodded, adjusting the strap to my helmet. “Played all the time as a kid.”

“Good. Are you planning on interrogating another woman at Mustang Ranch?”

I laughed. “Not even going in. Why?”

Shaking her head, she mounted her bike. “I’ve been riding with these gals for two years and hardly anyone really noticed us. You’re here for four hours and suddenly, we’re the belles of the damn ball. You know what that means, right?”

“Uh...no.”

“You need to join our club.”

“I’m not much of a joiner, as you astutely pointed out.”

“Yeah, and maybe now is the perfect time to change that.”

“Oh? Why now?”

“You don’t pay much attention when the universe is talking to you, do you? Because everything around you is falling into place. You’re lucky.”

We started our bikes and roared off toward the Mustang Ranch, Wizard’s words vibrating with the bike. *I was lucky?* I’d gotten two commissions in one week. I’d been saved by Tater. I even managed to pull out a win at shuffleboard and most importantly, I managed to bond with my granddaughter. Everything was starting to click for me because of Lucky.

Lucky.

Lucky was taking me into worlds I had only dreamed about. Lucky was opening doors I never knew existed, and because of it, my life was transforming right before my eyes. I wasn’t just riding Lucky anymore.

I *was* Lucky.

The Mustang Ranch, for all of its infamy, looked like a regular house with wrought iron fencing all around it. A big purple sign that read *World Famous Mustang Ranch* in three different fonts perched on the roof above the front door.

The sun was almost setting as we pulled in. Wizard wasted no time in getting to the aging dartboard. The game was simple: Each player had three darts to throw and you added up the total.

“Okay, Leo, what’s the best way to go about it?”

“Well, everyone goes for the bulls-eye, which is a mistake. You want to go for the highest percentage shot that will yield the most points no matter where you land. So, twenty is out, because it’s flanked by one and five.”

She listened carefully, nodding sagely.

“If you’re good, you’d go for the twenty. If you’re not, your best shot is at the left side there, with eleven, fourteen, nine and twelve, which equals—”

“Forty-six.”

I grinned. “Or, the fourteen, eleven, eight and sixteen, which equals—”

“Forty-nine. Okay, I see your point.”

“You get double by hitting the outer ring and triple by hitting the inner one. Go for the dead center of the fourteen to maximize your odds.”

Nodding, she took her three darts and toed the line. Her first dart hit the eleven. She looked at me.

“Trust me. Go for the fourteen.”

She did and landed on the sixteen, giving me yet another high-five. The last hit the double twelve, for twenty-four, for a total of fifty-one. Not a bad score. Pretty good, compared to what some of the other scores were on the sheet.

“Not bad,” Wizard said, taking the darts from the beefy rider manning the station.

Taking the darts from her, I felt their weight. Too light, and not well-balanced.

“Wait a sec, Leo. I’m going to see what our competition scored.”

“Sure. No pressure.”

Apparently, my delay at the Bunny Ranch meant the two teams ahead of us had already gone.

“Damn. You’ll need at least sixty-four to tie. I guess they dominated in shuffleboard.”

A sixty-four meant I had to go for a triple at least one of my numbers. A part of me wanted to go for the bulls-eye, to take my chances there. It had been a long time since I’d played darts, and that was with my expensive and well-balanced darts.

“What are you going to do?” Wizard whispered.

“Gonna go for it. All three at the bulls-eye.”

“Yes!” She clapped me on the back and stepped away. “That’s my kinda girl! Gutsy. Go big or go home, I say.”

Again, game as life metaphor flashed through my mind’s eye. Life was more like darts than most games. You take a dart, choose a target, and let her fly. On a rare occasion, you hit the space you mean to. More often than not, you come close, but not on it. I guess we all just miss most of the time in our lives. Unless we are incredibly accurate or very lucky, our darts seldom find the target.

And that was when I knew.

Turning to Wizard, I whispered, “Going for broke.”

“Bulls-eye?”

I nodded. “Going for it.”

Toeing the line, I aimed, held the dart out, brought it back and with a flick of my wrist, sent it spiraling toward the red bulls-eye. For a minute, I thought I hit it, but when the judge stepped in to look, he said, “Forty.”

Wizard cheered in the background, drawing a crowd I didn’t need.

I turned to her. “Sixty-four for a tie?”

She nodded. I only needed twenty-four more, and I could get that without breathing hard.

Taking aim again, I let the dart fly. To my dismay, it hit the metal frame of the dartboard and ricocheted to the floor.

“Disco. Zero.”

“Wait a minute. Isn’t that a do-over?” Wizard asked.

I turned and shook my head. “A disco is not a replay, Wiz. It’s zero.”

“Shit. Now what?”

I went back up to the line. Every guy was telling me where I should go. I am always amazed by how often guys think they know it all.

I wasn’t listening.

Inhaling deeply, I took aim. I had to go for the bulls-eye now. With forty and a disco, it was too risky going for a double or triple. Releasing my breath, I sent my final dart. I knew the moment it left my hand I’d missed the bulls-eye. I’d released too early, meaning it would go too high, which it did. It landed two inches above the bulls-eye and when the judge plucked it from the board he said, “Twenty!”

“Shit.”

Wizard put her arm around me. “No problem, Leo. We gave it our best shot. Besides, you got more from the Bunny Ranch than what we would have by winning this damn thing.”

Everyone was in amazingly high spirits as we headed back to Bridges to claim our prize.

When we got off our bikes, Wizard came over to me and walked into Bridges with her arm across my shoulder, grinning from ear-to-ear. “Damn, girl, you were so good in there.”

Stopping at the door, I looked at her, the day’s events flowing by. I hadn’t had this much fun since...well...since I could remember. “I wasn’t really good, Wiz, though I wish I was.”

“No? What were you then?”

I laughed. “Lucky. Very, very lucky.”

The party at Bridges was loud when we got there. There was a band playing seventies rock and people were dancing, chatting, and eating barbecue that smelled so good, my salivary glands started hip-hopping.

“Damn, that smells good,” Wizard said, nudging me toward the food. They’d spared no expense on the spread. They had

barbecued ribs, chicken, tri-tip, hamburgers and hot dogs, four kinds of salad, watermelon, corn on the cob and more. After loading up our plates, we all sat together at a table slightly away from the band so we wouldn't have to yell to hear each other.

"Here come our winners!" Lil G said, high-fiving us.

Viper clapped while Ace said, "You did great." Easy was on the dance floor with her husband. "Second place is better than third."

"It was fun," I said. "I had a great time."

"Okay, Leo," Wizard said, "You going to join our gang, or what?"

I blinked. "Join?"

Lil G nodded. "Apply to join, at least. No pressure, of course."

Funny that. Pressure was *all* I'd been feeling all day long.

"We like you," came Viper's quiet acknowledgment. "And we don't like just anybody."

"Oh, I don't know. I'm not much of a joiner. I get panicky in closed quarters and social events."

"Just think about it. Don't say no until you think about it, okay?"

After eating dinner, we went up to the organizer table to get our prize. The first-place finishers were standing there as well; three huge mammoth-like men, shaking their heads.

"So, you bagged a hooker *and* second place? Don't seem real fair," the red-bearded one said jovially, clapping me on the arm. "Heard about your disco dart, man. Without that, you'd have kicked our ass."

I smiled. "It was just one of those days. Win some, lose some."

For second place, we received a two-hundred dollar Harley Davidson gift card, a bottle of Jack Daniels, and a long-sleeved T-shirt with flames on the arms. Not a bad haul.

"Sweet," Wizard said, looking at her gift card. "I need a few bits of chrome."

"It's been a great day, Wi—" I stopped short. "What's your *real* name?"

This made her laugh. "Kristine. Kristine Echavia."

“Parker Lee,” I said, extending my hand.

“Nice to meet you, Parker Lee.” She handed me her card: Professor Kristine Echavia. I gave her mine.

“How long are you staying up here?”

“All summer. I’m on a painting mission.”

“Ah, good for you. Well, enjoy your painting time, Leo, and thanks for a great day. You...well...you were just what the doctor ordered.”

I looked at her, wondering what I had missed.

She smiled softly. “Busted heart that’s slowly mending. I needed a day of sunshine. Thank you.” Stepping on tiptoe, she lightly kissed my cheek. “I really do think you rock.”

We all saddled up and headed off in our own directions. I couldn’t believe what a wonderful time I’d had. It *was* just what the doctor ordered, and by the time I got home, I was ready for a tub and bed.

Dropping out of my gear, I headed straight for the hot tub. Jackson’s backpack on the floor indicated she was already home.

Sliding beneath the warm water, I leaned my head back, and thought about how fun it was riding with JUGs and playing with Wizard. Talking to Bailey had been a moment I was sure I’d never forget. I felt refreshed and ready to go once more.

“Have a nice ride?” Tricia’s voice cut through the dark, scaring the crap out of me. “Damn!” I peered through the dark, but couldn’t see her. Something about that seemed apropos. “I had a wonderful ride. How was your trip home?”

“Eventful. Can we talk?”

“Talk?”

She chuckled. “Yes. Jackson explained it all to me, and I think we need to talk. I was...well...quite frankly I jumped to conclusions. I think I owe you an apology.”

“Come on over.”

I heard the sliding glass doors close and sat up. I knew what was coming and was just too damned tired to stop it.

Tricia did not get in the hot tub all the way. Instead, she

sat on the edge of the tub with her feet hanging in. By the moonlight, she looked waifish, and I thought it would make a great picture.

"Leo, you owe me no explanations or excuses, or anything for that matter. I made no claims on you; how can I? I'm married."

I sat up a little. This was a surprise.

"I won't lie and say it didn't knock the wind out of me, because it did, but only because I did not want to believe you were some female gigolo bagging a different woman every night."

"Tricia—"

"Please, let me finish. Do I *want* to be special? Of course, who doesn't? I had no right to be upset, so once my attorney brain kicked it, I realized I reacted like some hormonal teenager when I thought you...you know...with that hot woman...so I drove back. By then, you were gone."

I nodded, feeling my eyelids getting heavy. The ride had tucked me out. Tricia didn't notice.

"When Bill and I returned from dinner, I saw lights on and came over, hoping it was you. It was Jackson. She explained the whole thing."

"I didn't tell her everything, so I don't know what all she told you."

"Oh no, that kid is smart as a whip. She said Alyssa was your ex and that she came up uninvited, had a bad moment at the bar and passed out in the guest room."

"Yeah, it wasn't at all how it looked."

"Or how Alyssa *wanted* to make it look." She moved her feet in and out of the water. "That wasn't all Jacks said."

"Oh?" I opened my eyes wider at this.

"Yeah. She...well...she pretty much warned me to step off."

Now I was completely up and halfway out of the water, my breasts bobbing like tiny bouys. "What?"

"Don't be mad at her. She is just protecting you from the clutches of a married woman."

"What did she say?"

“Not to hurt you. That you’d had a rough time of it lately and the last thing you needed was a broken heart.”

“And you said?”

“I assured her that everything was above board and this was all consensual.”

I slid back in the water. It was not like Jackson to be confrontational.

“So, I guess what I need to know is that we’re okay. I don’t want it to be awkward and uncomfortable.”

“We’re fine, Tricia, but you’re right, when all is said and done, you’re married. We can enjoy each other’s company, but there’s a *big* line in the sand that can’t be crossed. Has, yes, but shouldn’t regardless of how we feel.”

“You sound tired,” she said, getting out and handing me a towel. “I’ll let you go.”

Taking the towel, I wrapped it around me and got out. Before I knew it, Tricia had my face in her hands and was kissing me deeply, using her lips to say all the things her tongue couldn’t.

Wrapping my arms around her, I pulled her closer, my hands in her hair around her neck. Her skin was cool against my warm body and the kiss hot in the warm night air. But I knew it for what it was.

Pulling away, she whispered, “Leo, Leo, Leo. What am I going to do with you?”

Smiling, I whispered back, “I can think of a few things... none of which are the right thing under the circumstances.”

With that, I sent her home and trundled off to bed, to dream of darts, prostitutes, and a tiny Filipino woman named Wizard.

Jackson and I walked down to the lakeshore after our first cup of coffee and shared our previous day’s activities. She loved the Bailey story and promised to get a canvas stretched for it before leaving on yet another adventure with the twins.

Jackson was just now hitting her stride here on the cove. With the twins in tow, she had already lived three summers’

worth of activities. She had color in her cheeks, her eyes danced as she spoke, and she was genuinely happy. Everything about her said she was doing everything she wanted to do. Funny thing was, so was I.

I don't know when it happened, but quite suddenly, my granddaughter had blossomed into a lovely young woman I enjoyed hanging out with. She was articulate, funny, and had a self-deprecating humor that drew people to her. It made me wonder...made me question.

"You seem to be having a great time," I said.

"I really, really am."

"And the online class? You seem to be getting everything in order."

"Don't tell Chase, but having my ducks in a row sure feels good. I think I'm going to like it."

I sat across from her and noticed how much blonder her hair had become. "Care to tell me about your conversation with Tricia?"

She whipped her hair over her shoulder. "She told you, huh?"

"She did."

"I just think you're falling for her, and I wanted her to know that it's uncool for her to play you."

"She's not playing me!"

Jackson looked at me with eyes that said she thought I was slightly pathetic. Or dumb. Maybe both. "Gramms, there's something not right about her, and not just because she has two cell phones. She's...sneaky."

I cocked my head. "So you threatened her?"

"I did not. I just told her you didn't need any shit."

I waited.

"Well, I might have said something about slashing her tires or bashing her windshields. I don't really remember."

"Jacks!"

She shrugged. "She's a player, Gramms, and just because you don't see it doesn't mean it's no less true. I have to watch out for you."

I could only smile at my granddaughter. My protector.

“Well, thank you, but I can take care of myself. Now...back to you. Lately, you’ve seemed really happy, Jacks. Is it because of some guy? Have you met someone up here and you don’t want me to know?”

She stopped walking and turned to me. I could see her weighing her options. “Sort of.”

Damn. Where did I go with that? “Sort of?”

“I’m not seeing anyone here, Gramms. Summer sex doesn’t interest me, and I’ll never be some guy’s booty call. Ever.”

Oh, thank God for that.

“It’s David.”

My mind scrambled to its library of names, but could not pull up a face.

“He’s this guy I was hanging out with at home.”

David, David, where are you? No file existed on this guy.

“We’ve been going out for about four months, but I never told you or Mom.”

Uh-oh. That could only mean—

“He’s black.”

I was so relieved. I was scared she was going to say he was an ex-con or something. “Who cares?” Then it hit me, and I realized why she had stuffed all of this. “Chase.”

She let out a loud sigh and nodded. “Yeah. Are you *sure* she came from you? Two people couldn’t be more different. You’re so cool and she...well...she so isn’t.” Jackson continued walking.

“I’ve asked myself that very question a hundred times.”

“God, they’re so fucking racist. They ought to go live in a red state.”

This made me laugh. “Well, you were right in not telling her. She’d blow a gasket. Chase has never opened her mind to people’s differences. How serious is it?”

“It’s not. It’s over.”

I bit my tongue and waited for the rest.

“I came up here to test a theory I had. David swore he wasn’t a player. You know the ‘I’m not like all the other guys’ speech guys like him give. A friend of mine saw him at a party a couple of weekends before school got out, flirting with some

cow.” She inhaled deeply. “So I needed to see if he was as sincere as he played to be.”

“And he wasn’t?”

“Oh hell no. Out of sight, out of mind. He wasn’t even smart enough to stay away from people who know me. I heard from enough people to know he stepped out on me the first weekend I was here.”

“Ouch. That must have hurt.”

“For a minute. That was when I realized something you’ve probably felt before. The stress and strain of keeping a relationship under wraps cracks the foundation of that relationship. That’s why so few extramarital affairs work out; the foundation is compromised right out of the gate.” She shrugged. “Then I realized something even more profound—that he *liked* us being closeted because it made it easier for him to play around.”

“Yep. Been there, too.”

“So, if I seem happier, it’s because I am. I don’t have any guy to worry about. I’m not stressing over whether or not I look good when I go out or if he’s checking out other chicks. Hanging with the twins is a drama-free zone, and I need that right now. They’re going to go to college, so starting something with some booty-duty dude up here isn’t on their radar, nor is it on mine.”

“Good to know. You have your whole life for that, but summers like this one? These come once in a lifetime. You need to revel in it. I’m just so glad you’re having a wonderful time.”

“God, am I, and I’ve gotten some great pics!”

When we turned around and headed back to the house, I asked her, “Have you spoken to your mother?”

“That’s the other reason I’m so happy. No, I haven’t. She texts me fifty times a day and calls twenty. I just can’t listen to her drone on and on about college anymore.”

“Not to defend the harpy, but it would be *good* if you had that plan we talked about.”

“I know, and I’m working on it. You think I’m going to be a minimum wage earner my whole life? Hardly. As soon as I figure it all out, you’ll be the first to know.”

Most of the way back we walked in silence except for Jackson telling me of her day. Today, they were Jet-Skiing with a group of kids they met at the party. This was that one summer she would always remember and always talk about. This was that summer of carefree living that happened before you left your childhood behind and stepped through the one-way door to adulthood. Suddenly, I was so happy I'd let her stay.

There was only one thing, though.

If she'd managed to keep David a secret for four months, what else wasn't she telling me?

I waited for Jacks to get in the shower before taking both chips out of her cameras and uploading them into my laptop. It took a few minutes to upload them all, and once they were all in a file I named "gallery exhibit," I quickly replaced them in the cameras and returned to the desk.

