

Tom and Emma
by Kate Simon

Tom Winters sat at an outdoor table of his favorite coffee shop. They served strong, real coffee and a decent bear claw. They also had some fairly cute waitresses. A smile and a harmless flirt with a sweet young thing wasn't a bad way to start the day. It didn't hurt that they flirted back. He may be a couple of decades older than they were but he wasn't dead yet.

He looked down at his watch and saw it wasn't quite nine. He still had time to kill before he walked up the block to his shop. He had a ten o'clock appointment with an old client, Jimmy. He was a buddy from their bike club. A good guy, a little out there, but you could count on him to have your back in a bar fight. He'd been doing Jimmy's ink for years. He was surprised the old coot still had any room for new ink.

Tom took a sip of his coffee and glanced at the blonde a few tables over. She'd sat down about twenty minutes ago. He'd noticed her because she was at least five foot eight. That, and she was stunning. But there were a lot of stunning women in LA. She looked vaguely familiar but she was a tall blonde in LA, not exactly unusual. Her waist length hair was pulled into a tight ponytail. She wasn't wearing any makeup and somehow that made her even more beautiful. He wouldn't be surprised if she had a Swedish accent. She had a large leather case that seemed out of place with her jeans and t-shirt. And she was watching him.

Emma had a hell of a morning. She had to finish this shoot by the end of the week and she had no model. Well, she didn't have the right model. She was shooting for Stryker Jeans, a relatively new label, that want to make a name for themselves. They wanted hip, cool and classic, with a little badass thrown in for good measure. Everyone she looked at for the ads were all wrong. Too young, too cute, and way too millennial. The company didn't want to be just another jean and she respected that. She just couldn't find the right face.

She was aware of him before she saw him. Almost as if she could differentiate his heat from that of the California sun. She looked up from her coffee to see a man in his fifties, black t-shirt and jeans, hair brushed back and dark aviator shades. And he was fit.

Damn, was he fit. His muscular chest and arms were perfectly outlined by the not too tight t-shirt. She could also see some very interesting tattoos. What was so different about him? Lot's have men in this town had tattoos. She looked back down at her coffee and took a sip. Could it be that easy? Could he be the right one?" Emma couldn't help but look back and stare. Now he was staring at her. She stood and walked toward him. She liked the lopsided grin he got as she got closer.

"Excuse me, I know this may sound like an odd request, but could you take off your sunglasses?"

"Sure thing, sweetheart," he said in a gravel voice. He pulled off his shades and she gasped. His eyes were crystal blue. She felt transfixed. And the Stryker execs would be too.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm sorry." She indicated toward the other chair. "May I?"

"Of course," he smiled a broader version of his lopsided grin.

"I'm sorry for staring. I know that was rude of me."

"That's okay."

She pulled a business card out of her pocket and handed it to him. "Emma Nillson, I'm a photographer." He read her card and repeated her name. She was used to the slow dawn of recognition anyone over the age of thirty five.

"Sports Illustrated, 1995?" he asked.

"Good memory," she smiled.

"You're hard to forget," he smiled.

She tried to slow her hammering heart. "That was a long time ago. I've been behind the camera for nearly twenty years."

"It's very nice to meet you, Ms. Nillson, but I'm guessing you're not looking for a coffee date."

She smiled. "Well, that's a nice idea but I don't drink coffee with anyone I don't know."

He extended his hand. "Tom Winters."

"A pleasure Mr. Winters."

He didn't let go of her hand. "Tom."

"Tom." She pulled her hand back before she totally lost her focus. "Tom, I want to photograph you." She was taken back by his deep laugh.

"Why the hell would you want to do that?"

"Because I think you're just who I need."

Tom sat back in his chair. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "What do you mean, I'm what you need?"

"I'm shooting an ad campaign for Stryker jeans and I think you'd be perfect for it."

He burst out laughing. "Me? A model? You must be joking." He stopped laughing when he realized she looked offended.

"I never joke about my work."

"I'm sorry. You took me by surprise. Why would you want to photograph someone like me?"

"Stryker doesn't want to be like every other jean company. They want edgy and cool. They want different."

Tom smiled. "Well, I've been called different." He waved to the waitress who brought over the check. "I'd loved to stay and chat but I have a client in thirty minutes and I have to go."

A cute brunette brought his check. She always served him a smile and a wink along with his bear claw. "Here you go, Vinnie."

"Thanks, Tiffany. Give me the lady's check too." Tiffany shot Emma a death glare but did as he asked.

"Oh, that's not necessary."

"Yes it is," he smiled. He tossed a twenty in the folder and told the no longer smiling Tiffany to keep the change. "I'm sorry, but I really have to get going." He extended his hand. "It was very nice to meet you."

"Five hundred an hour with a five hour guarantee."

"Excuse me?"

"Twenty five hundred for five hours of your time."

Tom smiled. "Thanks for the offer but I really need to get going." He started walking toward his shop and realized she was following him. "You're persistent, I'll give you that."

"That waitress, she called you Vinnie. You told me your name is Tom."

"It's a nickname."

"How is Vinnie a nickname for Thomas?"

"It's not because of my name, it's because my job." He nodded to the sign above

the door. 'Skull of the Skeleton Tattoos.' He was impressed when she smiled. Not many caught the reference.

"Skull of the Skeleton with a Burning Cigarette. VanGogh."

"Very good, Ms. Nillson."

"VanGogh. Vincent. You're a tattoo artist."

He smiled as he unlocked his studio. "That I am and I have a client so if you'll excuse me."

"Let me photograph you while you work. I'll pay you."

"My client might not agree," he said. He watched as this force of nature blew into his studio and began looking around. "You don't take no for an answer, do you?" She turned her attention back to him. Her smile hit him in a way he hadn't expected.

"Not when it's something I really want."

He walked into his office and tossed down his keys. He couldn't stop a smile, wondering how long it had been since he'd been woman had gotten to him this fast.

"Yo, Vinnie, you here?"

"That's my client. I have to get work." He leaned out of the office. "I'll be out in a second. Grab a seat."

"If I can get your client to agree will you let me photograph you?"

He shook his head. "Fine. You get Jimmy to agree and I'll let you take the pictures."

"Great," she smiled and started unpacking her case.

"You haven't gotten Jimmy to say yes."

She picked up her camera and smiled. "He will."

Emma followed Tom out to his studio. Sitting in a reclining chair was a man mountain without a shirt. She thought he must be close to three hundred pounds and his chest was covered with tattoos.

"Hey, Jimmy," said Tom. "You ready?" Jimmy didn't answer. He was too busy staring at Emma. "Jimmy, this is Emma. She wants to photograph the session."

She put on her brightest smile and extended her hand. "Hi. Jimmy. It's nice to meet you."

"Emma Nillson?"

"That's her," said Tom.

"Tom said he'd let me photograph him at work if you give your permission."

"Oh, I don't know," he said.

"How about I cover the cost of your tattoo?"

Jimmy got a broad smile. "Cool. Let's do it."

Emma smiled at the look of frustration on Tom's face. He'd been hoping Jimmy would say no. "Excellent. Just do what you do. You'll forget I'm here."

Tom shot her a look. "Doubtful," he murmured.

Emma sat back and watched Tom work. Jimmy was getting a logo on a patch of bare skin near shoulder. The light in the studio was perfect for her. She moved back and forth through the studio, getting shots from different angles. The world she saw through her viewfinder was different from the real world. This world made sense to her in a way the rest of the world never did.

She didn't have to look at the shots she'd taken to know they were terrific. The camera loved Tom. She knew it would. His granite jawline, his eyes that were intense and mischievous. And that damn grin. That grin could get a girl in a lot of trouble, if she was lucky.

It happened like this sometimes. People who were by anyone's standards, classically attractive, were completely bland on film. Then there were those whose energy jumped out at you, making you unable to look away. Like Tom. He looked over at her and gave her a lopsided grin. She took another shot despite her pounding heart.

"How did you meet, Vinnie?" asked Jimmy.

