

The warm September sun's glare bounced off El Gallo's flaming orange hood and directly into Lucy's eyes. Squinting, she fumbled with the muscle car's visor and wished she hadn't lost her sunglasses. She quickly considered where she'd last seen her dark shades.

*Peaches' dressing room before the whole Santa fiasco.*

Lucy groaned, wishing away the memory. She patted the burn on her calf through her cargo pants.

*Seems to be healing pretty fast.*

Not long after crossing the Golden Gate Bridge, they had hit Marin's Panoramic Highway. Xochi had white-knuckled it around blind curves, past sheer drop-offs, and through miles of what she had cursed as "the rollercoaster from hell." She hadn't even bothered to turn on the radio.

"Our father who art in heaven," Xochi prayed out loud, "please don't let me drop seven hundred feet to my death."

Lucy stared longingly at the expansive redwood-filled canyons. In the far distance, Northern California alpine ranges jutted out, looking pristine and untouched since the beginning of time.

"How fun would it be to go hiking in those hills? Poppy and Chasselas would so be down with that," Lucy murmured.

"Who? What?" Xochi smacked on her bubble gum in a panic.

"Just daydreaming about taking my dogs for a hike."

"You and your pinche perros." Xochitl's voice rose. "I'm sure Granny's got all the furry four-foots you could ask for. A whole ranch full of them."

"I guess." Lucy sighed a little.

*But her dogs are not my dogs.*

"Where's the turn? Where's the turn? Where's the turn?" Xochitl chanted. "Granny's directions said something about passing Mountain Home Inn. Stay on Gravity Car Road. Pass Zig Zag Trail."

"You sure?" Lucy asked.

"No, I'm not sure. This whole fucking place is a zigzag."

"I haven't even seen a road sign in ages." Lucy glanced from side to side. The road they traveled on was paved but in desperate need of repair. They'd passed abandoned house after abandoned house.

*Guess people don't want to live near the woods with all the Werebeasts running around.*

"There aren't any pinche signs," Xochi huffed. "Granny said the *geniuses* around Broglie are pretty reclusive. It's all unmarked roads. They voted."

"And they decided not to have road signs and markers?"

"Uh-huh."

"Can they do that?"

"Apparently," Xochi said and flung both hands in the air. "Oh, shit!" She immediately slammed them back on the wheel, barely keeping El Gallo from careening off the sheer embankment.

Lucy's eyes wandered over the tips of the evergreens that blanketed the mountain and stretched for miles on either side of the crumbling road.

"Just weird how close this is to The City," Lucy said, "and yet—"

"It's totally secluded," Xochi finished her sentence. "Granny said the town itself is only one street with a couple of shops and a post office."

"Oh...No restaurants?" Lucy's stomach had started rumbling miles ago.

"She said there was one diner between her ranch and the town." Xochi leaned forward, the tip of her nose nearly touching the glass. "But I'm sure she'll feed us. She seems like the feeding type."

"I hope so." Lucy spotted a fork in the road ahead. "Is that the hotel?"

A ramshackle wooden lodge sat on the edge of the mountain, overlooking the scenic view. Its many large windows were broken, shattered glass sparkling on the ground. *Caution! Werebeasts!* had been spray-painted in red on the inn's sky blue sign.

They drove by slowly.

"The directions say the dirt road is just past an apple grove." Xochi frowned.

"How do you have an apple grove on a mountain side?" Lucy wondered.

"Ask me if I care!"

They rode on in silence; each lost in thought.

"What are those?" Xochi said after several miles. "I can't tell from here."

"Apples," Lucy said. "Nice and pink too. Ready to be picked."

Xochi arched a quizzical eyebrow at Lucy and stared for a moment. "Whatever." Her stomach let loose a huge growl, and she seemed to reconsider. "Maybe Granny will make us some apple pie."

Xochitl turned the car down a long, narrow road lined not only with apple but also fig, peach and pomegranate trees, all heavy with fruit.

"Mature trees. Looks like they've been here a while." Lucy noted the thick trunks and gnarled branches. She rolled down the passenger window. "Just fill your lungs with that. Smells like fall. Ripe fruit, green fields, the redwoods—"

"Dog piss," Xochitl said mercilessly.

"Sure, there's a whiff of that too," Lucy agreed. "It's a dog kennel. Unless you constantly bleach, it's going to have a doggy odor."

"So, your Emyrean ranch smells like piss?" Xochi said and popped a pink bubble with her gum. "Awesome!"

"Hell, no!" Lucy yelled. "Mama made me scrub every inch of every kennel every morning. I must have washed a million dog blankets." She thought back to the never-ending banging of the washer and dryer. "'Cause if you don't...It's just mud and piss and drool and vomit and fleas and ticks and diarrhea—"

"¡Hijole! Enough already."