Sunnie-

These are the pics Jacks has been shooting. I'd like you to comb through them and choose the best fifty or so for an exhibit at the end of July. It's a surprise, so don't say anything to Chase. Just get it on the calendar and make room for it in the gallery. I am painting like a woman possessed; new theme for the rest of the year: Harleys and Hookers. LOL. Long story. Anyway, contact me if you have any questions. Get invites out ASAP for the end of July, and let me know if you have any issues. Thanks for your hard work.

P.L.

Sunnie was my agent. She's the one who got me gigs in other galleries, commissioned paintings, blogging ops, et cetera. She was also an incredible photographer in her own right, and would know exactly what photos to use for my surprise showing of Jackson's work. If I was ever going to make Chase see the light, I needed a giant spotlight, and a gallery showing was just the ticket.

After Jacks left, I started Bailey's portrait. I worked without stopping until around ten o'clock, when Marla called.

"Sunnie called about making a space in the gallery for Jackson. That's wonderful."

I clipped my Bluetooth on and continued painting. "Yeah, I'm hoping once Chase sees how good she is, she and Charles can throw their weight behind her and stop peddling goods Jacks doesn't want."

"One can only hope. They aren't the sharpest tools in the shed when it comes to Jackson."

"Isn't that the truth. They see only what they want to see."

"Well, I see you sent Alyssa home."

I stopped painting. "That ship sailed, Marla, without me, no thanks to you."

She chuckled. "Can't blame a girl for trying."

"Sure I can, but I won't. I have bigger fish to fry. Can you get the gallery set up for a showing at the end of July?"

"Of course I can, and it will be fabulous. Sunnie and I will have everything we need to make a great show. I've already informed Harrison that he is to invite big money guys who need to spend that wealth at the show."

"Perfect. Thank you."

"It's a good thing what you're doing for your granddaughter, Parker. You've really stepped up."

"Do you know why?"

"Because you are single and don't have some woman sucking the life out of you?"

"Close. Because Chase hasn't stepped up for her when she needed it most...because the kid has pure, raw talent. Because—"

"DuMont didn't for you?"

I sighed. "Probably. Don't we always blame the mother?"

"I know I do."

"I won't blame Chase. That's too easy. Jacks has turned out to be a supercool person, and we've been having a ball up here. I'm really glad she's here."

"I'm proud of you, Parks."

"Now tell me about Alyssa."

"She quit when she got back. Sunnie'll run her hours until

you get back. I think the time up there was good for her. It allowed her to get over you. What about Mrs. Billingsley?"

She never missed a beat. "Is still married and will remain so. We...have an understanding."

"Screw till you get caught? So, what are you working on?"

"A boudoir portrait."

"No, really. Another bike?"

"No, really, a boudoir portrait."

She was silent. "Of?"

I chuckled. "A really cool prostitute I met." For the next ten minutes, I told her all about Bailey the Bunny and my time with the JUGs. Her response was a silent shaking head and rolling eyes I couldn't see but felt nonetheless.

"Adventure at every corner. I'll e-mail you the date and time, and start sending out invites. Chase and Charles in?"

"Yes, but don't send theirs for a couple of weeks. I don't want Betty Buzz Kill to douse the fire."

"Gotcha. Trust me, this will be an evening Jacks'll never forget."

"Perfect."

I painted for a few more hours before the phone rang again.

"Leo? It's Wizard."

"Hey!" A smile grew on my face at the sound of her voice.

"Sorry to disturb you, but we're hitting the casinos tonight and thought you'd like to join us."

I looked over at the painting, then to the clock, and back again. "I'd love to."

"Excellent! Meet us in Reno out front of the Silver Legacy where it faces Circus Circus at around seven?"

"That'll work."

I went back to painting Bailey and wondered about everything that was transpiring in my life because of Lucky. In the blink of an eye, I'd found my mojo, taken my work to a completely new level, hung out with a girl gang, and met some fascinating people. Then there was Jackson. Watching her morph from sullen teen to the gregarious party planner was a bonus I hadn't counted on or anticipated. Everything about her was changing, and I realized with a sudden intake of breath how

valuable this time with her was. I remembered my early twenties like they were yesterday; the world is your oyster and you stand at the buffet of life not knowing where to start, so you dive in, barely tasting what is in your mouth because you are already eyeing your next choice.

Life was full of choices for her now, but I wasn't sure if she knew it. The last summer before college, everyone already had their plans and could rightly kick up their college heels and enjoy the last lazy days of summer.

Not Jackson.

She came up here because something in me grounded her, made her feel less vulnerable to the pressures I know she carried on her shoulders. She wanted to be okay and knew I would see to it she was.

Suddenly, she came bounding through the door, carrying what looked like a bunny.

"Look what I found outside the garage."

"Put it back."

"It has a hurt leg."

"Put it back."

"I think it's broken." She held it out for me to see. "See?"

I turned now, looking at the tiny white fluff of fur she held against her chest. "Which leg?" Rising, I looked at the sweetest face I'd ever seen. All white, with one tan patch over her eye. Her front paw did, in fact, look broken.

I started to tell her to put it back, until I looked in her eyes and saw a remarkable resemblance between her and the bunny.

"Go online and find a vet in town, and I'll—"

"Mr. Stegman down the cove is a retired vet. Can I take her there?" Her voice rose like it did when she was little.

"Of course, but if he says to let her go—"

"Then I will. Thanks, Gramms. This means a lot." Jackson and bunny left as quickly as they came, replaced by Tricia, bearing a lunch tray.

"I don't want to keep you," she said, handing me a tray with a ham and cheese sandwich, purple grapes, chips and a pickle. "But I was pretty sure you haven't eaten."

"Come on in."

She shook her head. "Thanks, but I've been watching you paint. You're transported. Go on back to work, but *do* eat."

Setting the tray down, I stepped up to her and kissed her softly. "You're sweet."

She blushed and stepped back. "Where did Jackson run to?"

I told her about the bunny.

"Broken leg will mean a sure death. You know that, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"You better get a cage."

"A cage?"

"A rabbit pen. Some sort of enclosure. Tell you what. We have a crate we used for Dolly, our Lab. I'll grab it and bring it over."

"I couldn't ask—"

"You don't need to." She ran her hand through my hair. "It would be my pleasure. Eat. I'll be back in a flash."

And she was, only this time, she was hefting an enormous metal crate. "This'll do until you get her home, but you better look up bunny care to get everything else she needs."

We set the crate in the family room, out of the sunlight.

"You do know what this will mean to her, right?"

"That I'm either crazy or cool?"

"No. That you care about what she wants. That you are on her side."

"I am, but her mother will kill me."

"Then, I hope *you* have room for a bunny."

I pulled her to me and kissed her a little more deeply. "Thank you for this. We'll get it back to you when we leave."

Taking my face in her hands, she leveled her gaze at me. "Parker Lee, what have you done to me?" She kissed me once more before making a hasty retreat.

I was online looking up bunny care when Jacks returned.

"Gramms, she does have a—" When Jacks saw the pen, she suddenly burst into tears.

"Why on earth are you crying, Jacks?"

Jackson composed herself and blinked back more tears. "Patches needs us, Gramms, and I thought...you know—"

Rising, I gently took the bunny from her. She had a

makeshift cast on her front leg that obviously annoyed her. “Nonsense, silly girl. We’re not putting her out for the coyotes to eat. That may be what your mo—anyway, wipe your eyes and look online for how we treat this little *infantata*.”

“Patches. I named her Patches.”

“Patches is perfect.” Lying on the couch, I seated the bunny on my chest, where she closed her eyes and fell asleep as I stroked her long, white ears. She was precious lying there asleep, all cuddled against me. “She’s awfully cute,” I whispered. “Look at her sleeping. Chase will have a stroke.”

“We won’t be there long.”

I looked up at her. “Oh, really? Do tell.”

“Dad said if I wasn’t going to college, I had to move out.”

“So you’re calling his bluff?”

She shrugged. “It’s no bluff. I need out before I suffocate. This summer has shown me that much. I need out.”

Boy, could I understand that.

“Okay,” she said, hitting the print button. “This is all I really need to know.”

“That was fast. You’re really good with computers, Jacks.”

“Taught myself Photoshop. That’s why my website looks so cool.”

Rising, I asked to see it. She was right; it *was* cool. The site was called *Colorfullee*, which I thought was a brilliant play on words. The site looked like something a professional made, with her photos arranged by albums, which she showed me briefly.

“What’s in there?” I asked, pointing to an album called comical.

“Just some comics.”

“That you drew?”

“No, Gramms, I can’t draw. I colored them.”

I nodded and watched as she showed me all the cool little doodads on the site. She had a blog, a guest sheet, a contact form, and so much more.

“I’m totally impressed. This is better than the one I have for the gallery.”

“Almost, but not quite. Yours is pretty good.”

“I paid a pretty penny for it, too. You’re really good.”

She blushed a little. "You can do amazing things with Photoshop."

"I can see that."

She rose and took Patches from me. "Thank you for this." The look in her eyes said more than any words. She truly was happy to have the little thing, which seemed to have no issues with being handled. "Dr. Stegman said she's a little dehydrated, and her leg may or may not heal right, but other than that, she's good to go."

"So what now?"

"I was thinking of having the twins over tonight, if you don't mind."

"Not at all. I'm meeting some bikers in Reno to gamble a little."

She cocked her head. "You always said gambling is for fools."

"It is. I'm not going there to gamble. I'm going there to socialize. Big difference."

She studied me a minute.

"What?"

"Just seeing if there was a woman involved. There isn't. Good for you."

I chuckled. "I came here to paint. Time to revel in that."

She looked over at Bailey's painting. "Yeah...about that..."

Laughing, I told her my own story about finding a *bunny* in the desert.

They were all waiting there when I met them at the Silver Legacy. I was slightly surprised to see them all dressed up but still sporting their leather vests.

"Hey!" Wizard said, crushing me in a bear hug. I was not dressed up, having ridden Lucky into town.

All three of the women with long hair looked different without the braid down their backs, and it was the first time I realized Wizard was pretty; maybe not pretty, exotic. She looked like an Asian beauty, all natural and relaxed. She wore a sparkly silver sleeveless shirt with sleek black pants and toeless

stilettos. Very hot. They all looked hot next to me in my jeans and long-sleeved button-down shirt. Luckily, I had brought a sleeveless black cowl sweater that dressed my jeans up just right. Thank God I had Jacks, otherwise I'd have stood out like some Garanimal lesbian missing some matching pieces.

"Let's have a drink first," Viper announced. "To celebrate new friends!"

Once inside the casino, we headed to the bar and ordered six shots of tequila. After a quick lick, drink, suck, we surveyed the casino. Easy and Ace went off to the card tables, while Lil G and Viper hit the slots, leaving Wizard and me to our own devices.

"Your call, Leo," she said, nudging me gently. "What's your poison?"

I grinned. "Craps."

She smiled back showing flawless teeth. "Good choice."

We made our way to a less crowded craps table where a couple of bikers were casually leaning over the table and chatting while the pit lady gathered up the chips of the losers.

Wizard threw down a fifty, and I tossed down two twenties. Once we got our chips, we both pushed two chips on the pass line.

Craps appears hard to learn, but there are many ways to play it. The shooter picks up the dice and rolls. Let's say he rolls an eight. That's now his number. The goal is for him to roll another eight before rolling a craps, which is a seven or eleven. When you put your money onto the pass line that means you're pulling for the shooter. You think he'll roll an eight before he craps. If he does you win. There are also other places to put your chips on the board. I put four bucks on the pass and two on the eight the hard way, meaning he needs to roll two fours to get his eight, and not a six and two, or a five and three. This pays out at eight to one. There are still other places as well, so there's a lot of chip activity going on at a craps table.

Wizard and I both put our money on the pass line because eight is an easier number to roll, with three possible combinations.

Sure enough, the shooter rolled a hard eight, and we were in business. I collected my hard eight money, but let my pass

money ride. Now, he needed a new number. When he rolled, it was a seven, which, along with eleven, is a winner only if you don't have your number yet, so it was another winner. I took all but two chips off.

"Glad you could make it," Wizard said, leaning into me. She smelled of lavender and something exotic and sweet.

"I appreciate the invite. It's good to get out."

"You working on a painting?" She was staring at the red paint on my wrist.

"Shooter rolls a nine."

I nodded, rubbing the paint off with my thumb. "A boudoir picture for Bailey."

Wizard cocked her head at me. "The prostitute? Cool. Good for you."

"I want it to be tasteful, yet seductive. You know, a piece that makes men want to talk about it."

"Shooter rolls a four." No winner or loser. It's just a number. We needed a nine before a seven or eleven.

Wizard turned to the waitress and ordered two shots. I shook my head. "I'm driving."

"Not tonight, you aren't. You don't want to be in the twisties at night."

"I don't—"

She held up her hand. "I'm in a room by myself with a huge king-size bed. You can stay with me." She smiled. "Or sleep on the sofa. Your call, but you're not going back tonight."

I was glad for the invite. I didn't relish the idea of driving home through the dark. "Sounds like a plan," I said, watching the dice land on a four and a five. The table roared. I let it ride. He rolled two sevens in a row. My chips were slowly growing, as was the table population.

Our shots came and we tinked glasses. "To another game of chance," she said.

Craps.

"Next shooter!"

The woman with the biker passed to her man. He rolled for a couple of minutes without much fanfare. We chatted about the ride, about joining the group, about her job at Cal.

"You like teaching?"

"Love it. Shaping young minds and all that. Cal is a great place to work, with wonderful people in a supercool city. What more can you ask for?"

"I love Berkeley. Thought about buying a place, but it became too expensive."

"So where do you live?"

"In the city, above the gallery."

"Sweet."

"It really is."

"Alone?"

I looked at her.

"Do you have a roommate?"

I smiled. "You meant am I seeing anyone."

She grinned slightly. "If I meant that, I would have asked that."

"Well, no on both counts. I can't seem to keep a woman longer than sixteen months, two weeks and five days."

This made her laugh. "I'll just bet."

I completely turned to her now. "Oh really now?"

She picked up her chips and laid a ten on the pass line. So far, we'd both won our money back twice.

Before she could reply, the shooter crapped out, and the lady with the hook pushed the group of five dice toward me. I glanced down at them and then at Wizard.

"Go for it, Leo, I'd bet on you every time...unless you disco the die off the damn table."

I looked at the dice another moment before choosing my two.

"New shooter coming out."

Reaching down, I took the two dice showing fives. Ten has always been my lucky number, so I went with it.

"One moment," the hook lady said. They were changing stations. People tipped her. A big bald man was taking her place.

"So, you gals ride?" one of the burlier players asked as we waited for the changeover. I thought I'd heard one say he played for the Raiders, but I wasn't really listening. I found myself oddly at ease with my little ride partner, and nothing else around

me seemed to matter. I did notice they were playing high value chips all over the table, and it made me slightly nervous. You don't want to lose right out of the gate or no one will play with you next time it is your turn to throw.

"We do."

He looked over at Wizard. "You must have lowered yours a bit."

"I did. I have an oh-eight Fat Boy I lowered and chopped."

He nodded. "Sweet."

"What position do you play?" she asked. I marveled at how comfortable she was in her own skin. I liked that about her. No pretensions, no airs, just a woman who knew her worth.

He stuck his chest out. "We're all special teams here." The five mammoth men introduced themselves. I was sure she could captivate a classroom by the sheer power of her presence alone. These men were drawn to her like the proverbial moths.

Half a blip later, I realized that I could be, too.

"Well, ladies, welcome aboard," the big black guy with dreadlocks said when the pit crew changed.

"Let's make some money!" Wizard said, rubbing her hands together.

"Go ahead," the bald pit boss said, pushing the dice closer to me. As I reached for the dice, three other men pulled their chips from the table. I stopped in mid-reach.

"No lefties," one man grumbled as an explanation, walking away.

"No women shooters," said one Jethro, shaking his head as he withdrew his chips.

The lone black guy at the table leaned almost completely across it. He was enormous. Arms the size of tree trunks, broad shoulders, small waist. He was gorgeous. And huge. And not very pleased with such overt sexism.

"You never mind those *bigots*, hon," he said softly. "You throw."

The third man in retreat stopped, turned, considered a retort, then thought better of it and made a hasty escape.

"Their loss," the one who seemed to be in charge said. His name was Everett, and Everett was a mountain of flesh with no

neck, and hands the size of baseball gloves. I placed his accent somewhere around Tennessee. "Okay, sinners, pony up!"

Chips started flying, Lil G and her husband joined us at the table, and I reached down with my left hand once more and picked up the dice. I blew on them and let them fly.

"Seven. Pay the pass."

Everyone roared. Wizard was grinning ear-to-ear, and suddenly, I was transported.

Like many of the games I'd played since coming to Tahoe, I saw craps as yet another metaphor for life. There you were, the shooter; the one with the power of chance, surrounded by people, some friends, some new acquaintances, all believing you can do it, all supporting your tosses at life. Sometimes, you take greater chances. Others, you pull back, but still, the people around you stay and cheer.

And there was a lot of cheering. I threw for five minutes, then ten. The chips around the table grew. Then something happened that changed the whole game.

Rodney, one of the Raiders put five hundred dollars down on boxcars, which is double six. Now, I had to throw a pair of sixes *before* either my number, which was nine, or craps.

I looked at Wizard, who looked like she was having the time of her life. Unlike blackjack, where the tables were quiet and pensive, craps is a party. People cheer. High-fives abound. It's a great atmosphere when you have all the right elements. Tonight was that night, with the Raiders' special teams, the JUGs women's motorcycle club, and alcohol flowing like the Nile, our table became the place to be.

"Come on, Leo!" Rodney yelled. The guys had taken to calling us by our street names, and we, in turn, referred to them by their numbers.

Our table was so full, they pulled two more pit bosses for it and there was hardly any room to squeeze by.

