



BOOK 1: CALIFORNIA BLEND SUMMER VACATION

THE HEART'S JOURNEY HOME

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Lo, there do I see my father.

Lo, there do I see my mother,
and my sisters, and my brothers.

Lo, there do I see the line of my people,
Back to the beginning!

Lo, they do call to me.

They bid me take my place among them,

In the halls of Valhalla!

Where the brave may live forever!

— The Viking Prayer.

Chapter

One

“I gotta go,” Tori said.

“I was thinking that for the first day of summer vacation maybe we could do something as a family,” Rachael faintly smiled. “When you dad wakes up...”

“Dad got home late and won’t be waking up until 4, by then it’ll almost be time for the bar-b-que so I’ll see you guys anyway.” Tori was talking and backing out of the kitchen.

“Then maybe you and I...” Rachael started but Tori cut her off.

“Look, you’re my dad’s girlfriend not my mother, we don’t have to hang. I gotta jet. I’m meeting AJ at Kalea’s.” And with that Tori bounded out of the kitchen and ran towards the front door.

Rachael sighed shaking her head. “How long?” she whispered.

After a whirl-wind courtship Rachael Cleary moved in with the handsome and debonair Fletcher Edmond Logan, a renowned archeologist who made his millions searching for and finding underwater treasure. He was young, tall, tanned and handsome - an

energetic wanderer. When they met in Florence Italy Rachael was doing advanced studies; studying clay sculpturing at The AccademiaEuropea di Frene. It was her last year of college and she was doing it abroad. Fletcher was co-sponsoring a dig at the PoggioColla site which was approximately 20 miles away from her campus.

The two were introduced through a mutual friend and by summer's end they had decided to move in together. Yet there was a hitch – Fletcher had an eight year old daughter. His wife had died a little over a year before from breast cancer and Tori was the sole product of this union – between a half-blooded Sioux mother and a British Norwegian father.

Tori was as feral as a Scottish Wildcat and appeared to have inherited the warrior traits from both her Viking and Lakota heritages. She would frequently be found running around barefoot, swinging from trees or any other high object she could find. She was as stubborn as a billy goat and whenever she wanted to dismiss an adult or any authority for that matter, she would suddenly stop speaking in English and switch over to responding in any one of the several languages she had learned during her globe-trotting with her father from one country to the next. From her mother's Sioux side she had the longest, thickestblack hair which was always hanging free and trailing unkempt behind her like a mad dark wave.

Rachael was a tender 24 years of age when she first met Fletcher, a man who despite his youthful appearance was 11 years her senior. Despite his wild half-breed daughter Rachael found herself hopelessly smitten with the man. She especially loved his hazel eyes which had the ability to be sparking, passionate, and fiery one minute then in an

instant change to a cool look with stony indifference, but with her they were always warm and comical. Affectionate, Rachael thought. Those eyes that had formally brimmed with sparkling passion had become, over the nine years they'd been together, affectionate. When had this occurred?

Tori jumped on her favorite mode of transportation, a 1950 MV Agusta CSL scooter and powered down the drive to the high gated fence. She pressed a button on a sterling silver gray pad containing controls that opened the gate to their home enabling her to quickly roar through it.

“If I miss this...” Tori muttered to herself as she sped down the road to Kalea’s house.

If Fin was there to pick her up the gate would already be open. If not, she’d have to ring the bell to get buzzed in. Almost there she saw that the gate was in fact open. *Excellent*, she thought smiling. She could zoom right in without slowing down.

I could really use a belt. Fin thought as he jumped from the porch, bounding over the five steps. Running down the graveled drive at break-neck speed he cursed the fact he was wearing tennis shoes - that along with the baggy, beltless pants was hemming up his stride.

The sound of shrieks and a male voice yelling at him in a foreign language didn’t help the matter. Fin tripped over his own size 12 feet, rolled and got up running. After

gathering his wits about him he heard a muffled roar zoom past him followed by a streak of green. He was unsure of what it was but he was too scared to try to figure it out – he was running now – minus the jeans and a tennis shoe.

Fin all but dove into his Camaro thankful he'd left the keys in the ignition and not in his pants pocket. He turned the key and sped down the drive, kicking dirt and gravel in his wake. In his rear-view mirror he could see the crazy man chasing him with the longest, sharpest sword he'd ever seen.

Making it to the end of the drive, Fin did a complete donut, spun the vehicle around in the right direction and then tore off down the street. Tori had grabbed his errant shoe and AJ leaned down to scoop up the jeans, then the two of them tore down the drive after Fin.

Kale Kinimaka stomped angrily up the drive to the house. "You get in the house!" he yelled as his daughter Kalea was climbing onto her own scooter, a 1960s era Vespa 90SS, refurbished in a shiny hot pink.

"Daddy! We were just going to the Observatory," she whined.

"In the house!" he ordered. Kalea shoved the scooter to the side and stomped past her mother.

"I hope you realize you're hampering the exploration of knowledge!" she cried over her shoulder. Disappearing down the hall, a door slammed in the distance.

"Oh Kale," Pualani shook her head.

“Surely you’re kidding me Loni,” Kale waved the sword toward the door. “Some boy comes to pick up my daughter and his pants are halfway down his butt?! Then he’s driving my only child away in some car and he’s already half out of his clothes! At the door! And how old is he anyway!” Kale stomped and sputtered, swearing in Hawaiian.

“Will you put that thing away before you cut yourself?” Pualani said. Kale looked at the exquisite sword forgetting it was in his hand. The Katana had been given to him by his father who received it from his father before him, and so on all the way back to the original owner – a Japanese Samurai. The long slightly curved sword had long been regarded by the Kinimaka family as a symbol of strength and peace. It was said to bring protection to the home of its owner and now this weapon of warriors hung above the mantle over the fireplace in the living room.

Kale placed the sword back in the cast iron dragon fixtures attached to the stone hearth. Protection and Peace. It had brought little peace to him and Pualani, he thought. Being raised Catholic neither of them believed in divorce yet staying together was hurting their daughter Kalea. The arguing, shouting, the icy stares and deafening silence had caused their brilliant daughter’s grades to plummet. She began having nightmares and stopped eating. Her already slim frame had nose-dived to an unhealthy 90 pounds before the two of them decided that for the sake of their daughter they could no longer share the same home. It was agreed that Pualani and Kalea would live in the home while Kale moved out to live with his younger brother Makani at the family-owned winery. Kalea was 11 at the time. This had been their way for the past three years and it seemed to be working.

Kalea gained back the lost weight and was healthy. She was excelling in school and was happy and laughing again. Though Kale and Pualani were no longer living under the same roof, Kale was often in the home and Kalea would spend the weekends visiting the winery.

“My crazy father.” she lamented before allowing the thought to flutter away. Kalea knew she really did have the best of both worlds. She’d known kids whose parents divorced and had to move out of their home and away from their school and friends. She couldn’t bear the thought of leaving her home. Her grandpa Takehiro had designed their house bringing together both their Hawaiian and Japanese heritages. Although she hated leaving Hawaii, the new house more than made up for it. Yes, her dad could be a stuck-in-ancient times ogre, but he meant well and she knew he loved her.

Rolling over on her back Kalea fished her cell phone from her pocket and dialed her best friend and big sister Tori.

Tori and AJ were speeding behind Fin and his Camaro. Fin slowed enough to allow the main gates of the luxurious subdivision to open then he peeled out into the street. The guard on duty waved as they sped by. Then he leaned out the doorway of the stone-mason guardhouse a bit. He could swear Tori was waving a giant tennis shoe in the air while AJ was waving a pair of jeans. They were whooping and yelling appearing to be in hot pursuit of the Camaro.

“This is going to be a long summer,” he muttered as he closed the gate.

Fin sped down the street and didn't stop until he reached “The Main,” what most people called Hacienda Drive. It was right off Old Stone Road, the only road leading in and out of Vigne Valley Crest, an international gated community in an affluent section of Napa.

Vigne (veen-ya) was labeled ‘International’ because the 20 homes built on a flat 45 acre mesa each had their own distinctive flair. The homes were a designer’s cornucopia of Ultra-Modern, Italian, European and Japanese architecture. Each home sat on a two acre plot, except for Tori’s home which was on three acres, and each had its own gated drive.

Tori and AJ caught up with Fin at Vin de Garde Place, a high end strip mall right on The Main.

Fin was breathing so hard you would’ve thought he ran all the way from Kalea’s to the parking lot on the Jumba Juice end of the strip. Tori and AJ pulled their scooters alongside the haphazardly parked vehicle.

Tori tossed the tennis shoe in the back of the Camaro and disappeared inside Jumba’s before returning a few minutes later with three Crisp Apple energy drinks. Fin was standing outside the car, yelling and gesturing wildly, reenacting the whole scene in his boxers. His long blond streaked hair was flying all over the place, the peach fuzz of a

mustache and sparse facial hair making him look younger. The sight of him standing there near hysterics in bright orange boxers doubled Tori over with laughter.

“What the heck was that about! Her old man is nuts!”

“He’s kinda over-protective,” AJ said.

“Over-protective?” Fin said still gasping for air.

Tori came up beside them and passed around the drinks. Fin popped the top and threw the can back. He practically drained the contents in two swigs. He let out a loud belch, took two deep breaths and seemed to settle down. Finishing the can he tossed it in the back of the Camaro, next to his jeans.

“That’s what I get for diggin’ on a brainiac.” Tori and AJ both chuckled as they continued drinking. Fin walked to the rear of the Camaro, popped the trunk and leaned over, fishing around the mess of clothes and swim gear looking for a pair of shorts.

“I wore pants man,” he said throwing up his hands. “She’s sweet and all but her old man is loony. Too much drama.” And just that quickly he switched gears. “I’m headin’ over to Jake’s, what about y’all?”

Jake’s Big Surf Water Park Mania was a full acre of manic fun – slides, mega slides and more slides. The draw for Fin was the boogie boarding.

“We’ll take a pass man,” AJ said. “Maybe we’ll catch you later in the week.”

“Chow brudda.” He and AJ slapped hands into a shake and bumped chests. “Chow dudette.” Tori nodded and waved. Fin jumped into the car, backed out and was gone.

“Was that crazed or what?” Tori smiled.

“Totally nuts.” AJ laughed. “That dude ran clear out of his pants and one shoe.”

They both laughed.

“And I almost missed it.” Tori was serious now.

“What happened?”

“Got hung up with Rachael. The first day of summer vacation and she’s trying to play the mother bit. ‘Why don’t we do something as a family?’” Tori mocked.

“Well she is sorta like your mother,” AJ said. Tori gave him a look of complete and total disbelief. “I’m sayin’ sortakinda.” he explained.

“You’re on drugs, sortakinda nothing. Wachiwi Eaglewolf is my mom and will always be my one and only mom.”

“Hey I know, but who’s to say Rachael can’t be like a step-mom or something?”

“I’m sayin’ that’s who’s sayin’. Look, your whole reality’s different because you never knew your real parents. Biological parents,” Tori was quick to add before AJ went off.

“All you know is the Sarge and your mom. These people showed up at some kid orphan home and picked you. Rachel didn’t pick me – she picked my dad so let’s not get it twisted. I’m the luggage that was in the trunk.” She turned and threw the empty can with laser force toward a nearby trash can. It hit the side and ricocheted in.

“Luggage in the trunk” was a term she’d used more than once with AJ. It was the best way she could think of to explain how she felt about her position in the whole “living together” thing.

Nobody asked her how she felt about it. One minute it was just her and her dad, and the next thing she knew they were flying home with a stranger. Rachael was as white as could be. Short unruly red hair that looked closer to orange half the time and lily white freckled skin. She burned if you stared at her too long.

Tori felt she didn’t look like anyone in this little family unit. Her eyes, neither favoring her mother or dad, were a light brown that seemed to have shiny flecks in them. Being part Sioux her skin was a natural reddish smooth tan.

Tori tolerated Rachael and it had taken nearly six years to even get there. Prior to that Tori had previously lived in open hostility to the woman who dared try to replace her mom in her dad’s heart and in her life. All 5’8 of her was pacing back and forth in front of AJ without looking up at him. She was caught up in some thought powered by her previous statement.

“Look, I know I’m not the Sarge and Fran’s real-life blood kid,” AJ said.

“Wait, I…” AJ waved her off.

“But I am their real life ‘they love me’ kid. And though I don’t look like either of them they’re my parents. I’m a part of them because I want to be – and they’re a part of me because they want this, and that’s why it works. Rachael wants it to work with the

two of you and before you start, I think it stopped being just about her and your dad years ago. I think she genuinely likes you and cares about you.”

Tori looked at him as if he were crazy.

“And I bet you believe everything you’re saying,”she said. He laughed.

“Just keep believing Toto, we’ll make it to that fairytale land one day.” She climbed onto the scooter and slid the half helmet onto her head. AJ climbed onhis scooter and snapped the WWII German-styled helmet onto his head. Right then Tori’s cell rang.

“It’s Kalea. Hey Kiki.” Tori said into the phone. “He’s fine, he just had the crap scared out of him. Don’t want to be the one to break it to you squirt, but I think the relationship is over before it began. Yeah, we’re on our way. Chow mein.”

She slid the iPhone into the inside pocket of the one of many Indian vests she owned. She wore the buckskin vest over a plain white t-shirt and this would be her signature look for the remainder of the summer. Both she and AJ slid a pair of Maui Jim Stingray sunglasses on and pulled out of the lot and onto the street.

Tori’s dad presented her with her first car on her 17th birthday, some 2 months ago. She’d taken the flaming red BMW convertible around the block for a spin, much to her dad’s glee and she’s barely driven it since. The truth was she preferred her scooter for tooling around the neighborhood. As for AJ, he was riding his personal favorite – the Sachs MadAss 125, a German scooter that looked like a sun-yellow motorcycle. AJ had it modified by raising the overall height 6 inches to better accommodate his 6’1 frame

and to take some of the bend out of his prosthetic leg. When he wasn't on the scooter he was driving his baby, a 1999 Cadillac DeVille convertible.

AJ had seen the car featured on a car show when he was just eight years old. That was the year he almost died. He had osteosarcoma; a type of bone cancer. After the cancer spread to the nerves and blood vessels in his leg it was amputated to save his life. He carried on so about the car that his dad searched high and low until he found one. He made a project out of restoring it, and him and his dad, and eventually Tori, spent years putting life back into that old wasted heap. Whenever things got bad and the pain worsened AJ would go out into the garage and work on the car. Putting life into that old wreck saved AJ as much as all the different medications he was taking. The car was now a beautiful well cared for classic.

Tori and AJ sat outside while Tori texted Kalea, querying if it was really safe to come in. At that moment the door flung open and Kale Kinimaka was standing there.

“Well don't just sit out there like a couple of bums, get in here.”

Kale turned and walked away. At 5'9 he looked like he'd just stepped out of a martial arts movie. Slim and buffed he had black hair and black eyes. A mustache and a thin beard lined his chin. He had 101 scowls and frowns each scarier than the previous one, yet he was fiercely loyal, protective and loving.

Tori and AJ climbed off their scooters and followed him into the house.

“Hey squirt,” Tori smiled, she and Kalea hugged.

“No harm no foul kid,” AJ said.

“And that’s a totally meaningless guy phrase,” Tori said, following Kalea as she headed toward her bedroom.

“Do you really think he’s not coming back?” Kalea asked. Tori glanced over at AJ, waiting to see if he’d speak up. AJ shifted in the loveseat, propping his leg over the sofa’s arm, pretending not to be paying attention.

“I wouldn’t hold out much hope,” Tori finally answered. “He thinks your pop’s a case.”

“He is a case!” Kalea pouted.

“Well at least this one got all the way up to the porch,” AJ said. “He was practically in the house.”

“And then he was running down the drive in his boxers wearing one shoe,” Tori smiled. AJ cracked a smile and then they were all laughing.

“I thought he was gonna ram the gate trying to get out,” AJ laughed.

“I heard mama on the phone telling Buster to open the gate to let him out,” Kalea said. The guard’s name wasn’t Buster, it was actually something quite normal but Tori started calling him Buster for some reason and it stuck.

“Look Kiki, your pops is your pops,” Tori said. “He’s not gonna like any guy coming around here.”

“Especially one with a car,” AJ piped in.

“And keep in mind you’re only 14,” Tori said.

“Kiki, your pops has been weirded-out ever since you started at the Academy. Whoever heard of an 11 year old kid starting high school while everybody else in your class is 14-15?”

“Kid, you’re lucky we talked to you.” AJ shared.

“But you were so cute in your big glasses and little cherub face,” Tori teased.

“And remember how she wouldn’t shut up about outer space,” AJ said. “NASA, NASA, NASA.” AJ and Tori laughed. “If you were a guy you would’ve definitely gotten stuffed in a locker.”

Kalea joined in the laughter. She remembered her first scary days at Shasta Vista Academy. Even the freshmen looked like grown adults to her. Everything was dauntingly over the top – home room, lunch, even gym. Any class that didn’t meld into academics the second after the bell rung was problematic for her and the dead air seemed to turn all eyes and attention to her by default. Curious stares, whispers, even giggles. Yet she met Tori and AJ on one of those awkward days. It was midday and she felt absolutely lost and different in the lunchroom. She remembered standing there with her tray of food and a loaded down backpack, looking for a lone table. As she was looking around she heard someone calling -

“Yo squirt.” It was Tori and she was sitting with AJ. “C’mere.”

Pensively Kalea approached and just stood there waiting for one or the other to say something to embarrass her.

“Well sit down,” Tori told her. AJ pushed out a chair with his foot and she did a double take when she saw that he was wearing a prosthetic leg that had a tattoo of a dolphin on a surf board riding a sea blue wave.

“That’s an Atlantic Humpback Dolphin,” Kalea said. “They’re indigenous to the coast of Africa and India all the way down to Australia. Their diet consists mostly of mullet and other fish and they’re considered an endangered species.”

Both Tori and AJ erupted in laughter and they’ve been fast friends ever since. Tori and AJ were both 15 at the time.

As for Tori and AJ, they met when they were both eight years old. Tori had been back in the U.S. for only a short time and was spending a long visit with her grandparents. Her grandfather, Chankoowashtay ‘Bo’ Eaglewolf, and her grandmother Louise had taken her to a Veteran’s Day celebration at the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center in Mashantucket, Connecticut. The celebration was given by the Mashantucket Indians to honor the contribution of Native American Soldiers to America’s various wars. Grandpa Bo was a full-blooded Sioux, and her grandmother Louise was African-American. The only child of this union was Tori’s mother.

Tori was intrigued by the fact that AJ was an eight year old kid with a fake leg. Her grandmother was horrified at the personal, intrusive questions Tori was asking and she put her foot down when Tori asked him to take his leg off so she could see his stump.

AJ’s dad laughed out loud, slapped him on the back and ordered,

“Take it off boy.” And he did. Grandma Louise gasped, threw up her hands and rushed off to find Bo while Tori was thoroughly impressed and entertained by the fact AJ could turn and balance and hop around on one leg. Off they ultimately went to explore the Museum with AJ toting his prosthetic across his shoulder. They’d been fast friends ever since.

“Listen Kiki,” Tori said a bit seriously. “Fin isn’t necessarily the swiftest boggie board on the rack you know.”

“I know, but he liked the observatory just like me,” Kalea said.

“He’s a knuckle-head who wants to be a surfer when he grows up,” AJ said. “I don’t think that’s the kind of guy your dad wants you hanging out with.”

“Well, Kiki will be working for NASA.” Tori offered. “If they get married she can bring home the fat paycheck and Fin can stay home with the kids.”

“Kids!” AJ shouted. “Little Fins? Now I’ve heard it all.” He pushed himself off the loveseat and stood. “I think I smell food.”

“Me too,” Tori said climbing out of the beanbag. They started toward the door. “Don’t forget your phone Kiki, we need to co-ordinate.”

Kalea’s dad had hotdogs, Italian sausage, burgers, shish kabobs and smoky cuts of salmon on the grill. Kalea’s mom was tossing together her famous pineapple Hawaiian salad, spooning the yogurt fruit concoction into the hollowed out pineapple shell halves.

They were on the outside patio deck, in the backyard which extended nearly the entire length of the house.

“Just in time to set the table,” Pualani said. “Set the table for nine.” As an older version of Kalea she was wearing a checkered apron that matched Kale’s. “Sweetie, put out a tablecloth,” Pualani added. Placing the tray of glasses down, Kalea grabbed a bright lime and yellow colored tablecloth from the buffet.

The trio had the outside table clothed and set by the time the parents were arriving. AJ’s parents – Stuart and FranReynolds arrived first, then Tori’s dad Fletcher and Rachael. Not only had the trio become best friends over the years, their parents had done the same.

Kalea, Tori and AJ had taken their usual places across from the deck on the other side of the outdoor pool. They were stretched out on thickly padded wicker chaise lounges.

The parents were gathered on the other side of the pool, in the spacious patio kitchen area. They were chatting amicably while placing bowls of food on the long marble table. Customarily the adults took the space at the head of the table and the teens sat at the end so each group could better indulge in their own conversations.