"I saw him drinking coffee and thought he had an interesting look."

"Hah! You could call it that!"

Tom pulled his pen away from Jimmy's chest. "Hey. You want the bottle to look like shit?" Jimmy snickered and settled back in his chair.

"What's the bottle?"

"It's our motorcycle club. The Boozefighters."

"Ours?" she asked. "You ride?"

Tom pulled his pen away from Jimmy's chest. He turned and raised an eyebrow at her. "Yes, I do."

"Of course you do," she smiled.

He set his pen down and reached for a mirror. He gave it to Jimmy who admired his latest artwork. "Vinnie, you're the best."

"You're done already?"

Tom looked surprised. "It's been three hours."

"Really? Wow. Jimmy, may I?" she asked as she held up her camera.

"Sure thing, darlin. You're paying for it."

Emma leaned close and took several shots. A bottle with three stars across it was in the center. The club name and the established date were at top and bottom. For a relatively simple design it was very detailed. It was also very red. "It looks like it hurt."

"Ah, you get used to it."

Tom put some ointment on his art and covered it with a bandage. "You know the routine, dude. Don't fuck up my work." Jimmy reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet.

"No, I was serious. I'm paying for it."

"Are you sure? Vinnie here isn't cheap."

Emma gave Tom a sly smile. "He's worth it."

Jimmy laughed and took her hand. "Well, thank you, darlin. It was lovely to meet you." The bear of a man then kissed her hand like an English aristocrat.

"It was lovely to meet you too, Jimmy."

Tom shook his head as Jimmy closed the door behind him. "Suck up," he muttered.

"I thought he was very nice." She reached into her bag and pulled out her wallet. She pulled out a black American Express card and handed it to him. "Here you go."

"Aren't you even going to ask me how much?"

"Okay. How much?"

"Three hundred. It wasn't that big."

"So charge eighteen hundred."

"Excuse me?"

"Three hundred for the tattoo and fifteen hundred for you." Tom stared at her for a moment. "What?"

"I'm trying to see if you're serious or just crazy."

"A little of both, I suppose."

Her smile threw him. That was odd. "Okay, it's your money." He put the card through, half expecting it to be declined. He was startled to see the approved sign pop up on his card reader. He tore off the receipt the machine printed out and handed it to her. She signed it quickly and accepted her copy.

"I'm starving. Any good lunch places around here?" she asked.

"There's a pizza place down the block."

"Cool, let's go."

He looked from his paperwork. "Excuse me?"

"I'm asking you to lunch. I'd like to go over some of the shots and show you why I think you'll make a good spokesman for Stryker."

"I thought you got what you wanted?"

"No, those were just to prove I'm right."

"You spent eighteen hundred bucks to say I told you so? You don't even know if you were right."

"I'm right." She stuck her camera in her bag. "Let's go. I'm hungry."

Tom crossed his arms stood for a moment studying her. He still didn't know if she serious or just bat crap crazy. "Come on. I'll make you some lunch It's the least I can do." He opened the door the led to his apartment. He grabbed her bag and she walked ahead

of him up the stairs. He smiled to himself. Yeah he was being chivalrous, carrying her bag but miss an opportunity to watch Emma Nillson's world class ass? He sure as hell wasn't crazy.

Emma walked up to Tom's loft apartment. The light downstairs was good but upstairs was perfect. She could see why he chose this place. It was a perfect artist's studio. The open floor plan showed a sparse but eclectic taste in furniture. Function over design. Sketches of tattoo designs were pinned to a cork board. The far corner appeared to be a work center, with an easel and a stool. The smell of paint and linseed oil permeated the room. The real surprise was what was hanging on the walls, landscapes, still lifes, portraits. She stood transfixed in front of a portrait of a man with long grey hair and beard. His skin was weathered and wrinkled. And he had the most beautiful blue eyes. "Your father?"

"Yeah. How did you know?"

She turned and smiled. "You have his eyes." She walked the apartment taking it all in. "Your work is stunning."

"Thanks. You good with a salad?"

"That's fine. Why aren't you in a gallery and famous?"

Tom snickered. "Have a seat. This will be ready in a minute." He set a plate in the microwave and started slicing an avocado.

"I'm serious. You're really good. Why haven't you pursued it?"

He pointed to his work. "I have pursued it. Now, ice tea?"

"Yes, thank you." She sat down at the small dining table and he set a large salad in front of her. He had mixed some ingredients in a metal bowl and then poured the light dressing over the warmed chicken and avocado. He set an ice tea in front of her and then sat down across from her. She took a bite and her eyes rolled. "Oh my God, this is amazing."

"Thanks. I like a bit of a kick in the dressing." He took a bite of his salad and smiled.

"An artist in the kitchen too. Is there anything you can't do?" The way Tom looked at her and smiled made her nearly drop her fork. She needed to get back on track. "Let me tell you about the campaign."

"Campaign? Sounds like waging war."

"Actually, that's pretty close to the truth. We are trying to dominate and overwhelm the competition." She took another sip of her tea. "You are going to be my secret weapon."

After lunch Tom and Emma sat on his couch and started to review the pictures she's taken on her tablet. "I didn't realize they'd be digital."

"These are. I'll be shooting you with film for the campaign."

"You still haven't convinced me to do it."

"I will." Her smile made him miss a beat. She started paging through three hours of photographs. He saw she was engrossed in her photos. "Damn, I love being right."

"About what?"

"The camera loves you."

"I admit these are good pictures but I think it's your work, not me."

Emma laughed. "I'm good but I can't create this kind of magic."

"Magic? Aren't you exaggerating just a little?"

She didn't answer. Couldn't answer. She was looking at one of the last pictures just as he was finishing Jimmy's tattoo. He'd smiled a lopsided grin.

Tom shook her shoulder. "Earth to Emma."

"Huh, sorry," she said, trying to shake it off. She turned to face him. Tom, these photos have proved my point. You have an energy that can't be faked."

"I think that was a compliment."

"Don't believe me? Watch this." She pulled all the shots up into a grid and selected five. She touched a few more icons and she emailed them. "I sent these to Jane Martin, the head of Stryker's marketing department. Now you'll get to hear what she thinks the same time I do." Emma pressed a contact on her phone and then put it on speaker.

"Hi Emma. Please tell me you're calling to say you found our model."

"Open your email."

There was a moment of silence followed by "Holy crap! He's perfect. Just what I had in mind."

Emma smiled. "He is a bit older than we had originally discussed."

Tom winced. He knew he was old enough to be the average model's grandfather but he'd rather not be reminded of it.

"I don't care how old he is," said Jane. "He's fucking hot. Tell me you signed him."

"Let me get back to you."

"Sign him, Emma."

"I'll do my best." She hung up the phone and smiled. "I told you so."

Tom couldn't believe he'd agreed to this. The money was good but that was never a reason he did anything. The truth was he wanted to see her again. He stood at the lobby door and looked for Nillson Studios. He pressed the call button and door buzzed open.

Emma's studio was much like his own, open floor plan with an area that was devoted to work. The rest of the studio had comfortable furniture, a bit more upscale than his.

"Hi, come on in," said Emma. "I'm all setup for you."

He noticed the kitchen and big screen opposite side of the room. Apparently, he wasn't the only one who lived where they worked. "I like your place."

"Thanks. It suits me." While she was angling a large screen he looked at her gallery. No fashion shots or glamour poses. These were personal. Her art. He stopped in front of a self portrait. It wasn't at all vain. She was wearing the same torn jeans she had on today and a button down shirt. Her hair was pulled back but strands fell loose around her face. She was staring into the camera like she was trying to understand it. She startled him when she came up from behind him. "That was a couple of years ago. I was going through some things. The real world can be tough for me to understand but in my photographs I see clearly."

He knew just what she meant. "Did it help?"

"Yeah, it did," she smiled. "Okay, you ready to rock?"

"As I'll ever be."

She walked over to a bench and picked up a pair of jeans and a white t-shirt. "Your wardrobe, sir. You can change in the bedroom."