"Come on, Leo, baby needs new shoes!"

I looked at Everett's full chip caddy. His baby would be wearing golden booties.

Blowing on the dice, I let her rip. Against all odds, boxcars.

Double sixes. At thirty to one odds, I'd just won Rodney fifteen thousand dollars.

The table went wild. Guys were hugging me. Rodney pushed a stack of chips toward me that must have been at least a thousand dollars. It was crazy. Our table got so loud, they closed all the other craps tables and suddenly, we were a show; a really boisterous one.

"Damn, Leo," Wizard said as the chips were all paid out. "You really *are* lucky."

Cocking my head, I had one of those time-stands-still moments. Suddenly, it dawned on me how right she was. My Harley had done something to me. Gone were the blues I'd come up here to deal with; gone was the albatross that had sucked away my mojo. Now, I was incredibly lucky, as if the bike had somehow transformed my life; reshaped my world. Here, among new friends, I realized I was a different person...and I liked her.

"Oh shit. He isn't."

I pulled myself from my reverie to see what Wizard was cussing about.

Rodney was letting a thousand dollars ride on boxcars. I looked up at him. He grinned. Perfect white teeth. "I got faith, sister."

It was a fool's bet. Two boxcars in a set was a nearly impossible throw. The odds were staggering.

"Come on now, twenty-five," I said. "Stop putting on the pressure." My heart started hammering against my chest.

"No pressure, hon. You done gave me my year's bonus already. This one here is for you."

"Rodney—"

"You got this, Leo," Rodney said, smiling. "One a them times when everything is just right. You catch the ball and when you look downfield, all you see is daylight. Nobody exists at that moment but you and the field you're on. And once your legs get movin', girl, you know in your heart that ain't nothin' gonna stop you."

Ain't nothin' gonna stop me.

I nodded and looked down the table at faces of two women

who had embraced me with no judgments or illusions. I looked around at a group of men who were, by their very presence, teaching me the joys of teamwork.

Suddenly, there was no sound. I didn't hear the crowd, though they rooted us on. I didn't hear Lil G, who was clapping and grinning. I heard nothing. It was another time-in-slow-motion moment with just me and the dice. I felt like I was in a movie as I brought my hand back and cast the dice down the green felt. Bouncing together like school children racing, they hit the back wall, careening back toward the center of the table. The first die miraculously landed on six, while the other bounced one more time, slowly, teasingly, until it, too, rolled onto the six.

For a split second, time stopped as we all stared at the two sixes. We nearly brought down the house. Thirty thousand dollars in chips were being counted out to him while everyone hugged and yelled, ordered more free drinks, and carried on like it was our own private party. Wizard crushed me to her and lifted me off the ground. It was bedlam!

"OH. MY. GOD!" came Wizard's cry, breaking through my silence. The whole place erupted in a cacophony of cheers and gasps and laughter.

When Wizard pulled away from an extra long hug, she looked at me, her dark brown eyes like fairy dust. "Hot damn, Leo, I can't remember when I've had more fun."

The crowd was pretty substantial now, our noise contagious. Giant men flanked on all sides by tiny women, a team in our own bizarre way. It was as fun as it was strange.

Once Rodney collected his chips, everyone focused back on the game. I could hear people muttering that "the lefty" had just rolled boxcars twice. It made me smile inside and out. The Lefty was on a roll, so to speak.

Rodney came around the table and lifted me up by my armpits (which hurt) and held me over his head like a child until crushing me to him.

"I knew you could do it!" He said, smacking me hard on the lips before setting me down.

It was crazy in there. The crowd was louder, our table was

loud and the casino sent a couple more pit crew to the table. I'd never seen anything like it.

"Damn, woman," Wizard said, pocketing half her chips. There was no room on the table for any more chips. I mean literally. There was no more room.

I looked down at Wizard and wanted to kiss her right then and there, but thought better of it. The idea settled somewhere in my chest and rode quietly with me through the rest of the night.

I'd been the shooter for almost a half hour now, without seeing craps once. As I reached for the dice, I saw a hand lay down three crisp one hundred dollar bills on the Don't Pass Line.

It was a bet against the shooter...against me.

The table went quiet.

Turning, I saw an old, weathered Texan, complete with cowboy hat, boots and an enormous belt buckle of the state of Texas standing one person from me with a piece of eye candy on his arm. She had to be at least thirty years younger if not more.

"Dude," Everett growled. "You fuckin' serious?"

"She's gotta lose some time, son."

I don't know if it was the word "lose", or "son" that pissed Everett off, but he made a half step toward the cowboy, when I put my hand on his chest. It was rock solid.

"He's allowed," I whispered on tiptoe.

He was glaring at the man, as the pit bosses moved in.

"Everett, it's okay, really."

He finally looked at me, nodded, and then back at the Texan. "Asshole," he muttered, going back to his place.

To say that everyone was glaring at the Texan would be an understatement. Betting against a shooter largely responsible for most of the chips on the table was bad form and bad luck.

Turning back to the table, I reached for the dice and rolled my number.

"Niner so finer," the pit boss said barely above the roar of the crowd. As he swiped the Franklins from the Don't Pass Line, the crowd got much louder.

"She put these chips in our hands, Bubba." This came from Rodney. "Try going with the flow old man."

The cowboy reached into his back pocket and slipped three more hundreds out of his money clip. Again, he set them on the Don't Pass line.

"You're beginning to piss me off," Everett growled. "You feelin' the need to make a point or something?"

Wizard gently touched his arm. "Everett, if you start anything, they'll shut this table down, and I'll bet they'd like nothing more than that. Let Leo take his money."

I looked at her, grateful for her poise under fire.

Everett backed down, tossing a hundred dollar chip at me. As he did, the rest of the table followed suit. Again, hundreds of dollars in chips landed in front of me. It was a sign of solidarity; a subtext that wasn't so sub.

"Take his money, Leo," Wizard said, winking.

When I blew on the dice, I realized that Parker Lee was slowly changing. Right here. Right now. I wasn't Parker Lee, eccentric artist, terrible mother, inconsistent lover, and absent friend. I was Leo the biker. Leo, the one who joined, the one who competed, the one who liked teamwork. Leo sprang from my head like Athena from Zeus, fully formed and ready to approach life differently than the narcissist I'd been most of my life. Suddenly, it was as if I had landed in this body with a completely different idea of how to live life.

And I liked it. I rolled once more.

"Yo eleven, take the Don't, Pay the Line." Cowboy's money was, once again, scooped up to the roar of a crowd who hated him on many levels.

Unflummoxed, he threw down three hundred dollars and again, the jeering crowd let their displeasure be known.

Wizard slid her arm around my waist and whispered, "Take all his money, Leo."

I looked at her and nodded. Then I threw a seven. Three hundred more gone to the casino, thousands paid to the other bettors. It was pandemonium at our table, and I wasn't sure if it was because we'd won or because he had lost. Maybe a little of both.

Glancing over to the Texan, I watched a vein in his temple beating. This time, he tossed the entire clip on the table, his eyes smoldering with intensity. It was personal now.

"Please take the clip off, sir."

Begrudgingly, he did, and left seven hundred dollars on the Don't Pass.

Everett leaned across me and said to the cowboy. "Once she's cleaned you out, buddy, do *not* come back. You've tried my patience long enough. *Comprende, amigo?*"

The Texan eyed him, then Rodney, then nodded. "She won't win this time."

"Dude, she's taken twelve hundred bucks of yours already. *She's* the winner."

The Texas grimaced. "We'll see."

The pressure was mounting. This time, I scooped up the dice, blew on them, and threw another eleven. I was on fire.

"Yo eleven! Slice of heaven!"

The crowd blew, everyone in the casino turned to see what the ruckus was about. I wondered if they would shut us down. I knew so little about gambling and casinos, but this seemed way out of the norm.

Cowboy took one step toward me. Everett took two around me, stopped only by Wizard's hand to his wide-body chest.

"Never seen a lucky lefty like you," Cowboy said, tipping his hat. "It's a rare occasion that a woman can step up to a table and beat the odds." With that, he left, candy girl in tow and about two grand lighter.

The next roll I crapped out. The round of applause was deafening, and the guys, one by one, came around the table to hug me and hand me chips.

"You hungry?" Everett asked, motioning for a chip caddy.

"Starving."

"Come on. Dinner's on us."

I turned to the JUGs girls. "Come on." And we followed the players like we were running backs to the nearest restaurant, where I'm pretty sure we ordered everything on the menu. While we waited for the food, everyone chatted with each other, and Everett peppered us with questions. When I told him what

Leo stood for, that I painted, and why I was up here for the summer. He looked carefully at me.

"So, you do portraits, huh? I've been thinking about having one done for my wife as an anniversary present."

I showed him some of my work on my cell phone, and before I knew it, I was handing him a card and making arrangements to chat with him later, when he was more sober, about painting something for him.

As we ate, Rodney and the boys signed autographs for Raider fans who recognized them, and all three found themselves inundated with admirers while we waited for our food.

"You were absolutely amazing tonight," Wizard whispered, leaning over to me. Her face was within inches of mine and she smelled of peppermint schnapps. "I can't remember when I had so much fun."

The feeling that had settled in my chest woke up, reminding me that I had looked at her lips and wanted to kiss them in a roomful of people. "A night to remember, that's for sure."

She studied me a moment. "Leo—"

Before she could finish, Rodney came back and slid an envelope over to me. "When I said this one's for you, I meant it."

I stared at him. The whole table stared at him.

"Rodney, I couldn't."

"Didn't you girls say you were up here making money for some dead cops?"

We all nodded.

"Give it to them. Look, you made us *a lot* of money when we already make *a lot* of money. I would be honored to help some families who suffered a loss like that."

Everett nodded. "Take the money, Leo. Give it to the cops' families. It's the perfect way to end this evening."

I couldn't disagree, and didn't, and we all toasted to the cops who had fallen in battle.

Not long after, we exchanged numbers and I found myself sitting on the king-size bed in Wizard's hotel room waiting for her to finish showering. When she came out, towel around her tiny body, long black hair streaming down her back, her natural

beauty caught me off guard. Averting my eyes, I walked by her and into the bathroom, thinking I heard her chuckling. When I came out, she was already in bed, so I turned out the lights and slid into bed next to her, bone-tired.

I lay there listening to her breathing and thinking about how I came to be here.

"You are a helluva lot of fun to hang with, Parker Lee," Wizard whispered in the darkness. "We single-handedly shut down craps tables and you threw your own little party that just kept growing and growing. Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being you."

"It was luck," I said softly, feeling my bones melt into the mattress.

"Winning at dice is luck, Leo. Making friends like we did tonight is a gift. Those mammoths adored us. I can't believe Everett got us box tickets!"

"Yeah. That was cool. They were the best."

"And how cool was it for Rodney to cut you that check?"

I remembered Tater's admonition to pay it forward. So far, that was really working for me. "I think I'll ride over to Reno PD tomorrow and put it in the fund. Care to come along?"

"I'd love to."

We lay quietly for some time, and I thought she was asleep. She, my new partner in crime, the first woman I'd felt comfortable with in a long time, was lying in a bed next to me wanting nothing more than sleep. Like Marla, she was trustworthy and loyal, a combination I felt sorely lacking in most women I'd met lately...including myself. I was finally beginning to see outside of myself and though I hadn't liked what I saw, it felt really good knowing I was transforming into something... kinder.

"Leo?"

"Yes?"

"I hope you find whatever you're searching for." Her voice was so sleepy, I wondered if she was talking in her sleep.

"You know what, Wiz? I'm pretty sure I already have."

The police station erupted much like the casino had when we dropped off the check for twenty-five grand. They wanted me to sign a huge card and take pictures. There was a lot of backslapping and handshaking. A crowd in blue gathered out front and surrounded our bikes. They were incredibly grateful, and it felt so wonderful to know we were helping the kids of the downed officers.

When I saw they were going to have an auction in a couple of weeks, I decided I would paint a picture of the officers' badges and give it to the department for the auction. They were thrilled. I was thrilled. Hell, we were all pretty damn happy.

When we were done there, it was time to part ways. Saying goodbye to Wizard was a little harder than I'd anticipated, and the feeling of disappointment caught me off guard. She was going back to Berkeley in the morning to continue teaching and molding young minds. I was going back to happily paint my life away.

"I had an awesome time this weekend. Thank you so much for everything." Why was this so damn hard?

Wizard took my hands in hers. She had the smallest hands I had ever held. "Likewise, Leo. My God, what fun we had. One for the record books. You have my number. Anytime you want to ride or have coffee, just give me a buzz. Any excuse to get to the city, and I'll be there." She looked into my eyes. "Any. Excuse."

I smiled into her eyes. There was so much warmth and sincerity in them. Perfect complexion, soft brown eyes, gorgeous hair, she was stunning. Right now, she was shining that light at me, and it felt really, really good.

"Count on it, then. You've not seen the last of me, Wiz." I watched her straddle her bike, give me a finger wave and drive off.

When everyone had gone their separate ways, I headed back to the cove feeling somewhat lonely and surprised at the hollowness in my chest. I guess that's what happens when you belong.

I felt like I belonged, and I hadn't felt that in...well...I couldn't remember when.

The ride home went by quickly, and I found myself looking forward to seeing Jackson and catching up on her and her lake life. I surprised myself by missing her as well. *She* surprised *me* by being there when I arrived. It was almost as if she knew I needed her to be there.

"Hi!" Jackson said, hugging me when I walked in. "I missed you!"

I pulled back and looked at her. "I missed you, too. You okay?"

"Yeah, it's just been so quiet around here without you." Pouring me some coffee, she slid a mug over and leaned on the counter. "I can tell by that look in your eyes that something happened. Tell me everything."

Cocking my head, I wondered what she wanted to hear.

"Oh come on, Gramms, you're glowing. Who is she?"

Laughing, I shook my head. "There's no woman, but there is *certainly* a tale. How much time do you have?"

"For you? All day."

Jacks and I spent the morning catching up like two teenagers. She laughed and applauded in the appropriate places as I described my gambling triumph, running forty bucks into eight grand, and meeting some of the nicest Raiders one could hope to meet. I listened to her talk about her visit with a professional photographer in town and the first three quizzes she aced in her online course.

"How big a canvas do you want for the police painting?" she asked when I told her of my plan.

"I want to do two, in case the families want to bid on them. Let's go three by three?"

She nodded. "Perfect. I'll have those ready this afternoon. What are you about?"

"I want to finish Bailey's portrait and get it to her this week. Then I want to start the police paintings. I've got so many ideas churning in my head, I'm gonna need a full pot of joe."

She nodded and held up her coffee mug. "Welcome back, Parker Lee."

I clinked mine against hers. "Thank you, kiddo. It's good to be back."

As she ran water into her mug, she said softly, "Talked to Mom. She's still fuming that I'm here. Threatened to kick me out. Threatened to cut me off."

"Just threatened in general?"

"Yeah. It ended when I hung up on her. That woman doesn't know how to listen."

Boy was that an understatement.

"She wants to talk to you."

"And I want to be world famous."

Jackson chuckled before going to the garage to stretch the canvases, and I went to work on Bailey's painting. I loved what I had so far and was just getting into the painting when I heard, "Psst."

Looking over my painting, I saw Tricia smiling at me.

"Hey you. Have fun?"

I nodded, thinking about Wizard's smile. "I did. It was an awesome time."

"Looks like it. You're positively beaming. Does she have a name?"

"Why does everyone think that? I hung out with a bunch of really good people. I had a ball gambling, and I laughed a lot. How about you?"

She shrugged. "Same ole, same ole. Come over later?"

"I need to paint," I said softly, hearing the death knell of something that had never truly lived.

"Sure thing," she said quickly.

"Tricia—"

"No explanations needed, Parker. If all I get out of this summer is a new friend, then I hit the jackpot. From here on out, any invite comes from your friend, okay? No sexual tension, real or implied."

I nodded, grateful she was a class act, but knowing it stung her nevertheless. I was tired of making the same mistakes over and over. I was wasting her time as well as my own. It was a go-nowhere fling and I didn't want a fling. Sure, I didn't know what I wanted, but I knew what I *didn't* want. The bell tolled for me.

The painting was really coming along. Bailey was sitting at the edge of a pond with her feet dangling in the water as she glanced down at her reflection. She looked like a fairy sitting there, with the emerald forest behind her. I originally wanted to portray her in a bedroom scene, but that was just too cliché. I wanted something fresher, something dichotomous with where the customers were; a forest scene seemed appropriate for her personality. She liked to hike, she loved the outdoors, and I thought this was something she'd do. Her expression was thoughtful, pensive even.

"She's going to love that, Gramms. I know I do."

We ate pizza and ignored Chase's many phone calls. Jackson and I had settled into a comfortable friendship, and I realized how much I enjoyed her company. She had grown up so much this summer.

Funny thing was...so had I.

Three days went by and all I did was paint. I was on fire. I finished Bailey's portrait and one of the police officer portraits as well. I stopped only to eat and sleep. Occasionally, I heard Jackson come and go, but for the most part, I just painted away. Several bikers had e-mailed me photos of their bikes and left down payments in my PayPal account, so I had to get busy. My list of commissions grew every day, and I was painting like a woman possessed.

"Oh. My. God."

Turning from my portrait of the second police officer, I saw Marla standing there.

"Look at these," she said, staring at Bailey's portrait. "Parker Lee...you..." She shook her head. "You've actually gotten better! These are marvelous. Simply stunning."

I threw my arms around her and hugged her tightly. "God, it's good to see you."

Pulling away, she looked hard into my eyes. "Okay. 'Fess up. Who is she?"

"Who?"