Pualani removed food from the outdoor refrigerator, while Fran filled a bowl with ice from the ice machine. Off to the side of the eating area were comfy plush chairs facing an outdoor fireplace. To the side and over a bit was a stone fire pit. The bamboo overhang was fitted with skylights and there were two 50 inch TVs, one closer to the kitchen area suspended from the ceiling and the other at the end of the patio.

“This summer is gonna be tore off the chain.” AJ smiled. “We’re only gonna be home, like what, seven weeks?”

“Whoo-hoo!” Kalea shouted. “I’m going to Space Camp!”

“Space Camp? I’m going to Pixar Camp!” AJ shouted out. “No comparison baby girl.”

“Are you guys on drugs?” Tori sat up swinging her feet onto the deck. “I’m going to FBI Agent Training Camp,” she stood, arms in the air. “Please don’t even try to pretend Space Camp or learning how to draw cartoons camp is even in the same league, surely everybody’s jesting.”

“You’re crazy!” Kalea yelled. “I’m going into outer space!”

Tori and AJ erupted in laughter.

“You’re not going into space crazy, you’re going to camp.” Tori smiled.

“Well, I’m going to be in simulated space.” Kalea clarified sheepishly.

“I think you should go into real space,” AJ said winking at Tori and coming to his feet.

“Me too.” Tori agreed. They were on her in seconds, AJ grabbing her arms and Tori her feet. They swung her back and forth with Kalea screaming gleefully. The noise finally attracted the attention of the adults on the other side.

“Kids, we’re going to be eating soon,” Pualani called. “Don’t get...” with a big heave-ho they flung Kalea into the pool. The pair ducked as the water splashed up and over their heads. Thankfully the pool was a safe distance from the kitchen patio area.

Kalea surfaced laughing and AJ took the opportunity to grab Tori while her back was turned. He was able to lift her off her feet before she realized it. Though he was taller and out-weighted her, Tori was taut, muscular and a mixed martial arts aficionado. She didn’t just know “some” stuff, she knew a whole lot of stuff. Had it been anyone other than AJ she would have flipped the scenario around by now and had them on the ground in a rear naked chokehold.

“AJ don’t get that leg wet!” his mom called out. AJ had a specially made prosthetic that was water resistant, but he wasn’t wearing it. That’s the only reason why Tori let him throw her in the pool without a real fight. In one swift movement AJ unhooked the prosthetic and dove into the water behind her. The trio erupted in laughter, splashing with the noisy abandon of a group of kids who didn’t have a care in the world.

The parents had to laugh themselves.

“Goodness, were we ever that noisy?” Pualani asked.

“Were we ever that free?” Rachael asked wistfully.

“I was already working three jobs when I was their age,” Kale said, checking the meat. “What was there to laugh about? I put away the books and put on an apron.”

“I’m with Kale,” Stuart said. “I worked in my uncle Charlie’s Auto Shop summers, and if I wanted any personal pocket money, I mowed lawns and worked on my buddies’ cars on the side.”

“Ten minutes and food’s on!” Kale announced. The kids were sitting on the deck with their feet in the water.

“Burn mine!” Tori called out. Kale sighed loudly.

“I’m a co-owner and sometimes chef at one of the most popular vineyard restaurants in the city, I never burn anything.”

“Don’t think of it as burning Kale,” Fletcher said. “Just well done.”

“Extremely well done.” Rachael said. She could identify with Kale’s frustration. Practically any meat Tori ate had to be “twice dead” – killed then cooked to death. Rachael attributed it to her Lakota upbringing and the early years spent living on the Reservation. From what few stories she’d heard, Tori was raised a traditional Sioux – fishing, hunting, killing and cooking wild game over an open fire. In addition, Tori travelled extensively with her father for the first year after her mother’s death. Fletcher went on digs among Canada’s Inuit, rural Japan, Nepal, Tibet, Australia, Puerto Rico, Egypt and Israel, living among cultures where refrigeration was rare to non-existent.

Rachael glanced over at the trio as they spoke and laughed in quieter tones. She smiled. It was obvious how they felt about one another. Rachael couldn’t remember the last time a full week went by without the kids being together at the house. Then Rachael’s smile saddened a bit. Even though things were not as horrible as they had been

during the “dark years” things hadn’t turned out the way she thought or the way Fletcher promised.

Fletcher promised that in time Tori would accept her and they would be married, and the three of them would live happily ever after. Neither had come true. Admittedly the yelling, screaming and fighting had decreased over the years as Tori got older and she realized Rachael wasn’t leaving causing them to forge an uneasy truce where Tori all but ignored her. And marriage? Somewhere along the way they agreed it would be best to wait until Tori was 18, off to college and involved in her own life.

Over the years marriage had become less important to Rachael. First her mother died then her father. No daddy to walk her down the aisle. No mama to share in such a wonderful blissful day. Now she was 32 years old. She’d been living with Fletcher for nearly nine years and nothing had turned out the way she thought or hoped. Releasing a sigh she brushed the thought away as if fanning a gnat and turned her attention back to the conversation at hand.

Kale set platters of meat at both ends of the table. The table was already loaded with Pualani’s French onion bacon spinach, grilled corn on the cob, baked and roasted potatoes, a string bean dish and a plate of rolls, buns and other breads. Rachael’s famous baked peach-pear cobbler was cooling on the counter and Tori’s homemade vanilla ice cream was churning in her electric White Mountain ice cream maker.

The trio had joined the adults, taking their spots at the end of the table. Kale ditched his apron and took his seat at the head of the table.

“A blessing,” he said. “God bless this food and the gathering.” The group mumbled their endings – Amen, Mother Mary, Father Earth or nothing at all. Then platters and bowls were passed around the table until everyone had their desired first serving. Tori scooped the burnt sausage onto her plate and squirted a healthy dollop of spicy ground mustard to the edge of her plate. The trio smiled wide with food-filled cheeks.

“This is good.” Tori grinned.

“How can you mess up a burnt sausage?” AJ asked with a chuckle.

“Just wait until we get to grandpa Bo’s,” Tori said, forking the spinach salad. “We’ll be getting some serious bar-b-que,”

AJ fished in his pocket for his iPhone. He wiped his fingers with his napkin and scrolled to his calendar.

“Grandpa Bo’s in August?” he asked. Tori and Kalea looked at their calendars.

“Leaving on the 16th.” Kalea confirmed. “There the whole week, family bar-b-que the 22nd.”

“Then you guys fly home and I’m off with Grandpa Bo to the Reservation the week of the 23rd” Tori smiled.

“We’re going up on Thursday the 20th,” Fletcher said speaking about him and Rachael. “Why don’t we all go up on Thursday and fly back on Sunday? We can take my company jet.”

Fletcher had attained some critical acclaim as an archeologist but his millions had been made searching for and finding sunken treasure under his company *Expedition Unearth*. He had a Gulfstream G650 for domestic travel, a Boeing 747 used mainly for overseas travel, a company yacht christened *Wachiwi Princess*, named for Tori's mother, and a survey ship christened *Odin's Bow* for water expeditions.

"That sounds like a perfect idea," Fran said.

"Why should the kids have all the fun?" Kale stated. "Why don't we do an evening at the vineyard before we leave? I can schedule a private party, fly in Chef Metregon and hire a string ensemble to provide the music. We can set everything up overlooking the mountains."

"What a wonderful idea." Pualani smiled.

"So are we game group?" Kale asked. The adults nodded.

"Keldudalr goes the whole week of June 15th." AJ said scrolling through his calendar.

Though the Viking Reenactment took place in San Francisco, approximately 50 miles from their homes, the trio along with Fletcher's father Harald, stayed at the village the whole time.

"Are you guys coming to Keldudalr?" Kalea called to the adults.

"I'm showing up for Market Day," Pualani said. "but I'm not sleeping in a tent."

“We’ll be there too.” Rachael said speaking of her and Fletcher. “I have some pottery and glass I can sell and Fletcher will be presenting a slide lecture on the Viking shipwreck he discovered last month.”

“I remember reading in the Napa News about you finding a Viking wreck last month off the coast of Sweden.” Stu said. “How’d you convince these reenactment freaks to allow you to bring in a slide show?”

“This group will be the first to see the details of the salvage at a private viewing. We’ll be showing actual video footage of the sunken ship, artifacts in place. They’ll see the inventory and cataloguing process of every artifact we’ve retrieved thus far, laid out on display. It’s estimated that the craft dates back to the early 1300s based on preliminary testing of the ship’s wood. As you know my father’s on the Council and when he made the pitch to the Keldudalr Werod Founders, they jumped all over it.”

“Well I might show up for the viewing myself,” Stu said pulling a sterling silver cigar tube out of his shirt pocket. He unscrewed the top and chomped down on a Cuban cigar. “No freaking out woman.” he said in response to Fran’s raised eyebrow. “This isn’t a smoking cigar.”

Stu had what he considered two types of cigars, ones you actually lit and smoked and the ones you simply chomped down on. He’d seen a news reel of George Patton with a cigar in his mouth when he was a young man and the strong image of Patton “the leader” never left him.

“Kale, Fletch and I will go off a respectable distance before we light up the good ones.” Stu said cocking a thumb towards the portable humidor plugged in and resting on the counter.

“So what’s the figure on this haul?” Kale asked getting back to the wreckage.

“Goodness Kale,” Pualani flushed. “That’s private!” The men laughed.

“Guys like to brag honey,” Kale smiled. “So what are you bringing in?”

“Well, museums are crazy for this stuff, Countries too, they love anything that deals with their personal history.”

“Stop all the explaining and just tell us,” Stu said. “How much you stickin’em for?” Fran stood shaking her head as she started clearing away plates.

“Well Sweden’s giving us the brunt of the excavation contract and we’ll be treating it like an archaeological dig, just under water,” Fletcher said. “Kalmar County Museum in conjunction with The Swedish Museum of Natural History will do the oversight. It’s a little sketchy for them because the wreck was found 300 miles outside of their territorial waters, putting it in international waters.”

“So technically it’s yours.” Pualani said clearing away the glasses.

“Technically it is, and on paper the wreckage and all artifacts found are mine, but the raising of the ship as intact as possible could cost a small fortune. Likewise the underwater excavation will be extremely expensive so I’ve contracted to share a defined portion of the findings with the Swedish government, if they pay for the work.”

“So you get this pre-defined portion of the loot and you’re not on the hook to pay for any of the work to get to it.” Stu said.

“Pretty much.” Fletcher smiled. “They’ve paid me a hefty sum for the ship so the Swedish government now owns that. I’ve also received compensation for partial rights to the find and I get to keep a good portion of the excavated treasure with the agreement I’m willing to sell most of it back to the Swedish government. And my ship is contracted to do the hauling. We’ve already been paid three million and there’s probably anywhere from five to upwards of ten, twelve million or more still on the ocean floor.”

Stu threw his head back and laughed loudly.

“Man, you’re a modern day pirate.” He said shaking his head.

“I do okay.” Fletcher smiled.

“How are we sized up for camp?” Tori asked.

“Good.” Kalea smiled. “Looks like we’re all gone about the same time.”

“We’re home for a couple weeks after that, then we’re all off to Israel with Tori’s pop.” AJ said.

Fletcher was scheduled to participate in an archeological excavation at the Givati Parking lot in Jerusalem. He had taken on the assignment of Lead Excavation Chief. The site was touted as being the largest excavation ever conducted in Jerusalem and had been going on in some form or fashion for the past two years.

“That should be three full weeks,” Fletcher said to the group as a whole. “The dig’s going on longer than that, that’s just how long we’re going to be there, so any adults who want to tag along should get with me so I can make the arrangements and get you set up in the King David Hotel which is close to the site. That is unless you want to camp at the site with me, dad and the kids.”

The adults grumbled and laughed, commenting on the flexibility of youth and the stiff old bones of age.

“Once we get back from Israel that’ll leave us the rest of August then back to school.” AJ said.

“Let’s not talk about it.” Kalea groaned. “We’re just starting summer vacation today,”

“And what a way to start.” Tori leaned over to whisper so only they could hear. “Your pops chasing Fin with a Samurai sword.” Tori and AJ chuckled, then all three erupted in laughter.

“What’s that racket down there?” Stu asked.

“Just coordinating our calendars,” AJ said holding up his phone.

“You don’t have a job but you got a calendar?” Stu teased.

“Job?” AJ smiled. “What do I need a job for? I’ll just live off the family fortune like you pops.” That brought howls of laughter from everyone.

“Hey, hey here,” Stu said snatching the cigar out of his mouth. “I work. Who’s the football coach huh? And co-ROTC instructor at your school?”

“Pop,” AJ smiled, “you work for kicks. Who ever heard of a guy with a trust fund that doles out millions a year working?” Stu chomped back down on the cigar.

“Listen, I grew up a poor kid on the wrong side of the tracks so I never put all my trust in any one thing. You need to have a trade son, all of you kids do. If something goes wrong and me and your parents end up penniless...”

“Hey, bite your tongue on that one man.” Fletcher quickly piped in.

“I’m just saying,” Stu continued. “all you kids are doing the right thing. You’re setting yourselves up for the future. Going to college, being self-sufficient. I ate a lotta beans before I got that trust. I lived in a pit of hell before I got the Mansion.” His voice lowered and his eyes glazed and misted a bit as he thought back on the road that brought him to where he was today. His rough features softened making him seem younger than his 44 years.

After his mother died Stu lived with her brother, uncle Charlie, who expected Stu to work in his Auto Shop to kick in for his living expenses. At 16 he stopped working at the shop in Lubbock, Texas because he’d figured another way to get money – stealing, fencing, selling booze and cigs to kids. So long as he was kicking in his share uncle Charlie could care less where the money came from. Then came the accident that changed his life forever. Stu was drinking and driving with some buddies when he plowed into a station

wagon. The woman driving the car was in a coma for a month. Prior to this Stu had been busted for minor infractions and spent time in Garza County Juvenile Detention but now he was 18 years old and had seriously harmed an innocent person.

Stu had been in Garza County Lockup for two weeks when a three-piece suited lawyer showed up, wanting to take some of his blood. He couldn't figure out why, they'd taken blood from him at the hospital while he was chained to the bed and his blood alcohol level came back three times the legal limit.

A couple of weeks later the suit came back with a deal. Be tried as an adult and go to prison or join the military. From Stu's position it was a no-brainer, he enlisted in the Air Force. Years later he would come to understand who the suit was and what the jailhouse visit was all about.

Stu's mom had been involved with the son of one of the richest oil barons in the country. His mom never knew who this man's father really was, "just a drifter" she would tell Stu when he asked about his father, a sweet guy who blew through town one summer and disappeared in the fall. She never heard from him again, but unbeknownst to her he continued watching over her. Though she only had a 9th grade education she always somehow had a job. Even when grown men couldn't find work his mom would get a call from somebody concerning something that just turned up.

Stu eventually learned that the blood he gave was for a DNA test which confirmed that the billionaire drifter was Stu's dad. Though AJ teased him often concerning the "family trust of millions" the trust was anonymous. Stu had no idea who set it up. All he

was ever told was that it was established by his father's family and by accepting the trust he was agreeing in writing, to never try to discover who that was.

“So who's ready for my world famous peach-pear cobbler?” Rachael called. The “I ams” circled the table.

“Girls get the ice cream and bowls,” Pualani instructed. Tori quickly retrieve the metal canister from the ice cream machine and a scooper. Rachael and Kalea passed out wedges of the warmed cobbler while Tori circled the table, dropping scoops of ice cream on top. Tori then grabbed a bowl, giving herself a generous scoop and jumped into her chair. Kalea had already placed a bowl with the cobbler at a spot in front of her.

“You've got to give me the recipe for this cobbler,” Kale said to Rachael. “I seriously need to add it to my menu.”

“Kale, it could be a family secret.” Pualani said.

“Look, I'll kick back a percentage of the sales.”

“There you go hon,” Fletcher said. “You need to think about that.”

“I will.” Rachael smiled.

“What about you Tori?” Kale asked. “This ice cream is delicious.”

“No way,” Tori replied. “This ice cream is a family secret. My grandma Louise taught me how to make it on condition that I keep the ingredients strictly confidential. This recipe has been in her family for 100 years.”

“Well let me know if you ever want to franchise.”

“Will do Mr. K.” Tori smiled.

After the meal the group dispersed to their favorite spots; the men to the far side of the pool where they pushed the lounge chairs into a small circle so the ends were nearly touching. Stu passed around and lit everyone’s cigar and the men enjoyed the finishing touch to a great meal and grand dessert.

“This is the best cigar I’ve ever smoked.” Fletcher said taking a quick enjoyable puff.

“That it is.” Kale agreed. He took a short puff, rolled the smoke around in his mouth the way he’d taste a fine wine. Smiling, he blew the smoke out in one long wisp. Stu smiled. He took a puff releasing it slowly.

“They’re from the Gurka’s Premier Collection – His Majesty’s Reserve, premium aged tobacco that’s somehow steeped in Louis XIII cognac and hand-rolled by expert cigar rollers.” The cigar had a mellow incense type smell that was as delightful as the taste.

“Only 100 boxes a year are made and I own two.”

“You’re kidding.” Kale said taking the cigar out of his mouth to look at it. “How much is a box?”

“One cigar costs more than most guys would pay for a whole box of cigars.” Stu shared smiling.

“Well heck,” Fletcher said leaning back in the chair. “Let’s enjoy it then.”

The women gathered in the Sunroom to the left of the outdoor kitchen. The Sunroom was large yet cozy with plants and strikingly colored flowers situated thickly about the area. There were four antique finished wicker rattan chairs, circling a rattan framed glass top table.

The sound of the men’s yells and laughter interrupted the women’s calm chatter.

“Goodness, what is that noise about?” Pualani asked.

“There’s no telling,” Fran said shaking her head. “My husband and his blasted cigars.” The women laughed. “However,” she thought aloud. “He’s gets one from Spain that tastes just scrumptious.”

“No!” Pualani gasped. “You smoked a cigar?”

“I most certainly did.” Fran said proudly. “I wanted to see what all the hoop-la was about. For goodness sake the man has a smoking room. Who ever heard of such a thing? A room where you do nothing but sit and smoke. Thank goodness it has an air filtration system. The smoke is sucked out of the air while fresh air is filtered into the room.”

“I guess we all have our indulgences,” Rachael said lifting the cup of white tea to her lips. She inhaled the soft fragrance before taking a sip. The women nodded and hummed their comments. The Darjeeling blend of tea Pualani served her guests was one of the most expensive brands of tea in the world.

“Where did the three Musketeers get off to?” Fran asked scanning the backyard and pool area.

“To Kalea’s second home,” Pualani said.

Kalea’s second home was a treehouse situated down a small garden path that opened to a well-tended forest. Tall red wood trees filled the acre of land that was the Kinimaka’s property. A clustered group of three trees made up the base-frame for the elaborate 800 square foot treehouse. Kalea’s treehouse was specially designed for her and her unique tastes. Tori and AJ also had treehouses in their back yards too, both of which were unique to their owners.

In actuality the treehouses numbered five; the one in Kalea’s backyard, AJ’s backyard, Tori’s backyard, Grandpa Bo’s Lodge and the one on the Eaglewolf property on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota.

If Tori had her way she would live in trees and her feet would never touch the ground. If she spent any measurable amount of time someplace she wanted to be able to climb a tree and sit there with walls around her and creature comforts at her disposal.

The parents indulged the trio mainly because of the amount of time they spent together at each other’s homes. The parents had their input though; the treehouse had to be well camouflaged, not readily obvious when they, or their guests, were being entertained in the backyard; not so high as to be dangerous or to where neighbors would feel as if they were being spied on. And the treehouses were for them alone, no visitors. All entertaining of friends had to be done poolside or in the house.

All of the treehouses were equipped with state-of-the-art security systems. Key punch/thumb scan recognition that released the staircase and unlocked the steel reinforced doors. All the windows were break-in resistant and even the bases were encased with lightweight copper chainmail which was laser, saw and hack proof. The treehouses were all security extensions of the homes they were connected to.

While in lockdown mode, the homes on The Mesa were virtually impenetrable. Doors/windows/walls/roof were all blast resistant. Panic Rooms existed on each level with video monitoring hooked up to each TV. Community security protection was equally state-of-the-art. Hidden cameras along the fence line, static roving patrols, radio communication that allowed the homeowner and command house to communicate through land, cell, TV monitoring and the home's built-in speaker system. The men and women hired to protect and patrol the area were all ex-special forces or ex-federal law-enforcement. No one knew how many were patrolling at any given hour, yet last year when Mr. Butterman passed out from a heart attack in the middle of the night and Mrs. Butterman hit the panic button, twenty armed men and women in three black vans converged on her home encircling it in 4 ½ minutes. They defibrillated Mr. Butterman and wheeled him out of the house to a waiting chopper that had landed on the roadway just outside the gate.

Most of the flowers and trees surrounding the homes were native to The Mesa and were already there when the residents moved in, but much had been landscaped according to the homeowner's personal tastes. Kalea's parents were of Hawaiian and Japanese heritage and the home and the surrounding grounds reflected this. There were white and pink lotus, azalea bushes, cherry blossoms and chrysanthemums.

Kalea's treehouse was NASA themed. Nestled between three larger Redwood trees it was all but hidden among branches and leaves. Instead of the usual NASA color of white/silver, the treehouse was made of wood and camo-colored to better meld with the forest-like surroundings and be as unobtrusive as possible.