"Mama was a clean freak. I swear, you'd never know it was a dog ranch," Lucy said, her voice getting thin. "That was just Mama."

"So, Mama was awesome and clean. Is Hanna like that too, or is she a sloppy little piglet like you?" Xochi pointed to Lucy's empty twenty-ounce to-go cup on the floor.

Lucy smiled sheepishly and rolled the cup under the seat with her foot.

Xochi exhaled tragically.

"Hanna hired a couple of ladies to help keep the place up," Lucy said, undeterred. "I can't see Hanna scrubbing Were cages on her hands and knees, now that the ranch is—"

"Hanna's Rescue and Rehabilitation," Xochi grumped.

They passed two old barns situated perpendicular to each other. The more square of the two had a fenced corral attached.

"Does Granny have horses?" Xochitl slowed the Toronado. Lucy and Xochi both studied the layout.

"Could, I suppose," Lucy said. "But I think that enclosure is for training dogs. Look at the wire between the boards."

"Seems elaborate."

"Not unusual on a farm, but mostly it's used for the back forty. To keep animals out... Foxes, coyotes—"

"Wolves?"

"Not in California since the early 20s, you know." Lucy tried to remember Mama's talk about wolf conservation. Mama had become very engaged in the effort after befriending a few UC Davis grad students and helping them with a coyote study. "I guess there used to be wolves all up and down California. Wolves show up all over native tribal art, in the language, in the myths. To the native people where I grew up, the wolf was sacred. But with all the building..." She shrugged. "Hunters took out the prey that the wolves lived on. And then there were bounty laws put in place to eradicate wolves and coyotes."

"Sounds like a little bit of history repeating," Xochi said.

They pulled up to the main house shortly after they'd passed the barns and the enclosure. Healthy orange trees, the fruit not yet in season, dotted the side of the road and shielded the house from the barns.

"Pretty house." Xochi rolled her window down too. "Logs and stone work. Look at those giant windows. Granny must have great views."

"Hmm," Lucy considered. "Large windows plus dog paws equal slimy dog prints on glass."

"You gotta learn to live a little, chica," Xochi said while steering the Toronado around the circular driveway. "Looks clean from here. And that's the nicest carport I've ever seen."

"Like a little wood cabin with the walls taken out," Lucy agreed. "And river rock pillars."

Xochi tilted her head, "Hey...What's with the Harley?"

Half hidden in the shade of the carport, a matte black chopper perched alongside the house.

Xochi chuckled. "I am getting the weirdest picture of Granny on a Harley with a giant dog on the back, wearing one of those black German army helmets."

Curious, Lucy studied the biker graphic on the motorcycle's tank. "What about that wolf skull and flaming chain?"

"Local club?"

Lucy's gaze flew up to the porch. Three white plastic outdoor chairs sat pristinely arranged near a little white plastic table. A coffee can had been positioned conveniently next to one of the chairs.

Lucy's nostrils flared at the acrid stink of cold cigarette butts. "Granny smokes? At her age?"

"What?" Xochi grabbed the gold rooster key chain and opened the car door.

"Coffee can on the porch." Lucy scrambled out the passenger side. Her legs felt stiff, and her ankles ached.

"Cop," Xochi teased. "You can take the girl out of the uniform, but—"

"Front door's slightly ajar too," Lucy said in a low whisper and doubled back to grab her Beretta from the glove box.

"Hold up," Xochi said under her breath. She popped the trunk and swung her shotgun into the air.

A short gasp sounded in Lucy's ear. She shot Xochi a this-doesn't-sound-good look, pointed directly at her and then indicated the front door.

Xochitl nodded and edged up the stairs, quietly but quickly.

A series of urgent screams resonated from around the side of the house.

Lucy crept around the front, keeping below the line of the porch and the rock foundation skirt. Rapid splashing of water followed the screams. Sudden pained groans followed the splashing and a raspy murmur, "That's good. Just like that."

Lucy stuck her head around the corner.

A redwood deck ran the length of the house, a narrow lap pool cut neatly into the center. Two figures grappled in the rectangular hot tub on the far side of the pool. A square-shouldered man with longish blond hair held someone under the water. The smaller person was mostly blocked, but Lucy caught the flash of a thin wrist and black lacquered nails grasping on to the side of the hot tub.

"Break it up!" Lucy hollered — Beretta trained on the assailant.

"Luce!" Xochi dashed onto the deck from the side sliding door. Gun down, she carried a pair of jeans and a white T-shirt in one hand.

*What?*

The man straightened up immediately. "Hey!" he yelled at Xochi.

"It's not—"