"Your muse. This!" She waved her hand in my face. "That sparkle in your eyes." She looked at the picture of Bailey and then studied me a moment. "No. It's not her. Who?"

"There isn't anyone, Marla. Really. I'm just back. I'm in the groove. I'm doing what I came here to do, and it feels great."

"Well, you look amazing, and these paintings...my God, Park."

"Thanks. I feel so alive, so together. I have so much to tell you. So, what brings you up here, and are you going to stay and visit awhile?"

She sat on the couch and patted it. I sat next to her and she opened our appointment book. It was solid for three pages.

I stared at it for a moment before whispering, "You're kidding."

She shook her head slowly. "I don't know what the hell you're doing up here, but our e-mail is flooded with bikers, friends of bikers, wives of bikers, attorneys of bikers, biker moms, bike mechanics, all wanting you to paint their bikes. The phone is ringing off the hook." She looked at me. "I can see you're kicking ass up here, but I think you need to come home."

I reached for her hand. "I'm not ready to come home, Marla. You're right. I *am* kicking ass up here. I could never get this much done at home. Things get in the way."

"And...there isn't any *thing* getting in your way here?"

"Nope. I came here to paint, and as you can see, that's what I'm doing."

"Well, I gotta hand it to you, I'm impressed with your work. This woman in the pond...stunning."

"Want to meet her in person? I need to take it out to her and I don't have a car."

Marla checked her watch. "I wasn't planning on staying long. I just needed to see you for myself, make sure you're okay. I hadn't heard from you in a few days and I knew you'd never invite me up, but don't you think it's time to come home? I know you want to paint up here, but things are heating up at the gallery. I have pushed the show for Jacks to mid-August, just to give you more time to paint, but the gallery needs you."

"I've just now found my center. You go ahead and plan the

mid-August show. I'll have enough paintings to fill it, but I won't if I come back and have to deal with the gallery and Chase, and real-life shit." Rising, I called for Jacks, who came running.

"Want to go to a whorehouse?"

She grinned. "I thought you'd never ask."

So we loaded up Bailey's portrait and headed back out to the Bunny Ranch. We met Bailey in the velveteen lounge area. I was worried about Marla's mouth, but I think she was too stunned to make it operate correctly.

Bailey came out and hugged me like we were dear friends. She wore black flats, hiking shorts and a button down shirt tied at the waist. She reminded me of Ellie Mae Clampett.

"Leo! Back so soon? Couldn't stay away, could you?" She winked at Marla and Jacks before laughing. "It's great to see you again."

I made introductions. Jackson acted as if she were meeting royalty. It was cute. Marla looked like she wanted to disinfect her hands after shaking Bailey's. I wanted to kick her.

"I brought you something." Nodding to Jackson, I watched the expression on Bailey's face when she unwrapped the portrait.

Her hand went to her mouth, her eyes watered, and she approached the painting with awe and reverence. "Oh...my... God...Leo."

Jacks and I exchanged happy glances. A reveal was always the best part of a commission; to see the joy, the incredulity of someone who got more than they paid for. It was the bonus of my job and I dug it.

Walking up to it, she looked at it up close, then backed away, her hand still on her mouth, her head shaking back and forth slowly. "Oh, Leo."

Marla whispered Jacks, "Why does she keep calling Parker Leo?"

"Shh." Jackson had a wall-to-wall grin as she stood holding the painting. "I think she likes it," she whispered loudly.

"Like it? Like it? I love it. Oh my God, Leo, it's gorgeous. It's nothing like I expected. Nothing. It's sweet and sexy all rolled into one. The colors are amazing." She leaned toward it. "The face...she looks just like me."

I smiled and nodded. "That was the plan."

"What made you put her...me in this setting? It's perfect."

"You told me you liked nature. You like hiking, the woods, that sort of thing, so I incorporated your natural loves into the painting."

"It's so much better than I ever thought." Two tears rolled down her cheeks. "I don't know how to thank you."

"You don't need to. This was a lot of fun to do and got my spark going again. I loved every second of painting it."

We sat in the lounge and chatted with Bailey for a few more minutes before she handed me a wad of hundreds in an envelope to pay for the rest of the painting. "I feel like I got the better end of the deal, Leo, but I just love it. I really do."

After hugging her goodbye, the three of us made our way through the Bunny Ranch, elated that Bailey the Bunny loved her portrait.

"She's really nice," Jackson said as we headed for the car.

"She's a person, Jacks, who happens to provide a sexual service. That doesn't say diddly about the quality of her character. She's an amazing woman with a college education and a sweetness to her unlike most people I've met."

We were almost to the car when I heard a man calling after us.

"Excuse me, ma'am? Ma'am?"

Turning, I saw an overweight, bald man hustling toward us. I had seen him last time I was here. "Yes?"

"Are you the woman who painted Bailey's portrait?"

I started to nod, then saw Bailey hurrying after him. Uh-oh. "Why do you ask?"

Reaching his hand out, he introduced himself as the owner of the Bunny Ranch.

"Nice to meet you. This is my granddaughter, Jackson, and my friend, Marla."

He shook Jackson's hand as well, just in time for Bailey to join him. Her eyes were wide and excited.

"That painting is a beautiful piece of artwork, Ms. Lee—"

"Parker, please."

"Well, Parker, here's the thing. In a house full of twenty-two

women, when one has something better than the other twenty-one, it sets the stage for problems.”

Uh-oh.

“Surely you understand that.”

I did, but that didn’t mean I understood where this conversation was headed.

“I can already see the writing on the wall, Parker, and the rest of my girls are going to want to have something as classy and provocative as that picture you painted of Bailey, which captured that stunning young filly better than a photograph.” Reaching into his jacket, he withdrew his checkbook. “I’d like to commission you to paint the same size portraits for the rest of the full-time staff.”

“Holy shit,” Jackson muttered.

Marla stepped up to him. “While we appreciate your excitement, the amount of time required for such an endeavor is rather extensive.”

I just stood there, looking at Bailey, who winked at me.

Turning to Bailey, he asked, “How much did you say you paid for yours?”

Oh no. Marla was going to kill me if she found out I had—

Without hesitation, Bailey said, “Twelve grand.”

Jackson cut her eyes over to me. Apparently, I’d gone mute as my brain tried to calculate twenty-one times twelve grand.

Mr. Bunny Ranch nodded. “Twelve grand for each portrait?”

I nodded slowly.

“I’d like one as well, for my office, so we can make that a total of twenty-two. How do you prefer to be paid? Half now, half upon completion? Forgive me for reducing your art to business, but,” he waved back to the ranch, “it’s what I do.”

I swallowed hard and found my voice. “How about a third now and the rest on completion? I’ll need to include photographer fees.”

Jackson’s head whipped around and I nodded, looking hard at her.

“Perfect.” He wrote a check for eighty-seven thousand right then and there. “If you deposit this in Nevada, you won’t have a problem cashing it. They all know me.”

I nodded, taking the check. "The photographer fee for today's shots is three hundred."

He peeled off three hundreds and handed them to me, but I motioned to Jackson, who slowly took the money before pulling her camera out of her backpack. Marla was smart enough to keep quiet.

"I'll need to talk to each girl if I can, otherwise, if you have a bio of those not here, that'll give me a good idea of what each is about."

"Done." Shaking my hand, he nodded to Jackson. "I'll have the girls lined up and ready to go."

"It won't take long, sir, I'm pretty quick."

When he walked back to the ranch, Jackson threw her arms around my neck and hugged me. "You are the coolest *ever*!" And then she composed herself and started checking her camera.

I turned to Bailey, speechless.

"*That's* how I thanked you, Leo," she said, laughing. "I've been thinking about our conversation...about *The Secret* and giving back...or paying it forward as is the case, and I have no doubt I'll get triple back what I paid. The painting is...it's unbelievable."

"Yes, but twelve grand?"

She flipped her hair over her shoulder and nodded. "I started to quote ten, but he can afford it. The guy is loaded."

"Thank you, Bailey, really."

"I have one favor to ask."

I nodded. "Name it."

"It's been years since the girls have had a road trip. Can you, you know, have a gallery showing or something in the city so we can all come down and—"

"What a perfectly splendid idea," Marla's voice chimed in. She handed Bailey her card. "I manage the gallery, and I think that is an excellent idea. We have an event in mid-August. Perhaps you and your friends could make it down to that."

Bailey looked positively ecstatic. "Perfect! The girls will love coming down there for something chic and classy. Well, Leo, I have to get going." She kissed my cheek and took off toward the Bunny Ranch.

When Bailey was out of earshot, Marla snatched the check from me. "Are you kidding me?" Shaking her head, she put one arm around me. "I'm seeing the advert for it: Bikers and Babes is what we'll call the show. Jackson, be sure to get artistic shots, not just headshots. We'll want to include those in the show."

"But—"

"And with Bunnies in residence, we'll have maximum capacity crowds! Oh God, I can see it now. Well? What are you two waiting for? Get to work!"

I sent Jackson ahead so I could talk to Marla about our new show.

"Bikers and Babes?"

"Hell yes. When women see those portraits, they'll want one of their own. There's a little Jenna Jameson in every woman. You won't have time to sit around twiddling your thumbs, Parker. This is a goddamned gold mine." Hugging me, she pulled away and looked into my eyes. "You're back...Leo."

Smiling, I nodded. "I sure am."

Marla kicked me to the curb when we got back some four hours later. Jacks had taken incredible photos, and I'd managed to chat with all but five of the "girls." Marla had been on the phone calling everyone who needed to advertise the show, including every Harley dealership in the Bay Area.

"That was so much fun," Jackson said, picking up Patches, the recuperating bunny, who snuggled into her neck. "You've got such a cool gig."

"Yes, I do. I can't imagine doing anything else with my life."

"You know, only twenty percent of Americans love their jobs."

I saw an opening and went for it. "Then I'm one of the lucky ones, and it is all I want for you."

She nodded and slid a glass of lemonade over to me.

"What will it take for us to get you into that twenty percent?"

She wasn't fooled. "We're not talking about me. We're

talking about you, and I just want you to know I'm really proud of you, Gramms."

I tilted my head as she studied me. "Oh?"

"When I first got here, you were kinda lost. You were more into bagging Tricia than finding your muse. But you found her in the most unlikely place, didn't you?"

"In a whorehouse?"

She frowned and shook her head. "Uh-uh. In the garage, silly. Look how much she's changed your life. Look at all the people you've met because of that bike. Whatever's happened to you has ignited this fire within. Even your painting has changed. The fire in your belly is back." Walking over to the finished badge painting, she made brush motions with her hands. "Your strokes are stronger, freer, as if you're letting yourself go more."

I nodded pensively as she continued.

"Even your color choices are different. Look at the vibrant colors here and here. Normally, you would have used more muted colors." She looked at me. "Your passion is so evident. There's no going through the motions here. This is the real deal. This is passion personified."

She was right. I had changed. "You're so right, Jacks."

"Mission accomplished, Gramms. You are free to go home now."

I looked at her and realized what she was really saying. *She* wasn't ready to go home, but she couldn't very well say anything to me. "You were also right about Tricia, Jacks. For a moment, I let hormones get between me and my muse. I've got a buttload of portraits to get started on, and I need your help. Here. We need to stay here and get these portraits done."

Her face brightened. "We're not going home?"

"No, *we're* not. We've got a lot to do here. I need you to get some background paint on all the canvases. Go with some deep blues and greens first. Stay away from reds and pinks. Use my favorite background brush for those, and keep the stroke light."

Her face brightened. "Seriously?"

"Jackson, I'm not the only one who's grown this summer. You have talent. *Real* talent. You've watched me long enough to know what's needed. We just got a ton of work heaped on us and

if we're going to be ready before the show, we've got to nose-to-the-grindstone it. My days of playing are over, and I can't do it alone. Are you in?"

"Oh hell yes!"

"Good. Then we need to start early tomorrow and not stop until—"

She reached for a flyer on the counter. "Not quite. I think you need to go to this pow-wow. It isn't every day you're going to be invited to something like this, and I think you should go."

Taking it from her, I looked at the date; this Saturday night, somewhere in Reno. "I'll go on one condition: You come with me."

Her eyes grew wide. "On the back of Lucky?"

I nodded. "On the back of Lucky."

And so, we got down to it, in the days that followed, Jackson worked hard getting the canvases stretched and painted. The first few were only so-so, but when she hit her stride, she started layering and texturing colors that created backgrounds even I envied.

Our week consisted of waking up at dawn and having coffee. Then she would fiddle on her laptop doing her summer school work while I read the paper. Then she would make breakfast and I'd eat it while she got my paints and brushes ready. Then I would paint until she came back from playing with the twins to feed me. It was a pattern that worked.

On Sunday morning, Marla e-mailed me the fifteen motorcycle commissions she'd contracted for, and Jacks downloaded the photos of the bikes onto my computer so I could get started on those. The house was filled with canvases, and more than once I had to saddle up Lucky to go to the paint store.

After coffee this morning, we both got to work. I finished painting the badges and got to work on the Bunny portraits. In order to make the gallery title work, I decided to paint a bike and a babe at the same time. We broke at noon for lunch, where we'd eat a bite before taking a half-hour stroll around the cove, where we usually caught up with what she was doing, what

projects we needed to work on, and where we were going with the works.

After the walk, it was back to work, and I often painted straight through dinner. Jackson would set food and coffee next to me. More often than not, I skipped the food and drank the coffee. She usually left after dinner to visit the twins, returning around midnight.

During one of our walks, I asked her if she would miss the twins and the lazy days of summer. Truth was I needed Jackson's help if I was going to finish the commissions before the show. I knew I'd never reach that goal, but I could come close.

"You know, Gramms, I really like them, but we're all kinda burned out on free time. Those girls love school. I think they really miss it and are anxious to get started in college."

"And you? What are you anxious about?"

She blew out a loud, exasperated breath. "I should have taken the Stanford acceptance. I know that, but no matter what angle I looked at it from, I just couldn't see me going there."

"Fair enough. Then where *do* you see yourself after summer?"

"I've been thinking that the California School for the Arts would be a cool place to go."

I tried to remain calm. This was a pleasant surprise. I knew just about everyone in the art department, having been a guest speaker on several occasions. Getting her in there would be a breeze. It was spendy, but Chuck could pay for it with one check. "Majoring in?"

"I'm not sure yet."

I wondered why photography wasn't the obvious answer, but I had come to realize Jackson preferred sharing her life and thoughts about life on her own schedule, so I refrained from the obvious questions her mother would have peppered her with. "You took some great photos at the Bunny Ranch." I handed her a check for a thousand bucks.

She stared at it, but did not take it.

"I'm not running a child labor camp, Jacks. You've more than earned this."

She threw her arms around me and hugged me. "Thank you so much!"

"If you stay in the Bay Area for school, we'll renegotiate your contract." I grinned. "Remember that your time is *always* worth something. If friends want you to shoot them, you gotta lay down the law. No one gets your skill for free. *No one.*"

"Roger that. I have to go show this to the twins! Thank you!" Back at the cabin, she scooted out the door and past Tricia's husband on his way over. He wore a pair of black cargo shorts and a green golf shirt that looked as tired as he did. Maybe it was all those phone calls.

"Hi Bill. What's up?"

"Can we talk for a minute?"

Uh-oh. "Umm...sure. Come on in."

He sat heavily on the stool and leaned on the counter, rubbing his face with both hands. The sound of his stubble against his palms was like nails on a chalkboard. "I'm a man of few words so I'm going to cut to the chase here. I know you are interested in my wife."

My mouth dropped. Oh shit.

"I know you banged her in the bathroom and that you both are physically attracted to each other. I've not seen my wife this excited about another woman in a really long time, and I am here to ask that you not break her heart."

What?

I blinked. My vocabulary had absconded with my voicebox and I just stood there like a mute.

"Ah, I see you didn't realize I've known about your affair all along. It isn't like Tricia to keep something like this from me. It's not...well, to be frank, it's not how we operate."

What? My mouth just hung open. He knew?

"I see you're stumped. Let me elucidate this for you. My wife and I have always had an arrangement of sorts. We do not usually share our peccadillos with others, but you have caught her eye, and perhaps more, and it appears you two are at an impasse."

I could only stare at him.

"It's quite a simple arrangement, really. I have a predilection

for younger men and she favors women. Lots of women, and she has shown quite an interest in you.”

Okay, now this was just fucking weird, even if it explained the call I overheard. “Bill, I don’t think we ought to be having this conversation.”

“Oh pshaw, Parker. You’re a San Francisco artist in her fifties. Surely you’ve met couples like us.”

“Like you?”

“Yeah. You know...polyamorous.”

I knew what the word meant, but no, I’d never known any couples who were swingers. “I...umm...you know, I don’t think I have.”

He played with a cuticle. “Not that you’ve known. Anyway, when we first arrived, all Tricia could talk about was Leo this and Leo that. Now, she’s sullen and sad, as if she’s lost something really important to her.”

“And you’re here to what? Try to get it back?” My head was swimming with questions, none of which would have made one bit of difference to ask.

“I’m here to ask you to please reconsider having her in your life. Tricia was so alive and lit up when the two of you were... enjoying each other. Lately, she’s just down. None of the others seem to do it for her.”

“Others?”

Bill looked up from his cuticle. “Oh. I’m sorry. Did you believe you were the only one?” He shook his head. “I always forget how women operate.”

I didn’t want to know. He went on anyway.

“The young men I get involved with understand that there is no commitment, no expectation, nothing but a good time. You women...well...you need a little more than a booty call.”

Others?

“How many others...you know, never mind. It’s not important.” I walked to the door and opened it, feeling foolish for all the time I wasted worrying about hurting Tricia. “Bill, while I can appreciate your...alternate lifestyle, it isn’t anything that interests me. I’m sorry your wife is...mourning the loss of something she never really had, but *this* isn’t how I operate.”