Kalea fell in love with her treehouse. She hung out in it whenever she was alone. All of the treehouses were equipped with central air and heat, a 50 inch flat screen TV, a mini kitchenette with double sink, a roaster and an apartment sized refrigerator.

The sitting/entertainment area contained a loveseat, giant beanbag chair, and the TV with a Bose home theater system. There were several cabinets for DVDs, CDs and any personal items the trio might want to store.

Hanging from the wall facing the TV was a large padded hammock with a large hook beside it. AJ preferred hammocks and used the hook to hang his prosthetic when he took it off to "give his stump a rest." There was a built-in shelf to the side where he kept various things needed for his prosthetic and stump's care. AJ was so comfortable without his prosthetic that he would literally climb out of a tree only to have one of the parents ask him where his leg was.

On the other side of the room was Kalea's sleeping area, an Asortia daybed situated under the stairs leading to the loft.

Opposite the stairs was a bathroom with an incinerator toilet, biodegradable shower, a sink, mirror and small cabinet containing linens and other bathroom items.

The staircase led up to where Kalea's 'space stuff' was situated.

Access to the module's interior was through a door hatch. The interior was an exact replica of the Apollo 13 command module, specially reproduced via numerous photographs and from the movie Apollo 13. Not only was it a precise model, but it was functional. Once the hatch door was closed Kalea, as well as anyone sharing one of the other two seats, were encapsulated in her own little space world. The cockpit had two modes; missions simulation and observatory. Mission simulation allowed Kalea to participate in actual space missions through a computerized interface mission command. There were CGI graphics of life-like actors that she could see on the numerous built-in monitors, and hear through the command seat or head-set which allowed her to interact with them. Though Kalea was just a kid, her dad had connections that allowed her access typically reserved for retired and professional astronauts.

When she wasn't in simulated mission mode she was surveying the skies via a direct feed to the Hubble or Spitzer space telescopes. When she wanted to "free style" it and simply survey the stars Kalea would exit the command module and go out onto the balcony where she had a Celestron Edge HD1400.

"Think we should interrupt space cadet to see if she wants a float?" AJ asked, jumping out of the hammock. He didn't bother to put his leg on, instead he hopped to the counter where Tori had already set up the float glasses.

"Are you nuts?" Tori said. "She's getting in her flight time before Space Camp. Let's leave her alone." AJ filled his glass to the halfway mark with diet Coke while Tori poured Cherry Coke into her glass.

AJ pulled two beanbag chairs to the center of the room, and flopped down on his – the Pixar animated character one and grabbed the remote.

“I’m starting the movie,” he called out.

“Okay, okay.” Tori said wiping down the counter. When she was done she flopped down onto her beanbag which was large and sand camo-colored.

“Lo there do I see my father,” Tori recited. “Lo there do I see my mother and my sister and my brothers...”

“These are the opening credits,” AJ said. “The “lo theres” are practically at the end of the movie.” Tori picked up the remote and turned up the sound. AJ laughed picking up his glass to take a drink.

“Hey kids!” It was Kalea’s dad.

“Man,” Tori sighed stopping the movie. She got up and followed AJ through the door to the platform outside. The parents were standing there, grouped beneath the tree.

“We’re calling it a night.” Stu called up. “Be home by midnight or don’t come home at all,” he teased.

“Stuart.” Fran gasped giving him a playful swat on the chest.

“We just started the movie.” AJ said.

“And we still have to watch Apollo 13 and Toy Story,” Tori added.

“We’ll see you kids tomorrow then.” Fletcher said.

“Good night Tori.” Rachael said holding Fletcher’s hand. Tori felt a strange sinking thud in her stomach.

“Don’t stay up too late,” Kale said. “And will one of you drag my kid’s comatose body out of that tube and put her to bed?”

“Will do Mr. K.” Tori smiled.

They waved, said their goodnights and Tori and AJ watched them walk off, listening as their voices disappeared into the night.

“I just love a good ole fashion all-nighter,” AJ said rubbing his hands together. “I brought extra popcorn just in case.” Tori shoved her hands into her pockets and walked back inside.

“The float’s melted,” AJ observed. “I’m putting mine in the freezer.”

“Mine too.” Tori said flopping down on the beanbag. Just that quickly Tori’s temperament had changed. All Rachael said to her was “night Tori” to which Tori responded “yeah.”

“It’s gonna be a long hot summer,” AJ said to himself, putting both mugs in the freezer.

“What are you mumbling about?” Tori asked.

“If you just tried..”

“Here we go.” Tori said. “My reality’s not yours dude, when are you gonna get that?”

“It sort of is,” AJ said. “I’m living with two people who aren’t my birth parents. You’re only living with one person who isn’t yours.”

“But I’ve got a dad and a mom.”

“A live dad and a dead mom.” AJ clarified. “Your mom’s been gone what? almost ten years?” He paused to let it resonate a bit. “And Rach has been with you guys what? Nine years now. At some point you’re gonna know Rach longer than you were with your own mother. Rach isn’t going anywhere Tor, she’s put up with you and your antics for years and she’s still here. Doesn’t that tell you something?”

“Yeah,” Tori said flatly. “She’s a crazy gold-digger. My dad’s a millionaire, remember?”

“Get real,” AJ said. “No woman would hang around you for all these years just because she wants your dad’s millions. Anyway, Rach has her own place.”

AJ was talking about di CureCondi Visa, Rachael’s Art Gallery. It was located in downtown St. Helena, nestled in an area of exclusive shops and high-end restaurants. The Gallery not only exhibited her work but the work of local and world renowned artists. Rachael’s gallery was purchased and sustained by money she earned selling her art along with the vast commissions she made selling the artwork of people she showcased.

Rachael’s iron and clay sculptures could be found in office buildings, parks and the front yards and homes of the rich and famous. AJ was right, Rachael had amassed her own millions.

“Look AJ,” Tori said. “I’m outta here next fall so Rach and I have a very comfortable peace. I’ll be at Berkeley, living in my own place and completely out of her life. She’ll finally have what’s she’s been waiting for and wanting all this time, having my dad all to herself.”

“Listen kiddo,” AJ said flipping onto his stomach so he could face Tori. “By the time you’re off to college Rachael will have been living in your house with you and your dad ten years, longer than your own mom has lived with you,”

“Hey!” Tori shouted.

“Just look at this thing in context. You don’t think she likes you by now?” AJ asked.

“Aww c’mon.” Tori moaned. “Who do you think she’s probably blaming for the reason my dad hasn’t married her yet, huh? Me dude, and the reason my father hasn’t married her is because he hasn’t gotten over my mom yet. My parents were soul mates – *nag hosanna*, they had a love that lasts forever. When you have that type of marriage it’s hard to commit to anybody like that ever again. Living with her, cool. Marry her? Dude he still loves my mom.” Right then the shuttle door opened and Kalea popped her head out.

“Time for Apollo 13?”

“Aww man!” Tori groaned. “Now we’re gonna have to watch my movie second.” Tori knew there would be no peace until Kalea watched her movie. She always acted this way before Space Camp.

“Yeah, c’mon,” Tori said getting up. “I’m getting my float while I’m up, anybody else ready?” Both Kalea and AJ were.

“I’ll get the movie.” Kalea said.

Tori was partially right. Fletcher was in no hurry to marry Rachael but not because he was still in love with his wife. He wasn’t anxious to get married again to anyone, period. Truth be told, Fletcher loved and prized his freedom. He took every opportunity he had to participate in a dig or go off looking for buried treasure. To Rachael, the “footloose, carefree” charm she fell in love with almost nine years ago had, over time, become an irritant. No sooner was he home then he was planning to be gone again.

Rachael lit a fire in the library fireplace and was sitting on the rich brocade sofa, sipping a warm cup of Pokka nighttime tea. She loved the soft smell of lavender and the hint of lime flavor in the mixture of herbs.

She placed the cup on the table and stared into the fire. The library was her favorite room in the house. Books were stacked from floor to ceiling in mahogany shelves around the room. The floor was dark wood as well, covered with a great Persian rug. The sofa and four sitting chairs were richly upholstered and situated in a cozy semi-circle around the fireplace. Her office space was on the other side of the library. Besides her workshop, Rachael felt this one room was singularly hers.

Rachael snuggled into the arm of the corner of the sofa tucking the plush throw pillow under her head. It saddened her that she and Tori had barely spoken five words to

each other all day long. They'd come a long way from the scream-fests of years gone by, the "I hate you," "I wish you were dead," "Leave why don't you." followed by angry defiant silence.

Once, when Tori was younger, she and Rachael got into such a terrible fight that Tori refused to eat. She would sit at the table, arms crossed angrily across her chest, lips pursed iron-clamped shut. Rachael would send her away from the table hoping she'd creep downstairs and raid the kitchen in the middle of the night but she wouldn't. She was that stubbornly dug in. After day three Rachael packed her up for a week's stay with Kalea and Pualani. When she returned a week later she was eating again.

Rachael had spent years trying to get Tori to love her, then simply to like her and the best she could do was to move her from outright hostility and hatred to icy tolerance and part-time indifference.

Rachael reached for the cup and sipped. She felt her eyes slowly fill with water as she rehashed the walk home with Fletcher.

"Do you really have to leave so soon, you just got back."

"You heard the whole story at Pualani's. I've got a salvage."

"And you have an experienced crew that can function without you, at least for a few weeks."

"Rachael, I am the company. My contractors aren't signing on with Butch, Caryn and Cappy: they're signing on with me. It's my reputation not theirs." Fletcher stopped

under a streetlight and pulled Rachael close, facing him. He wrapped his arms around her and gave her that “Fletcher smile,” smiling with his whole face not just his lips.

Fletcher kissed Rachael deeply.

“Okay,” she said a bit breathless. “Just spend some time with your daughter.”

“You mean the kid who's up a tree watching the same Viking DVD for the 500th time with the other two Musketeers?” Rachael laughed and they continued on their way. “We’ll spend some father-daughter time together soon, okay?”

“Okay.”

Rachael nestled and let the soft flames draw her in. She cared deeply for Tori. She can’t say when it actually happened, she simply came to the awful realization one day. Rachael was at Red Oak Senior Living, visiting her grandmother Agnieszka and Tori had gone with her. She’d left the room to speak to the doctor and when she returned her grandmother and Tori were having a grand old time – her grandmother was laughing and speaking Yiddish to Tori and Tori was speaking perfect Yiddish in response. During the drive home Rachael asked Tori where she’d learned Yiddish and Tori responded “Bubbe,”

Rachael asked “Bubbe who?” At which Tori laughed.

“Bubbe Agnes.” Agnes was the shortened form of Agnieszka that family and friends used.

Tori called her grandmother Agnieszka, “Bubbe” which is grandmother in Yiddish. Only then did Rachael realize Tori had been spending time at the Senior Home with her

grandmother without her knowledge. She hadn't believed her grandmother when she'd mentioned seeing Tori or speaking to her on the phone. Rachael thought it was simply her grandmother's mind slowly slipping away, but she checked with the front office and discovered Tori had been signing in as Agnieszka Lieberman's granddaughter, three to four times a month, and she'd found Tori's cell number programmed in Agnieszka's phone.

Rachael was floored. She remembered sitting in the parking lot of the Senior Home for several minutes, marveling that Tori had been doing this for months, apparently riding her scooter to the Home, spending time and a portion of her life with this little old woman.

That's when it hit her, she cared for her. She actually had feelings of affection for this bright, beautiful, sensitive child. The realization was nearly earth shattering for her. She knew she'd never have children of her own so she was more than willing to have Tori, but Tori would have none of that. The specter of her Lakota mother hovered around her like some invisible teepee blanket. Yes, Rachael told herself, she was willing to settle for a tolerant indifferent peace if it meant Tori could grow healthy and whole in a peaceful environment. With Fletcher becoming an increasingly absent father Rachael had become the only real parent Tori had.

Tori checked to make sure the stairs were retracted up and the doors and windows secured before tossing her tree hammock over her shoulder and climbing nearly 10 feet

up to her favorite spot. The spot had just the right number of strong limbs where she could secure the mosquito netting enclosed cotton canvas hammock.

Tori hung the hammock securely to four limbs and then crawled into the tent-like structure zipping herself in. The hammock came padded with a lightweight micro-thermal blanket she could pull over herself if she got cold. The stitched in pillow was full and fluffy and the boxy-shaped mesh covering was functional while allowing her an unhindered view of her surroundings.

From her high perch she could see every home in the community. Curtains and blinds were drawn with the faint hint of light illumined on the other side. Two patrol vehicles slowly moved up and down the street, stopping every now and again to shine their infrared lights into yards. The Mesa as it was affectionately known was reputed to be the most highly protected gated community in all of Northern California.

Kalea's and Tori's backyards overlooked the Napa River. Perched high in the trees Tori's view was unobstructed. The moon glistened on the water, reflecting the misty orb and stars like diamond stickpins against a velvet curtain. Beyond that were rolling hills and a mountain range. If she had to live away from the Reservation there was no better spot than this. It was *nearly* perfect. Tori sighed at the thought, nearly perfect. The only one thing that would make her life completely perfect would be her mom nestled in the hammock beside her.

Tori smiled as the memory of sleeping in the trees with her mother flooded into her head. The two of them would go deep into the woods and live off the land for days. Her dad would be away on some dig and although Tori missed him it really didn't bother her

because it meant she would get to spend special alone time with her mother. They would fish in one of the many streams, trap rabbits and squirrels and cook them over an open fire. They had a portable teepee they could easily assemble, sleeping packs and the tree hammock. They would sleep on the ground if it was safe and take to the trees if they were in wolf or bear country.

Before she got sick Tori's mother could scale a tree like a lumberjack. It was her mother who taught her how to select the best tree for her hammock and then how to select the limbs and branches to secure and tie the hammock to. They would then crawl in together, the large hammock giving both more than enough room.

As the day faded and night slipped in, Tori's mom would gather her in her arms and share all the grand stories and exploits of her ancestors and people. Even when Tori drifted off to sleep her mother kept talking and pouring her culture and her Tribe's ways into the mind of her dreaming child. Lakotas believed if you did this with a child while they slept the stories would take on life and breath, becoming so real that the story would become as tangible as if they themselves had experienced it. It would then become the child's own memory, one they now shared with their ancestors; the path of the ancestors reaching forward, the path of the Lakota child reaching back, completing the grand circle of life.

After being diagnosed with breast cancer, Wachiwi took to the trees until the regiment of chemo and radiation grounded her. Even after the mastectomy to remove her diseased right breast she still led her child high up into the tall trees. It was the removal

of the left breast and the acceleration of the disease that ultimately left her chained to the ground.

Tori had photos of her mother, various mementos and memorials spanning from her early teens to the time of her death. The majority of the photos had been copies her grandmother Louise had placed in a photo album for her. Tori's favorite photo of her mother was sitting on her night table next to her bed. Her mother was still full of life and color. She had long black hair parted on the right and hanging down the sides of her face. She was smiling, her dark brown eyes glistening. She was beautiful and fond of saying every time she saw the picture – “as flat chested as a ten year old boy.” Because of the ways she was sitting you couldn't tell she had no breasts. That would be the last picture ever taken of Wachiwi Eaglewolf. She would be dead in four months.

Pualani was pleasantly surprised to find the kids up, showered and fixing breakfast.

“Tea is on the patio mama.” Kalea said taking her mom by the hand and guiding her to the already set table. AJ was balanced on one leg, scrambling, pouching and omelet'ing eggs. Tori was putting a tray of homemade biscuits in the oven and Kalea was grilling bacon, sausage, ham and smoking thin fillet cuts of salmon. Fresh squeezed orange, grapefruit and apple juice were in pitchers chilling in a bowl of crushed ice. A fresh fruit tray was in the fridge and a pot of Hacienda la Esmeralda coffee was brewing.

“I might get used to this,” Pualani smiled.

“You should taste our cooking at Keldudalr.” Kalea said.

“No thanks,” Pualani responded. She totally refused to sleep out in the wild and go to the bathroom outside, even though the “wild” was an acre and a half plot of land at the University of San Francisco’s campus. Right then the gate buzzed and AJ grabbed the nearby remote and clicked on the 50 inch TV. Tapping the front gate button on the screen a view of the gate area appeared. Seeing his and Tori’s parents at the gate he pressed a button to open the gate and clicked the monitor off.

“Just daddy, then we can eat.” Kalea said.

“Your daddy called earlier, he said he’d be running a little late and to start without him. An issue at the Vineyard.” Kalea turned back to the grill slightly disappointed. She wanted her dad to see her wearing one of his aprons, cooking at the grill.

Oh well, she thought. At least he was still coming.

“Morning all!” Stu boomed, leading the group around the side of the house and onto the slightly raised patio deck. He came up behind AJ, put an arm around his neck and gave him a kiss on the side of the head.

“Dad!” AJ groaned.

“You hooking your old dad up?”

“Made to order.” AJ said referring to his dad’s specially made omelet with matiz sardines and brie de melon.

“That’s m’boy!” He gave him another kiss and slapped his back.

“C’mon dad,” AJ said wiping away the kiss. Tori laughed and AJ gave her his “don’t even start” look.

Though AJ was 17 years old and could stand eye-to-eye with his dad, Stu had no problem giving him a hug and a kiss. He’d spent too many worried days and restless nights hovering over his son’s hospital bed through the sickest times of his life. And now here he was, nearly ten years later, “as healthy as a horse” his dad was fond of saying. If he stared at AJ too long he’d get teary-eyed causing his son to really groan. AJ knew he was the luckiest kid on the planet; not because his folks were filthy rich, but because they loved him. AJ had known not being loved and being loved: and he’d take his dad’s sloppy bothersome hugs and kisses any day.

“Where’s the mutt?” Tori asked sliding the tray of golden browned biscuits out of the oven.

“Home.” Stu said.

“Whining.” Fran added.

“You should have brought him,” AJ said bringing the platter of eggs to the table. He scooped Stu’s on a spatula and slid it onto his plate.

“He’s fine,” Fran said pouring herself a cup of coffee. “He’s just being a ten year old Basenji. Your dad took him for a run this morning so he’s a little less fussy.” The kids retrieved the food, spaced it on the table and everyone sat down to eat.

“Mahalo, aloha God.” Pualani said blessing the food.

“Gimme that maple syrup,” Fletcher said scooping five biscuits onto his plate.

“Fletcher,” Rachael started.

“There’s more,” Tori interrupted. “I’ve got another tray. I’ll put them on when the basket gets low.”

“You kids are awesome.” Fletcher said going for more of everything.

“Son, this omelet was perfect.” Stu said mopping up the remaining dredges with his biscuit.

“I’ll have whatever Stu’s sopping up with his biscuit,” Kale said coming through the kitchen.

“Daddy!” Kalea called out. “You should’ve seen me cooking.”

“Sorry I missed it baby but we had a problem at the Vineyard.”

“What’s going on?” Pualani asked.

“Looks like we had some vandalism at the north ridge.”

“Vandals?” Kalea asked.

“Vines and stalks are wrecked, like somebody came in and just tore them up. One of the hands noticed it while making the rounds.”

“You didn’t get an alarm?” Fletcher asked.

“I don’t have anything set up that far out. We use the north ridge for experimenting with cuttings, soil, and shade types. We have a 6-8 foot test section up there, testing vine

canopy, flowering, photosynthesis, transpiration and fruit growth. We were trying out some new variety grapes to see how they would hold up.”

“You don’t think it was a competitor?” Pualani asked.

“No,” Kale said shaking his head. “There’s nothing to be gained from ripping up a few feet of vines. The trek up there isn’t worth it, it’s a bit of a hike. We’re stepping up patrols in the area.”

“Thanks,” Kale said, taking the plate from AJ.

“Well, increased activity should detract these hooligans,” Fran said.

“How about we go out and look for clues?” Tori suggested. There were a few giggles from around the table.

“Tor, we’re talking about some tore up grape vines not a luxury car theft ring.” AJ said.

“Did you call the cops?” she asked ignoring AJ.

Kale shook his head.

“Not worth the trouble. The north ridge is undeveloped, not part of the fenced-in monitored portion of the Vineyard. The damaged vines are worth less than \$100.”

“Then we should definitely go and see what we can find.”

“Is it safe?” Pualani asked.

“We’ve been back there hundreds of times,” Kalea said placing a fresh platter of bacon and sausage on the table.

“And thug-hooligans are no match for us,” AJ added.

“We’ll take the mutt with us,” Tori said. This brought a round of laughter from the adults.

“Hey, he’s a tracking dog.” AJ said defensively.

“Tracking dog?” Tori asked. “We all know who the real tracker is here.”

“You are,” Kalea said putting the last tray of biscuits in the oven. “You’re from a whole line of trackers, going back to times past,” she recited.

“When the wolf taught your ancestors how to hunt; when the Lakota and wolf lived as brothers,” AJ added smiling. Soft chuckles came from Kalea as Tori squint-eyed them both. Kalea couldn’t hold it in and she erupted in laughter.

“Laugh it up.” Tori said. “One of you gets lost you’re gonna appreciate my tracking abilities.”

“Daddy appreciates you pumpkin,” Fletcher said. “Biscuits done?”