Tom looked at the label and smiled. "My size. Good guess."

"Thirty years experience."

Tom was vaguely uncomfortable getting changed in Emma's bedroom. It felt voyeuristic. Her taste in here was very different than her studio. Flowered quilts, lace curtains and a small collection of teddy bears. He changed into the jeans and the t-shirt and went back out the studio. "They're nice jeans. Comfortable." Emma turned around and froze. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, fine," she said after a minute. "The jeans are fine. Please take a seat on the stool."

He moved to the stool and watched as Emma fooled with some screens. Was her hand shaking? "What do you want me to do?"

"Just sit like you normally would." She grabbed her camera and started taking shots as she moved around him. She moved reflectors, change lighting and took her shots. The closer she got to him the more awkward he felt. He started shifting in his chair. "Do you have your sunglasses?" she asked.

"In my jacket."

"Let's do a few with those on." He retrieved the glasses and felt a bit more comfortable as she continued to take shots. "Tell me about yourself?"

"What?"

"You're uncomfortable. I find if people talk about themselves they relax."

"What do you want to know?"

"Where were you born?"

"LA."

"Siblings?"

"One brother."

"Parents?"

"Two."

She dropped her camera and smiled. "Smart ass. Are they still living?"

"No, they passed some time ago."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's okay."

She held the camera tight. "Married, significant other?"

"No." He thought he saw her smile. "What about you?" he asked.

"What about me?"

"Married, significant others?" he said, matching her tone.

"No. Could you stand, please?" She continued walking around and photographing him. She set her camera down and picked up a second camera. "Now I'm going to do a few headshots." She took a few shots and stopped. "This isn't working. It's too static."

She walked close and studied him.

"Why do you need a headshot if you're selling jeans?" he asked.

"I'm sorry?" she asked.

"Headshots?"

"Ah, yes, headshots. We're selling sex."

"Excuse me?"

"People want to feel sexy. You're sexy and you're wearing Stryker jeans. Therefore the jeans are sexy."

He pulled his glasses down on his nose and smiled. "You think I'm sexy?"

She paused for a moment then smacked his shoulder. "Save the false modesty. You don't work out that much just for your health." Tom captured her hand before she could pull it back. Her eyes registered surprise then desire. He let go of her hand and smiled.

"Let's take a break. It's time for lunch," she said.

"Emma..."

"I'm not great in the kitchen but I dial a mean take out."

"Why don't we get out of here for a while? I'm in the mood for some Atomic wings."

"Montie's?"

"You know Montie's?"

"Of course but isn't that up the coast? My car's in the shop."

"Thirty minutes and it's a good day for a ride."

"On your bike?" She got a gleam in her eye. "Do you have room for my camera?"

"Yeah."

"Let's go."

Emma held on tight to Tom's waist as they traveled up the highway. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been on a bike, but then she couldn't think of much else than holding on to him. It had been far too long since she'd had her arms wrapped around a man.

Tom insisted on paying for lunch and they walked down to a small strip of beach near the restaurant. "Do you mind sitting in the sand?" he asked.

"It's Montie's. I'd sit on hot coals for this."

"Good to know."

His lopsided smile made her heart skip. "What is it with this guy?" she thought. She'd photographed hundreds of models over the years and none of them had this affect on her.

"Why did you stop modeling?" he asked. "You were everywhere."

"Because I was everywhere. Everywhere I looked I saw my own face. I never understood why anyone wanted to look at me. I didn't consider it a great achievement. I'm tall like my father and I look like my mother, genetics pure and simple."

"But your genetics are lovely."

"Thank you." She took a sip of her drink and tried to focus. He was getting to her. "Ten years was long enough. I'd been working since I was fifteen.

"Isn't that a little young?"

"Not really. I was scouted when I was in high school. A big agency signed me. The next thing I knew I'd quit school and was working in Milan."

"Your parents let you move at that age?"

"My father died in 1991 during the first Iraq war so it was just me and Mom. We had his benefits, but they aren't that great. I knew we needed the money." She shrugged her shoulders. "And at fifteen I thought it would be fun. What it was, was a lot hard work and very little fun."

"You had to have been very popular."

"I was but Mom moved to Milan with me. She went with me to every job. Nobody got past Mamma Orso."

"Mamma Orso?"

"Mama bear in Italian. It's what everyone called her."

"She sounds tough."

Emma smiled. "She's great. She kept me safe. Everyone thought she was a stage mother but she wasn't. Not at all. I only worked as long as I wanted. When I wanted to stop I did. Mom had protected my assets. She made sure I knew where every penny went. I had enough to go to any art school I wanted and start my business."

"What's Mom doing now that you don't need a Mamma Orso?"

Emma licked her fingers as she finished off a wing. She looked at him and smiled. "I think I still might." She smiled to herself when he froze in mid sip. "Mom's retired. She has a place in Long Beach. She spends her days gardening and playing bridge with her friends."

"Sounds nice."

"She's earned it." She put the remnants of her lunch in the paper bag and tossed it to Tom. "Here." She didn't see he still had a wing in his hand until the bag smashed it against his white t-shirt. He looked down at the shirt and back up her. "Oops," she laughed.

Tom shook his head and laughed. "Well, it's your shirt." He yanked it over his head in one move and Emma thought her heart would stop. His chest was as well defined as she'd thought and highlighted with several elaborate tattoos. She watched as he walked down to the water's edge and rinsed it in the waves. Across his back was tattooed a magnificent eagle. He walked bare foot into the waves and rinsed the shirt. She'd had sex that wasn't as physically satisfying as looking at this man. "Ah crap," she whispered. "I'm in big trouble."

Tom realized Emma wasn't just watching him, she was studying him again. It was unnerving to be looked at like a specimen in a zoo. "I'll throw this on the rocks. The sun's pretty bright. It should dry pretty fast." He spread it out on the jetty and saw she was still studying him. "Is everything alright?"

"Yes, but I do have a question for you. Would you mind me photographing you without your shirt? Your tattoos are...remarkable."

Now it was his turn to study her. She was flushed and seemed nervous. "I don't mind if you don't."

"Thanks." She grabbed her camera and struggled with cap.

"Emma, are you okay?"

"Yeah, it's just stuck, damn it."

He took the camera from her and popped off the cap. "Are you sure you're okay?" Tom handed her back the camera holding her hand a bit longer than necessary.

"I'm fine," she whispered. She took the camera from him and took a few steps back. "Could you walk toward the water for me? I'd like to get some pictures of your eagle. It's beautiful. When did you get it?"

Tom walked toward the water, letting it surround his ankles. He got the feeling Emma was filling the air with nervous chatter. "I got it a few years ago. The artist I trained with did it." He could hear the click of her camera as he looked out over the water. "What do you want me to do?" He turned around when he stopped hearing the shutter clicks. "Emma?"

"Walk toward me like you're coming out of the ocean."

"Well, I'm not exactly Venus Rising, but sure." He liked it when she smiled as he started walking toward her. She dropped her camera down. "What?" he asked.

"It's not exactly working. When you mentioned Venus Rising I got the idea of you walking out of the water looking like a god. Maybe it's the light."

"Or maybe it's because I'm not really coming out of the ocean." He smiled and ran back into the water.

"What are you doing?" she called.

"Just get ready," he said as he dove under the waves. He popped back up and pushed his wet hair over his head. He smiled as he walked through the waist high waves toward the beach. He walked slowly toward her as she snapped shot after shot. He stopped in front of her and she dropped the camera. "How was that?"

"Perfect," she whispered. She reached out to touch his tattoos. She traced the dragon on his shoulder with her fingertip and his breath caught. She pulled her hand away quickly and turned away. "Oh God, Tom, I'm so sorry. I'm being incredibly unprofessional." She all but ran back to her camera bag and started packing up her things. "I'm really so sorry. I completely crossed the line."

He took the bag from her hand and turned her to look at him. "Emma, stop. It's okay."