“Ah, come on, Parker. She’s a gorgeous, intelligent woman. Surely letting her back into your bed would be easy enough.”

I couldn’t believe I was having this conversation. I motioned toward the outside. “My bed is no place for a married woman in a polyamorous marriage. In *any* marriage. I crossed the line, and I should have been more responsible. I should have been a better role model for my granddaughter. But you know the beauty of this? It’s not too late for that. But it *is* too late for your wife and me. Now, if you don’t mind, go home and take care of your own life. Mine? Mine is going just fine.”

Bill walked to the door and said, “I trust your discretion on this matter.”

I didn’t reply. I just wanted him gone.

When Bill left, I just stood there staring at the door.

Others?

I could only shake my head.

As I waited for Jackson to return, I called Marla and told her the whole Tricia story.

“Oh Parker, I am so sorry. I never saw that coming.”

“You? Oh my God, Marla, I just stood there with my jaw on the ground. I had no words. None.”

“And you kicked him out?”

“Practically, yeah.”

“And Tricia?”

“Haven’t seen her. When I do, I’m just going tell her that Bill and I had a chat and I understand they have an arrangement, but friendship is the only thing I have to offer. It’s the only thing I should have ever offered.”

“Why do you sound so sad about it?”

“I’m not bummed about Tricia playing me. I’m bummed that I wasn’t a better role model for Jacks.”

“Oh Parker Lee, you have grown up so much this summer that your granddaughter is just happy for the time you’ve had together. Don’t look at the one mistake you made. Focus on all the great experiences you and she have had.”

And that was why she was my best friend.

"Now, what else is going on?"

"I bagged an interview with the *Reno Times*. Looks like we're going to get even busier."

"Not possible, Parker. I am pulling my hair out here. Who are these wives of Oakland Raiders who want to meet you? What in the hell are you up to?"

I told her about the craps game.

"Wait. Whoa. You're doing *a portrait* of those yahoos?"

"Haven't started, but yeah, and they aren't yahoos. They were supercool and tons of fun."

"Cool enough to come to the show?"

"Maybe. I have no idea." I could hear her wheels spinning.

"If the posters and invites haven't been printed, what do you think of changing it to Bikers, Babes, and Backs?"

"As in running backs?"

"Bingo!" Her voice had risen an octave, a sure sign she was getting ready to run with it regardless of what I said. "Give me their numbers and I'll call and see. Do you realize the business you'll get from the professional sports community? Oh, my God. You'd better get painting, girl."

"Trust me, I am. We're busting our humps up here."

"Jackson helping?"

"Like a pro."

"Good for you both. You need each other."

I could tell there was something else. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Some kid came by asking for her."

"Black kid?"

"How'd you know?"

"David?"

"Yeah. That was it. Wanted to know when she'd be back."

"And you said?"

She chuckled. "Never. If he was so important to her, he'd know, right?"

"I love you."

"I know. I gave him the thumb. Beat it, bozo. Chase isn't quite as easy to shoo away. If you don't talk to her soon, the

damages might be irreparable. Call her. Tell her when you're coming home, at least, but you better throw that dog a bone or that bark will turn into one nasty bite."

"Gotcha. Thanks for blocking for me."

"What? One night with a bunch of no-necks and you're all into that lingo?"

Laughing, I hung up and called Chase.

"Hello, *Mother*." I think my ear got frostbite.

"Before you get started, I owe you an apology."

"Yes, you do."

"I should have made Jacks call you and let you guys work it out. I apologize if it feels like I'm not being supportive, but I thought I was doing the right thing. I was *trying* to do the right thing by her."

"And you don't think that way now?"

"Oh no. Now, I *really* do. What I hadn't realized, Chase, is how much the kid and I needed this. Needed each other."

There was a slight pause before she asked, "Are you drunk?"

"No."

"High?"

I shook my head. "No. I'm sober. It's just...a lot has happened—" I heard her intake of air. "A lot of good, Chase. I think...I think she's going to go to college."

Long pause. "Which one?"

"Not sure yet, and it doesn't really matter, but I'm pretty sure she plans on staying in the Bay Area."

The airwaves were silent, and I thought I heard her sniffle. "Don't toy with me, Mother, or I swear I'll never speak to you again."

"I'm not toying with you, Chase. I mean it. So much has happened this summer, and Jackson has made some very grownup decisions about her life. If you and Chuck would just let her come to you, you'd get all your questions answered. Just give the girl some room."

"You make us sound like—"

"Micromanagers, Chase. That's what you both are, but look, I didn't call to argue or fight. I called to apologize for not

having Jackson call you more. I was stubborn and spiteful and I'm sorry."

Again, silence. "I can count the times on one hand that you've said those words to me. Has something happened?"

"Nothing and everything. Look, it's too long to go into here, but I'll have Jacks call you tonight and you can show me that, for once, you'll listen to what she has to say. Don't bombard her with college questions, okay? Let *her* come to *you*."

"I'll try."

"That's all I ask." The air was silent. "So, how are you?"

More silence. "You're freaking me out. Is this a trick?"

I laughed. "No trick. No joke. Got your calendar out?"

"Yes."

"August twenty-seventh is a big show; a really big show. Make sure you and Chuck attend. You won't want to miss it. I need all his monied folks to show."

"Marla already gave me the date, after she shamed me for not trusting you." Her voice got smaller. "You're hard to trust, Parker Lee. I want to, but I...I just can't."

Now it was my turn to be silent. "And I am sorry for that, too, Chase, but if you'll let me, I can show you I've changed."

"Only time will tell, Mother. Only time will tell."

The night of the pow-wow, Jackson came out wearing jeans and a leather vest over a black T-shirt. She looked like she belonged on the back of a bike.

"You ready?"

She grabbed her backpack and nodded. "I can't wait."

We got on the bike and headed out to the pow-wow, Jackson yelling directions in my ear. I have to admit I was a bit more nervous having her on the back, but after a couple of minutes, I didn't even feel her back there. I was looking forward to the pow-wow for reasons I couldn't understand but I was really glad she was with me.

"God, Gramms, this is fucking awesome!" she said into my ear. "I never knew it was so much like flying."

When we got to the meeting place, there were several bikes waiting, and before we could stop and visit with anyone, we filed out and followed in a single file line around the twisties for about thirty minutes until we came to a clearing where over a hundred bikes were already parked.

“Oh man, this is so cool!” Hopping off the bike, she laid her helmet on her seat and grabbed her bag. “God, look at *that* bike.”

I glanced over at the bike in question; it was painted with Tinkerbell on the tank. “Girl’s bike.”

“Sweet. You know, *you* have a great bike.”

“Yes, I do.” Standing there, I studied Jacks a moment. She looked twenty-five years old standing there. Something had changed in her since she came up here. She stood taller, her shoulders thrown back. There was a natural calm about her, as if she was finally comfortable in her own skin.

“Leo!” Grits called, waving from the rat bike.

“Hey, you!”

She hopped off the bike like a weeble wobbling, and came over to hug me, her big belly getting in the way. “Oh my God, *everyone* is talking about you.”

“I didn’t do it.”

We laughed.

“Yes you did, and I have several friends who want a painting.”

I grinned. “I’ve already received commissions from it. Thank you so much for all your support.”

“Are you kidding me? I didn’t have to say a word. As soon as everyone saw it, they were all gaga over it. At first, I teased them all saying I’d never tell, but they hounded me until I coughed up your name.” She glanced in Jackson’s direction. “Your daughter?”

“Grand. Her name is Jackson.”

“How sweet. You brought her with you? She’s in for the time of her life.”

“With all of the experiences we’ve had this summer, I can think of no better way to end it than at a pow-wow.”

She smiled softly. “Have a great time, Leo. I’ll see you in there.”

Catching up to Jackson, who was shooting photos of a bike painted like an iguana, I inhaled deeply. The scent of the bonfire hung in the air, along with pine, motorcycle oil and marijuana.

"How much you think this paint job was?" she asked.

"Nine, ten grand. Look at that detail."

She studied the bike a few moments longer. "It's something. No wonder you're digging this scene. So many intriguing people, so many great bikes. You're part of a community, one that doesn't judge you or your life, or even your bike. It's *uber*."

I couldn't agree more. I'd met so many interesting people who didn't come out of the gate identifying you by your job or where you lived. It's all about the bike, the steel horses. When you meet up with someone new, you talk bike, parts, engine, paint. You share stories of what you used to ride and where you're going next. No one gives a crap if you have money or a high-powered job, or if you're gay or straight. We're bikers. Period.

And I loved that. I guess, in a way, I needed that. I had boxed myself in as Parker Lee, artist. Parker Lee, bad relationship handler. Parker Lee, sucky mom and grandmother. What I had needed wasn't to get my mojo back, but to find new mojo. The biker community had given me just that.

As Jackson and I followed the crowd deeper into the small canyon, the energy changed. It was as if the thunder from our pipes was contained in the canyon. It was rhythmic and hypnotic and when we rounded the bend, I realized it was from the dozen men beating on drums.

"Oh...wow..." Jackson said under her breath.

In the middle of the clearing, surrounded by walls of the monstrous canyon was an enormous bonfire. All around the fire sat people drinking beer, visiting, laughing, while men played a steady beat on drums. Each drummer had shoulder-length black hair and appeared to be of Native American descent. They sat in a circle around a huge—at least three feet across—drum. There were several different groups, each with a huge drum, sitting under separate canvas tarps. There was a main "caller" or leader for each drum, who led the drumming and chanting. Somehow,

some way, they seemed to have unseen signals on when to start and stop the drumming and chanting. They never missed.

Suddenly, I felt Jackson's hand in mine. "How fucking cool is that?" she whispered.

I squeezed her hand. "Pretty damn cool."

"Thank you for bringing me."

"Just keep your wits about you. No drinking, Jackson, okay?"

"I promise. No drinking."

"Then have a blast."

"Parker Lee!"

Jackson and I both turned. It was Tater, waving us over.

"Come on," I said.

"How in the hell do you *know* all these people?"

I chuckled. "Another long story."

With introductions made, we sat on a fallen tree trunk next to the inferno.

Handing me a Corona, which I declined, he said, "You *know* I'm gonna want one."

Smiling, I nodded. "For you, my friend, yours is on the house. Your money's no good with me. You taught me about paying it forward, and in my book I owe you big. Twice."

Jackson raised an eyebrow in question, but didn't ask.

"Jackson needs to snap some pics of your bike and then away I go. It's that simple."

"She's parked over there. Next to the wigwam."

We both turned to look at the enormous teepee tucked between two large boulders of the canyon.

Jackson was already on her feet. "I'll get it."

"One thing," Tater said, "some guys are camera shy for... um...legal reasons. Don't be takin' pitchers of anyone without their permission."

"Roger that."

He turned to me when she bounded away. "Cooluhya to bring your granddaughter."

"Yeah, well, she's pretty cool."

"These pow-wows can get pretty wild. I'll keep an eye on her for you."

"We won't be here that long."

Tilting his head, he studied me. "It's not an experience you want to miss, Parker. Pow-wows like this can be life-changing if you let them."

"Life-changing, eh?" Like I hadn't changed enough.

"Oh, hell yeah. The Native experience is unlike anything I've ever been through. If it isn't life-changing, it certainly will be eye-opening. You don't need to worry about her. Everyone knows you guys are members of Tater's tribe."

I couldn't help but smile. "Thank you." I glanced over at Jackson snapping away, a dark figure looming in the shadows four bikes over. I was on my feet instantly.

Tater grabbed my wrist. "He's onena mine. I told you, she's safe."

"One of—"

"The moment you walked in, I put my sergeant at arms on granddaughter detail. I may know alotta bikers in these parts, but I don't know everyone. With Brock watching her, you can relax and enjoy yourself."

"But what about Brock?"

"He's an Iraqi War vet. He digs that shit. Trust me. That is a good time for him. He'd snap any guy in two who breeched what he laughingly calls 'the cone of safety.'"

"I like that cone," I said, resuming my seat. "Thank you."

"No problem. Now, you can kick it and not worry about a damn thing. He's got her covered."

We chatted a little more and he offered to grab us a plate of food.

While he was gone, an elderly native woman sat in his spot, gazing intently at me through eyes that had seen a great deal of life.

"Tater told me quite a bit about you. I am Norris, medicine woman for the Paiute tribe."

I tipped my head to her. "Leo. Nice meeting you."

She gazed unblinking into my eyes with brown eyes smoldering with wisdom. "You have a remarkable gift, Parker Lee, but it is a gift in which you hold on too tightly to the reins."

I blinked. "Excuse me?"

Reaching two hands out, palms up, she waited for me to

place my hands in hers. “Do you believe you came here for a reason?”

I nodded.

“Because?”

“Because so much has happened to me since I got here. I’ve met so many great people, and my painting—” I shook my head. “It’s taken off like I’ve never seen it.”

She licked her lips. “The Goddess has been good to you. Someone has been watching over you, helping you find your way, assisting you on this path to self-discovery. With all your success, though, I still sense a void in you; one you cover with a canvas, pretending it is not there. I would like to take you to a place where you might discover how best to fill this void.”

“Oh, I don’t know—” I glanced over at Jackson, who was chatting up two biker women.

“She’s never been safer. Trust me. She is on her own journey of self-discovery, but I...I came for you.” Rising, she motioned for me to do the same. “Follow.”

I hesitated, unsure of leaving Jackson, until my eyes met Tater’s. He was nodding and pointing to the wigwam.

“Come, dear. Let me lighten the load you carry.”

I followed her to the wigwam where she threw open the flap and held it while I entered. There were rugs on the floor and a small fire burning. There was a bookshelf on one wall with glass vials and leather pouches. One torch stood at the back of the teepee, its flickering flames throwing shadows every which way.

“Please, have a seat.”

I sat on a brown woven rug slightly away from the fire.

“Do you know what a medicine woman’s job is?” she asked, plucking two vials and a leather pouch from the wooden shelf. “To help the members of the tribe find their center, that elusive thing called balance. When one member is out of balance, it affects the whole tribe. This can be a dangerous thing to everyone. You are out of balance and it has been affecting everyone in *your* tribe. I would like to help you find your center. Without your center, that young lady cannot find hers as well. We are all interconnected, Parker, and your balance is vital to the whole.”

The funny thing was, I didn't really feel out of balance anymore; not since I'd made the decision to stop chasing every woman who glanced my way and start focusing on my art.

"You are too close to the situation to clearly see how off-kilter you are, but I can tell just by your energy that not everything is as it should be." She opened two vials and dropped pinches of two different colored powders into the pouch. "You think your art is at its peak?"

I shook my head. "Not quite."

"Do you want it to be?"

I nodded. "Of course."

"Then you need balance. Close your eyes. When I say breathe deeply, I want you to inhale only through your nose. Inhale slowly, expanding your lungs as much as you can."

I nodded.

"Clear your mind of everything. Relax your shoulders, relax your abdomen, clear your spirit of all emotions, and clean your mind."

I breathed in and out, the party noise fading away as I listened to her steady voice. In and out I breathed, pushing thoughts from my mind.

"Breathe deeply."

Inhaling deeply through my nose, I felt her blow something into my face, and tasted an odd mixture of sulfur and something else at the back of my throat.

"Inhale deeply and hold it. Now open your eyes."

When I did, her face swam like liquid in front of me. My head was light and I blinked to clear it. It did not help. Her face was out of focus, as was the fire and the interior of the teepee.

"What...happened? What was that stuff?"

"A little of this, a little of that. It is used for many quests in our nation. Do not worry. Its effects are only temporary. It just helps you relax and see your life as it truly is, not as you wish it to be. Look into my eyes and listen to the thrum of the drums. The drums will lead you through your journey. They will enter your veins, finding their way to your heart. Listen."

I did, and, I swear to God, my heart joined in the rhythm.

"The void in your life, the chasm you struggle to cross, can you name it?"

"Relationships," I whispered without thought. The word jumped from my mouth. "I suck at them. I like the *idea* of being in one, but I've yet to find a woman whose life melds nicely with mine."

"What does that 'melding' look like?"

"A woman who has her own gig that makes her feel happy. A woman who can throw some logs on the fire. I guess a woman who is happy with her own identity and doesn't need me to 'complete' her. I'm not half of a whole looking for the other half. I *am* whole, and I need a partner who is as well."

She nodded. Or at least, I *think* she nodded. It was hard to tell. The drugs, like the drumbeat were racing through my veins. I was seriously lit.

"You want a woman who can stand on her own, yet, you continue to choose women who need you to 'complete them.'"

"If there is a complete woman out there, I'd love to meet her."

Norris leaned forward and whispered, "You already have."

I laughed. My laughing felt disembodied, like if I opened my eyes, I would see colors of it streaming from my mouth.

"If I've met her, she didn't stay around long enough for me to break her heart."

"Ah, I see. You picture yourself a heartbreaker?"

"I am."

"You give yourself too much power. Someone who gets their heart broken is someone apart from their reality. If you are apart from your reality, you cannot see the truck bearing down on you. You cannot see the potholes in the road or the roadblock on the street. Blinded by fantasy, we cannot veer away from the potholes of reality as we approach them. Do you understand?"

I nodded slowly. "You're saying they're partly responsible for having their hearts broken."

"Not partly. Mostly. Parker, you don't hide your flaws from women. You are an artist and you wear yourself comfortably in your skin. It is not up to you to shake them from their fantasy. They go there with or without your help. When you meet a

woman who is being herself, who can see you for who *you* truly are, then you will have a relationship that stands a chance.”

I nodded once more. “I want that. I want a true partner. I want to be a *part* of someone’s life, not the center of it. The center of my life is my art. I can’t live without painting. I can’t imagine my life without it.”