“There’s no harm in the kids going up to the ridge,” Kale said. “And they will have wonder dog with them.”

“Then why don’t we do a sleep-over?” Kalea asked.

“Not a bad idea baby.” Kale said.

“Yipee!”

“No tracking at night though,” Rachael said. “If there’s some activity going on out there I don’t want you kids near it.” Tori frowned but Fran jumped to Rachael’s defense.

“I’m in perfect agreement,” she said.

“Mom, we’re talking about a few lousy grape plants not a marijuana stash.” AJ said.

“I think I take insult at that,” Kale said feigning injury. “But your mothers are right.” He added seriously. “The area’s unlit, open and remote. You can tramp around during the day but at dawn I want you three at the house. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” the trio said in unison.

Chapter

Two

Stuart and Fran were sitting in the little nook area off the kitchen. Stuart was reading the newspaper and enjoying a cup of Panamanian coffee, strong and black, while Fran was working on her favorite pastime – the New York Times Ferocious Crosswords Puzzle Book while sipping a cup of Joy’s Teaspoon Lemon Zest Tea. Chopin was playing softly in the background.

Fran was curled up on an Aniline leather loveseat while Stu sat in a companion chair, sockless feet on the matching ottoman. AJ’s dog was lying beside the ottoman.

The dog was a rich chestnut red with a natural collar of white that started just under his chin and went down his chest. He had a curved tail that had a white tip and two white paws. He was sleek, fit and trim, and missing his hind legs; both having been amputated at the fibula and like AJ, he had a variety of prosthetics.

The loveseat and chair were facing the glass double sliding doors that led out onto the deck and pool. The house was built on a slightly slopping hill, yet from where they were sitting it gave the illusion that beyond the pool was a drop-off, and beyond that an unobstructed view of the mountains. Stu and Fran immediately fell in love with the property and knew this was where they wanted to live. AJ was sold the minute he discovered his new little friend Tori would be living nearby.

At that moment the trio came tearing through the front door like gangbusters. The atmosphere had gone from a soothing calm-like silence to boisterous yelling, laughter and shouts. The dog jumped to his feet and ran to the front of the house.

“Good Heavens!” Fran said putting down the crossword puzzle.

“Looks like we just inherited the three stooges.” Stu smiled. The trio was known for going from one house to the other, spending upwards of three to four days at each during the summer. Fresh off a three-night stay at Kalea’s they’d decided to do AJ’s next and save the first of the week for Tori’s home.

“Look, they didn’t have enough guys who knew how to ride a motorcycle so Steve McQueen did the motorcycle riding for everybody, Americans and Germans.” Tori said, dropping her bag in the foyer.

“Get out of here,” AJ said, “they didn’t even have special effects then, how could he be the same guy in the same scenes with himself?”

“You’re nuts, of course they had special effects in the 60’s!” Tori yelled, arms waving. It was all AJ could do to keep from busting out laughing.

“Are you sure?” he asked with as straight a face as he could put together.

“Where’s your old man, let’s get this straight right now,” Tori went stomping off toward the kitchen and the others followed.

“AJ’s crazy,” Tori said.

“Well, that’s to be expected,” Stu said. “He fell out of a tree when he was a kid.”

“Stuart, you caught him.” Fran said.

“You sure he didn’t fall on his head?” Stu asked with a smile.

“Dad...”

“I could’ve sworn I missed him and he fell on his head.” Stuart said, tapping his chin and staring off into space as if trying to remember.

“Did or did not Steve McQueen do most of the motorcycle riding in The Great Escape,” Tori asked.

“He most certainly did.” Stu answered.

“Well, at least Cool Hand Luke was a better prison escape movie.” AJ said.

“Have you lost your mind?” Tori asked. “There’s not even a comparison. Maybe, just maybe Stalag 17 might be a close running second but Cool Hand Luke’s not even on the same page.”

“Are you tryin’ to say something about Paul Newman?” AJ asked feigning insult.

“Who’s talkin’ bout your precious Paul Newman?” Tori said. “I’m talking about wartime facts.”

“Now who’s the crazy one?” AJ asked, walking off. “It’s a movie not real life.”

“Not real life?” Tori called following him out of the room. “The Great Escape is practically a documentary.” Stuart and Fran looked at each other and laughed as the sound of AJ and Tori arguing faded out of hearing.

“Now you know those kids are going to be up all night watching old war movies,” Fran said.

“I may join them for a couple.” Stuart smiled.

“How long are they going to argue about Steve McQueen and Paul Newman?” Fran asked shaking her head. She took a sip from her cup.

“Until they’re an old broke-down couple like us,” Stuart said. “They may take a ride or two around separate blocks but mark my words, you’re going to end up with that daughter you always wanted.” His voice had taken on a softness Fran didn’t hear very often. He smiled, thinking back to the day they’d seen AJ for the first time.

After years of trying, Stu and Fran learned they couldn’t have kids of their own. Eventually Fran convinced Stu to consider adoption. They hired the best attorneys, and ultimately settled on an adoption facility. They decided to get a little girl, Fran always wanted a baby daughter. Stu wanted whatever Fran wanted, so when a little girl was available, the pair went to see her and hopefully bring her home.

They were living in Oklahoma and the Bright Hope Children’s Facility was in Midland Texas. They made the drive, rehearsing the description of the little girl that had been especially picked out for them. She was four months old and looking at her picture she favored Fran a bit. They had the same dark auburn colored hair, big brown eyes, pert little nose, and rosy cheeks. They were going to call her Amanda, after Stu’s mother.

Along the drive they envisioned the child’s entire life, from infant to college graduate, to wife and mother herself. Independent, a business woman, a contribution to

her country and society as a whole. That little girl was already theirs as they pulled into the drive and took the leisurely ride to the office door. There were two women outside waiting to welcome them, Stu and Fran initially thought, but as they drove closer they realized the women were yelling and screaming at a tree.

“You come down right now!” the woman with the black hair in a tight bun shouted.

“Oh please, please come down.” The shorter one begged. What appeared to be a little boy ignored them and climbed higher. He looked to be no older than six.

“If we have to call the police you’re going to jail!” The Bun threatened.

“Please come down,” The other one continued to beg. Stuart and Fran were out of the car by now and swiftly walking toward the women.

“I’m calling the fire department, they’ll get you down!” the Bun yelled up, “they’ll cart your heathen carcass straight to jail!”

“Oh please, please, the fire department...” the other one whined. Stuart stood under the tree with his hands on his hips and a cigar chomped between his teeth. The kid had to be at least 20-30 feet off the ground.

“Everybody hush!” Stu yelled. The women went silent. He stepped to where the boy could clearly see him. “You!” he called up. “Get outta this tree now!” The boy stopped climbing and peered down through the limbs at the big man standing on the ground. He didn’t look like anyone he’d seen before. He would have certainly remembered his voice.

“Come down!” Stuart ordered. “Now!”

What happened next would live in adoption home infamy. Fran would recount the events as if they happened in slow motion. The child leaned forward to look at the stone stature of a man standing beneath the tree and Fran could see the decision come onto his face. Before anyone could yell stop the little boy jumped out of the tree.

Ignoring the screams of three hysterical women, neither the boy nor Stuart lost their focus. Stuart took a step to the right, put out his arms and caught the child.

Now in his arms, Stuart looked down into the face of the scrawny, dirty blond-headed kid with the biggest bluest eyes he'd ever seen. They were frightened eyes, like the ones he'd seen on the faces of kids when his platoon would arrive in their village and they didn't know if the strangers were friend or foe, all they knew was they came with tanks and guns.

Stuart's face softened into a slow smile. He lifted the little boy over his head, grinned his widest grin and said, “We'll take him.” And with that he threw the little boy over his shoulder and headed toward the car.

The tight bun woman yelled at him to stop, saying something about paperwork. Fran was shouting something about kidnapping and the soft-spoken woman had yet to get up off the ground. When the kid jumped she fainted.

Stuart was grinning wide and the little boy hanging over his shoulder did something he hadn't done in the nearly six years he'd been there – he smiled the biggest

widest smile and laughed. He laughed all the way to the new people's home and his heart has been laughing ever since.

“Well look at you,” Fran smiled. Stu was carrying a tray, balancing a cup of Fran's favorite tea, a cup of his favorite coffee and a saucer with two chocolate éclairs and two lemon bars. He placed the tray on the table between the loveseat and his easy chair.

“You cooked the meal.” Stu said handing her the cup.

“Just spaghetti.” Fran smiled, taking a sip.

“Those kids put it away like it was more than just spaghetti. Where are our guests?”

“In the treehouse,” Fran said. “The dog's up there with them.”

They sat in silence, listening to the Hampton String Quartet playing softly in the background. Fran loved their cozy little nook. The entire wall in front of them was made of glass which allowed them a perfect unobstructed view of the entire backyard. Those outside could only see in if the privacy setting was turned off. If not, a person could literally stand with their face pressed against the glass and not be able to see inside the house.

Just then the peace and quiet was shattered by the sound of yelling, shouts and the dog yodeling. Tori appeared, crawling through the limbs of the oak tree and she jumped to the ground with AJ's prosthetic leg in tow. AJ then swung from a branch and landed,

balanced on the one leg. Tori took off with AJ behind her and Kalea climbed down the extended stairway, dog in tow. They were yelling and hollering, running and hopping and generally keeping up a ruckus.

“Remember when?” Fran asked. She sipped her tea while looking at the melee going on in their backyard.

“When it was just us?” Stu smiled.

“Um-hum.” She nodded going for an éclair.

“No kids,” Stu said. “No dog, no noise.” Kalea ran by, waving AJ’s leg over her head with Tori, AJ and the dog in hot pursuit. Fran shook her head.

“I wouldn’t trade this for anything.” Stu said laughing heartily at the sight of the dog running and dragging AJ’s leg as the trio tried to corner him. Fran joined him.

“How did we last all these years without this?” Fran asked, placing her cup down, her bright brown eyes brimming with tears.

“When it’s like this I feel as if the three of them are ours.” he said.

“I know what you mean,” Fran said. “sitting at dinner with them earlier, eating and listening to each of them sharing their excitement for the summer; their plans for college, and their jobs for the future. It was like we were listening to our own children.”

“They are our children honey,” Stu said. “We’ve practically watched these kids grow up right in front of our eyes and in this very house. Middle school with AJ and Tori and now High School with all three of them. They’ll all be off to college soon. We

couldn't love them any more if they were our own kids. We've changed half this house to accommodate them.”

Over time, most of the second floor had become AJ's living space. He had his own master bedroom and an equally large guest bedroom had become Tori and Kalea's living space when they were there and not in the treehouse. AJ had his own home theater on the floor as well as a game room that contained pinball machines, arcade games, football and foosball tables and an old-fashion juke box. There was also the music listening room across the hall. AJ had collected hundreds of CDs over the years as well as old 78s and 45s – vinyls that he played on a turntable.

In addition, there was a two-lane custom bowling alley in the *subterranean living space* that had formally been the basement. The bowling alley was constructed with AMF and Brunswick equipment complete with ball return rack, automatic scoring cameras and a large-screen overhead display.

AJ had a separate game room on the other side of the bowling alley. The “Game Cave” as he affectionately called it, contained every popular board game known to man. He all but lived down there during the bad years while he was fighting the cancer.

When he was too sick to eat or hurt too much to sleep he would curl up in the theater room and watch movie after movie or Stu and Fran would find him in the game room playing by himself. Of course they invited kids over, boys he'd made friends with when he was attending school, but he couldn't run and keep up, or do the things other boys did – wrestling and playing rough.

And then he looked ghastly; sick and weak, unnaturally pale and bald most of the time. What a stroke of luck they thought, when Tori came into their lives. She thought he was the luckiest kid ever, actually able to take his leg off. When he relapsed at the age of twelve and she saw what he had to go through she chopped off half her hair in solidarity before Fletcher discovered it and stopped her. A few minutes more and she would have cut her hair off down to the scalp. It literally took Stu shaving his head bald to appease her. She couldn't bear the thought of AJ suffering alone.

They moved to The Mesa because of Tori. *Little kept secret.* They initially lived in St. Helena a good 20 minute ride away. Fletcher had purchased the land rights to The Mesa and pitched developing it into a gated Community to the Napa County Zoning Board. Once the project was given the board's blessing Fletcher divided the acreage into lots and hand-picked his prospective neighbors from among 136 applicants. He built a miniature golf course, tennis, volley-ball, and racquet-ball courts. A scenic running trail rounded a small man-made lake which became a haven for woodpeckers, humming birds, swallows, warblers and a few owls. The lake itself was the home of a large family of ringed-neck ducks, and residents would spot the errant peregrine falcon or lone night hawk every now and again.

"Daddy will pick us up around three." Kalea said. "So we'll need to be all packed up. And the cool thing is there's a wedding on Sunday. The whole place is rented out."

Kale's first restaurant, The Maui House, started to fail right around the time his marriage started to have problems. On top of that Kale made a risky investment deal

with his kid brother Makani, which tanked practically overnight. That, along with trying to save his failing restaurant had cost Kale millions. When he approached Pualani with the idea of mortgaging their home that was it.

Pualani felt her unquestioning support of Kale over a four year period had practically partnered her in his ruin. They were angry and fighting nearly non-stop. Kale was home less and less, trying to save his restaurant and salvage his and his brother's deal, and Kalea was failing; failing school, failing health, failing emotionally. Her near genius intelligence was a ready-made barrier; she was too young to be so smart. Too smart for her peers and too intimidating for adults. It was incredibly difficult for her to find a place to fit in, so Pualani worked to make home the sanctuary her child needed.

Kale's brother Makani acquired the broken-down Vineyard as payment on an old debt from a friend. It had acres of land and four free standing buildings; a 3-story home, the winery, a large storage type building and the building that would eventually become The Restaurant.

Kale moved in with Makani and one fateful day as they were rummaging around the winery building they found a cache of bottled wine. As they sat drinking one of the bottles they had an epiphany – resurrect their crashed and flamed-out lives by resurrecting the winery.

Pualani's landscaper had been a vintner for a large winery in France. Kale convinced Pualani to introduce him to Rene Filion. They brought the old man out and took him on a tour of the broken down estate. The old man chortled, gruffed and was

especially unimpressed by the two acres of grape vines; Zinfandel, Bordelaise, Semillon and Sangiovese, all ungrafted vines.

They apologized to Filion for wasting his time and asked him to sit, rest, and have a glass of old wine: a pinot noir that according to the label was about seven years old. When he brought the glass to his nose and inhaled, something awakened in his eyes and he swirled the wine around in the glass, inhaled the wine's fragrances again and looked at the brothers.

"Mon Dei!" he breathed. "Where did this come from?" Kale and Makani exchanged confused glances.

"We found it in a small room," Kale responded.

"Is there more?"

"Of this? Yes," Kale answered. "And others. White Bordeaux, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot..."

"Riesling," Makani added. "Something labeled Syrah."

"How long have they been cellared?" the old man asked breathlessly. "Cellared!" he shouted at their befuddled glances. "The age boys!"

"From what we can gather, 6 to 8 years." The old man shook his head smiling in wonder.

"Would you like to sample another one?" Makani asked. The old man stood.

"We shall sample them all."

That day the Kinimaka brothers and an old landscaper formed a partnership, and Mawehe Pauloa Vineyards was born.

“So Sunday we’ll be pretty much on our own,” AJ said.

During weddings at the Vineyard when the kids were there they were expected to stay out of the way and out of trouble. It was not unusual for Kale to have the kitchen prepare a buffet feast for the kids and have stacks of the latest movie releases set up in the home theater. Kale responded positively to any reasonable request the kids made, anything to keep them tame and out of mischief.

“Let’s take the ice cream maker,” Kalea said.

“yeah,” AJ agreed.

“Daddy should have everything you need in his kitchen.” Tori slid her phone out of her pocket.

“Let me text Mama Josie to be sure.” Mama Josie was Josephine Boudreau, the head chef and overall boss of The Restaurant’s kitchen. There were junior Chefs under her; experts in seafood, beef, poultry, sauces, breads and desserts. Thomas, an ex-Louisiana State prison warden, ran the house and the part of the restaurant that involved patrons. He was over the wait-staff, busses, hostesses and bathroom cleaners. Between Thomas and Josephine, The Restaurant ran like a well-oiled machine the four days a week it was open.

“We need a tracking plan,” Tori said as much to herself as to the others.

“I think we should head over after breakfast.” AJ said.

“Head where?” Kalea asked lazily, eyes closed. Tori sighed.

“To the crime scene.” Tori said.

“It’s not a crime scene.” AJ said. “Some kids just tore up some old unused grapevines.”

“The jury’s still out on that one dude,” Tori corrected. “I think this is a mystery.”

“You think everything’s a mystery.” AJ said.

“Everything is until proven otherwise. I’m a Fed in training, remember?” Tori said.

“You’re a 17 year old girl going to Fed Spy Camp,” AJ said chuckling.

“Everything starts someplace. I’m wearing my tracking moccs and I’m taking the knife Grandpa Bo gave me.”

“Which knife?” AJ asked. Tori had several knives, each one with a special use.

“I’m bringing my nautical telescope.” Kalea said.

“I guess I can bring a sketch pad so I can document the visual evidence.” AJ said.

“All right!” Tori smiled. “Now we’re a tracking team.”

Kale sent a bright red 2009 Hummer H3 for the kids. With the wedding on Sunday and other things going on he couldn’t pick them up himself.

AJ sat in the front with the driver, Eduardo. They were chatting away in Spanish. Tori, Kalea and the dog sat behind them. It was a 30 minute ride from The Mesa to the Winery. The closer they got the antsier Kalea got. She chatted away with Tori, hands flailing about.

Though Kalea was 14 she oftentimes seemed younger than that. She had this youthful freshness about her. As smart as she was she still seemed like a clueless kid in other areas. Tori marveled at her too little common sense as well as her huggy-touchy and at times whiny ways. Her being short just added to her persona.

The Hummer turned left toward the main house Kale shared with his younger brother Makani.

The Tuscan-style villa was situated in a corner that afforded a view of the winery grounds, an 11 acre expanse of the vineyard and an orchard in the rear. The Villa had been restored to its original outside as well as inside architecture; terracotta-tiles, beamed ceilings, soft colors, parquet floors.

Eduardo left the kids' bags at the elevator. It was forbidden for anyone other than Kale, Makani or Josie to go any further in the house and absolutely no one was allowed in Kalea's wing except for Josie and the maid.

Kale was very protective of his daughter. She may have been awkwardly enjoying puberty but the change was not lost on him. He watched his male staff like a hawk when the girls were about and they knew it. Young "use'ta be" Nick as he was fondly remembered, made an innocent teenage boy comment to Tori not realizing "stealth Ninja" Kale was right there observing. Even though Tori ignored him, Nick

turned to see Kale step out of the shadows. Kale wrote out a check on the spot, with an extra month's pay, folded it, and slipped it into Nick's shirt pocket then pointed him to the front gate.

All the employees knew what a sweet deal they had with the Kinimaka brothers. The brothers paid very well for less than a week's work. That made the rules easy to live by.

"So what do you kids want to do today?" Kale asked.

"Let's go look at the grapes." Tori said.

"I'm good with that." Kalea said.

"Cool with me." AJ concurred.

"Then let me make a quick phone call and we can go." Kale said standing.

"Is the mutt wearing the right legs?" Makani asked. The dog was wearing his 'roller' prosthetics.

"Naw, I can switch him into the hiking legs in a jiffy," AJ said.

"I'm going to the bathroom," Kalea announced.

"Me too." Tori said falling in behind her.

Kale thoroughly loved what had now become routine when all three kids were staying at the Vineyard. The first thing the kids wanted to do on the first day of their visits was to go out to the grove and the vineyard. It was always Tori's suggestion. She

wanted to look at the vines and see the growth and handle the grapes. She would ask tons of questions, all of which Kale would happily answer. He concluded it was because she was Sioux, a native of the land, and the vineyard not only intrigued her but held some earthy Native meaning as well.

In the past he'd spied Tori in the vineyard while the other two slept. The sun would barely be up yet she would be out there, walking the rows. He wasn't worried or concerned about her safety. He knew she could more than handle herself.

A little more than a year ago one of the hired hands came up on her and she kicked him so hard in the head he lay unconscious in the hospital for two straight hours. Even upon his release he couldn't walk steady for almost a week. Kale didn't bother to fine or fire him, he figured he'd learned his lesson.

Then there was Luke "the fool," he was summer help. He said something off hand about AJ's prosthetic while the trio was within ear shot. Before anyone could tell Luke to shut up or at least duck, Tori had picked up a heavy crystal elephant and threw it at him. Luke dropped like a sack of potatoes, the side of his head gushing blood. Josie came running out of the kitchen at the sound of the ruckus to hear Tori yelling and inviting the "punk" to "step outside" and "bring yo punk mouth with you!"

Josie directed a couple of the staff to take Luke to the hospital. Kale showed up later to pay the hospital bill and to slide a healthy severance check into his pocket. He strongly suggested to Luke that he not make waves. He was out-monied and out-gunned and no one had seen Luke the fool since. That and the altercation with use'ta be Nick

taught everybody else a truism about Tori Logan - the Native kid could put a grown man in the hospital so she wasn't to be trifled with.