"No, it's not. I've seen this sort of thing my whole career. I swore I would never take advantage like that. I don't know what came over me. Obviously, I find you very attractive, but that's no excuse."

He was stunned to see her eyes welling with tears. "Emma, I don't feel taken advantage of." He smiled. "In fact, I'm very flattered. A beautiful woman like you thinking an old dog like me is attractive? Nope, I'm not having a problem with that." He was relieved at her small smile.

"You're not that old."

"I'm fifty eight."

"What? Wow. I had you pegged for fifty at the outside."

"So long as we're being honest, I've had a hard time thinking about anything but how beautiful you are. I can't honestly say it wasn't the reason I agreed to do this. I like being around you, Emma. You're fascinating." This time she laughed. He took her hands in his. "You are. You walked away from a glamorous life to create your art."

"Thank you," she whispered. She tried to turn away. "I guess we should..."

He pulled her back to him. He studied her face for a moment. It was no longer the face from twenty years ago, the face on every magazine cover. This face was better. No makeup, no pretense. A few lines of experience. "I want to paint you," he whispered.

"What?"

"I need to paint you." He leaned close and touched his lips to hers.

Tom pulled back and looked in Emma's eyes, looking for hesitation. He smiled when he saw none. "Emma," he whispered. She slipped her arms up his bare chest and around his neck. He dipped his head down and kissed her the way he'd been thinking about all day. A passion exploded between them like nothing he'd felt in years. He pulled her close as their tongues explored. If he didn't stop now he wouldn't be able to. He smiled as they both came up for air. "I'm get you all wet."

"Excuse me?" she laughed.

"Your clothes. I'm getting you all wet." His trip to the ocean had now transferred itself to her jeans and t-shirt.

She looked down at herself and smiled. "So I am."

"What do you say we get off the sand."

"Are you okay to ride like this."

"Sure, I'll dry fast." He raised her palm to his lips and kissed it. "Let's go."

Tom loved the freedom of riding his bike down the open highway. The feeling of do it with Emma's wrapped around him, her head resting on his back, that was amazing. He knew this would probably be a big mistake but God knows he'd made enough of them in his days. This particular mistake would be worth it.

He pulled into the parking spot for Emma's studio and parked. Emma grabbed her camera bag and entered the security code open the door. "Would you mind if I grab a shower before I change. I dried off but now I smell like salt and sand."

"You smell good," she whispered. She walked toward the hall closet and pulled out a couple of plush towels, fumbling with them. "Here you go." He took the towels and smiled at her nervousness.

"I won't be long."

"While your doing that, I'll take a look at the shots from the beach."

Tom stripped off the salt encrusted jeans and tossed them over a hamper in her master bath. The shower was spa quality and he thought how much better it could be if Emma joined him. "It was one kiss, old man. Dial it down," he said to himself. "She's a

swimsuit model and you're old biker." He dried off and tied the towel around his waist. When he opened the door to bedroom he found Emma looking through a drawer.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she stammered. "I was looking for..." Her voice trailed off as she looked at him.

"It's okay. It's your place. Besides, you saw this much of me on the beach."

"Yeah, I did," she smiled. "Tom, I...God, I'm acting like a school girl. I sorry." She turned to walk out when he caught her hand.

"Emma, just talk to me. I'm far from a kid. My feelings aren't easily hurt. You don't have to be afraid of me."

"I'm not afraid of you."

"Then tell me. What do you want?"

"You," she whispered. "I want you."

He smiled. "See," he whispered "That wasn't so tough." He took her face in his hands and kissed her. "Emma," he whispered as she kissed and nipped at his neck.

"Hummm?"

"This towel isn't going to stay put for long." He loved the wicked gleam in her eye as she reached for the edge of the towel.

"May I?"

"Please do."

She pulled the towel away and let it hit the floor. She rubbed her hands down his back and over his ass. He reached under her t-shirt and pulled it up and over her head. She stepped back and stripped off her jeans. Standing there in front of him in nothing but a small bra and panties, she looked even more beautiful than she had on any magazine cover. "My God," he whispered. He ran his hand down her waist. "So beautiful." She turned her head.

"I'm not what I was."

He made her look at him. "No you're not. You're better. You're real." He kissed her shoulder. "Not made up." Kissed her neck as he unhooked her bra. "Not airbrushed or photo shopped." He let the bra fall to the ground as he pulled the clip from her hair. "You're real. Beautifully imperfect and real." She smiled and took his hand, walking toward the bed. She laid back and he slipped the panties from her body. He explored her with his lips

and his tongue until her moans and whimpers drove him to the edge. "Emma," he whispered.

"Tom, please," she begged.

When they finally came together it was better than the fastest Harley on an open road.

Emma curled up against Tom's chest and tried not to worry about breaking every professional rule she'd ever set for herself. She thought instead about Tom's powerful arms wrapped around her. When she cuddled tighter into his chest he stirred. "I didn't mean to wake you."

He pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. "Who's asleep? I'm just trying to return to earth."

Emma laughed and leaned up on her elbow. "Yeah. That was..."

He pulled her close for a kiss. "It certainly was."

"Tom, I don't want you to ever think that I offered you this job to get you into my bed."

"I don't, sweetheart."

She sighed with relief and rested back on his chest. "That's good."

He turned on his elbow and smiled. "I need you to know that I did take this job to get close to you."

"What?"

"Emma, you are a very beautiful woman. You offered me a chance to spend time with you." He brushed a loose strand of hair from her face. "I may be an old man but I still appreciate a beautiful woman."

She'd been through the emotional mill with models and photographers and promised herself she'd never do it again. People who spent their lives creating an illusion on film often do so in life. Tom spent his life creating art, not a mass consumption fantasy. She studied his lopsided smile. She saw no deception in his eyes. She smiled and stroked his well defined chest. "Well, I think I can attest to the fact that you're not that old."

He laughed and rolled over top of her. "Oh really?" he smiled. "Can I get a reference?"

She gasped and smacked his ass. "Smart ass."

"You do seem to be particularly taken with my ass."

"It is a very fine ass, indeed. And I have seen my share, you know." A look flashed in his eyes that she thought might be jealousy. "Models are usually not self conscious about their bodies. They get naked in front of each other all the time."

"Oh," he whispered as he touched his lips to hers. "Well, I'm not a model, not really." He kissed her neck and shoulder.

"Trust me, you have nothing to be self conscious about."

He looked up and smiled. "Thank you, sweetheart, but I think you might be a bit prejudiced. Now, where was I?" He moved down to tease her breasts with his tongue.

"I'm not," she said between gasps. "I looked at the some of the shots from the beach." She paused as enjoyed his hands on her skin.

"Did you get what you wanted?" he said between nips at her skin.

"Huh?" she muttered.

"The shots at the beach, did you get what you wanted?"

"Oh yes. You're going to be a star."

Tom stood in front of the mirror and adjusted his tie. He didn't break out the suits often but tonight was a special. He'd been seeing Emma for a few weeks and tonight he was going to take her to The Downtown Grill. It was one of the hottest restaurants in LA and impossible to get a reservation. John Stone was the best chef in the city but Tom could get in whenever he wanted because he'd been doing John's ink for years. But he still had to dress the part. It was very upscale so no bike and jeans tonight. Tonight he'd break out a suit and the Charger. Just because he was wearing a suit doesn't mean he couldn't drive a muscle car.

He was buzzed in to her building and took the elevator to her floor, knocking before he let himself in. "Are you ready?" he called. Emma walked down the hall in a slinky black dress and stilettos. Her hair was twisted up on top of her head and he immediately thought of pulling it down when he took her to bed.

"Yes, now will you..." She stopped mid sentence when she saw him. She walked toward him until she was facing him. She rubbed her hand over the suit and down the tie. "Wow," she whispered. "You look so different. Wait, were is..." She grabbed his right hand and smiled at the large skull ring. "Ah, that's better. My man is still in there."

Tom was startled. Her man? When did that happen? Did he want that to happen?

"I take it we're not going to Montie's."

"Downtown Grill."