“Ah, but you can live without a woman.”

“If I have to, yes.”

“Do you think they know that?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it that way. I suppose. Yeah, I suppose I might send off those vibes.”

“And then what happens?”

“They cling tighter.”

“And you?”

“Run. I run like the wind.” I blinked, the drugs opening up parts of my mind I hadn’t had access to in a long time. “Oh, I see now. It’s a game of push me-pull you.”

“Then you run. What do you want? What is it you *really* want?”

I didn’t need to think about it. Whatever drugs she’d concocted were acting like a truth serum. “I want to be understood.” When the last consonant was uttered, I blinked. Norris nodded. I continued, unable to stop myself. “To be understood as an artist, that my time in front of a canvas has nothing to do with our relationship or my feelings for them. That I am, first and foremost, an artist. *That* is my identity. It is who I am.”

“But having a healthy relationship and being an artist are not mutually exclusive. You just keep choosing poorly. It is time, Parker, for you to start choosing more wisely, and that choice is just around the corner.”

Norris handed me a cup with something minty in it. “Drink all of it.”

I did. It was cool and minty on the back of my throat.

“If she understood you, would you push her away?”

“No.”

“Would you run?”

“No.”

“Would you break her heart?”

I shook my head. It felt like a helium balloon in the Macy’s parade. “No.”

“Then when that woman shows herself to you again, remember what it is you want. Look into her eyes and know that she is the other end of the precarious teeter-totter of life.”

Rising, Norris looked eighty feet tall from where I sat. “Come.”

I rose unsteadily. “Where are we going?”

Holding open the flap, she pointed outside. Everyone was dancing around the bonfire like tiny dervishes. Well, they looked little in my current state.

“Dance. Be free. Let everything go. Connect with your true self and balance will come. I assure you, balance will come.”

Stepping out of the teepee, I watched as dozens of bikers danced to the beating of the drums. It was then I remembered Jackson.

Turning to Norris, I said, “My granddaughter—”

“Is fine. She is with my sister, Naomi.”

My eyes grew wide. “She’s not—”

“She’ll be fine. Go on now. Dance.”

And I did. Around and around, like I was the freest bird on the planet. Sweaty from the fire and the drugs, I let myself completely loose, my body not part of this plane. It was surreal and wonderful, all encompassing and magical.

I had no idea how long this went on, but when Tater gently pulled me to the log and handed me an ice-cold bottle of water, I chugged the whole thing at once. As his face came into focus, I felt the last of the drugs seep out through my pores.

“My God,” I said, wiping the sweat from my brow. “What in the hell was that?”

“It’s called a vision quest and it helps us maintain balance in a world that is nothing but the opposite.”

“That...that was amazing. Like I could see my life so clearly.” I began scanning the crowd for Jackson. “Where’s my—”

“She’s in with Naomi. Don’t worry. No drugs were given to her. She is not in need of that journey. Hers is something else entirely.”

I studied this monster of a man for a moment. “Who *are* you?”

He laughed goodheartedly. “I believe people come into our lives when we need them most. A few weeks ago, you needed me to save you from physical harm, but I soon realized you needed something more. There are no coincidences in this life, Parker. We are friends for a reason. You needed this moment here. It is up to Norris and Naomi to help both of you find your centers.” He shrugged. “It’s what we do for those we care about. It is as primal as it is tribal, and it is beautiful.”

Embracing Tater’s wide frame, I whispered, “Thank you,” to him. I felt like a doll against his extra large frame.

“No need to thank me, Parker, you are one of us now, and some day, when you are ready, we will officially bring you into our tribe.”

The rest of the pow-wow was a blur to me, with Jackson keeping me hydrated as I danced and danced. When I finally couldn’t move another muscle, we lay down on this huge blanket. Jackson lay down next to me and stared up at the stars dotting the sky.

“Thank you for bringing me here, Gramms. This is one of the coolest things I’ve ever done.”

“Did your visit with Naomi help?”

She surprised me with a “No.”

“No?”

“Help is an understatement. I’m pretty sure she just changed the course of my life.”

If she said any more, I didn’t hear it. All I knew was that sleep had come to take me away, and I would willingly go. As I felt the heavy hand of sleep on my chest, I also felt Jackson slide her hand into mine, and together, we faded off into the land of dreams.

We woke with the sun and said our goodbyes. The mood was somber and pensive. Many of us were still in amazement at whatever had happened to us the night before, while others

suffered from king-sized hangovers. Whatever had happened earlier had disquieted us both, and we were silent for the entire ride home.

Once home, I made us some iced tea and then met Jackson on the deck.

"Well...that was sure different," I said softly, handing her a glass.

"No shit," she said, sipping her tea. "That was awesome. I...I don't have the words. It was the best thing I've done all summer."

I leaned forward. "Really? Care to share?"

She shook her head. "Naomi said part of my problem lays in talking to people about what I'm thinking because I let their words knock me off my path, or at the very least, divert me from making progress. She said I either believe in myself and my dreams and goals, or I don't. When we talk to people or share those goals with them, what we're really doing is looking for validation. If we need that validation, then it shows we lack faith and confidence. That's when we succumb to doubt, and doubt and fear are the two greatest obstacles that keep us from accomplishing our goals." She smiled. "She was like my very own Oprah."

"Sounds right to me," I said, looking up at the sun. It was only ten in the morning and I had a lot of painting to get through. My orders were piling up and I was afraid to check both my e-mail and my voice mail now.

"You were pretty wild, Gramms. Can't say I've ever seen you whirl like a dervish."

I laughed. "Jacks, I can't say I have either."

"You've got great friends. I dig that Tater guy. He's one of the coolest people I've ever met."

My phone rang and Jackson excused herself to go see the twins while I answered it.

"Where in the hell have you been? I've been calling you for twenty-four hours." It was Marla.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Oh God, what are you up to?"

"Self-discovery, among other things. What's up?"

"I hope you're painting your fingers raw because I'm changing the title of the show to Bikers, Babes, Backs, and Badges."

I rose and went in when I saw Tricia moving about in her house. "I like it."

"Please tell me you've started the football player's portrait."

"I have."

"Good, because there's two Native American guys who called this morning wanting paintings. Jesus, Parker, what are you doing up there? Can you even keep up?"

"I can and will. Who are the guys?"

She gave me two names I'd never heard before. I took their names and numbers. "I'll call and see what they want."

"Can you really handle the volume, Parker? I mean, you're not thirty, you know?"

I chuckled. "Thanks for the reminder. Yeah. I can handle it. My head is clear for the first time in my life and my emotional plate is empty. It's all good. How's the show shaping up?"

"Three and a half weeks to go and it's looking really good. I just wanted you to know I was changing the name for the final posters, but the invites and e-vites have already gone out. There's already quite a buzz in the art community about your show. It's been a while."

"How are Jackson's photos coming out?"

"You were right about that kid having talent. She is really, really good. Comes by it naturally, I think."

"Let's hope so. She's had quite a spiritual awakening up here. I think the kid is going to be okay."

"And what about you? How are you going to be?"

"Me?" I looked at all the work before me. "I'm better than I've ever been."

Funny thing was, I wasn't kidding.

I spent the next two weeks hunkered down and doing nothing but painting. It seemed like the minute Jackson finished stretching the canvas, I was ready for another. For her part, she

left me alone, often just setting food out for me. I was in heaven. The images came easily, the colors blended smoothly, and I was in my own private paradise. I made sure to get out on Lucky once a day to clear my head and feel the rush of wind on my face. It was on one of my Lucky rides when one of the most incredible summer moments happened.

Three bikers were stopped on the side of the road, two kneeling and scratching their heads trying to figure out how to fix whatever was wrong. Seeing as it was broad daylight, I figured it was safe enough to stop and offer help. I was barely off my bike when I saw it.

Red and white.

Hells Angels.

Oh shit.

Now, I'd done some homework on them while cruising the Internet and all I really knew about them was they were better at hiding their criminal activities now than they were in the Sonny Barger days of old. Still, they were known to be the muscle at several functions and were feared by every other group, including the Mongrels, their bitter archenemies.

Personally, I thought the whole Mongrels versus Hells Angels on a par with the East versus West music rivalry, or maybe the Jets versus the Sharks from *West Side Story*. I mean, come on, really. It was ridiculously immature; but scary, nonetheless.

Here they were, three enormous bald bikers, sporting the red and white patch of the Hells Angels, and I had calmly and innocently driven right into their midst.

"You guys need some help?" I asked as nicely as I could. I tried not to act like a pansy, but I would be lying if I said I wasn't scared shitless.

"Yeah, Bruiser ran over something that punctured his tire."

I nodded. Of course his name was Bruiser. At least it wasn't Killer. "Did you call Triple A?"

All shook their heads. "No cell coverage up here."

"I'm Bruiser," he said, sticking his gloved hand out to shake mine. "This is Rip and Stoli."

I shook their hands. "Leo."

"Thanks for stopping, Leo. Four assholes on bikes drove right by, pretending they didn't even see us."

"If I ever catch that prick on the purple panhead, I'm gonna trash that fuckin' bike. He was gonna slow down until he saw our colors. Fuckin' asshole." Rip had biceps that could probably crush a brick, with tattoos all over them. Even his neck was tattooed.

"What an asshole," I said, trying to appear sympathetic. I'd heard stories about Angel Anger, and even though it was daylight, I never let my guard down. Truth was I was no better than the purple panhead prick. Had I seen the colors before pulling over, I'd have ridden by as well.

"So, doesn't look like there's anything I can do for you guys."

"Can you call this number when you get in range?" Bruiser asked. "We'd send Rip here, but we spotted a couple Mongrels in town and it's just not smart for us to leave one of us alone."

I thought that to be the dumbest thing I'd ever heard, but wisely chose not to share my opinion. "Sure," I said, taking the business card. It was the name of a motorcycle repair in Reno.

"They'll come take care of everything."

I nodded and started to say something when their eyes grew wide.

"Fuck," Rip said under his breath. "Mother Fucking Jumping Jesus, why can't they leave us alone?"

I turned to see what they were looking at. It was a cop car pulling over.

Shit was right.

Rip turned to Bruiser. "Take my bike and get outta here. He won't catch you."

Bruiser looked at the bike and shook his head. "Maybe he won't run us. Ain't leavin' you guys alone. I can do the fuckin' time."

Rip and Stoli stared at him. "Dude..."

Bruiser cursed again. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

I looked over at Stoli in question.

"Warrant."

I wanted to ask what for, but decided that was only "need to know" information, and I didn't need to know.

"I'm royally fucked. You guys just let it go, man. Call my old lady and tell her to call the lawyer."

"No way, man. Get on my bike when the cop gets out," Rip said, shielding his bike with his body. "You know he's already run us."

The two cops got out and adjusted their utility belts.

"I don't think so," Stoli said. "Or they'd be drawing down."

I gulped. What in the hell had I gotten myself into?

The cops swaggered over to the four of us, their faces a mask of seriousness, their chests all puffed up. The younger cop laid his hand on his sidearm in a threatening manner. "Problems, fellas?"

"Yeah, just a little tire problem, officer. No biggie," Stoli offered.

"I'm gonna have to ask you fellas for your driver's licenses."

Stoli turned to Bruiser. "Be cool, man."

You could cut the tension with a melting plastic knife. I think I might have wet myself, and would have stood there like a deaf mute until I looked at their badges. Something inside me clicked on.

"We came up for the 'Ride for Their Lives' event," I said, reaching into my vest pocket for my license. I had no idea what the three men were planning on doing, but I knew it wasn't going to be good. I could either stand with them, and possibly go to jail for reasons I couldn't even name, or I could let these cops know I wasn't really with them and risk eternal damnation by the Hells Angels. Neither choice was ideal.

"She's not with us, man. She just came by to offer a hand."

Both cops turned their attention to me as if seeing me for the first time. I held my license out for them to see.

"Yeah," the younger cop said, "and I'm Helen Fuckin' Keller."

Bruiser stepped up next to me. Both cops took a step back. "Our women are Devil Dolls. She's not even wearing colors. Let her go, man."

"We're not your *man*, asshole." The older cop took my license and grabbed his mic attached to his collar. For a moment,

he didn't say anything. He looked at the photo ID, then at me, then at the photo, before handing it to his partner.

The young cop looked at my license and then back at me. "You're that artist. The one who donated that check."

I nodded. All three Angels exchanged curious looks.

Stepping forward, I nodded. "Yes, sir."

The two cops grinned at each other, then at me. He handed me my license back with one hand and shook my right hand with the other.

"Your donation and that painting you did were over the top. We can't thank you enough for all you and your club did for the families of those guys. All the guys at the station are talking about the painting you did, Ms. Lee. I mean, the donation was one thing, but that painting..." he shook his head and looked away. "You really did them justice."

"It was my pleasure, really. I'm doing a show in the city on the twenty-seventh called Bikers, Babes, Backs, and Badges. I'll have copies of the painting in a lithograph and am donating the proceeds from those as well. It would be great if your guys could make it."

Both officers looked like they might start crying. "You have no idea how much this means to their families. A cop's pension can't begin to cover college expenses."

It was as if the Hells Angels had vanished from sight.

I nodded and replaced my license back in my pocket. "I know. I've got a granddaughter preparing for college. Damn expensive." I noticed the young cop's attention was now on the bikes. "I heard the officer's bike was auctioned off and the winner donated it back for a second auction? That's supercool."

"You bikers raised a lot of money for those kids. And your generosity is much appreciated. Is it true you made all that money at the casinos with the Raiders, or was that just a tall tale?"

Smiling, I nodded. "We had a good run at the craps table, and those guys were throwing down some big-time bets. We got lucky."

"I guess you did." The older cop looked over at the Hells Angels. "You're really not riding with them?"

I didn't miss a beat. "Actually, I really am. They just didn't want you hassling me. I'm doing a series of paintings about the many different bikers who came to ride this weekend. These three were kind enough to let me ride along for a bit before the interview."

The cops looked at the bikers and nodded. "Cool. Well, we'll call it in and get you some help, Ms. Lee."

"We'd really appreciate it." Turning to the younger cop, I said, "Feel free to look at the bikes a little closer. Nothing a biker likes more than to have his ride appreciated."

He looked at Stoli, who stepped aside. "Sure, man. Come on over."

It was a surreal moment watching lawman and lawbreaker oohing over the bikes. For a moment, I stood, amazed at the power of the Harley. It crossed all boundaries, gender, sexual orientation, occupation, and lifestyle—this being the most tentative of truces. Smiling, I took a snapshot of this moment in my head. What a great painting that would make. I would title it "Crossing the Great Divide."

When the tow truck from the cycle shop got there, the cops said their goodbyes and left us in peace. When they were gone, Bruiser picked me up and crushed me to his chest. "Fuck me, you're an angel. You were so fucking cool under pressure. I can't thank you enough."

When he set me down, I grinned at him. "It's Leo, and I paid it forward."

"And it paid off, man. I was going to jail for sure." Bruiser nodded to Stoli, who got something out of his bags. Stoli took my hand and shook it. In his palm was a Hells Angel pin. "You wear this. Anytime, anywhere you need *any* help you just show this to any Angel, and they'll make sure you get out of it in one piece."

I looked down at the pin. It said "Hells Angels Honorary Member."

"We don't just hand those out things out, either," Bruiser said. "And it might make others uncomfortable, but that's their problem. You just kept my ass outta jail and that means a fuckin' helluva lot to us."

“Wow. I’m honored.”

Stoli took it from me and pinned it to my vest. “Do you know who Bruiser is?” he whispered.

I shook my head.

“His name is Bruiser Barger. You just kept the secretary of our club from going to jail for bullshit charges. Other than taking a bullet, that’s about the coolest thing you could have done. Thank you.”

Bruiser came up and handed me his card. “Any time you need something, Ms. Lee, I’m just a phone call away. My cell number is on the back. Day or night, I can get guys to you anywhere in the country any time of the day. Loyalty means everything to us, and what you did for me...well...it means something in our world.”

Taking the card, I tucked it safely in my vest pocket. “Hopefully, I’ll never need it. Thank you.”

“No, thank *you*. Have a great day, Ms. Lee.” He motioned for me to get on Lucky, which I did. I started her up, waved, and got back on the road. Half a mile down, I patted the gas tank.

I really *was* Lucky.

“I’m really going to miss this place,” Jackson said as we turned to lock up.

I’d been painting nonstop for almost three weeks, and now it was time to load up the van we’d rented and head back to our real lives.

“It’s been a great summer, huh?”

“Oh man, was it ever. I filled two journals’ worth of stories and thoughts, but the best part was meeting the twins. They are really quality people.”

“Are they coming down for the show?”

“I think so.” Loading the last painting, Jackson held her hand out for the keys. “It was really hard saying goodbye last night.”

I knew the feeling.

The door to Tricia’s place opened. “I knew she’d come out,”

Jackson whispered, getting in the van. "I'll wait for you at the Shell station in town."

Nodding, I dropped the keys in her palm. "Perfect. Drive safely. That's about three-fourths of my show."

When Jackson pulled out, Tricia walked up to me, and I could see tears in her eyes. "God, Leo, you have no idea how much I am going to miss you."

"Tricia, I spoke with Bill. I know all about how you two live your lives, and you won't miss me. I am...was nothing more than a diversion for you."

"That's not true."

"Sure it is. Be honest. Was I the only woman on your line?"

Her slight hesitation answered the question. Studying her a moment, I shook my head. "Do you know the single most important characteristic an artist must have? Honesty. If we are not honest, if we don't surround ourselves with truth, then we cannot create honesty; and creating honest, truthful art is what I do...what I want to be doing with my life."