“Are we ready?” Tori asked, wiping damp hands on her capris. AJ had slid another pair of prosthetics on the dog and cinched them in place. The dog walked stiffly and comically as it always took him a few minutes to adjust to the change. He'd been wearing the 'rolling' prosthetics designed for paved sidewalks and roadways. Constructed with shock absorbent hinges and titanium balls the dog would use his front paws to stop. When on grass or at the beach the dog had a pair of carbon-fiber blades he liked wearing. He also had different pairs of walking prosthetics custom-made for every possible walking surface. The ones he was currently wearing were especially designed for walking on dirt and along trails.

AJ and his family were returning home from one of his treatments when they saw the car in front of them strike the dog. He bounced off two cars before landing in a ditch. No one stopped to check on him; that is no one but the Reynolds. AJ saw the whole thing and made such a fuss that Fran demanded Stu pull over and check on the animal. The dog was a bloodied, mangled mess but Stu wrapped him in his jacket, put him in the cargo area and sped off to the nearest vet hospital.

Both rear legs were too mangled to save and were amputated immediately. The dog had internal injuries and was hurt to the extent it was suggested he be put to sleep. What could Stu do, looking down into the weary and sick-battered face of his one-legged boy? Put a two-legged dog to sleep? Stu stood in the waiting room of the vet hospital,

let loose a few choice swear words and then handed his American Express Centurion card to the doctor with instructions to spare no expense.

“Do we need to leash him?” Makani asked.

“Naw, he’s good.” AJ answered. The dog had learned not to run off or go chasing after stuff. He’d learned that lesson the hard way.

One of the hired hands dropped off a touring jeep. Mawehe Pauloa Vineyards had regularly scheduled tours to the main vineyard. There were eight acres of lush impressive vines and an olive grove that kept tourists enchanted. The winery was to the side of the grove; it was a giant stone structure that comfortably held more than 200 barrels.

The brothers and kids would take a leisurely ride through Kalea’s favorite spots. Both were areas of the winery the brothers didn’t allow guests to tramp through. This area contained the brothers’ prized and most loved vines. It was this area that took them out of ruin and started them on the road to becoming one of the most lucrative wineries in all of California. Their wines were not only nationally known but had also achieved some international acclaim.

Kale and Makani climbed into the front of the jeep and the kids climbed in the back. A row of thick padded seats with cushy padded backs lined both sides of the touring jeep. The jeep was open air except for the flat canopy-covering which had been completely rolled back and tied in place against the cab.

Kale turned off the drive and headed to the vineyard. It had been a few weeks since the kids were here and there was noticeable growth and change. Kale took a right at the dirt road then drove up to the edge of the olive grove and stopped.

“First stop!” Makani called over his shoulder. The kids climbed out, not waiting for the tailgate to be opened.

“This is our Olive Grove,” Makani said in his tour guide voice. Even though the trio had been to the grove numerous times, Makani never tired of giving them the whole tour and they never tired of hearing it.

Large olive trees were spread out for half an acre; with Frantoio, Leccino and Maulino olives hanging from the branches. The trees were squat and thick trunked, about 35 feet tall with limbs that spread out 20-25 feet.

Tori reached out, touching the rugged bark of one of the trees. The grove reminded her of her Reservation. The grass was kept cut low, yet the uneven cluster planting of the trees along the slightly elevated hill reminded her of the deep thick forests of the other home she loved so much.

As they continued walking they came across an oval shaped table that had been set up in the middle of the grove. It was covered with a sandy-brown tablecloth. All the varieties of Olive Oil the Kinimaka brothers bottled had been imprinted as a border design that rimmed the lower edge of the tablecloth. On top of the table was a warmer, a tin with bottled water chilling in ice and bottles of olive oil.

“Yippee!” Kalea squealed, taking off toward the table. This was her favorite part of the tour. The dog took off after her.

“Don’t eat all the bread!” Kale called out. Kalea was already unpacking things; the still warm loaves of bread; some oval and soft freshly baked, thin pita bread, still warm, and thin triangle squares of herbed toast. Kalea opened the bottles of olive oil and poured each onto its separate plate. Beside that was an aluminum covered platter of whole olives; green, red-purple and jet black.

The group stood sampling the olives and olive oil while Makani continued his tour speech. He shared how the olives were machined pressed squeezing the last drop of oil from each olive; the bottling process and the various blue ribbons and other awards their olive oil had won over the years. The kids listened attentively as if hearing this story for the first time. They whoo’ed and ahh’ed and asked tons of questions while sampling everything.

“Okay group, we can take a short-cut over here to the left to reach the vineyard,” Kale said. “I want to take you someplace new.” In a few minutes they were out of the olive grove and on the access road. Directly across from where they were standing was the smaller, non-tourist vineyard that spanned 12 acres. Neat rows of dark colored grapes fanned out in front of them.

“These are our Syrah grapes,” Kale said leading the group over the short access bridge, across the roadway and into the field. “This part is off limits to tours. It takes a lot of our time to grow these grapes because of the special care and handling we give them. We use these grapes to make our own blend under a special label. We also use

these grapes in a handful of our specialty aged wines. So each harvest is vitally important to us.”

“I smell berries,” Tori said pressing her nose against a fat cluster of grapes.

“Good nose,” Kale said. “The finished wine does have a slight blackberry taste that we like to subtly enhance.” Tori picked a grape, wiped it off and plopped it in her mouth.

“Hmm, this is a little sour.” She commented.

“With a little more time on the vine it’ll lose that taste.” Kale said. Tori took a few more grapes in her hand as they walked along.

“We’ve had good results with the blends we’ve created with these grapes.” Kale continued as the group walked through the vineyard. “So much so that we’re thinking about expanding the field in the next year or so. The wine we make from these grapes bodies up better the longer it’s aged, but the longer a bottle is aging is a bottle we’re not selling today.”

They came to the end of the row to find a table set up in the machinery access roadway. The table was also covered with a sandy brown tablecloth. The various wines the Kinimaka Brothers bottled had been captured in a border design that rimmed the lower edge of the tablecloth. On top of the table was a bowl teeming with clusters of varied colored grapes, cheeses, crackers, bottles and glasses. The kids dug into the grapes almost immediately barely taking in Kale’s explanation of what each grape was and how they used it in their bottled wines.

Kale uncorked a bottle of white wine, poured some into a wine glass and swirled it a bit.

“Now smell.” He held out the glass for each to smell.

“A little like a flower,” Kalea said.

“And like dried fruit,” AJ added, “I like dried fruit.” he smiled.

“This is one of our more popular blends with the 20-something crowd,” Makani said.

“Now smell this,” Kale said holding out another glass, this time a red blush, under each of their noses.

“Hmm, this one is kinda spicy,” AJ said.

“Definitely berry,” Tori said.

“Right in both cases.” Kale said. “This is our most popular blend with the soccer mom group.”

“Now we brought some sparkling wine for you three to sample,” Makani said. He lifted three bottles out of the cooler under the table. “This is from our non-alcoholic group and it’s become very popular over the last couple of years.” Makani poured them each a glass.

“This is good.” AJ said a little surprised. “It’s more fruity than sparkling, if that makes sense.”

“Perfect sense.” Kale said. “We blend it that way on purpose. Our polls show that the teen to college set likes a more robust non-alcoholic flavored wine.”

“They want to taste more flavor than fizz,” Makani added.

“Adults who are or have been wine drinkers generally want a subtler taste.” He filled their empty glasses from another bottle.

“So these grapes made this?” AJ asked motioning with his now empty glass.

“Not these.” Kale responded. “These grapes are set aside to make specialty wines under our own label as well as used in a number of our blends. These 12 acres alone aren’t enough to allow us to both cellar and make a non-alcohol blend.” He turned, pointing to the expansive rolling hills of neatly rowed vines around them.

“We’ve got 12 acres of Merlot,” He said pointing to the left, “To the rear of that is 53 acres of Zinfandels, to the side of that is 42 acres of Sauvignon and on the other side we have 30 acres of Pinot Grias grapes. So of the 180 acres we own, roughly 150 have grapes, and an acre and a half has the olive grove.”

“Just how big is an acre?” AJ asked turning to take it all in.

“About the size of a football field.” Makani answered.

“What’s on the other side of the land we’re looking at?” Tori asked.

“Well there’s 25 acres of forest, trees, hills, rock structures, and ponds. We’ve got a nice sized pond that we keep stocked for those special clients of ours who like to fish. You kids have been trailing back there.”

“And we own that?” Kalea asked.

“Yes baby, we do.” Kale said putting his arm around her shoulder. “Then there’s the four and a half acres up near the house. That includes the house, the winery, buildings for the machinery and vehicles, and on the other side the building for making and storing the olive oil. As you know over from that is the Little Town Mall.”

The Little Town Mall was half an acre of shops including the restaurant the brothers ran four days a week. There was a sign pointing out Grape Main on one side of the street and Grape Vine on the other side. In the very center of Town Mall was a large fountain with four life-sized figures of women carrying pitchers in their arms or on their heads, with water spewing out in the middle of the pool.

Various little shops lined Grape Vine Street where visitors could purchase wines, olive oils and cheeses. There was also a large gift shop, a chocolatier store and a bakery. At the end of the street was a Customer Service building that housed the vineyard’s security office, information desk and the restrooms.

“We should camp out here sometimes,” Tori said looking at the expanse of grapevines and rolling hills in front of them.

“You’re always saying that.” AJ remarked.

“And I’m always saying no,” Kale interjected. “You kids are not camping out here in the vineyards or the grove.”

“How about the forest?!” Kalea said jumping up and down clapping.

“Have you lost your mind?!” Kale asked. The others laughed. “No camping anywhere.” Makani chuckled, patting his brother on the back.

“Don’t get an embolism big bro.” he said.

“You kids can camp back at the house,” Kale said. “but not in any trees.” He quickly added, “Feet on the ground.” He looked at his watch. “It’s getting late, the restaurant will be opening soon. We need to get back.” The group turned and followed Kale back toward the vehicle.

“I want to know where you kids are at all times,” Kale said as they walked back through the orchard. The trio groaned.

“I mean it,” Kale said. “If you’re not at the house I want you to phone me where you are, and when you move from that place let me know.”

“Yes daddy,” Kalea signed.

“And tomorrow I want you to have a field phone: the cell reception can be spotty the deeper you go into the forest.”

“Yes dad.” Kalea said a bit aspirated. She glanced over to Tori and AJ and rolled her eyes. The pair giggled.

“Okay kids jump in,” Makani said lowering the vehicle’s tailgate. The kids and the dog climbed in. Kale started the vehicle and they were off.

“Sorry guys,” Kalea said.

“Bout what?” Tori asked.

“My crazy over-protective father,” Kalea answered.

“Listen, your dad’s not gonna chill with you until you’re thirty.” AJ said.

“Thirty with a husband and kids,” Tori added. “Look, you’re his only kid and you’re 14 years old *and* a girl? Kiki, your pop’s gonna be tripping for a while.”

“But you’re only a couple of years older than me and your dad lets you do stuff.”

Kalea said to Tori.

“I’m a Lakota kid,” Tori explained. Kalea and AJ waited for her to say more but she simply shrugged as if that explained it all.

“That’s not an answer,” AJ said.

“Of course it is,” Tori replied. “Look, Lakotas are raised different. We’re raised to be independent, to think for ourselves and be able to survive on our own. From an early age we go into the forest with our Elders and are taught to survive. Part of this training is them backing off and letting us make certain decisions for ourselves. I was around three the first time my grandpa and mom took me camping. Gramps was teaching me to track at four. I was nine the first time I spent the night alone by myself with nothing but a knife and a hammock. When I was twelve grandpa took me deep into the forest and just left me there for a whole week, living off the land. Again, all I had was a hammock and knife. Feel free not to mention that in front of my pops. He doesn’t know anything about that.”

“My dad needs to take a page out of your dad’s book and leave me alone too.” Then Kalea went on some long tirade about her dad but Tori wasn’t listening. That remark about her dad had landed and stung a bit.

Tori knew her father was gone a lot but she didn’t let it bother her – well she didn’t let it bother her much. Tori had told herself the reason why her father was never around more than two consecutive weeks in a row was because he was making a living in order to provide a good home for her but the excuse had begun to wane over the years. Her dad was getting richer and richer and the house was showing it. It was filling up with expensive art, toys and things that were more a luxury than a necessity.

Tori knew AJ had been right the last time they talked, well, really argued about Rachael. Rachael had more than a few of her own millions. Deep down Tori had no doubt that Rachael was around because she actually loved her father. Yet she had equally convinced herself that her father’s frequent and extended absences were because he hadn’t fully gotten over her mother. Tori told herself that Rachael was “okay” but was no match for the wife her mother had been to her dad. She felt that her father was a tortured soul imprisoned by the memory of his beloved Wachiwi, that theirs was a timeless love never to be found again. Tori remembered how her dad was such a mess when her mother died that her grandparents had to make all the funeral arrangements. He was so distraught afterwards that they got on a plane and left the country for nearly a year. Tori was convinced this was the reason her grandparents never mentioned their daughter Wachiwi in her father’s presence, out of respect for his grief.

AJ elbowed Tori and she snapped out of her daydream.

“We’re here.” he said. Here was back at the house. Josie was standing at the foot of the steps.

“Mama Josie!” the trio yelled when they saw her standing there. They jumped out of the jeep and rushed her. There were hugs and kisses and the three of them talking at once.

“Goodness, goodness.” Josie breathed.

“Are you going to visit with us a while?” Kalea asked.

“For a bit, then I have to go back to The Restaurant. There’s fresh squeezed lemonade in the house.” They turned and AJ took one hand and Tori the other.

“Well I don’t have a hand to hold,” Kalea pouted.

“Oh stop being such a kid,” Tori said releasing Josie’s hand. “Since I don’t have a hand I get to talk first,” Kalea took Josie’s hand and squeezed, “And I get to hold your hand all day tomorrow.” Tori added.

“Well that doesn’t sound right.” Kalea said.

“Then gimme her hand back.” Tori responded.

“Well I guess it’s okay.” Kalea relented hugging herself to Josie’s side. Josie and the brothers laughed. Tori bounced in front of the group.

“Are you going to be okay with this brood?” Kale asked Josie with a smile.

“Just come get me in a couple of hours.” Josie said over her shoulder. The kids led her noisily across the porch and into the house.

Kale and Makani exchanged glances and smiles as they walked to the jeep.

“Good luck with that crazy pack tonight brother.” Makani said. “I’ve got a late date so I won’t be coming home.” Kale nodded as he started the jeep and pulled off. One of the now unspoken rules between the brothers was no dates sleeping over when Kalea was there.

“Just make sure you’re back at a decent time tomorrow.” Kale said. “I want to start getting set up for Sunday’s wedding.”

“Got’cha Bro. How long we got the mid-sized crew?”

“Until Monday morning.” Kale answered. Makani chuckled. “Just help me keep’em out of trouble, okay?”

“I’ll do my best Bro.”

The trio drank tea and lemonade and generally talked over each other while Josie made lunch.

By the time Kale doubled back after lunch to pick Josie up the trio were all out back sitting in the overstuffed lounge chairs under umbrellas around the pool. They were all asleep, even the dog.

“Well how long has this been going on?” Kale asked in a quiet voice.

“About thirty minutes. They’re going to be swinging from the rafters the rest of the evening. They look like such perfect little angels.” Josie said looking at each one. She misted up a bit.

“Come along now.” Kale said taking her hand. “You know they’re going to be underfoot tomorrow.”

“They’ll be fine.” Josie said patting his arm. “They’re growing so I don’t half feel I see them enough.”

“I know what you mean, but we’ve got them off and on over the summer. We’ll all make up for lost time.” Kale locked up the house and he and Josie left.

Kalea’s theater room contained a large theater type screen hanging from the wall. The floor was a thick padded burgundy carpet and the walls were covered with a burgundy colored raised textured wallpaper.

There was a stack of DVDs at the machine in the back and the trio had planned to look at each and every one. They were looking at Kalea’s DVD choice first since she claimed home-field advantage and because she wanted to spend a good portion of the evening looking at the stars through her telescope.

The trio had eaten and were well into Kalea’s first movie *Capricorn One*. Though Kalea was thoroughly engrossed in the movie, Tori and AJ were half-watching and half-talking.

“We’ll be at your house on Monday,” AJ whispered. “When are we going to grandpa Bo’s again?”

“The week of August 16 and remember to bring something to wear to church.”
Tori whispered back. “And don’t forget to bring a tie.”

“Why do I gotta wear a tie?” AJ asked a little too loudly. He was quickly shushed by Kalea.

“Dude, don’t start.” Tori said. “Grandma Louise ‘not raising no heathens’.” Tori mocked. “So you gotta wear a tie.”

“Well I’ve been to churches out here and some let you wear shorts and flops.”

“Are you on drugs?” Tori asked loudly. Kalea shushed her.

“Look dude,” Tori said. “You can be all the white boy you want to be out here, but at the Grands you’re going to a straight up Black church. That means pants, normal shoes, white shirt *and* tie. Remember last year?”

AJ thought back chuckling. He’d packed pants and shoes and he brought crew neck short-sleeved shirts but Grandma Louise wasn’t having it. He had to wear one of Bo’s white shirts and a tie. Being tall and stout Grandpa Bo’s shirt swallowed AJ up and the only tie he could find that didn’t make him feel or look like an old man was bright red.

“If you know her like I do you’ll bring your own shirt and tie.” Tori advised.

“Yeah and you better bring a dress, I can’t wait.” AJ tried to hold the laugh in.

“You want to get socked in the head?” Tori asked leaning toward him and waving a balled fist in his face. AJ laughed out loud.

“Stop laughing at the non-laughing parts!” Kalea called out.

“It’s all non-laughing parts!” AJ retorted just as loudly. “Whoever heard of a movie about a fake moon landing?”

“It’s about a faked *Mars* landing,” Kalea corrected. “And the movie is practically a classic.” Both Tori and AJ snorted.

“You’re the only person who’s ever seen *Capricorn One*,” Tori said. “That’s not enough to make it a classic.”

“You know this movie is the reason behind the belief that the NASA Moon landing was faked.” AJ said.

“Yeah,” Tori joined in. “There’s a whole population out there that believes the Moon landing never happened.” Kalea sat up and stared at Tori and AJ through squinted eyes.

“They think the whole thing was filmed on an elaborate movie set that NASA created when they figured out they couldn’t get a guy to the Moon and back,” AJ said.

Kalea squinted even more, pressing her lips in a strong pout.

“Do you think the whole universe is a fake, huh?” Kalea asked sitting up fully. “Do you think the Hubble Telescope is on some movie set and the video and pictures it’s sending back is all faked up? Do’ya? Have you seen the pictures? Only God in Heaven

could make something look like that. No human being could paint pictures like that in a million years. Not even in their wildest imagination could they do it. I'm going to outer space because I want to see all this with my own eyes."

Kalea threw up her hands when she turned to the screen, realizing she'd missed a few minutes of the movie. She reached for the remote on the tray beside her chair. Tori and AJ protested immediately.

"No rewinding!" they both yelled out. That was the standing rule; it had to be or they'd never get through all the movies they planned to see in one evening.

"You made me miss some!" Kalea protested.

"Okay, okay don't have a cow but don't be talking to us." Tori said.

"Then don't be saying nothing against NASA."

"Nobody's saying anything about your precious NASA," AJ said. "Why do you want to go up there anyway?" He asked.

"Dude, let her watch the movie or we'll be here forever." Tori whined.

"Hey, I'm just asking." AJ said.

"She's said why a dozen times already." Tori said. "Cause she's looking for God out there. She wants to stare God straight up in his face."

"I didn't say I wanted to stare at his face," Kalea corrected. "I said I want to find him. God's up there," she said wistfully. "Out past all the universes, beyond everything to the end and the edge of everything there's God: the one who painted everything up

there we see. I just want to go up there and find him. I want to find the person that can paint like that.” Kalea turned back to the movie.

“Well you better bring a dress.” AJ whispered to Tori. “Everybody knows you gotta get dressed up if you want to see God.”

Kalea finished her round of movies and was actually sitting still long enough to watch AJ’s first selection, *Highlander*.

“I’m wearing my kilt to Viking Week.” AJ announced to no one in particular. He didn’t mind talking during his movies, you just had to be quiet during his favorite parts.

“You do know that a kilt and Viking clothes are different?” Tori said to him. They’d had this conversation before yet he persisted in wearing a kilt with his Viking outfit anyway.

“I don’t know why you wear a kilt in the first place.” Tori said taking a mouthful of popcorn.

“Every time I watch this movie I feel a connection.” AJ said.

“You cannot possibly get some type of DNA recognition sense by watching a movie.” Tori said.

“I think I’m part Scottish.” AJ said ignoring her.

“You’re part nuts.” Tori said. “Look, Vikings wear leggings, shirts and tunics. The guys don’t wear kilts or skirts.” Tori said motioning to the actors on the screen. “That’s why you get ragged on during Viking Week.”

“That was only that one time,” AJ said, “and the guy who did the ragging got punched in the stomach by an unnamed somebody and that’s been the end of any ragging.”