"Wow. I heard that place is amazing."

"It is. John's a genius chef."

"You know him?"

"Yeah. He's a client." He noticed she couldn't stop staring. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. You just look so different."

"Different bad?"

"God, no." She ran her hand up lapel. "It's very sexy, especially since I know about all those lovely tattoos underneath."

He slipped his arms around her waist and pulled her close. "Thank you, sweetheart. You look very beautiful tonight."

"Thank you," she whispered. "Tell me, am I going to get to take this off you later?"

"I think you can count on it," he smiled. Emma pulled him into a kiss so passionate he was tempted to forget their reservations. "Ah, Emma, babe, dinner?"

She gave him a sly grin as she wiped lip gloss from his lip with her thumb. "We will finish this later. I need to get my purse. I'll be right back."

Tom watched Emma walk back down the hall and smiled. Being her man made her his woman? "Yeah, old man," he thought. "I'm not seeing a downside."

Tom gave his name to the maitre d' and they were led to a secluded table. "I'll tell Joe you're here."

"Tom, this is beautiful."

"I'm sure you've been to lots of places like this."

"Not as many as you think." She smiled and reached her hand toward his. "And not with someone like you."

"What do you mean?"

Her answer was stopped by John coming to their table with the maitre d' in tow. "Vinnie, brother, how are you?" Tom stood for an enthusiastic bro hug.

"I'm good, brother. John, I'd like you to meet Emma Nillson."

Emma extended her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I've heard such wonderful things about your place."

"Thanks," he replied. "Vinnie told me who he was bringing but I had to see you to believe it." He turned to his friend and smiled. "Dude, you are definitely fighting out of your class."

"Don't I know it."

Emma got a shocked look then forced a smile. "Not at all, John. Ex-models in LA are a dime a dozen. Men like Tom are a rare breed."

"I've brought you a wine I want you to try. It's new to the menu." The maitre d' handed him the bottle and set the glasses on the table. John uncorked the bottle and poured. "It's from a small place in Napa."

They both tasted the wine and smiled. "Oh, that's good," said Tom.

"Mmmm. Delicious," said Emma.

"Have you looked at the menu?" asked John.

"Not yet," said Tom. "We've only just sat down."

John waved his hand dismissively. "Like I don't know what you'll order."

"If you already know what he wants why don't you choose something for me," said Emma.

John smiled broadly. "I like her," he said to Tom.

"So do I," he replied.

Left alone, they each took another sip of wine. "Don't I know it?" she asked.

"Someone like me?" he countered.

She set down her glass and sighed. "It looks like we have something to talk about."

"Looks like it."

"Tom, I've never met anyone like you. I've spent the last thirty years with people who by and large were pure illusion. There is not one phony thing about you. You're completely honest. I love being with you."

"When you saw me in the suit tonight, you thought it was a costume. Not me."

"No, not at all." She smiled. "Well, maybe for a second. When I saw your ring I knew you are simply dressing appropriately for the occasion. As am I. I would much rather be wearing jeans and a t-shirt."

"But you look stunning." He acknowledged a few people who were looking at their table. "People are noticing you."

"Actually, I think they're noticing you, but that's not the point. I dressed like this for my job for twenty years. It's pretty and fun, but it's not how I'm the most comfortable. Tom, I've never seen a man our age look as good in jeans and a t-shirt as you so. But you also look terrific in a suit." She reached for his hand again. "Have I cleared up my side of this?" He smiled and nodded. "Good, now please explain fighting out of your class."

"Sweetheart, you are a famous swimsuit model. I'm a guy who does tattoos for a living."

She sat back in her chair and stared at him. "That may be how the world perceives us. Is that what you see when we're together?"

"When we're in public it's hard not to notice people watching you. When we're together, no. That's not what I think about. There are those moments when your beauty catches me off guard. It's the reason I want to paint you."

"Because of how I look? Is that why you're with me?"

"No, not at all." He smiled. "Well, maybe a little. You are incredibly beautiful. Why I want to paint you is I can see your fire. You are so passionate about your work. And with me." He tilted his head a bit to hide his blush and took another sip of wine. "That's why I want to paint you." He set his glass down and wondered if he just blown a great thing.

"Okay," she smiled.

"Okay?"

"I'll sit for you."

"You will?"

"Yes. You just proved my point. You're not just some guy. Tom Winters, you're the real deal."

"Oh my God, it is you!" A tall brunette had approached their table unnoticed. "I told my girl friend it was you but she didn't believe me."

Tom sat back in his chair waiting for the girl to ask for Emma's autograph. It had happened a few times since they'd been together and he was starting to get used to it. Well, not really, but he was trying.

"You're the Stryker jean man!" she cooed. "I love your pictures."

"Thank you," he said fighting not to make it sound like a question. She looked at Emma and whispered as if he couldn't still hear her. "You're so lucky. He's so sexy."

"I know," she smiled. Tom could see "I told you so" written all over her face.

"Could I have your autograph?" The girl pulled a notebook and a pen from her purse and handed it to him.

He glanced at Emma who was fighting a grin. "Sure thing," he managed to say as he scribbled his name on the paper. "Here you go." The girl squealed and dashed back to her table. He looked back at Emma who was sipping her wine and no longer fighting her grin. "Go ahead. Say it."

"I told you so."

Tom stared ahead at the road, realizing he was missing half of what Emma was saying. He'd seen a couple of the magazine ads and he thought they were okay but autographs? He'd never imagined. Once the first girl had left with his autograph, four more showed up until the maitre d' finally stopped them. For what? Because Emma had photographed him without a shirt?

"Did you hear me?" asked Emma.

"What? I'm sorry."

"Where are you?"

"I'm sorry it was just so..."

"The autographs?"

"Yes. I can't believe they'd want my autograph. I didn't do anything except stand there."

"Now you know how I felt for ten years." She put her hand on his leg. "I did warn you."

"I thought you were joking." It was a damn good thing he'd been stopped at a light when he looked up or he would have crashed the car. "What the fuck!" he shouted. On the side of a building in downtown LA, there he was. Twenty feet tall and walking out of the ocean. Good God he was never going to hear the end of it from his friends.

"What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? Look!" He pointed to the billboard as the traffic behind him started beeping horns. He pulled the car into the side street and got out. "What the hell is that?"

Emma walked to his side and took his arm. "That is a picture of a very handsome, sexy man walking out of the ocean. And it's a rather good picture if I do say so myself."

"It's so big."

"I told you how much everyone at Stryker loved your photos and they were accelerating the campaign."

"I never expected something like this."

She moved in front of him. "Babe, what are you so upset about? Talk to me."

"God, I don't know. I thought maybe it would show up in a couple of magazines that nobody I know would ever see, but this. Everyone is going to see it."

Emma pushed on his shoulder. "Are you ashamed of this? Of what I do?"

He stopped his tirade long enough to see how upset he'd made her. "No, sweetheart. I'm not, really. It's just this, and autographs, it all is so foreign to me."

"I know, babe. I'm sorry it feels so overwhelming. I never meant that to happen."

"I know you didn't." He gave her a hug and kissed her forehead. "Come on, let's get out of the street." They got back in the car and continued back to Emma's.

"If it's any consolation you're going to make a hell of a lot of money off this campaign," she said.

"What are you talking about. You already paid me."

"Not me, your check from Stryker. I showed you the contract. You weren't listening

to me were you?"

"Was that was when you said I had to wear nothing but Stickers for a year."

"Yes."

"Well, that wasn't a big deal. I signed it."

"Do you remember the payouts I had them put into the contract?"

"No." He pulled into the parking garage and parked. "Weren't you wearing that little blue top and those little shorts?" He pushed the elevator call button.

"Tom Winters are you telling me you didn't read a contract because you were too busy staring at my boobs?"

He smiled as he hit the button for her floor. "And your legs, babe. Your legs are spectacular. Don't even get me started on you ass."