She blinked, but said nothing.

"I just think we place a different value on the truth." I leaned into her and pressed my lips to her cheek. "Best of luck to you." Turning, I strapped my helmet on and clicked it together.

"You haven't seen the last of me, Leo," she said softly, tears filling her eyes.

I did not reply, but fired Lucky up and revved her a couple of times. I was looking forward to the ride home.

The last three weeks had been a magical stream of paint stroke after paint stroke, with me finishing more paintings in that three-week period than I'd ever accomplished. It was as invigorating as it was exhausting, and I'd loved every minute of it. I'd churned out wonderful portraits of bikers and their bikes, of prostitutes out at their ranch, and linebackers crushing their opponents. I hit my stride after the first four or five, and then the artistic floodgates opened and I was a little like the dervish who was dancing at the pow-wow. Colors mixed perfectly, paint thickness was usually right with the first brushstroke, and I was able to "see" the finished product in the galleria of my mind's eye. I felt sated.

After meeting Jackson at the Shell station, I got ready to fill my tank, and called Chase.

"Hello, Mother."

"Chase. I thought you'd like to know we'll be home in a couple of hours, and I'd appreciate it if you would greet my granddaughter with joy and love in your heart."

"What on earth are you babbling about? I am so excited to see her. She called and told us she finished her summer school course. Is that true?"

"It is. Jacks has done a lot of growing this summer."

"You sound good. Marla says you've been painting like a madwoman. Is that code for banging a lot of women?"

"Believe it or not, I've been doing nothing but painting. I have the show in a week and there's a lot to do. I'm going to need Jackson's help at the gallery."

"I'd have thought you'd be sick of her by now."

"The old Jacks would have driven me nuts, but not the young woman I'm coming home with. You'll see. A summer away from home is just what she needed."

"As long as I get her back in one piece."

We said our goodbyes, and I called Marla.

"Hey you! Oh my God, the photos of your paintings Jackson sent...one word: amazing. Some of your best work yet."

"I got my mojo back."

"Double mojo. Mojo jo!"

We laughed like schoolgirls.

"Oh my God, Park, the painting of the cops and the Hells Angels is brilliant, absolutely brilliant. And I love the title! It's incredible work."

I felt a slight blush on my cheeks. "I was inspired."

"I'll say. Oh God, and the portrait of the prostitute as a fairy in the woods. Gorgeous. Simply gorgeous. Some of your lightest brushstrokes. Like she's flying. It's stunning."

I'd been called heavy-handed a year ago by an art critic for brushstrokes that carried too much weight and detracted from the painting. At the time, I was pissed off and offended...until I realized the critic was right.

"And the football paintings? The two Raider helmets crashing into the bowling pins was awesome."

I'd painted the Raiders' helmets as bowling balls and the pins were painted like players from ten other teams being scattered all over. It was one of Jackson's favorites.

"But the medicine woman...I think she's your most brilliant piece. The way her walking stick had Harleys carved in it and the way the fire in the background had bikes going up in smoke. You certainly were inspired."

"My favorite is the horse running." The painting was of a mustang galloping and morphing into a Harley. I titled that one *Steel Horses*, and it was one of the better paintings I'd churned out in my seclusion.

"Oh yeah, that's good, too. Damn, girl. It's hard to pick just one. We're going to have to work overtime getting ready for the show."

"But you got Jackson's photos up and ready, right?"

"Oh yeah. These were cake. Really nicely done. I'm pretty sure Chase will be blown away when she sees them. They're really outstanding."

"Wonderful. Thank you."

"Are you okay? You sound...different."

"I'm fine. Ready to come home is all."

"And you're really coming home alone? You didn't manage to get involved while you were up there?"

"Oh, I got involved. Then, just as quickly, I was not involved. No, the only female accompanying me home is my granddaughter."

"I've really missed you."

"Same here. See you in a few hours."

I gassed up Lucky and pulled her alongside the van. "Ready?" She forced a smile and nodded.

"What's wrong?"

Looking away, Jackson shrugged. "Nothing, really. It's just—I'm not really looking forward to going home. It was nice not having my ass ridden all the time. I enjoyed hanging with you."

"You know, that's what going to college would be like. You'd be free to do whatever you wanted."

She shook her head. "As long as Dad and Chase control the purse strings, I'll never be free. That's what no one seems to understand. No matter where I go to school, they'd hang that over my head; they'd harp on me about grades. They'd want to know my schedule. I'd never be free living my life their way. Now, I'm going back to the same environment but I'm different now. I don't know that I can handle it."

"You can. You are capable of so much more than you give yourself credit for."

She sighed the sigh all teenagers master along with rolling eyes and vacant stares. "Guess I'll have to figure out how to get along with them better."

I chuckled. "You and me both, kiddo."

On that note, we both started our engines and headed for home.

"Damn you look good!" Marla said, kissing my cheek and standing back to examine me. "I can see the fresh air and sunshine has done you some good." Standing back, she surveyed me. "You've lost weight."

I shrugged. "Didn't do much eating the last couple of weeks. I pretty much painted from eight in the morning to midnight to get these done."

We'd gone straight to the gallery and unloaded the paintings before cutting Jackson loose to go see her friends. She wasn't ready to see Chase and, quite frankly, neither was I.

"Oh my God, Park, these are...well...even better in person. Look at the vibrant colors, the way the paint seems to be moving. These are gorgeous. Your best work, ever." Marla moved larger pieces from in front of smaller ones to see them better. "I've got the perfect frames in mind for these two. Oh dear, this one," she pulled out the Steel Horses. "This one must go front and center."

"I think that's my favorite. It symbolizes my own transformation."

Marla paused from her gazing, oohing and aahing to look at me. "That's it, isn't it? Something has happened to you." Taking my hands in hers, she gazed intently into my eyes. "Talk to me."

I shrugged. There was so much to say. How did I condense a summer-long experience to a single sentence?

"To make a long story short, I found my center. My balance doesn't come from a relationship or another woman. My balance comes from the art I love and the passion I put into it. I lost sight of that when I installed a revolving door in my bedroom."

Marla chuckled softly. "Nothing like a good dose of reality to create more equilibrium. You've been at it a long time."

"And it sucked the life out of my creativity. But I'm back, Marla. I'm even better than back."

"This body of work proves that, Park. These are gorgeous." Taking my hands, she tugged me into the back room. "What do you think of these?" When she flicked on the light, there were several of Jackson's photos blown up.

"Oh. Wow, Marla...these are amazing. She is going to love this!"

"The kid does good work, Park. She has quite the eye."

"She's going to die when she sees these."

"You still haven't told her?"

Gazing at one particularly beautiful photo of Bailey, I shook my head. "Wanted to surprise her." There were two photos of Harleys that were so amazing the way the sunlight reflected off the pipes. "Damn, Marla, the kid's really good."

"She'll sell, that's for sure."

"Perfect."

"We've got a lot of work to do before the twenty-seventh, Parks. I've got the showing in all major papers, and you're everywhere online. I've covered you in any news medium from Redding to Los Angeles. This thing is gonna rock the art world."

"That must have cost a pretty penny."

"It wasn't cheap, but this is a fresh start for you, and I want it to be big. We need people to see the new you, because Parker Lee, those paintings out there are nothing like what you've done

before. Nothing. You're on a whole new level now and people need to see that."

Smiling, I turned to fully face her. "Thank you for all your hard work."

"Labor of love, darlin', labor of love. Now, before we dive into the real hard work, why don't we grab a bite to eat and catch up. I can tell by the look on your face, you've got some wild tales to tell."

Laughing, I walked right out of the back room. "You have no idea," I said, smiling. "No idea at all."

As much as I dreaded seeing Chase, it had to be done.

"Where's Jackson?" she asked when she opened the door.

"Good to see you, too," I said, pushing past her. "She's out and about visiting friends. I'm fine, and you?"

Pushing out an exasperated breath, she closed the door and followed me into their kitchen.

To say that Charles and Chase were loaded is an understatement. The kitchen was solid gray granite with stainless steel appliances beneath a completely glass ceiling. The bar stretched in an S-curve and could seat ten people comfortably. That was where I always sat.

Sliding onto the wrought iron barstool, I inhaled the fresh scent of baked bread. "Esmeralda baking bread?"

"Yes. Something to drink?"

I looked at Chase's neck and saw the veins bulging. She was barely managing to contain whatever verbal barbs she was getting ready to fire.

"I'll take a Coke if you have one."

Plucking one from the refrigerator, she shoved it across the bar like a bartender. I managed to catch it before it slid off.

"The least you could have done was drop her home first."

"She was driving the van."

She stared at me. "The what?"

"Van. I have a big show coming up and we needed to bring my work home."

"In a van?"

I popped open the Coke. "Would you rather she have been on the back of the bike?"

"Of course not. I just think, after being with her all summer you might have influenced her to come see her parents first."

Stopping in mid-swig, I lowered the Coke. "You'll never get it, will you? Jackson is a free spirit. She paves her own path. I'm proud of her for that. You should be, too."

"I am!"

"No, you think she is something to control. To dominate. To bend to your will. She's not. For that, I'm glad."

"She's still our responsibility until she's eighteen."

"Oh for Christ's sake, how long are you going to play that sorry-ass tune? She's almost eighteen. She's not a baby anymore." I felt myself getting bigger. "Do you know why she didn't come here first? Because you and Chuck are buzz kills! She's had an incredible time; she's grown so much and had so many awesome adventures that she wants to bask in the warmth of those moments a little while longer before the two of you throw water on her fun."

"Do you honestly think—"

"Yes I do. If past patterns reflect future behavior, then yes, I do think the two of you are so unconscious about my granddaughter that you'll rain on her parade. She's just wanting to share her tales before the two wet blankets she lives with ruin it for her."

Chase stared at me, dumbfounded. "You think two months of playtime with Jackson qualifies you to hand out parenting advice? Trust me. When it comes to parenting, you could have used a few lessons."

"Maybe so, but I think that two months of *listening* to her qualifies me to hand you a fucking memo to wise up where Jackson is concerned."

"You said she might be going to college. Is that still a possibility? Because that's the only way Charles is ever going to forgive you for taking her this summer."

"First off, you both know I did not *take* her. What I did

was not turn my back on her. Everything that happened did so organically.”

Chase narrowed her eyes at me. “What. Happened. Mother?”

Gulping my Coke, I crushed the can and left it on the bar as I rose. “What happened is not my story to tell. If you truly wish to keep Jacks from hating your guts, then you and Chuck will climb down off your self-righteous pedestals and listen to her. Just listen. You’ll be surprised what you’ll learn.” I started for the door. “I know I was.”

“Mother.”

I turned.

She dropped her tone. “Thank you for taking care of her.”

“That’s where you have it wrong. It was Jacks who took care of me. I hope to see you at the show on the twenty-seventh. It’s going to be my best ever.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Bring Chuck, too. He won’t want to miss it. Trust me.”

“We’ll be there.”

I was almost at the door when I heard her voice, barely a whisper.

“Mother, look at me a second.”

I did as she asked.

“Something happened to you up there, didn’t it? You look... oddly at peace.”

Nodding, I opened the front door. “A great many things happened up there, Chase, and I’ll never be the same again. Neither will my granddaughter.”

The week flew by and we were consumed with getting ready for the show. There was so much to do, I barely had time to see Jackson. Marla had done a beautiful job of prepping the gallery; all I needed to do was put some finishing touches on a few of the paintings, make a few more lithographs and type up explanations about each piece. We worked hard from morning to night getting everything ready...making sure everything was

just right. Each night, I collapsed in bed satisfied I had done everything I could to make this the best show ever.

When the show night rolled around, I wore a flowing silver jumpsuit by Stella McCartney. It was elegant yet understated.

"It's perfect," Marla said. She was wearing a red dress with an uneven hem and matching red pumps. "You look every bit the artist."

"Thank you. The gallery is perfect. Every little thing, down to the napkins is wonderful. You really outdid yourself this time."

"Wait until you taste the food. I went with a different caterer this time. They serve a lighter meal and yummier hors d'oeuvres. Trust me, everyone who is anyone will be here tonight."

Rubbing my hands together, I said, "Let's hope."

I didn't need to hope; what happened in the following hours made this night bigger than anything I could have even imagined.

Anything.

The first people to arrive were the JUGs. Marla wanted me to let her get the door, but I was too excited and threw it open. There stood all of them: Lil G, Easy Breezy, Viper, Ace and Wizard. They were all dressed up in clothes that looked oddly out of place on them.

"Leo!" Lil G said, walking in wearing six-inch platforms and black skinny jeans. Her hair was coiffed, and several silver necklaces hung from her neck. Throwing her arms around my neck, she hugged me. "Did you think we forgot?"

Pulling away, I shook my head. "No, but—"

Easy silenced me with a hug. Then Viper handed me a package. "We took a vote."

Opening the package, there was a JUGs patch. "Oh. Oh man." I held up the patch for Marla to see. "Marla! I'm a JUG."

She looked over at me and shook her head. "Among other things."

Turning back to the girls, I thanked them. "I don't know what to say." As I caressed the patch, Wizard walked up to me. She wore a lavender sweater and black dress pants. Her long black hair hung loosely around her shoulders. She looked gorgeous. "Welcome to the family," she said softly, embracing

me. We hugged a lot longer than the other huggers, and when she looked into my eyes, she smiled with such warmth I felt something move within me. "I've missed you, partner."

"I've missed you, too." Other than several texts, I hadn't spoken to her since the poker run, but when I told her I'd missed her I meant it.

"It was unanimous, Leo. You belong with us, it's not even funny."

It had been a long time since I "belonged" anywhere. "I'll do you pr—"

"Oh my God!" came Lil G's voice from across the room.

Everyone looked up.

Standing in front of a four-by-four canvas of all of our bikes was Lil G, her hand on her mouth. The others joined her, and together, they stood silently in front of the painting titled, "Big, Bold, Bad, Beautiful."

"Surprise!" I said, walking up behind them. I kept my eyes on the clock, waiting for Jackson to return from the errand I'd sent her on. I wanted her to see the gallery when it was finished being set up and I didn't want to miss the look on her face when she saw the side of the gallery with her photos prominently displayed.

I have to say, Marla did an incredible job of mounting and arranging them. There is an art to knowing which pieces to put where, and Marla possessed that skill. You need to have an eye for such things as size, color, subject matter. Then, you needed to have labels that had more than a title on them, that piqued the viewer's interest. The wall and half a dozen tripods were put together in such a way as to draw you in for a closer look.

Jackson would be thrilled.

"Oh, Leo," Wizard whispered, stepping closer to the painting of our bikes lined up on the starting line of a track and field. "This is...it's...oh my." When I turned around, there were tears in her eyes. "Now it's my turn to be speechless."

"I was thinking we could hang it in the clubhouse," I explained. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jackson, Chase and Chuck getting out of their Lexus.

“It’s one of the most beautiful and realistic paintings I have ever seen.”

Smiling, I motioned for the server to bring over the flutes of champagne. “I’m so glad you like it, and thank you so much for coming. Please eat, drink and be merry. I’m surprising my granddaughter, and she just arrived, but don’t leave without saying goodbye.”

Making eye contact with Marla, who moved swiftly for the door, I grabbed two flutes from the next server and handed them to Chase and Chuck before giving Jackson a hug.

“Oh wow, Mother. You painted *all* of these?”

Nodding, I put my arm around Jackson and turned her back to her work. “With a lot of help from Jacks.”

Chase blinked slowly as her eyes took in all of the new work hanging on the walls. When her eyes landed on the photographs, she said, “Since when do you do photographs?”

Slowly turning with Jackson still in my grasp, I answered, “I don’t. Jackson does.”

Both Jackson and Chase gasped.

“Oh my God, Gramms.” Jackson’s hand went to her mouth. I released her shoulder and watched as she walked slowly toward her photos as if pulled by a tractor beam.

Chase turned to me. “How long have you been planning this?”

“As soon as I saw the kind of talent she has, I knew she needed a show. She’s amazing, Chase. It’s what she wants to do, and I implore you both to take a really good look at her work. It’s time you guys started supporting her in *her* chosen endeavors. She has a good eye, an incredible sense of color, and—” Before I could finish, both Chase and Charles were pulled to Jackson’s photos.

Standing there watching my daughter put her arms around my granddaughter, I suddenly became verklemt.

“You pulled off a miracle,” Marla whispered, nudging me. “The look on her face was priceless.”

I smiled softly. “Wait until she sees her second surprise.”

“You may have just changed the course of her life.”

Tilting my head I looked at Marla. “I’m just glad she let me

be a part of her life. It was a wonderful summer. Thank you for making all of this possible.”

“The crowd is starting to come in. Have a ball tonight, Parks, you deserve it.”

While Marla greeted people at the door, Jackson ran to me, throwing her arms around my neck. “Oh Gramms, I can’t believe you did this for me! I don’t even have the words.”

As I hugged her, I looked over her shoulder; her second surprise had just walked in.

“While your silence is sweet, I’m sure it will be short-lived.” Pulling away, I pointed to the door, where the twins were waiting. Three high-pitched squeals rang out and Jackson bolted for the door where they group-hugged.

“Looks like you make dreams come true, Leo.”

Half turning, I looked down at Wizard, who was smiling warmly at me. “Having fun?”

“Our bikes are one thing, and they’re impressive, but those women? They’re hot.”

I studied her a moment. Do straight women think like that? Why hadn’t I ever asked her if she was gay? Or did it even matter? “They came out remarkably well.” I’d only managed to paint about two-thirds of all the girls, but I was quite pleased with the way the finished ones turned out.

“Your granddaughter’s photos are awesome as well. Clearly, she comes by it naturally.”

“Thank you. And thank you so much for coming. I love my patch.”