Tori smiled. AJ was right. The guy had kidded AJ about his kilt – “wearing a woman’s skirt” and then he turned to Tori and said something about the Sioux chest piece she was wearing. It wasn’t unusual for Tori to wear something Sioux with her outfit. The guy had said something offensive about it, and worse, when Tori asked him to repeat it he did. She punched him square in the stomach. He was too tough to fall to his knees though he wavered, but it was enough to get his attention and everyone else’s respect. It was one of the reasons behind the establishment of the Keldudalr’s Bylaws. There’s now an entire section that deals with “respect” in the Village and prohibits any fighting outside of the scheduled games.

The bylaws also loosely discussed Viking attire and stated that since no one from that time is actually alive today to either protest or instruct, the Village would respect cultural individuality, as well as the cross-cultureness of its members, just so long as it wasn’t offensive, insulting, anti-patriotic (or anti-anybody else). To be on the safe side they instituted a committee who had to okay any additions or deviations to what was considered traditional dress. The dress code not only allowed Tori to accent her outfit

with a bit of Lakota clothing but it freed her from being bound to wearing traditional Viking female clothing, i.e. a dress.

Tori dressed in what she defined as “warrior clothes,” leggings and a long female cotton blouse tied at the waist by a wide leather belt. She was also fond of wearing her weapons attached to the belt - sword at her side and a knife attached to the other side. Looped on the knife side she usually wore her Lakota clan’s colors as a sash. This year she would be wearing an authentic female warrior outfit she was having specially made for Viking Week. She’d found a Comic-Con tailor and all she had to do was take him a Marvel Comic and point to the character whose outfit she wanted him to copy. He said he could hook her up.

“Look, I’m not saying you can’t wear a kilt dude, cause the bylaws say you can, I’m just saying the kilt stuff isn’t Viking.”

“Well I’m representing.” AJ said. Tori sat up.

“You’re representing what?” she asked.

“My people and my clan.” He said pointing to the screen.

“Scottish people?” Tori asked. “Dude, you were left at the Texas Zoo wrapped in a tiger blanket with a note that said – ‘I can’t take care of him and he likes apple juice.’ The note wasn’t signed, didn’t say what you were or your name or clan or anything. Nobody saw your mama or ever found her. The State called you baby AJ Doe until your today folks adopted you. Out of all the different cultures and clans on the planet how are you Scottish?”

“I just feel it.” He said. “I think it’s an empathy thing.”

“In that ‘empath’ means you can psychologically tune into the emotions of others, I don’t think it lends itself to the psychic discernment of one’s maternal or paternal ancestry,” Kalea explained. “However there are other ways to learn your ancestry, Ancestry.Com for instance.” She took out her phone and pulled up the website, then she handed the phone to AJ.

“You saying I should do this?” he asked.

“It can’t tell you who your bio parents are but it will tell you the people-groups in your ancestry and the percentages.”

“I don’t know.” he said.

“You don’t know what?” Tori asked. “You’ve been wearing this Scottish thing out since you saw *Braveheart*. This test will tell you for sure if you have any Scottish blood in you.”

“Hey, let’s all do it!” Kalea said.

“All of us?” Tori said turning to her. “Kid I’m Lakota, African-American and Norse. Percentages aren’t important.”

“It’ll be fun.” Kalea said jumping up from her seat and running out of the room. Tori shook her head and sat back in her chair.

“Look dude,” Tori said. “Wear your kilt but wear enough Viking too, okay?”

“You’re not gonna have to punch anybody in the stomach on my account.” AJ smiled.

“You can handle yourself dude,” Tori said. “I just get worked up and go off that’s all. I got your back anytime the odds get squirrely.” Kalea bounded back into the room.

“It’s all done,” She announced.

“What’s all done?” Tori asked.

“The DNA thing. I ordered the kits and we should all be receiving them at our homes within the next couple of weeks. Follow the instructions, send the test back in the mailer they’re providing and then wait for the results. Then we’ll all get together and share them.”

“That’ll be interesting.” Tori said.

“Yeah, who knows, I might even be Lakota.” AJ smiled. With that Tori jumped up and much to Kalea’s and AJ’s amusement she went on an arm waving, head practically spinning around tirade that the pair was able to egg on for nearly 30 minutes.

AJ was asleep in the theater room and Kalea had stretched out on one of the lounge chairs on the roof of the mansion’s tower. She’d come up to stare at the stars and dream, being lost in both for three hours before her eyelids started to weigh on her. She told herself she would lay down for a few minutes and then get back up. She’d tossed a

sheer mosquito net over the standing umbrella and pulled it down over the lounge chair, enclosing the chair and herself. She was fast asleep when Tori came up to check on her.

Kalea's dad would have had a fit if he saw Tori sitting on the raised overhang. She was sitting with her back against a brick rise with her left leg dangling over the side and her right leg bent and crossed across the ledge. Though adults had a problem with Tori sitting or climbing up on high things it was never a problem for her. She'd climbed trees with her mother and gone rock climbing with her grandpa Bo. In addition, she'd climbed mountains, trees and ruins around the dozens of places she traveled with her father. Fear of heights was never a concern with her. As a matter of fact, that was one thing that was never allowed to develop in Lakota children.

Tori loved the darkness, the darker the better. She'd learned at a very tender age to love, respect and even desire darkness. Over the year's she'd developed night vision, being trained from early childhood to literally see in the dark. Coming from the Tribal Clan of Wolf Trackers she was taught in the ways of the wolf and at an early age she had gained a reputation throughout the Reservation for being able to track as well as, or even better than a grown, experienced man.

Though poo-poo'ed by many her skill was put to the test when a ten year old boy went missing somewhere in Yellowstone National Park. The Park's wilderness guides had called on her grandfather and the Lakota tracking team to locate the boy after he was missing for three days.

Tori was paired with her grandfather and the sun was slowly setting when Tori suggested to her grandpa Bo they could cover twice as much ground alone. Bo gave Tori explicit instructions and they agreed to meet back at a designated location in two hours.

Approximately an hour and a half later Bo heard the wolf call and knew it was his granddaughter. She was either in trouble or she'd found the lost boy. It was the latter.

Bo hoisted the boy onto his shoulder and ran with him back to base camp where the search was being conducted. There were shouts and screaming and joyful yells from the family and loved ones. Friends and strangers slapped Bo on the back. It was only after the ambulance had left with the child and family traveling behind that Bo told the remaining group Tori had been the one to locate the missing child. All eyes turned to the young girl, staring at her in complete and total disbelief. Tori was nine years old at the time.

The boy being found by a child created a bit of a local media frenzy. Tori told the story to the area newspapers, TV news programs and to the National Park Service the exact way her grandfather told her. She'd claimed to have followed an obscure path, picked up the boy's trail and followed it to the grove of trees where he was laying. Then she ran back for her grandfather because the boy was too heavy for her to carry or drag by herself. He picked the boy up and carried him to the camp. That was the story she told and it was more than convincing.

Tori received a couple of awards and had her picture taken with the boy, then after two weeks her 15 minutes of fame was over. She returned home but things didn't

completely return to normal. On the Reservation the Clan's Elders wanted to hear the story for themselves so she told them what really happened.

Tori looked into the old weather-scarred, time-wrinkled face of the Chief Elder of the Lakota tribe. She knew she couldn't tell him the newspaper story. She was sitting in the Chief's teepee, surrounded by skins, ornaments and things of her people that he'd collected over the decades. She could smell the smoke of a century of Lakota life in the skin walls. She sensed her obligation to the old, dying man.

She and her grandfather separated to maximize their search time and shortly afterwards she picked up a scent. It wasn't animal, it was human. Somehow she knew it was the boy. The scent led her across a river and into a thicket. She didn't know how long she'd been tracking him when suddenly she realized it was getting late and she was walking further and further from the place she and her grandfather had agreed to meet.

She stopped and sat on a boulder to rest and pray to the Great Spirit for help: asking for her people to not be shamed by being unable to find the missing boy. No sooner had she taken up the trail again she heard the screeching of an Eagle overhead. She looked up as the screeching got louder and she could hear the words – "Follow me." "Follow me." The eagle was flying in the air and she was running below it for several minutes when it disappeared from her sight. She called out to it – "wanbli luga" *swift eagle*.

The eagle was gone and then she looked to see a large gray silver wolf approaching - "Follow me." it said turning. A few minutes later she came upon the boy.

The boy had been hiking alone in the woods when he stumbled upon a trapped wolf cub that had gotten stuck under an old log. The boy knew enough not to actually touch

the cub so he lifted the log and it scurried free. When the boy went back to hiking he got lost and the more he walked the more lost he got. The wolf tried to help him because it was her cub he'd freed but he became afraid and ran further and further from people and deeper into the woods. When he laid down the wolf came to keep him warm at night, covering him with her body, hoping the humans would soon find him. She wanted to save him because he was someone's cub and he'd saved hers.

The wolf spoke to Tori in her people's language. The wolf told her she'd heard the eagle's call and saw a small wolf coming out of the trees walking on its hind legs. As the little wolf got closer it turned into a child, it turned into Tori.

The Chief, who had lived 102 summers had never heard such a tale. He called for his drum and his pipe and tobacco. Tori had gone on a rescue mission and had a vision quest instead. Instead of having one totem, Tori had two; the Eagle and the Wolf. This meant Tori would be the full embodiment of her Clan's strengths, talents and ways, and that her medicine bag would contain both the medicine of the Eagle and the Wolf. Tori would soar as well as run. She would tame the earth and master the wind and sky.

The Elders, including her grandfather, beat their drums, chanted and passed the pipe. Even Tori smoked. The Chief gave Tori her *totem* name, a name that only she and her totems would know. Then he instructed the Elders on how Tori was to be raised from that time forward.

Afterwards Tori noticed a change in how people treated her whenever she visited the Reservation. She had the freedom to go anywhere and stay with any family she chose. This meant she could stay in their trees, so she would visit the home earlier in the day,

point out a tree and ask if she could sleep there. The owner would of course say yes. They would dote on her as if she was their own daughter. They would bring food out to her and if they had children her age she would play with them, and in the morning she would bless the house, the land, the family and move on.

As for the training, her grandfather and the other Elders would take to the woods and train their sons and Tori in the clan way of the wolf and the way of the eagle. When their sons' training was done for the day they would be sent home and Tori's training would continue.

When the old Chief was near death he charged the Clan Elders with Tori's continued training. They were to watch over her as they would their own daughters and if there ever came a time when the White Man Fletcher was hindering her training or had again cut the tribe's contact with Tori, they were to kill him.

Tori took a deep breath of air and smiled. It was a soft mixture of flowers, olives and grapes; all sweet and good. Cars were beginning to drive away from the Vineyard property and soon everything would be closed, dark and sleeping.

Tori heard the front gate opening and she saw Kale's car pulling up the drive. She hopped down and made her way down the stairs to the theater room. AJ was snoring loudly and the DVD had looped itself where it was showing *Outlander* again. Tori sat next to AJ and closed her eyes. Kale would come in to find them both asleep.

“C’mon, everybody to bed.” he said taking AJ about the waist. AJ had ditched his prosthetic and Kale would help the half-asleep boy down the stairs.

Tori kicked off her moccasins and crawled into bed next to Kalea.

“C’mon boy,” Kale said. He took the end of the hammock and pulled it out so AJ could climb in. He had to lift AJ’s good leg to help coax him into the hammock. AJ was asleep within seconds. Kale ruffled his hair then kissed both Kalea and Tori before dimming the light. He stood in the doorway looking at the children, his children he told himself. “Ke akua pu.” He said, then he turned and took the elevator down.

Tori waited until she heard it lock in place then she got up and made her way back onto the roof. She took Kalea’s place on the lounge chair, pulling the netting down around her. It would be another hour before she’d finally doze off. Until then she would listen to the nightlife, smell the flavorful aromas and pull up memories of her mother. This had become her routine and way of life; it was the only way to keep the fear at bay, the raging horrifying fear that someday she might not remember much of her mother at all.

Breakfast was prepared and waiting on the kitchen deck area when the trio came down. Kale was already up, drinking coffee. Josie was flipping the last pancake into the warmer.

“Well you three are just in time.” Josie said. “Juice is in the fridge along with a fruit bowl. Bacon and sausage on the tray on the table and here are your pancakes. There

should be more than enough for all of you. You can make your own toast if you want it.”
The kids hugged her one by one.

“Mmm,” Josie said. “You children smell nice and fresh.”

“Come back after they’ve spent the afternoon tramping through the woods,” Kale said. “They’ll smell like three funky grown men.”

“Daddy!” Kalea said bending to hug him from behind. Kale smiled, patting her arm.

“Now children, I packed you a lunch. There’s a package in there for the dog with his own food in it.” She took off the apron and hung it on a hook near the pantry. “If you feed the dog chicken make sure there’s no bones in it, and take some water for him and yourselves.” She added.

“Yes ma’am.” They said grabbing plates and food.

“You’ll have your dinner at the restaurant.” Josie said to the kids.

“Kale, let me get my bag and you can drive me there.” And with that she turned and headed toward the Caretaker’s House where she lived.

“She bosses me around like I’m the help,” Kale said shaking his head. “Don’t tell her I said that.” The trio laughed.

“So what’s on the agenda for today?” Kale asked, putting down the newspaper.

“Really just hiking daddy,” Kalea answered. “We thought we’d hike up to the pond and check out the fish.”

“Do a couple of the normal trails,” AJ continued. “and check out the trashed grape vines.” Kale nodded.

“There’s cold water in the thermoses on the counter, your food and the radio phone.” Kale said. “Stay together, nobody goes off on their own.”

“Except for pee’ing.” Kalea said.

“Pee’ing is a given Lea,” her dad said. “And that only takes two seconds. And no climbing anything.” Tori chuckled to herself. About a year and a half back Kale and Makani followed one of the trails looking for them. They’d climbed one of the rocky crags to get a panoramic view of the place when they were discovered. Kale just about had a stroke. He’d gotten himself so worked up he couldn’t bear to watch them climb down. From that moment on they were forbidden from climbing anything.

Kale finished off the coffee and put the cup in the dishwasher.

“Either me or Makani will be here at four to pick you up so I want everybody all fresh and clean.”

“Okay daddy.” Kalea smiled.

The trio finished breakfast and cleared everything away. Kalea loaded and turned on the dishwasher.

“Okay, let’s make sure we have everything.” AJ said. “We’re not getting halfway up the trail then turn around for anything.”

“Let’s spread everything out and split it up so everybody’s carrying something,” Tori said. “Two containers of water, one of lemonade...”

“I can take the water in my pack.” AJ said.

“I’ll take the lemonade.” Kalea said.

“I got the chicken, chips and the mutt’s food.” Tori said. “Kalea you take the slices of pound cake. AJ, you take the paper plates, napkins and cups. Who’s got the mutt’s leash?”

“I got it.” Kalea said.

“I got my Bowie,” Tori said sliding it into the side pocket next to her Swarovski Rangefinder Binoculars.

“I got my sketch book and pencils,” AJ said packing them.

“I got my spyglass and the field phone.” Kalea said packing the folded brass telescope in a side pocket.

“First aid kit.” AJ said packing it and closing his bag. “I think we’re all set.” he said hoisting the pack across one shoulder.

“Yo’Mutt!” Tori called. The dog scampered into the room.

“Let’s hit it.” AJ said. They walked around the side of the house to the front where Kale’s Jeep Wrangler was parked.

AJ pulled off heading towards the edge of the vineyard that butted up against the acres of forest land. The Kinimaka brothers had created paved walking trails that circled a scenic area of the forest in that particular area. For the hikers the Brothers fashioned a number of trails, each marked and advancing in difficulty. Off one of the trails was a road leading to the stocked pond. It was a little harder to get to, and you had to know the way or you'd miss it. The Brothers made it difficult to reach on purpose so they could control who was fishing in their stream.

After driving for twenty minutes they pulled over to the small gravel lot used for parking and got out. There was a picnic area with two large tables and a pair of grills. There were also dual-locked restrooms situated off to the side of the parking lot.

"Hey let's take the boat out!" Kalea shouted when she noticed the canoe, covered and pulled up on the dock's edge.

"We didn't bring life jackets." AJ said.

"Let's look in the canoe, maybe your dad left some." Tori said as the group walked over to the boat.

"I say we take the canoe out anyway," Kalea said, helping to untie and pull back the tarp covering the boat.

"No way." AJ said untying his end. "Mr. K left me in charge and I'm not doing anything stupid."

“Dude, you’re in charge of driving the car, that’s it. You’re not the boss of us.” Tori clarified. “And if the canoe was to tip over, which it’s not, everybody can swim, even the mutt.”

“The whole thing is a moot issue,” Kalea said. “Here’s a bag of jackets.”

The *Santa Miss* was 22 feet long and could accommodate two to eight paddlers. Since the center two benches were removable AJ took them out to give them more space.

The group put on the jackets and left the bag of remaining jackets and benches on the dock at the pond’s edge.

Kalea and the dog got into the canoe and AJ and Tori pushed the boat off, jumping in themselves. AJ was wearing his waterproof prosthetic, which for the most part resembled his regular daily prosthetic. It was a little heavier than his other prosthetics and because he wore it so sparingly he had a slight limp.

Tori took a seat at the front of the canoe while AJ sat in the back. Both had oars and were maneuvering away from the dock. Kalea was seated on the remaining center bench while the dog was standing with his front paws on the bench in front of her.

Tori and AJ paddled leisurely while Kalea stretched back onto the packs. Tori’s smile widened as she sat on the bench, pulling the oar gently through the water. Birds were singing overhead and from the trees outlining the pond. Frogs were croaking, crickets and other scurrying things were alive and chirping.

The pond was a good-sized body of water that spanned 26 miles long and 60 feet at its deepest point. The Kinimaka brothers had a group of naturalists who came out once a

year to make sure the eco-system remained balanced and was not overly affected by the presence or intrusion of humans. The Brothers would bring small groups out 4-5 times a year to fish, but outside of that, the pond suffered minimal human encroachment. Not only was the area off the beaten path it was a bit rustic and wild for the average trailer and hiker. The Brothers didn't allow any camping or overnight stays on any of their property, nor were cooking fires allowed. The forest and woods were too close to the vineyards and one absent-minded camper or hiker could put them out of business.

To combat any infractions of the rules much of the vineyard was fenced in with only one road in and out. Then there were the signs posted everywhere forbidding camping, overnight stays, cooking, fire pits, etc. There were no trespassing signs and signs warning that the grounds were private property and were being patrolled and under video surveillance. The Kinimaka brothers meant it when they said they would prosecute infractors and had done so on a few occasions and as a result, they really didn't have any problems.

"Let's get out over there." Tori suggested pointing to one of their routine disembarking spots. It was a spot where the pond seemed to close off but in actuality it was sort of a cove area – the pond had an offshoot that, if you didn't know it was there you would float right by it. From a distance it looked like the shoreline was heavily thicketed with trees and tall grass but upon closer examination you discovered a narrow inlet.

"Yeah, let's go exploring." Kalea said sitting up. She took the hat she had clipped to her belt and put it on. Tori took the cap out of her side pocket and did the same. There

were low hanging trees lining the shore and all kinds of stuff could fall down and onto your head. Once AJ got pounded with so much bird poop he had to rinse his hair out in the pond and even then it smelled so bad the Kinimaka brothers wouldn't let him come into the house to shower but instead turned the hose on him and made him shampoo his hair outside before he could come in.

“Okay AJ,” Tori said. “to the right.” The inlet was narrow and its shoreline was declining. The shore dove under the water and sharp rocks jettied out under any boat passing by too closely. The trio was safe because the canoe was made of aluminum lined with reinforced Kevlar. Because of its shape the canoe was extremely buoyant and maneuverable but it was also very tough.

“Let me paddle.” Tori said. AJ let his paddle rest in the water, acting as a keel. The boat followed Tori's guiding strokes as she maneuvered it through the small inlet. The group had to duck down because of the low hanging branches. Kalea held onto her hat to keep a limb from snatching it off.

Tori expertly guided the canoe through the entry-way without so much as a bump.

“That's the Lakota way people.” she said smiling, quite pleased with herself. She guided the group through the inlet and out onto a hidden cove. The trees were thick and huge on both sides, overgrown, dark and for the trio – inviting.

“Let's pull over here.” AJ suggested. Together he and Tori paddled to the edge of land and Tori jumped out. Kalea stayed put while AJ climbed around her and got out to help Tori pull the canoe far enough up on land to keep it from drifting off. While AJ tied it off around the closest tree Tori and Kalea started to unload the packs.

“All secure,” AJ stated. Tori handed him his backpack and they headed off into the trees. Tori looked around, marking their spot as they walked. There was no marked out trail, road or walkway, so regardless of how they crisscrossed and snaked around the area while exploring, it was always left to Tori to get them back to the boat.

“These trees have to be a million years old.” AJ said slapping his hand against the bark of a giant redwood.

“In reality this particular tree is between 500-700 years old,” Kalea said, “Guesstimating from its height and diameter. The oldest tree here in California is at Big Sur. That redwood is 350 feet tall and about 2,000 years old. How crazy is that?” she smiled.

Tori and AJ looked at each other and laughed. Only Kalea would have that piece of obscure information in her head.