"Oh dear God," she muttered as unlocked the door to her studio. She tossed her keys and purse aside and put her hands on her hips. He thought to himself he might be intimidated if she didn't look so hot. "Well, my best guess, which is usually right by the way, is you should make about one hundred thousand from the campaign."

Tom's brain snapped back from admiring Emma's plunging neckline. "Excuse me? It sounded as though you said..."

"One hundred thousand dollars. That billboard alone should net you about fifteen thousand."

"How is that possible?"

"Because of how I wrote the contract."

"You wrote it? I thought it was some standard thing."

"No. I've been in this business a very long time and I've seen models get the shaft on so many of these deals. I made sure that wouldn't happen."

"Don't agents get a percentage?"

"Do you think I'd take a cut? Damn it, Tom. Who do you think I am?" She walked into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

"Emma, I'm new at this. I assumed the contract was some standard thing and I signed it. I had no idea you put so much work into it."

She shrugged. "I could write one of those in my sleep. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you. Yes, lawyers and agents get a cut when they're involved but they weren't

necessary."

"But you negotiated the contract. You deserve a percentage."

"I was very well compensated for my work. I didn't need or want to take a percentage."

He slipped his arms around her waist. They'd argued enough for one night. "Thank you for looking out for me."

"You're welcome," she said quietly. "Now, promises were made."

"What promises?" he smiled.

"Come with me and I'll remind you." She reached for his tie and led him into the bedroom.

He followed Emma into the bedroom and closed the door behind him. "Em...I'm sorry..." His apology was interrupted when Emma pushed him up against the door.

"Enough talking," she said before she pulled him into a fiery kiss. "I've been thinking about this all night," she whispered.

"Oh yeah?" he asked reaching for his tie. She pulled his hand away.

"No. Wait," she whispered. "Stay put." She backed up and smiled. She unzipped her dress and let it drop to the ground. He smiled as she revealed the tiniest bra and thong. She slipped off her lingerie and approached him like a tiger hunting prey. She wrapped her hands around his head and pulled him into a devouring kiss.

Tom slid his hands down her bare skin and pulled her ass tight against him. "Em, babe, you're making me crazy."

She gave him a sly grin. "That's the idea." She slipped his jacket off his shoulders and set it on the back of the chair. She pulled off his tie and put it around her neck. She slowly unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it off his shoulders. He struggled to hold his ground. She smoothed her hands over his back and trailed the tip of her tongue up his spine.

He let out a harsh breath. "You're killing me."

"Hush," she muttered. She circled him and ran her hands up his chest and tasted his skin. "Ummm. So deliciously male." She knelt down and slipped off his shoes and socks. She reached up and unhooked his belt and pulled it through the loops. Unbuttoning and unzipping his slacks was agonizingly slow. She slipped off his slacks and boxers and now he was blessedly free of his clothes. Emma returned to her slow torture to his body. He was ready to scream when she took him into her mouth. Tom closed his eyes and tried to control himself until he couldn't take it anymore. He pulled her to her feet and pushed her on to the bed. He couldn't speak but he didn't need to. He could see she understood. They came together in a wild energy, one he hadn't felt in years.

Tom held Emma close as he tried to catch his breath. "My God, woman, what got into you?"

"You did," she snickered.

He gave her shoulder a playful slap. "You know what I mean."

She pushed herself up on her elbow and smiled. "There's just something so hot about being completely naked while you're wearing all those clothes."

"Yeah?"

"Hell yeah," she said as she straddled his body and ran her hands up his chest. She nipped at his ear and whispered, "Mmmm, you're so fucking hot. You make me crazy."

Tom flipped Emma on her back and lost himself in a possessive kiss. When he pulled back he was overwhelmed by her beauty. Her hair spread out over the pillow, her flushed skin, her kiss swollen lips. "Don't move." He jumped off the bed and opened the bedroom door.

"Where are you going?"

He turned and pointed. "Don't move." He dashed out to the studio and found a pad he'd brought over and a sketch pencil. He ran back into the bedroom and straddled Emma. He started sketching quickly, transferring his vision to paper. When he finally set down his pencil down he realized his feet had gone numb. He moved back to his side of the bed.

"Are you going to show me?" she asked. He handed her the sketch and was startled at her gasp.

"Don't you like it?"

Her eyes welled and a tear ran down her cheek. "Oh my God, Tom. It's amazing."

He slipped his hand to her cheek and smiled. "You're amazing." He gave her a soft kiss. "So beautiful," he whispered.

As he'd finished the sketch he'd realized it wasn't just good, it was one of his best works ever. There was only one reason why he could be so inspired. He was in love with Emma.

Emma sat at her kitchen table while Tom made them omelets. It had become their morning routine. She smiled as he chopped and whisked like a pro. "Where did you learn to cook like this?"

"My mom. She said I should never assume a woman should do all the cooking."

"A liberated woman for her time. I think I'd have liked her."

"She would have loved you," he smiled as he served the omelets.

"I was a fashion model. Wouldn't she have objected to that?"

"No. She would have understood the reason you got into it. Besides, she wasn't judgmental. She would have loved who you are, smart, funny, independent."

"Ah, thank you."

"How's the omelet?"

"Perfect as usual. What about your father?"

"What about him? Do you want some orange juice?" he asked as he poured a glass.

"Yes, thank you. What would your father have thought about me?"

"He would have flirted with you until my mother said "Dial it down, Romeo." Tom sat down and sipped his juice. "He loved to make her jealous."

"Oh yeah?"

Tom smiled. "Yeah, he was crazy about her. They were together over forty years."

"That's wonderful. How did they meet?"

"They were both students at Berkeley."

"Hippies?"

"Beatnicks," he laughed. "They were cool before anyone else was. They evolved into hippies. They took me to Woodstock when I was just a kid."

Emma stopped in mid bite. "Tell me you have pictures."

"I might," he smiled.

"It sounds like you had a great childhood."

"I did. My parents may have been free spirits but they were great parents. They encouraged my art. I always knew they had my back."

"That's wonderful." She smiled. "Tom, why didn't you ever marry?"

"I don't know. I saw how my parents felt about each other. I never found that with anyone." He took a slice of toast from the plate. "Why didn't you ever marry?"

"No one ever asked." She was surprised at his stunned expression.

"I don't understand. Did you want to get married?"

"There was one guy. He was a photographer. I thought...well he traded me in for a newer model."

"What a fool," he said.

Emma smiled. Tom genuinely looked shocked. "Thanks." She started clearing the table and loading the dishwasher. Tom came up from behind her and slipped his arms around her waist.

"I'm sorry if I overstepped."

"Of course you didn't. You can ask me anything."

"Good. Come with me." Tom took her hand and led her to the couch. "You're making me nervous."

"Don't be nervous. I just want to ask you something. Last night you called me your man. Is that how you think of me?"

"Is that okay with you?"

"Yes, of course. I was just a bit surprised."

"Tom, I love what we have together. You're fun and smart and incredibly talented." She ran her hand down his chest. "Not to mention very sexy."

He laughed. "Nah, go ahead, mention it."

"I like who I am with you. I'm completely comfortable. You don't have any expectations of me being a certain way. You seem to like me just as I am."

Tom put her palm to his lips and kissed it. "I do, very much."

"I'm not someone who sees more than one person at a time. So, yes, I'd like to think of you as my man."

He slipped his hand to her cheek. "Does that make you my woman?"

"Do you want me to be?"

"Yes," he said he gave her a soft kiss. "Em, I love being with you for the same reasons. You're smart, funny and incredibly talented."

"And sexy?" she smiled.

"Hell yeah," he smiled. "You don't expect me to be a certain way. Lots of people see the tattoos and assume I'm a bad guy."

Emma leaned in and whispered, "Badass, yes. Bad guy, no." She gave him a kiss. He deepened the kiss, then pulled away.

"As much as I want to continue this..."

"You have a client."

"Yeah but just the one. Do you have any clients this weekend?"

"No, why?"

"What do you say we take the bike up the coast? I know a nice place where we can stay the weekend and stick our feet in the sand."