“Wouldn’t have missed it for the world. It’s what we do, Leo; we support each other on *and* off the bikes. You’re one of us now, and we’re a sisterhood.” She lowered her voice. “But just so we’re clear, I would have come with or without the others.”

When I looked into her eyes, something happened, but before I could grab it, there was a commotion at the front door causing us both to turn.

“Aren’t they...”

I nodded, seeing Bailey and about two dozen other bunnies at the door.

I could not stop the perma-grin. “Yep. That would be them. I can’t believe they came.”

Wizard reached out and squeezed my hand. “Enjoy your bevy of beauties, Leo, and enjoy your night. You deserve it.”

“You’re not leaving yet, are you?”

She flashed me a huge smile. “Not a chance.”

Making my way through the gathering crowd, I shook a few hands along the way until I made eye contact with Bailey, who looked absolutely stunning in a Versace dress and Milano heels. Her hair was done in a French braid allowing her cheekbones and eyes to take center stage. She looked gorgeous in a classic little black dress. No one would believe that she was a prostitute by the way she was dressed or the manner in which she carried herself.

The same could be said of the other twenty or so women standing with her.

“Leo!”

In three steps, Bailey was to me, hugging me tightly.

“I can’t believe you came! And you brought all your friends.” Everyone in the gallery stopped to look at the live artwork standing at the door. No one would ever guess what these women did for a living. They looked like runway models.

“Of course we came,” Bailey said, her eyes sparkling with a touch of glitter. “We’ve been looking forward to it for weeks. And don’t worry, I told the girls no advertising. This is strictly pleasure. We came to support you. After all, fair is fair. You bikers support us. *Quid pro quo*.”

Marla came out of nowhere. “What a wonderful surprise,” she said, introducing herself as the gallery manager. “We would love it if you and the girls could sign your lithographs.”

I smiled and shook my head. My gallery was successful in part because Marla always had one eye on the money. So when she walked our gaggle of gorgeous girls over to where their portraits hung, she was already calculating the potential income from signed lithos.

“These portraits are...” Bailey shook her head, tears in her eyes. “You outdid yourself, Leo. These are—”

"I had beautiful subjects, Bailey. Hell, I could have painted these blind."

"These are going to really class up the place. Thank you so much."

"She painted my dog!"

"Look at me by the pond."

"I'm a fairy!"

"Look at the detail!"

Bailey leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. "You are wonderful," she whispered. "I am so glad we came."

Marla shooed her to the signing area, leaving me standing in front of portraits I was very proud of. The women's painted eyes looked out over the gallery, some blue, some brown, some green, all beautiful.

More people filed into the gallery and Marla gave me two thumbs up. The show was going to be an awesome success. I gave her a little finger wave. When her eyes grew wide, I followed her gaze to the door. Filling the doorway so no light could get through was an enormous black man with no neck in a suit that looked painted on.

I made my way to the door where eight enormous Oakland Raiders slowly entered like they were walking into an unfamiliar cave. The rest of the room paused as they filed in. When the last one entered, Bailey walked up next to me. "Don't worry, Leo, we'll take care of those boys."

I quickly turned.

"Like I said; this is pleasure. We're just gonna ease them into the art scene here. They look only slightly uncomfortable."

"I appreciate it. Thanks." Waving Rodney over, I hugged his hard body. "I'm so happy you're here."

"Wouldn't have missed it." He looked around. "This is supercool. Oh man. Are these ours?"

I grinned. "Go on and enjoy yourself. There's plenty of good food and drink."

He looked at me and shook his head. "Actually, I came to see you. I never really got the chance to thank you for such a good time at the casino. It was a gas, and the painting...the painting is fantastic. My wife wants more."

"You didn't bring her?"

"Hell yeah I brought her. She came in before us. She's over there. She's a little shy about meeting you. Nats! Babe, over here!" He waved a short, dark-haired woman over. "Nat, this is Parker Lee. Parker, my wife, Natalie."

She shook my hand firmly. "It is such an honor to meet you. The picture you painted of the boys was just perfect. Thank you."

"Glad you liked it. Thank you for—"

I heard them before I saw them. The sound of a couple dozen custom Harleys pulling into our parking lot. There were so many of them, the gallery practically shook.

"What now?" Marla asked.

I shrugged. "No idea, really." I thought Tater and his gang had come to the gallery.

They had.

Only *they* arrived after the cadre of Hells Angels.

Can you say show-stopper?

As they filed in, each wearing their leather jacket and patch, the room grew quieter and quieter. With great aplomb, Marla floated over and snapped for the servers to give them champagne.

When Bruiser and Rip saw me, they brushed by her and strode over to crunch me in a bear hug.

"Saw your show in *The Chronicle* and decided to pay you a visit and see what the biker part of the title was all about."

Bruiser nodded. "Stoli went to art school in Berkeley, and he convinced the guys they needed a little culture." His eyes caught the group from the Bunny Ranch. "I had no clue so many beautiful women would be here. Those who didn't come are gonna regret it."

I grinned, waving to Tater who just walked in with half a dozen of his guys. "I'm so glad you and your guys did." Suddenly, the Angels were in the midst of the bunnies, several made a beeline to the Raiders, and a room that was once a still and quiet gallery was now a lively party.

"Mother, do you actually *know* all these people?" Chase

handed me champagne, but I declined. "Some, yeah, others by extension."

"How? I mean, aren't those women—"

"Yes."

"And those no-necks in suits. Aren't they—"

"Yep."

"And those bikers? You *know* Hells Angels?"

The tone in her voice made me laugh. "Right."

"And the Hispanic-looking guys?"

"Those are indigenous people, and yeah, I know them." Tater was trying to make his way over to me, but got side-tracked by a Raider.

"What on earth were you into this summer?"

"If I told you, I'd have to kill you." With that, I walked away, wanting to feel the vibrant energy of the gallery on my own. This gathering was extraordinary, if not altogether wild.

"Ms. Lee?"

Turning, I was surprised to find the twins. "Oh. Hi girls. Having fun?"

They nodded in unison.

"Great party."

"Love the photos." They looked at each other like they had something else to say.

I frowned. "What is it, girls?" Exchanging glances, and no doubt identical twin telepathy, one of them assumed the mantle of responsibility. "We just thought...you being such a cool grandmother and all...that you might want to know—"

"Spit it out, girls. We don't have all night."

"Jackson doesn't really want to be a photographer." She said those eight words with such finality I was stunned.

"Excuse me?"

She inhaled deeply. "She loves taking photos, but that isn't what she wants to do or be. We're afraid that now that you've done all this, she won't feel free to follow her dream."

They might as well have slapped me. "She doesn't *want* to be a photographer."

They both shook their heads.

"Then what *does* Jackson want to do?" I looked over at the

crowd gathered around her photographs. She'd done some beautiful work and they were getting a lot of play. She was the Belle of the Ball.

"She wants to be a colorist for comic books."

I'm sure my jaw dropped. Then, all of the clues I'd missed began pouring into my head; the constant companion of coloring books; the attention to color and shadowing; her website. Of course, that was what she wanted to do. She'd *always* been happiest coloring.

"She's applied at some smaller, independent comic book companies but she hasn't had any bites."

"Does she have a portfolio for that?"

They nodded again. "She won't show anyone that one because she doesn't want to get shot down. Please don't shoot her down."

Suddenly, I had a flashback of those very same words coming from my mouth to my mother when I told her I wanted to be an artist. If you want to be any kind of artist, poet, writer or musician, you will face so many naysayers and pragmatists who will, even without meaning to, take some of the wind from your sails. I would *not* do that to my granddaughter.

"I really appreciate you guys telling me. Don't you worry. I may have an ace up my sleeve for her yet."

Just as they walked away, I felt a pair of arms slide around my waist. The funny thing was, as I turned in her embrace, she wasn't who I thought she'd be.

"Hi lover." It was Tricia. "Miss me?"

My eyes instantly left hers and combed the gallery for the woman I had wanted it to be.

And that was my epiphany, my aha moment.

As I heard the wise Indian woman, Norris's, voice in my head that who I was looking for was right under my nose, I *knew* who she meant, and it wasn't Tricia.

"Tricia. Thank you so much for coming!" I took a step back and removed her arms from my waist. She bridged the gap.

"I've missed you, Leo. I think about you every day, wondering if I should call or visit. I wanted the chance to tell you that I want something special with you." She reached for

my collar and ran her fingers over it. I edged back a little more. She followed. "You can tell me you miss me, Leo, really."

I blinked, feeling the heat in the room. I didn't want this right now...or ever...she wasn't the one. The one I had met, the one who understood me and supported me...

Before I could say another word, Wizard threaded her arm through mine and leaned into me. It felt like she had been doing that my whole life. "Honey, there's a large Samoan man over there dying to talk to you. You really do need to mingle now."

Looking down into her brown eyes, I smiled softly, gratefully, before looking back up at Tricia's embarrassed expression. It was Band-Aid time and I could hear it ripping.

"Oh. I'm sorry...I guess...I should let you go."

I nodded, but it was Wizard who replied, "Yes you should, hon. Completely," before walking me away from Tricia.

"Thank you," I said, realizing her arm was still threaded tightly through mine.

"I watched her make a beeline to you, and you didn't appear thrilled to see her, so I figured I'd better have your back...partner." She looked at me and something passed between us; something warm, like whiskey heat, spreading to my limbs.

"It means a lot to me that you're here."

"She's not the only one who's missed you. I've missed you, too, Leo. I would have come through fire and brimstone to be here on your special night."

Tilting my head, I smiled. "Do you have any plans after this?"

A big grin broke out across her face. "I thought you'd never ask. You do what you do best, and I'll see you when it's over."

"I'd like that. I'd like that a lot."

When Wizard left me, I stood back and surveyed the crowd. Like the title of my show, it was full of bikers, babes, backs and badges, and an incredible array of people Lucky picked up along the way. Everyone mingled as if they'd been old friends, brought together by a love of art, or perhaps of me...maybe it was a little of both.

"I don't know what the hell you did all summer, Park, but clearly, you made an impression everywhere you went."

"It wasn't me, Mar, it was Lucky."

"You do realize we're selling like never before, right? Those scary-ass Hells Angels are dropping some serious coin, but it's nothing compared to those football players. That's not to mention the dozen or so commissions you've garnered. All-in-all, Parker Lee, I'd say your summer was a successful one."

I looked over at Wizard, who was laughing with three Angels, a bunny and a Raider. "In more ways than one, my friend."

"Well, go mingle. You can have the girl aft—"

"Speech!"

"Yeah! Speech!"

Marla and I looked at each other. "I think they mean you." Pushing me to a small platform we used for a couple of Jackson's photos, I stood on it as the crowd gathered near. This wasn't my usual show protocol, but I figured most of these kind people had come from another state to support the show, and the least I could do was to speak to them and thank them for taking the time out of their lives to support me and my art.

As I looked out over the crowd, I saw the oddest mix of people I'd ever had in a gallery show; yet, there they were, supporting someone they'd met along the Harley trail.

It was a wonderful thing.

"First of all, I want to thank all of you for coming. Normally, we get locals to these gigs, but tonight...tonight is special. It's special because most of you met me when I was on my Harley, Lucky." Heads nodded, faces grinned. "Lucky brought me into your lives, but you allowed me to paint my perception of those lives and, without great subjects, there can be no great art, and you all were amazing subjects. You know, it's funny. When I bought Lucky, I'd lost my mojo. My muse had fled. I was artistically bankrupt. What I realize now is that I wasn't artistically bankrupt, I just needed to stop painting for a while and live more...I needed to find and meet each one of you.

"Lucky revved more life into mine and you all gave me something beautiful to paint. So, thank you for coming, for being my friends, for being interesting and wonderful and...for

being here in my life.” As I stepped off the platform to a rousing round of applause, I saw three men in suits I’d missed earlier.

They were cops.

I also saw a spectacularly dressed pregnant woman and her Armani-clad husband, both of whom made eye contact with me and waved.

The person who helped me off the platform was the guy who’d saved my ass twice before: Tater.

Throwing my arms around his huge neck, I pulled him to me before giving him a big kiss on his warm cheek. “Thank you,” I whispered, my eyes filling with tears.

Still holding me off the ground, he whispered back, “You’re one of us, Parker Lee. When you first fired up that bike, you joined a community that will always be here for you. Me, especially.”

When he put me down, I took both his large mitts in mine. “You’ve been a wonderful presence in my life this summer. Don’t go away.”

“Me? I’m like dog doo on your shoe, baby. Besides, we’ve got a bit of planning to do.”

“Planning?”

“For Sturgis, next year.” Reaching into his vest, he pulled out a picture of a feather. “We want you to paint a feather on every bike in the club. One feather for every Sturgis ride a bike has made.”

“But Tater, I don’t paint bikes.”

“You do now.” Handing me the feather, he tilted his head to one side. “I mean, how hard can it be?”

I looked at the feather and back to him. “Sturgis, huh?”

He nodded. “Sturgis.”

As the show turned into a party, I watched as Marla, Jackson and Chase wrapped up paintings to go. The bunnies all took theirs with them. Apparently, the owner of the ranch hired a tour bus to bring both the girls and their portraits back. One by one, sold signs were placed near each painting and photograph until very few of my pieces went unsold. I was astounded not only by the show of support, but by the sheer magnanimity of all those who had come.

The three cops cornered me when I finished chatting with Natalie and the other Raider wives about pieces they wanted.

"Great party," one said, reaching into his suit pocket and withdrawing an envelope. "If I'd have known art shows were so fun, I'd come to more."

"Uh...they aren't normally like this."

They all grinned. "We know. Hells Angels and cops partying together isn't something anyone would ever believe."

"Then let's not tell them."

"Too late. See that woman over there?"

I looked over and saw one of the city's top art critics chatting up two Raiders.

"She interviewed us. Said she's never seen anything like this."

"Truth to tell, neither have I."

When he handed me the envelope, I opened it. Inside were three letters, all handwritten in little kid printing. My heart skipped as I looked away from the scrawled writing—the emotions almost too much to bear.

"The kids wanted us to thank you for the donation to their college fund. Their mothers cried when we told them about your generosity...about what all of the bikers did for their families."

I would have read the letters right there, but was afraid I wouldn't make it through them without bawling. "It was my pleasure, really."

And it was. All of it. Everything that happened this summer had enhanced my life; but the greatest part of all of this wasn't my new friends or my renewed passion for painting, it was my relationship with Jacks. If I could water that relationship to make it grow then surely I could the others in my life.

When I finally caught up to her, I pulled her away from the crowd and into the back room.

"Great show, Gramms! And thank you so so much for including my photos. They look awesome! Chase and Chuck actually told me they were proud of me!"

"Well they should be." I took her arm and pulled her aside. "Jacks, why didn't you tell me you wanted to work in the comic book industry?"

She looked away, shaking her head. "Damn those twins. I told them to keep their mouths shut about it."

"Why?"

She looked away. "I thought you'd think it stupid and juvenile. I mean, come on. How do you tell your family you want to color for a living? Can't you just hear Chase if she heard *that* one?"

"Jacks, what do you think it is I do for a living?" I stared at her as she considered her answer. "I'm not living your life. As for Chase, she isn't living your life, either. It's time both of you recognized that."

"Even if I don't give a shit what she thought, it's not easy breaking into that industry."

"No. You're right. It's really hard unless you know someone." I smiled at her. "And, luckily for you, I do."

The look on her face was a mixture of hope and amazement. "You do?"

I nodded. "Of course I do. I'll call him in the morning and see if we can set up an interview. You'll need—"

She squealed and threw her arms around my neck. "Are you kidding me? Gramms, you're the best! The best of the best!"

"Whoa. Wait a sec." Pulling away, I looked intently into her eyes. "You'll have to apprentice under someone first. You'll also need to scan your portfolio so he can see your work." She was nodding, but there was no one home; her excitement had gotten the best of her. "We'll discuss what you need in the morning. Run along and enjoy the rest of your show."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" She made that high-pitched teenage girl sound before bolting from the room.

I followed her, and when I did, I saw Wizard talking to Tricia. It didn't look like anything other than a polite conversation, but when Wizard finally stopped talking, Tricia looked over at me, nodded once, and then left.

"What was that about?" I asked.

She shrugged. "She wanted to know the score."

"Oh?"

Wizard shook her head, a slow grin forming on her lips. "I told her the truth: Wizard, one; stalker, zero."

We both laughed, and suddenly I wanted the show to be over. I wanted nothing more than to sit down with her and enjoy a nice bottle of wine and conversation. I wanted to revisit that feeling still snuggled safely within my chest.

“Hope you don’t mind, but it pissed me off she was so territorial...so...presumptive.”

I reached out and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “Not at all. Looks like she finally got the hint.”

Wizard stood on tiptoe, kissed my cheek and whispered, “Go mingle, Leo. After the show, you’re all mine.”

When she walked away, the feeling that had been sitting in my chest since the night at the craps table became very clear and very warm, and I knew that something wonderful was about to happen in my life beyond painting, beyond these wonderfully diverse characters. And as I watched the various interactions of a group of people who could never have imagined themselves enjoying the same party, I felt blessed. Three months ago, I was lost. I couldn’t paint, I couldn’t dream, I couldn’t get out of my own way. The moment I sat on Lucky, everything changed.

Everything.

And little did I know that Lucky would not only bring me amazing adventures starring most of these people...she also managed to bring me back to myself. She showed me that life is about taking roads you’ve never been on and helping people because you can. It’s about exploration and a willingness to go to unfamiliar places and meet new people very different from yourself. Lucky opened up the throttle and took me to a world I couldn’t imagine, and in doing so, changed my life.

I was, indeed, lucky, and I would never be the same.

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