AJ opened the pack he had slung over his shoulder and took out his sketchbook and pencils. He’d found a log to sit on and was sketching the old tree in a thicket of other trees. The trees had grown so tall that their tops stretched out like a leafy green canopy hiding most of the light.

Tori stood over AJ’s shoulder, watching him draw. He had the hard cover sketchbook poised on a bent knee and held it while at the same time holding four charcoal pencils in the same hand. With the other hand he was sketching, changing out pencils, rubbing his finger against the page over a thick line to create shadow and depth.

Kalea moved on from the redwood to talk about the grass, flowers and plants. Tori marveled that she knew the name of each and something of its origin. Coyote Brush she called out - California Juniper, Blazing Star Wildflower, California Poppy, and on and on, and AJ sat sketching. It was as if he was capturing Kalea's words as he was working on the sketch, incorporating a deeper sense of life to the drawing.

They walked on their way with Kalea explaining and giving a history lesson on the trees and plants and different grasses they passed. AJ would pause to sketch and Tori would sit and watch him or Kalea and think of her Reservation home.

When they stopped in a meadow to rest and drink water, AJ sketched Tori, Kalea and the dog. Kalea was smiling, eyes closed with her face turned up to the sun. The dog was splayed half across her tummy. Tori was looking off at something, lost in the thought of it. AJ smiled as he sketched. The only thing that would make the drawing perfect was if he could sketch himself in it somehow; so he did. He sketched in his right hand holding three charcoal pencils, off to the edge. "Perfect" was the thought that came to his mind.

The group made their way back to the canoe and pushed off. They pulled up to the canoe's resting place approximately two hours after having left. The trio washed up in the restrooms and then spread their lunch out on one of the picnic tables. AJ placed the dog's lunch and a bowl of cool water beside the table for him.

"We should go see Bottie before we leave." Tori suggested. Bottie was the name the trio called Agnieszka when they weren't calling her Bubbe. "If we don't do it now we won't see her until after we get home from Camp."

"I don't want to wait that long." Kalea said.

“Me either.” AJ chimed in. Though both Kalea and AJ had their own set of grandparents Bottie was still their grandmother too.

“We’ll be at my house next week so why don’t we just do it Monday?” Tori suggested.

“Sounds like a plan.” AJ said.

“Cool with me.” Kalea agreed. “I love Bottie and we’re her only grandkids here in California.”

Tori smiled. Rachael was actually Bottie’s granddaughter but Bottie was always confusing Rachael with her mother Sara. Rachael stopped correcting her grandmother years ago and just answered to whatever she called her.

Rachael was legally responsible for Bottie which suited Bottie’s remaining children, Lea and Joseph, just fine. They rarely visited their mother, citing work and busy schedules. And they found the whole thing “too depressing” anyway. Bottie barely recognized them and with every rare visit they spent most of it explaining to her who they were.

As far as Bottie was concerned her husband and children all died in the concentration camps. She was only partly right; her parents and brothers were all lost in the camps. Bottie alone had survived. She eventually married and had three children, was widowed and over time was no longer able to live on her own. For a while she would be okay, then she’d look at the numbers crudely tattooed to her upper left arm and her eye would glaze over and she’d be gone. She’d be nobody’s mother or grandmother, child, sister or

kin. In her head she'd become just another Jew trapped in a Nazi concentration camp. She would eat the food placed in front of her, go to the bathroom when allowed, sleep and wake up but a big piece of her would be at the Birkenau Camp, dying the slow death.

"Okay crew," Tori called. "We've been here long enough. Let's hit it." They loaded up the jeep and drove to the spot where the experimental vines had been planted. The north ridge was less than a ten minute ride.

"Okay, your pops said the test vines are outside the fenced in area on the north ridge." Tori said fishing her compass out of her pocket. "That means we take the trail to the right headed in that direction. You got the mutt's leash?" Tori asked.

"In my back pocket." Kalea confirmed.

"Then let's head out."

The Trio took the foot trail that led into the woods. The forest was thick around there; trees closed in together, brush, wild grass and flowers. The test area was less than a mile out in the direction the group was walking.

Kale cleared away enough room to stake and plant twenty vines. He was curious to learn if the grapes were sturdy enough to product fruit in such a wild untended area. There would be no irrigation or tending at all. The twenty vines would simply grow wild, children of their environment.

Kale put up cheap chicken wire fencing to keep the small critters out and that was it. It was when he went to check on things that he discovered the chicken wire ripped down and the vines a mess. Because he'd staked the vines in the grass there were no tracks leading to or away from the area. All he had was a mystery.

Tori stopped a couple more times to take out her compass and check their direction. AJ and Kalea exchanged glances and smiles but dared not say a word. They dared not mention that she could get snatched up, blindfolded and dropped out of a plane with nothing but the clothes on her back and she'd still beat the plane back to the airstrip.

The compass had been a gift from Grandpa Bo, a K&R Meridian Pro military-styled compass. It had a flip out sighting prism and a rotating bezel which allowed it to be used either as a traditional hand-held compass or as an optical sighting transit. Tori was using it in traditional mode. Tori liked taking out the compass, flipping it open and taking readings.

When the foot path thinned to rugged ground the group fell into a straight line with Tori taking lead. Tori's role was to look out and warn them concerning what they were walking into and she took that role very seriously. If a snake or something equally as dangerous jumped out of the brush Tori would have to handle it while AJ covered Kalea. That was the unspoken rule.

"There it is," Kalea pointed. The tree line opened up into a bit of a clearing and the group could clearly see what Kale was talking about. The area in front of them was a heaped mess. The chicken wire was ripped up along with the vines it had been sheltering.

“Wow, this is a mess.” AJ said looking around.

“Well let’s not just rush up on it,” Tori said stopping everyone in their tracks. “If we’re going to look at this forensically then let’s not contaminate the scene. Everybody just stand still.” AJ and Kalea stood where they were while Tori slowly approached the piled mess, scanning the ground in front and to the sides. She made one full slow deliberate circle on the vine heap before stopping where she had begun.

“This is weird.” she said hands on her hips.

“I’m sketching this.” AJ said taking his things out of his pack.

“I can see your dad’s shoeprints.” Tori said to Kalea who was now standing beside her. “There’s Makani’s.” She pointed. “Looks like they had three hands with them, there’s the work shoes the guys wear, and that’s it. If some punks were out here and did this where are their tracks?” She turned. “Your dad and crew came here the same way we did. There’s their tracks, and they turned and left the same way.”

“Maybe their tracks are covering the hooligans?” Kalea offered.

“You would expect some coverage but not to the point where there’s no other tracks at all,” Tori said removing her sunglasses. She slid them into her side pocket and crouching down she moved bits of vine, scanning the ground for the least imprint or indentation.

Tori lifted a section of chicken wire and that’s when she spotted a tuft of fur.

“Oh man.” She breathed.

“What?” AJ said behind her.

“Kiki, put the leash on the mutt.” Tori instructed.

“Why?” Kalea asked

“Kalea!” Tori groaned loudly. “Put the leash on him and tie him to a tree. He can’t follow us.” Tori said standing.

“Why?” Kalea asked, hooking the leash to the dog’s collar.

“Cause if I’m right this fur is from a mountain lion.”

“Shut up!” AJ gasped approaching her. He stared at the small tuft of tawny colored fur in her fingers. Kalea secured the leash to a nearby tree and joined them.

“A mountain lion did this?” Kalea asked. “Just to eat the grapevines?”

“No crazy.” Tori said. “There’s no telling how long it’s been out here but it lives here. This is its turf, and so it shows up one day and your pop’s got all this set up on its turf. The mountain lion’s not having that.”

“So it tears everything up.” Kalea said.

“Exactly.” Tori responded.

“Then we should find some tracks.” AJ said.

“Yes we should.” Tori agreed. “I don’t see any around this mess but that could be because of the grass and the guys who were out here could have covered a track, so...” she walked over to the mess and started moving things slowly, one piece at a time.

“AJ, lean over and move the chicken wire.” Tori instructed. “Kalea, you take the vines as I hand them to you and then we’ll see.”

AJ started working on moving the chicken wire out of the way while Kalea took the stakes and vines as Tori handed them to her, stacking them to the side.

“Okay both of you keep removing stuff.” Tori directed as she crouched down. She stared, her eyes sweeping quickly back and forth over the small plot of ground as AJ and Kalea continued to work.

“Right there!” Tori pointed. AJ and Kalea bent down to where she was pointing.

“That’s a cat print.” Kalea said.

“Well what do you think a mountain lion is?” Tori asked.

“A really big cat.” AJ said taking out his sketch book. Tori pulled away the rest of the debris.

“Look at the size of that thing?” she breathed in wonder. She bent down and placed her hand on the ground next to it.

“Oh my gosh,” Kalea whispered, bending down to get a better look.

“I’m getting a picture of this,” she said standing. She fished her cell phone out of her pocket. “Okay Tori, make a fist and put it next to the print.” She snapped off a few shots.

“By the size of the paw this is a male.” Tori said. She cleared away more debris in the area to reveal additional prints. “These paw prints are a good four inches long.

Looking at the weight distribution across the paws this dude is a good 150 pounds or more. Looks like he's walking off that way," Tori said pointing toward a group of trees to the left. "I think there's a little pond over there."

"I think you're right." AJ said.

"I say we follow the trail." Tori suggested. AJ and Kalea were silent. "Look, it's mid-day, these guys are active early in the morning, at dusk and during the night. He's at his crib chilling. Let's just follow the trail a little and if anybody gets squirrely we'll leave, agreed?"

AJ and Kalea exchanged glances. Deep down they both wanted to see a 150 pound cat.

"Okay." They both agreed.

"Then let's get set up a little bit." Tori said laying her pack out on the ground. "I'm just getting my knife and binocs, I want'em handy."

"What about Lily?" Kalea asked. AJ cringed at the name.

"The mutt'll be fine." Tori said. "I just don't want him catching a scent of the mountain lion and taking off after it."

"Like he can run fast." Kalea said.

"AJ can run fast." Tori said putting the binoculars strap around her neck. "The mutt can move his legs too. Okay, let's head out."

Tori led the way toward where she knew the pond was. She'd snapped the Bowie knife to one of the front loops of her shorts. She wished she brought her bow and arrows. She didn't want to scare AJ or Kalea but the mountain lion was big, and though an attack on a human was rare it was not unheard of. Yet with all that Tori just couldn't turn down the chance to track a mountain lion and actually see one in the wild.

The thicket of trees opened to a stagnant pond. The edge of the pond was muddy with little vegetation.

"He drank right here." Tori said pointing to the clear set of prints at the water's edge. She bent over them and felt the ground. The tree overhang was thick blocking out a lot of the sun. As a result the ground would dry a lot slower.

"He was here very early this morning, had a drink and walked off that way." she said pointing to the right where the tracks led off. "Let's go."

The trio was off again. Tori was alert as she continued to follow the tracks. Her eyes scanned the path out in front of her as well as the trees. She listened for the slightest change in the singing of the birds or the chirpings of the other wildlife. If something as large and scary as a mountain lion was in the area, everything would be quiet and on full alert.

Tori stopped to study a tree that was slightly off to the side. She caught the faint putrid scent of urine and rotted animal flesh.

"Look here." Tori said pointing at the tree bark. "He leaped up here to grab at something, these scratches are from his claws." Following her nose Tori discovered the

remains of a raccoon. Everything but the hide and limbs had been eaten and the mountain lion had partially covered it with surrounding debris.

Tori saw where it had scraped the ground with its hind feet and then urinated on top to mark it as his. His trail then led into the trees.

“C’mon.” Tori whispered. AJ and Kalea fell in behind her. As they continued to walk the area became less dense until they found themselves in an open clearing. A craggy hill was on the other side.

Tori lifted her binoculars to her face. She found a jutting rock slab to zero in on. With the touch of a button the distance flashed and told her they were approximately half a mile from that particular spot. Right at that moment the mountain lion stepped out of a cave and just stood there. Tori gasped.

“What?” AJ asked.

“Man, he’s standing right there.” Kalea fished her spyglass from her pocket and stretched it to its full length.

“Where is it?” she said panning around.

“There’s a bunch of grass, then from that spot just look up.” Tori directed.

“Oh wow.” Kalea breathed. “It’s huge.”

“It’s the most beautiful animal I’ve ever seen.” Tori smiled.

The mountain lion just stood there looking around and Tori took it all in. His head was perfect, eyes clear as an Alaskan stream: his coat beautifully unmarred. Just the look

of him resonated strength, agility, power and youth. He was in his prime and feared nothing.

“Well let me see.” AJ said. Tori handed him her binoculars.

“Oh man.” AJ said, wonder and awe mixed in his voice. He let the binoculars hang from his neck and grabbed his things from the pack.

“I guess we should call your dad.” Tori said to Kalea.

“Yeah right,” Kalea said. She handed Tori the spy glass and fished around in her pack for the long range walkie-phone. The trio were less than 10 miles from the vineyard.

Tori raised Kalea’s spyglass to her right eye and closed the left eye. She was surprised at the depth and clarity, though it was no match for her military-styled binoculars. The mountain lion walked from one side of the small ledge to the other as if patrolling or better yet, surveying his domain. He stopped and seemed to look right in their direction. Even though they were in the clearing and out in the open, they were still half a mile away, too far out for the cat to bother.

The mountain lion, like most big cats, are powerful up close but don’t have the stamina for a long chase, so they were safe.

“I’m not kidding daddy, it’s an actual mountain lion.”

“Are you sure you kids aren’t confused?” Kale asked. “Maybe it’s a large dog.”

“But...”

“Hand me the walkie,” Tori said, hand outstretched.

“Mr. K,” Tori said into the walkie. “I’ve been tracking and living in the wild since I was four. I know a mountain lion when I see one and I’m telling you, we’re staring straight at it. We’re at the clearing past the north side, where that craggy rock hill is. It’s standing right up there as plain as day.”

“We even found a dead raccoon he ate up!” Kalea shouted out.

There was a half-minute of silence then Mr. K lost his mind. He was yelling for his brother, for the hands, guns, somebody to call Animal Control, but most of all he was yelling for them to get out of there.

They could hear Makani trying to calm him down and get information.

“We’re at the clearing where that craggy rock hill is!” Tori yelled into the walkie.
“Past that little pond!”

“Get away from there!” he yelled.

“But daddy the lion hasn’t moved.”

“You kids get to the jeep!” he ordered.

“But Mr. K we want to see you catch it.” Tori said.

“Get to the vehicle right this minute and lock yourselves in!” he yelled. “Discussion over!”

“Crap,” Tori said clicking off the walkie and shoving it at Kalea.

“We better get to the jeep.” AJ said putting his things in the pack. “If Mr. K gets there before we do all kinda crap’s gonna hit the fan.” AJ handed Tori her binoculars.

“You’re right, let’s go.” she said looping the strap around her neck.

AJ took the lead and started toward the trees. Tori turned and lifted the binoculars for one final look. The mountain lion was sitting now and facing her. Tori smiled and for the fleetest of moments she felt as if she was on The Res, in her own woods, where she was one with the forest and the living things. On her Reservation the mountain lion would be her brother.

“Tori!” AJ called.

“Coming!” She lowered the binoculars. But not here, she said to herself. Here the mountain lion was out of place and one way or another it would have to go.

The trio retrieved the dog and ran the rest of the way to the parked jeep. They had just shut the doors when two vehicles sped up spewing dust and dirt everywhere. One was a vineyard SUV and the other sported an Animal Control logo on the side.

Both vehicles barely came to a stop before seven men piled out, most of them with rifles. The two uniformed Animal Control officers had tranquilizer guns. The kids piled out of the jeep.

“He’s up in the crag,” Tori said pointing. “less than a mile in. We can show you.” She was quick to add.

“We can find it on our own.” One of the Animal Control officers said. “You kids need to stay here.”

“In the vehicle.” Kale added. “C’mon men.”

“If you kill it can I have the hide?” Tori said following them around the front of the jeep.

“Inside, I mean it.” Kale said pointing to the jeep.

“But can I have the hide if you kill it?” Tori asked again.

“Yes you can have it, now get in the jeep.” He ordered. “And lock the doors.” The kids climbed into the jeep and the group of men trotted off into the trees.

Once the group was gone and out of sight Tori rolled down the window, climbed out through it and up onto the roof of the jeep.

“Daddy’s gonna freak if he sees you’re not in the car.” Kalea hummed.

“Then I guess I better not let him see me.” she said lifting her binoculars in the general direction the men trotted off in.

“Shoot.” she breathed. There were too many trees in the way. If she was alone she would have disregarded Mr. K’s order and followed the group into the woods. She could follow them and get back to the jeep without them ever knowing she’d left. Yet she dared not. Kalea would slip up before nightfall and tell her dad she’d left and there would be a mess. Tori had no problem ignoring adult authority just so long as she was sure there’d be no consequences or repercussions. Kale was old school and he didn’t put up with teenage behavior from anybody, especially not from the trio of kids he’d come to view as his own.

Kalea was talking a mile a minute, AJ was touching up his sketches and Tori was sitting on the roof lost in thought when the first shot rang out. Right behind it came two more, then a fourth.

“That wouldn’t be a tranquilizer gun would it?” AJ asked.

Tori immediately knew it wasn’t. For one, tranq guns didn’t make much of a sound, definitely not enough to carry for nearly a mile, and two - the shots were from a McMillian hunting rifle. Tori had handled the rifles before at her Grandpa Bo’s and on The Res, and they all had a basic sound. On top of that, Tori knew the brothers had McMillians in the rifle case up at the house.

“That was a rifle.” Tori said to the pair. They got quiet and listened but those were the only shots.

“Maybe I should call daddy.” Kalea said more to herself. She looked at the walkie in her lap.

“Maybe you shouldn’t.” Tori advised. “If they’re chasing that cat they don’t need the distraction.” But that wasn’t Tori’s real reason for advising against it. If someone had gotten hurt, like her dad or Makani, she’d deal with it better if she could look at him, seeing that he was hurt but alive.

Tori had no doubt that the men would all return alive. Five rifles and two tranq guns against one mountain lion was a no-win scenario for the cat. Even if he managed to jump one of the men the four shots would have ended the fight quickly.

“They’re coming!” Tori announced, climbing back into the vehicle through the open window. Though AJ and Kalea heard nothing Tori’s trained ear could pick up the sound of seven pairs of feet tramping through the forest.

The trio stared intently at the tree line. A few minutes later the group appeared. One of the hands had Makani by the right arm helping him. A shirt had been haphazardly tied around his left arm. Two other hands were dragging the dead mountain lion, each had a paw. The side of his head was oozing blood from a bullet hole.

“What happened?” Kalea asked jumping out of the vehicle.

“We tranquilized him, he fell off the ledge and hit the ground like a ton of bricks.” one of the Animal Control officers said. “We went over to check him and he sprang.”

“He grabbed Makani’s arm and everybody fired on it.” Kale finished.

“I can have the hide right?” Tori said to Kale. “Cause you promised.”

“Yes you can have the hide.” Kale said helping Makani into their vehicle. “Carlos, put it into the rear of the SUV. I’ve got a tarp back there I think.”

“You know a taxidermist?” Kale asked.

“My dad knows a guy.”

“Carlos, you drive the kids back to the house and we’ll get Makani to the hospital. When she gets the information get the mountain lion to the taxidermist. Thanks guys.” Kale said turning to the Animal Control guys.

“No problem. We’re just sorry it ended like this. He was a fine animal. Too bad we couldn’t take him alive.”

The men got into their vehicles and sped off. Carlos got into the driver’s seat of the jeep and headed toward the house.

Tori dialed home putting the phone on speaker.

“AJ you write down the info.” Tori said.

Rachael answered.

“Dad there?” Tori asked.

“Your father’s in Stockholm, he’s not due home until the 14th.” Rachael said.

“Shoot, that’s right.”

“Everything okay?” Rachael asked.

“Makani got his arm practically ripped off by a mountain lion!” Kalea shouted out.

“It wasn’t ripped off its still attached!” AJ added.

“Both of you shut up!” Tori yelled over them. “I need the number for a taxidermist. It’s in the rolodex in dad’s office.”

“What’s going on?” Rachael asked the rational part of her insisting she was hearing things wrong.

“Makani got his arm practically ripped off by the mountain lion we were tracking,” Kalea said aloud.

“Why would your father have you three tracking a mountain lion?”

“Daddy didn’t have us tracking it,” Kalea clarified. “we were tracking it by ourselves.”

“What?!” Rachael shouted into the phone. “The three of you were tracking a vicious animal by yourselves? Where are you?”

“We’re getting way off the reason for the call.” Tori interrupted. “The mountain lion is dead. Mr. K said I could have the hide so I need the number of the taxidermist guy that dad knows. His number’s in the big rolodex, on the desk. I know it is.”

“Are you kids okay?”

Tori sighed loudly.

“Rachael can you just do this!” she shouted. “The mountain lion’s dead. It’s dead. Half his head’s blown off and the carcass is in the truck and we need to get it to a taxidermist so I can get the hide, okay? Everybody’s fine can you just give me the number?”

Rachael let her hand drop to her side and she closed her eyes, placing the other hand to her forehead. She took two deep breaths then lifted the phone to her ear.