"That sounds great. If we take the bike I won't be able to pack much."

Tom smiled his lopsided grin. "That's right."

Tom was finishing up the tattoo of an old style pin up girl. Charlie had been a long time client and favored the classics. He'd come in for his latest ink with Jimmy and Dylan.

"Where you been, Vinnie?" asked Jimmy.

"What do you mean. I haven't gone anywhere."

"No. You haven't been to the club for a while."

"I've been busy."

Dylan stood and strutted around the shop. "He's been busy getting his picture taken."

"Shut it, jackass." Tom tried to focus on Charlie's ink. He knew this would happen but it still sucked.

"Hey, I'd have done it. I told you know who the photographer is. Emma Nillson, whooo weee, she is one gorgeous piece..."

"Watch it," barked Tom.

"Sorry, buddy," said Jimmy. "You know we're just busting you."

"Yeah, I know." He bandaged Charlie and peeled off his gloves.

"We're headed over to the clubhouse. Why don't you come with us?" asked Dylan.

"Ahh...I would but I'm going up the coast for the weekend."

Charlie smiled. "Now it makes sense, why you're not around. It's a woman. Who is it?"

"I bet it's that hot waitress down the street. What's her name?" asked Dylan.

"Tiffany?" asked Tom. "She's just a kid."

"A cute kid who's made it very clear she'd do you in a heartbeat," said Charlie.

"Alright, that's enough." Tom took the credit card from Charlie and ran it. Charlie signed and took his receipt. He glanced up and saw Emma coming through the door. Crap, it was later than he thought. The men turned when they heard the door chime and went silent when they saw her. Emma looked every inch a supermodel. Perfectly fit jeans, a tight t-shirt and a leather jacket she'd gotten just for their rides.

"Isn't that?" whispered Dylan.

"It sure is," said Jimmy.

"Her? Impossible," said Charlie.

Tom could see Emma picked up on the men's surprise. She pulled off her sunglasses and gave them a dazzling smile. "Hello boys." The forty and fifty year old bikers instantly reverted to shy twelve year olds. She walked around to Tom's side. "Am I early?"

"No, these guys were just leaving."

"Introduce me."

Tom growled but relented. "You remember Jimmy."

"Of course. Your pictures turned out great. I'll have Tom get you a copy."

"Thanks. That'd be great."

"These two reprobates are Dylan and Charlie."

Emma extended her hand to both men. "It's very nice to meet you."

"Jimmy said you took those pictures of Vinnie that are all over town," said Charlie.

"That I did."

"Are you taking more pictures? Can we be in them?"

Tom rolled his eyes. These guys were killing him.

"No. Tom's taking me up the coast." The guys looked at him like he'd just claimed to be Santa Claus. "But I would love to take your picture." She opened her bag and pulled out a camera. While Emma set up her camera the guys gathered around him.

Charlie smacked his shoulder. "Holy shit, dude! You and her are..."

"Be careful what you say next," Tom whispered.

Emma smiled at the guys and held up her camera. "Stand next to Tom." The guys lined up next to him, putting their arms around each others shoulders. "Smile." She pulled the camera down and drilled Tom with a look. Tom softened his look and Emma snapped a few shots.

"Alright guys, that's it. Everybody out. We have plans." He locked the door behind them after promising the guys to buy a round at the club next week. "Sorry about that."

"I liked them. I got a couple of good shots."

"Yeah, what was that about? You didn't have to encourage them."

"I wasn't encouraging them. I was being nice."

"Fine. I'll go get my bag. I'll be right back."

Emma reached for him. "Wait. What's the problem? Are you embarrassed by me

"What? God no."

"They didn't know about me, did they?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it was none of their business."

"They're your friends."

"They're pains in the ass. They'll just bust my chops and want pictures with you."

"Would that be so bad?"

Tom realized this was spinning off in a direction he didn't like. Especially if they were going to have any kind of weekend. He slipped his arms around her waist. "No, of course not. Sweetheart, I've never really been good with this relationship thing. You'll have to bear with me." He gave her a quick kiss. "Are we good?"

"Yeah, we're good."

"Have you told your friends?" he asked.

"I told my Mom about you."

"But did you tell your friends?"

She patted his chest and smiled. "Go get your bag. We should get going."

"Emma, are you embarrassed by me?"

"You know better."

"I thought I did. So why haven't told your friends."

"Because I don't have any." Emma grabbed her bag and ran up the stairs to his apartment.

Tom locked the door to his shop then followed Emma up the stairs. He found her in the leaning over the sink in the bathroom, wiping her eyes. "Ah, sweetheart I'm sorry."

"I don't need pity."

"It's not pity. This is me trying to find out why such a wonderful woman says she doesn't have any friends."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you."

He led her out to the bedroom and had her sit on the bed. He took her hand and

covered it with his. "Talk to me, sweetheart."

"It's ridiculous."

"No it's not. Talk to me."

"Despite what I do for a living I'm naturally an introvert. I don't make friends, male or female, easily. The few people I have become close with never seem to stick around in my life that long."

"I understand."

"What?"

"You're comfortable with your own company and you'd rather be alone then spend time with just anyone."

He sighed with relief when Emma smiled. "Yes, exactly."

"Sweetheart, I'm the same way. I hang out with the guys at the club and they're good guys, but other than my brother Michael, I wouldn't say I had many close friends."

"Did you tell Michael about me?"

"Yeah, he's dying to meet you."

"I'd like to meet him too. I bet he's got some good stories to share."

Tom rolled his eyes. "You're going to hound him for details, aren't you?"

"Count on it."

He smiled and gave her a kiss. "Are you ready to go?"

There was something primal about holding on to her man as they rode up the coast on his bike. Emma felt awkward her whole life. Tall and lanky, she'd always stood out. Being a model brought more attention to her differences. Being with Tom was the first time she'd ever normal. He didn't expect her to be on display. He liked curling up on the couch and watching a good action flick. With Tom she felt safe. Then it hit her, for the first time, she felt loved.

They pulled in to a mid size hotel that was located right on the ocean. "Oh, this is beautiful."

"I like it. I come up when I need some quiet. There's a cove a short walk up the beach where I like to sketch."

"Did you bring your supplies?" she asked.

"Did you bring your camera?"

She smiled. "Yeah, stupid question. It's like asking anyone else, 'So are you planning on breathing this weekend?'"

He leaned in and gave her a kiss. They grabbed their luggage from the bike's saddlebags and walked into the lobby. The young woman behind the counter gave him a big smile.

"Hello Tom. It's nice to see you again."

"Hi, Karen."

The woman glanced over and looked like Emma's presence was an unhappy surprise. "Your room is ready for you." She slid Tom the key. "I hope you enjoy your stay." She looked at Emma and forced a smile. "You too, ma'am." As they rode up in the elevator Emma started to snicker and shook her head.

"What's wrong?" Tom asked.

"Did you and Karen ever..."

"What? God no. She's a kid. Besides, when I came up here it was to relax and sketch. What made you ask that?" He slipped the key into the lock and opened the door. The room was a lovely beach front room with a beautiful view of the ocean.

"Oh, Tom this is gorgeous."

"Yes, it is and you didn't answer my question."

She turned and slipped her arms around his neck. "I asked because if looks could kill I would have been dust at her feet."

"What? That's nuts."

"No it's not. It was the same with that waitress at the coffee shop."

"Who Tiffany? She just flirts to get a good tip."

Emma smiled. "You really believe that, don't you?"

"You don't?"

"I don't think you've been with either of them and I don't worry about it now. You're not that type of man." She felt him relax.

"I'm not? What type of man am I?" he smiled.

"One who can be trusted." He looked taken aback. "What is it?" she asked.

"I don't think I've ever had a nicer compliment." Emma smiled and gave him a kiss that quickly turned passionate. "Ah...babe. As much as I want to continue this, I made reservations for dinner."

She smiled and nibbled on his neck, knowing how much he liked it. "We'll finish this later."

"Count on it."