“Give me a minute.” She went to Fletcher’s office and rolled through the cards in the rolodex.

“Is it California Wilde Taxidermy?” Rachael asked.

“That’s it!” Tori said. “Give us the info.” Rachael read from the card and AJ wrote everything down.

“Are you okay?” Rachael asked.

“We’re great.’ Tori said. “Gotta go.” And she hung up the phone.

Rachael placed the phone on the desk, pulled back the chair and sat down. Then she did something Tori hadn’t made her do in a long time – she cried.

It was after six when Kale and Makani returned to the house. As hard as she tried, Josie couldn’t get the kids to eat any dinner. They were too hopped up on the mountain lion hunt and Makani’s near death experience. Kale had called from the hospital to check on the kids and update everyone on Makani’s condition. He was okay, but he had an eight inch gash on his arm that required almost 40 stitches. It was covered with a bandage and his arm was in a sling.

Josie had gotten the restaurant up and rolling before driving over to the house. She’d packed up enough food for the kids and Makani. A hostess had ridden with her to help her unpack the aluminum containers that held steaks, grilled salmon, loaded mashed potatoes, Cajun fried corn, and mixed vegetables. For desert there was key lime pie, custard pie, pound cake, lemonade and sparkling wine. She and the hostess set the food up on the outside deck.

Kale was taking a quick shower and planned to go straight to the restaurant once he was cleaned up. He would eat later once everything was in full swing and settled into its evening groove.

Kale appeared changed and refreshed.

“You gonna be okay?” Kale asked Makani.

“Sure Bro.” he said leaning back in the chair. “Having a little *Four Roses*.” he said lifting the glass of bourbon. “Taking the edge off the pain. I’m gonna sit with the kids then call it an early night.”

“Good idea.” Kale said patting him on the back. “Give me a call when you kids are ready to come over to the restaurant and I’ll send a car for you. Get cleaned up.” He added.

Kale headed for the door then stopped, turning to the group.

“Tori, Rachael called just to make sure you were okay. You need to call her back.”

“Didn’t you tell her everybody was okay?” Tori asked. Kale had partially turned and he stopped, turned back to the group and took a step toward them.

“If my kid had the exciting afternoon you three had I’d want more than a cursory conversation with her.”

I’m not her kid, Tori thought but dared not say her thoughts aloud to Mr. K.

“Call her kiddo.” He said. Then he left.

Tori lifted the chair by the back and slammed it against the table. Then she took off to the side of the house. She was pacing back and forth when she spotted AJ standing there.

“Walk it off,” AJ said. “Cause you’re gonna have to call her. Mr. K don’t say stuff for his health. The minute you show up at the restaurant he’s gonna ask if you called and if you haven’t he’s gonna make you call her right then and there.”

“But,” Tori started.

“But nothing Tor.” AJ said. “You know Mr. K and you know he don’t play. You’re gonna talk to Rach today – over the phone or in person. You know he will straight up send you home and for the record, I’m not going with you. Hey it’s Karaoke night.” AJ said in response to the look she was giving him.

“And then there’s that wedding tomorrow. It’s already half set up out at the Winery. Josie’s crew is catering and she’s making the Wedding Cake. And Mr. K’s gonna let us hang around and eat the food, do you really want to miss that?”

Tori thought long and hard. Everything AJ said was right. They passed the Winery on the way to the house and things were just about set up. The staff had transformed the Winery into a sweet magical place for a storybook wedding.

Over the years the Kinimaka brothers had expanded the already massive Winery, pouring thousands of dollars into decorating the interior. The Winery floor was a rich dark mahogany, while the walls were made of randomly shaped stones; auburn, chestnut and cinnamon brown. There was a bar with a custom made Philippine Carmella

limestone top; rich rustic reds, browns and creams. There was stainless steel and etched glass, and floor to ceiling wine shelves. It was really quite elegant.

Tori sighed shaking her head. She was stuck and she knew it.

“Would it kill you to just talk to her?” AJ asked. “Look, I wasn’t gonna say anything but my mom called me. She just wanted to hear my voice to make sure everything was okay. It’s the same with Rachael.”

“It’s not the same.” Tori said.

“I know, I know.” AJ said. “But let me ask you one question.” he said stepping to her. “And I’m gonna get close enough for you to sock me in the jaw if you want. I can appreciate the fact that Rach isn’t your mom, but are you blaming her because she’s here and your mom isn’t?” AJ took a breath. “Are you blaming her because your dad’s never around?” Tori gasped and looked at him as if he’d socked her in the jaw.

“I’m your best friend in the world,” AJ seemed to whisper. “And I would never say something jacked up to hurt your feelings on purpose, but are you blaming Rach because you’re not happy with stuff at home? Cause if you search down deep you know none of this is her fault.”

Tori’s eyes watered as she looked up into AJ’s face. Had it been anybody else she would’ve socked them dead in the face just for making her mist up. But AJ was her best forever-in-life friend and he had a “keepin’ it real” pass with her and she had the same with him.

Tori took a deep breath, shaking her head. Karaoke night was a blast. Mr. K let them get up and take the mike and sing until they got tired and the restaurant crowd always loved it. They weren't the greatest of singers but they weren't all bad either. That alone was reason enough not to get sent home and with the wedding on top of that?

"Sometimes I hate your guts you know that." AJ smiled, relieved.

"I'll call her." Tori relented. "But I'm not talking more than three minutes." AJ laughed and turned walking away. Tori took out her phone and dialed the house phone.

"Hello?"

"Yeah, it's me." Tori said. "Just letting you know we didn't get eaten up by the mountain lion." Rachael chuckled a bit nervously.

"Well I was a little concerned." she said.

Tori looked at her watch, barely a whole minute. She rolled her eyes.

"Well we're all gonna be at the house Monday so no biggie." Tori said.

"I'm picking up all your favorite things."

"Cool, well Josie brought dinner so I gotta go."

"Yes, yes of course. I'll see you all Monday."

Rachael placed the phone back in the cradle.

"I can't tell you how many times I've headed for that door." Rachael said aloud.

"But something always made you turn around," her friend finished. "or someone."

“It stopped being about Fletcher a long time ago.”

“I know sweetie, come, sit.” Her friend motioned at the empty seat across from her.

“Now talk.”

Rachael smiled at her old friend Awinita Kingfisher. Awinita, a full-blooded Cherokee was a strong 60’ish, she would say. She was 5’4 and petite, yet what she lost in height and girth she more than made up for in inner strength and power.

She and Rachael met a little over two years ago at a multi-artist show in Southampton, New York. Rachael was immediately taken by her blown glass work and the brash sassy attitude of the head-strong woman and the pair had developed a friendship.

“I’ll say it again Peaches,” Awinita smiled. “I’ll be more than happy to talk to that girl of yours.”

“I’m not sure that would go over very well.” Rachael said pouring more hot water into her cup.

“The Lakota and Cherokee have lived in peace for many years.” Awinita shared with a smile. “I speak quite a bit of Lakota and I suspect your girl has a fair Cherokee vocabulary if she’s as bright as you say.”

“She’s bright, but,” Rachael shook her head. “She resents what she considers my interfering in her life.”

“She resents you Peaches.” Awinita said. The silence hung between them for a few seconds.

“And I don’t know why,” Rachael whispered, barely able to contain the tears. “I have tried Nita, I’ve tried to be her friend,”

“But she won’t let you.” Awinita finished. “We Tribal females can be quite the handful. We’re fiercely loyal, strong and independent. We both love and hate to the root of us. We can be unforgiving and unrelenting, yet we give of ourselves unsparingly. Once we come beside you, we’ll never leave. We’ll die with you and for you. That’s our breed Peaches, why do you think we have such a tie to the land beneath our feet and the sky overhead? The wolf and the bear are our brothers, the beaver and heron our kin.”

Awinita chuckled softly at her own passionate words.

“And all that is fiercely inside your 17 year old girl, living in this house with two pale-faces. Girlfriend, I might have an attitude myself. I think I’d like to see her bedroom.”

“It’s very Native.”

“Then I’ll definitely take a peek before I leave.”

“Sure, thanks for helping out with the taxidermy thing.” Rachael said reaching across the table to take her friend’s hand. “It seemed so important to Tori and with her dad out of town I just wanted to make sure it’s handled properly.”

“No problem Peaches,” Awinita said. “I’ve dealt with Jimmy Wilde before. He’s nice, highly expert, and the best in the area for handling this kind of work. I gave him a couple of minor suggestions concerning tanning the hide because your kid is Lakota and

they're very particular about their pelts. It's a shame the head was ruined. It would have been a beautiful skin. I did do something and I hope you don't mind."

"What's that?"

"I asked Jimmy for the teeth, the two canines are beautiful, those are the two big teeth at the top. I want to make your girl a necklace. As for the other teeth, I asked Jimmy to extract them before disposing of the head and I'll clean and shine them up and make a little Sioux sachet for them. She may want to use them in dressing up a tribal shirt or dress."

"Nita that would be wonderful, but to go through all the trouble?"

"No trouble at all Peaches. It's not often I get to work with remains like this, takes me back to the old days and who knows, maybe you giving her this little present will show her that you really do care and you're in tune with who she really is." Rachael shook her head.

"I don't know..."

"Peaches how long are you going to just leave things around for her to find without letting her know they're from you? The books and articles I've given to you. The DVDs I've recommended?"

"She really like that one from last year's Lakota Pow Wow at the Pine Ridge Reservation. I've walked past her bedroom and heard her playing it numerous times. She still uses that Shawnee tailor you recommended – Mr. Running Elk for her vests and she uses him to order her shoes too."

“So where does she think these things are coming from?” Awinita asked.

“Fletcher for the most part. She thanked him for the Pow Wow DVD and he later asked me about it and I told him it had been me.”

“What was his response?”

“He thought it was a great idea – bringing a bit of Indian heritage into the house. He said he was 100% in agreement with whatever I did to encourage her in the exploration of her Indian roots.”

“He called her an Indian?” Awinita asked with a bit of shock in her voice. Rachael nodded.

“She hates it when she’s referred to as an Indian.” Rachael said. Awinita shook her head.

“Goodness, he’s the child’s father, he should know better.”

“Well Fletcher can be very politically incorrect at times, oblivious to things at other times.”

“Then why do you stay?” Awinita asked taking a sip from her cup. “You’ve put in what? eight, nine years? Peaches, why are you still here in this...” she motioned around with her hands. “This giant museum? Is it really Fletcher?”

Awinita looked deeply into Rachael’s eyes.

“The both of you are like two old comfortable married folks, two people who have broken each other in and decided they really do like each other; you like being

roommates with benefits.” she said. “It’s stable and you have a routine. With each ensuing year you become a little bit older, your hopes, dreams, desires have changed ever so slightly and you find ways to make this work.”

“That about sums things up.” Rachael said.

“Are you unfulfilled?” Awinita asked her.

Rachael gave her a quizzical look. Awinita hadn’t asked her if she was fulfilled or satisfied. She might have answered all too quickly yes, and then proceeded to list all the things in her life that was presently fulfilling; her blooming career and what she’d made of herself, certain portions of life at home and life with her close friends, the stable life she’s created for Tori while at the same time dealing with the instability of Fletcher as a parent. She knew a lot of women would envy her life.

“Do I have any right to be?” Rachael asked pushing away from the table.

“Come.” she said to her friend. “I’m going to show you Tori’s bedroom and then you, my dear friend, and I are going to put those fine marinated steaks on the grill, then we’re going to sip from that bottle of Pauillac 1994 I’ve set out to breathe, and we are going to visit the night away.”

Rachael led her up the slightly circular stairs to the second floor. The Mansion was three stories with a finished subterranean area. The second and third floors each had a Master suite equipped with a small room-sized walk-in closet, master bathroom and private balcony.

The first floor had two libraries. The smaller one was adjacent to Rachael's office and was her personal space so it was little used by anyone else. The larger main library, the main living room, the family living room where Tori could host her friends, Fletcher's office, the formal dining room just off the great hall, two kitchens including the Gourmet Kitchen: huge and used when entertaining, and the smaller one Rachael customarily used were also on the main floor. There was the indoor pool just off the large sun room, a weight and exercise room, handball court and sauna.

One massive half of the exercise room had over time become Tori's personal workout space. There were three punching bags suspended from the ceiling as well as a speed bag and uppercut bag, all evenly spaced out in one corner. There was a wooden dummy, free standing bounce back dummy and a grappling dummy the size of a grown man.

Tori had rubber training knives, deer antler knives, a pair of black chrome Sai, throwing daggers with target, and a number of throwing stars. She had two and three sectioned staffs, four and five foot bo staffs and a variety of workout gloves and mitts. She also had a Tae Kuk Bear - an edged weapon with a curved blade resembling the Star Trek character Worf's Klingon *Bat'leth*.

Often when she'd finished a work-out she would wind down by pulling out the bench in front of the wall TV and putting in a Bruce Lee tape. Tori owned a copy of every movie, TV program, documentary or special Bruce Lee ever appeared in and a copy of every book he'd written.

Also on the first floor was Fletcher's game room. On those occasions when he was home and wanted to hang out with some guys this was the room they could be found in. The bar was stocked with the finest liquor. There was a small four shelf cabinet humidor containing various brands of cigars (yet it was nothing like the giant Remington humidor Stu owned). There were two poker tables, a pool table, a 50 inch flat screen TV on the wall and a juke box in the corner.

On the other side of the main library was Fletcher's "Trophy Room" as he enjoyed calling it. There was no real name for it other than the room where Fletcher displayed the various works and treasures he'd acquired over nearly two decades of digs and treasure hunts.

The room was vast and filled with objects from around the globe; statues, paintings and other wall hangings, works of wood, metal and stone. Carvings of Ivory and other precious jewels. Ceramics and antiques. Rich and ornate rugs from the 15th through the 18th centuries; from Persia, Turkey, China, Iran, Tibet and India. All the items were professionally set up and displayed. Just to walk through looking at each item and reading the associated informational cards would take nearly an hour. The room itself had state-of-the-art security and fire suppression systems that rivaled those found in the most prestigious museums. The room's content was insured for over 50 million dollars.

There were also photos of Fletcher; on digs, on his treasure hunting ship, blown up photos of him with important people in the archeology world and world leaders. However, there were no photos of Tori or Rachael. There were no family type photos at all. This massive room was for all intent and purposes Fletcher's 'man cave.'

The subterranean area contained a huge game room, theater and four-lane bowling alley. The game room contained just about every board game known to man (or at least all the popular ones), a pool table, and various video and pinball machines. There was a 100-disk digital juke box that was plugged into a premier audio system set up by Paragon Sight and Sound.

Awinita had taken a tour of the home on a previous visit but Rachael purposely skipped the second floor. She explained that the second floor was Tori's space and at the time she wasn't in the mood for the "wrath of Tori" if she'd found out that a stranger had been given a tour of her area.

"This place is obscene." Awinita had voiced a year ago when Rachael had given her the initial tour. As Rachael walked her from one room to another all Awinita could do was to shake her head and say – "This is obscene opulent ridiculousness."

"And you live here?!" she said to Rachael. That and the continued amazement on her face made Rachael laugh. Rachael wasn't insulted in the least by her friend's reaction. The house was obscene. It was grossly too big for just three people, overly lavish and expensively furnished and accented with priceless paintings, rugs, tables and other things. Awinita marveled that she could fit a Tribe of fifty people comfortably there and half the time they wouldn't cross paths for weeks.

Rachael paused outside of Tori's closed bedroom door.

"Brace yourself," she said to Awinita. "This is going to be surreal."

Rachael pushed open the sliding doors and Awinita walked into, for all intent and purposes, a teepee. Rachael closed the doors behind them to complete the effect.

“This is amazing!” Awinita said turning to take everything in. “Simply amazing!”

The teepee’s optical effect was the result of 22 wooden poles that ran mid-wall and gathered at the top to give the room a cone-shaped effect. The walls were of a lightweight specially made and treated sandy colored buckskin-type material that was perfect for the interior of the room and accommodated heat and air conditioning. The floor border was decorated in black hills, horses and buffalo on the one side, and black hills and spirit dancers on the other side. The top border was designed with clouds, the Moon, four Ravens and a lone flying Eagle.

The space in-between had been painted with mountains and birds and various scenes; buffalo hunts, battles, home-life and other symbols indigenous to the Lakota people.

“Seven fires.” Awinita said pointing to seven distinct flames painted in rich burgundy and fiery hues. “Those are the Seven Council Fires. These warriors here,” she said pointing to the faces painted next to the fires, “are the great chiefs and men of the Lakota people; Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, Bone Necklace, Old Chief Smoke, Crazy Horse, Kicking Bear, Black Elk.” Actual photos of these men had been reproduced on the walls of the teepee, or in cases where no photo existed an artist’s rendition was in its place.

“There’s Custer and the battle of Little Big Horn.” Awinita said of a battle scene between Sioux and blue uniformed soldiers. “Wounded Knee,” she said pointing to the familiar stone monument. “Here’s a map of the Rosebud Reservation. This must be her home.” Awinita said stepping to take a closer look.

It sounded odd to Rachael hearing someone referring to someplace other than the house as Tori's home.

There were wall hangings Awinita stared at intently; a warrior's shield, an old style fur bag and hunting pouch, an unstrung bow resting atop a leather skin box and a quiver of arrows in a long fringed pouch sat beside it. There were pelts hanging from a pole; rabbit, fox, beaver. Beside that was an elaborately beaded and colored shield with feathers along the side and hanging from the bottom. In the center of the shield was a painted Lakota blue/black design.

Tori's bed was king-sized and hand-carved from a rustic oak and covered in Sioux blankets and pillows. At the foot of the bed was a lovely mahogany hope chest, and upon it was a stack of freshly washed and ironed clothes.

All the fixtures, furnishings, chairs, sofa and love seat, were designed to look as if they belonged in an 18th century teepee. Even the overhead lights had been expertly camouflaged and recessed in the high wooden beams.

The wood floor was all but covered with woven rugs bearing Sioux designs and pendants. Small end tables were on each side at the head of the bed. One had an old-fashioned looking lamp on it while the other held a group of framed photographs.

Various shaped and sized Native bags and beaded belts hung from wooden hooks on the wall. And overhead, strung from the apex where the beams joined, hung a large and colorful Dream Catcher.

Awinita picked up the framed picture of Tori's mother. The one that was her favorite.

"Her mother was beautiful." Awinita said. She picked up the photograph of Tori and Fletcher posing in front of the railing of a large boat. Fletcher had his arm around Tori and they were both sporting wide smiles.

"She's beautiful, looks like her mother. Nothing like her old man." Rachael laughed.

Awinita had taken an almost instant dislike of Fletcher, telling Rachael she was too old to have to put up with pretentious rich white folks. However, she'd always say, present company excluded. Rachael fell in love with the outspoken, ultra-real older woman almost immediately and Awinita had become the mother figure she missed and sorely needed.

"Take a look at this." Rachael walked over to a section of the teepee and unsnapped it. The folds of the wall dropped to the sides, revealing an opening. Rachael stepped inside and turned on the light. It was the largest walk-in closet Awinita had ever seen.

"You're kidding me." Awinita laughed, following Rachael inside.

"This room alone is the size of my bedroom."

The closet sported ten feet high red mahogany shelves that contained tall and short hanging compartments, dark brass shelves for sweaters and other foldables. A double-wide dresser drawer with large hutch and rollout jewelry organizer was against a wide corner and beside that was an eight row slanted shoe storage shelf which

comfortably held 80 pair of shoes. There were enclosed cabinets for additional out-of-the-way storage; linens, blankets and a full fold-down ironing board and retractable dressing mirror. A padded bench sat in the center of the room and matched the color and design of the large Indian rug that covered the floor.

“The master bathroom is around that corner.” Rachael pointed.

“Ingenious.” Awinita nodded approvingly.

“Now follow me.” Rachael said directing her out of the closet. She closed up the area behind them.

“And before we leave,” she said taking a remote from the night stand. She pointed and clicked and a curtain above the bedroom door slid open and a 65 inch TV slowly lowered. Awinita laughed applauding.

“The room is outfitted with surround sound and there’s a Stereo CD/DVD player somewhere in here but I’ve not been able to find it.”

“Your girl is serious about her heritage,” Awinita said taking one last look around. “I smell sage, sweet grass and lavender. She has an old Sioux soul. What’s her tribal name?” Awinita asked following Rachael out of the room.

“Her mother’s maiden name is Eaglewolf, if that’s what you mean.” Rachael answered.

“Tori isn’t necessarily Native. It has an Old English origin and meaning - ‘victorious’ a derivative of Victoria. What’s her full name?”

“Tori I'chante.”

“Ahh,” Awinita smiled. “I'chante is a Sioux name.”

“What does it mean?” Rachael asked.

“From the heart.” Awinita responded. “And what name does she have from her father’s people?”

“Her grandfather took one look at his yelping granddaughter and called her Brynhild.”

“No!” Awinita gasped.

“Yes, Tori I'chante Brynhild Logan.”

“Well you do know the meaning of Brynhild, Peaches.”

“No I don’t.”

“It means ‘ready for battle’.”

“You’re kidding me.” Rachael said stopping and turning to look at her.

“No Peaches, I am not. You, my darling never stood a chance.”