Emma stood in front of the mirror and gave herself a quick inspection. She learned from years of traveling how to pack light and still be presentable. She'd brought a light sundress and a pair of beaded flat sandals. She touched up her light makeup and fluffed out her hair. She knew how much he liked her hair down and she wanted to look nice for him. She realized she couldn't remember the last time she'd gone to this kind of trouble for a man.

Tom called through the bathroom door. "Em, are you ready?"

"I'm ready," she said as she opened the door. The smile on his face told her the effort was well worth it.

"Wow, Em. You look great." He gave her a light kiss. "But then, you always do."

"Thank you." She ran her hand down the crisp oxford shirt. She ran her finger under the open neck to see his dragon tattoo. "So do you."

"I just changed my shirt."

She leaned in and whispered in his ear. "It's working for me."

"Good to know," he smiled. "We should get going."

Tom had reserved a spot on the patio where they could enjoy the view as well as the meal. He'd never brought anyone here before, this had always been his private place. But having Emma here seemed right.

"How was your pasta?" he asked.

"Delicious." She reached across the table for his hand. "Thank you for bringing me here."

"I'm glad you like it."

"Could we walk down to the beach? I love the ocean at night."

"Sure." He waved for the server and signed for the bill. He took her hand and started down the walkway. They both kicked off their shoes at the end of the walkway and continued down to the water.

Emma sighed. "I love the sound of the ocean. It's so peaceful."

Tom watched her as she walked into the water. Moonlight washed over her body as she turned to him and smiled. He walked toward her and cupped her cheek in his hand. "My God," he whispered. "You are incredibly beautiful." He knew this image of her would be his next painting. He gave her the softest of kisses. He pulled back and looked at her knowing he was in love for the first time in longer than he could remember. He pulled her close and they stood quietly, listening to the ocean.

When they finally returned to their room he opened the patio door so they could hear the ocean. He reached for the lamp and turned on the light. Emma reached over and turned it back off. The moonlight played on her skin. He stood quietly as she smiled at him. She slipped the straps of her dress off her shoulders and let the dress pool at her feet. She stepped out of her dress and slipped her arms around his neck. Her kiss was gentle, her touch soft. He quietly removed his clothes and led Emma to bed. Their night together had a warmth and tenderness he could only try to translate to canvas.

The next morning, after a quick breakfast, Tom led Emma down the beach toward the cove. They climbed over the edge of the jetty to a small section of the beach.

"This is beautiful," she said.

"Yeah, it's great. Nobody bothers to make the climb so it's always pretty private."

"What happens when the tide comes in? That jetty will be harder to navigate."

"It's not for awhile but if it does, there's a stairway down at the other end."

Emma smiled. "Sounds perfect." She dropped her beach bag and took off her gauze beach jacket. Underneath she was wearing a bright blue bikini.

"Talk about perfect," he smiled. He put his hands around her waist and gave her a soft kiss. Emma got a wicked gleam and pushed on his shoulders.

"Last one in!" she yelled as she dashed to the ocean.

Tom laughed and chased her into the water. He was a pretty strong swimmer but Emma swam rings around him. He finally caught her and pulled her close. "Damn, girl. Are you part fish?"

"I just love the water. Ocean, swimming pools, it doesn't matter. It's so soothing." She smiled and wrapped her legs tight around his waist. "You know what else is soothing?"

"What's that?"

"This." She pulled him into a passionate kiss. He held her tight as they bobbed up and down in the waves.

"Let's take this back to the beach." They walked back to the beach and dried off. Emma ran comb through her hair and then grabbed her camera. She snapped a few pictures of Tom. "Aren't there enough pictures of me on the beach?"

"Oh no. These are for me." He smiled and she took another picture, then looked at the results on the screen. "Damn, you are one fine looking fella."

"Oh yeah?" he smiled and moved closer.

"Oh yeah," she whispered.

He gave her a kiss. "Now it's my turn." He grabbed his bag and pulled out a sketch pad and pencil.

"Now? You want to sketch me now? I'm all wet and my hair is a mess."

"Yeah," he smiled. "You're perfect."

She shook her head. "You're crazy. Sweet, but crazy. Okay, where do you want me?" Tom led Emma back to the water up to her ankles. "Venus Rising?" she asked.

"You make a much better Venus than I did." He moved her wet hair around and stepped back. "Yes, that's it." He grabbed his pad and began to sketch. He lost himself in the sketch until Emma called his name.

"I'm getting a little numb from standing still."

"Oh, I'm sorry, sweetheart. I have enough. I can finish this when we get home."

"Can I see?"

"Not yet." he smiled and closed up the sketch. "There's a place down the road that's supposed to have great burritos. What do you say about a ride and getting some lunch?"

Tom and Emma were given a table on the patio of Mama Rosa's despite the crowd. Mama Rosa was in her early seventies and as round as she was tall with a warm smile. Apparently Rosa was a fan of both Emma's and Tom's, since she personally seated them.

"Don't bother with the menus. I'll set you up with my best. My margaritas are legendary."

"None for me, Rosa. I'm driving," said Tom.

"All I need do is hold on so I'll have one," said Emma.

"Hold on?" she asked.

Emma smiled. "He has a Harley."

Rosa put her hand to her chest. "Dios Mio." She looked at Tom and back at Emma. "He looks like that and has a motorcycle. Lucky girl."

Emma laughed. "Don't I know it."

Rosa laughed when she saw he'd blushed bright red.

The meal was just as good as Rosa had promised. They thanked her and took a picture with her for her wall of fame. They were about to leave when Emma spotted a small gift shop off the lobby of the restaurant.

"Would you mind if I take a quick look?"

"Sure. I'm going to hit the men's room and then I'll join you."

Emma smiled at the clerk behind the counter and looked at some earrings on a rack. She saw a long gold pair with an agate stone in the center. "Could I see those?"

"Sure Ms. Nillson."

Emma was startled that the young girl knew who she was. She held the earrings up and looked in the mirror.

"They look great on you," said the clerk.

"They're really pretty. Would you put them aside for me? I want to keep looking."

"Sure thing. Please let me know if you need anything."

"Thank you. I will."

Emma looked around the shop, admiring the handmade goods. She was looking at a cute necklace when she heard a voice behind her.

"Hey there, Emma. You're still looking good."

She turned to see a guy in his late forties who'd had one too many of Rosa's margaritas. "Thank you," she said quietly and tried to move on.

"Let me buy you a drink and we can get acquainted."

"No, thank you." She tried to get past him but he grabbed her arm.

"Let her go."

Emma turned to see Tom standing there. She'd never seen him or anyone for that matter, as angry as he was.

"Back off, old man. The lady and I were just leaving."

"No, you weren't." he said.

Emma tried to pull away but the drunk had a vise grip on her. She saw the clerk run out of the shop to the restaurant. "Don't worry, baby," said the drunk. "I'll protect you from this bum." He took a swing at Tom with his free hand and connected to his jaw. It gave Emma a chance to pull away and hide behind the counter. She watched as Tom delivered a shot to the man's stomach and then a second to his face that sent him flying into a display rack of clothes. Tom checked on the man as he lay on the ground. Blood from the guy's obviously broken nose was running over t-shirts that read 'Mama Rosa's'. He tried to get up and Tom pushed him back down with his foot.

"Do yourself a favor, asshole. Stay down before I kill you."

"Alright. That's enough." A barrel chested man walked into the shop and pulled out

handcuffs. He reached for Tom's arm.

"What are you doing?" Emma yelled as she rushed out from behind the counter.

"I'm Officer Langhorne." He pointed to the clerk. "Carrie told me this guy started a fight."

"No he didn't," she yelled.

"Well, Jerry's on the floor bleeding and this lowlife made him that way."

"Lowlife!" she yelled.

"Emma, babe. Calm down," said Tom

"I will not calm down. This guy assumed because that jerk is wearing khakis and a button down shirt and you're wearing jeans and have tattoos that you're the bad guy in this scenerio."

"Ms. Nillson, please calm yourself."

Tom smiled and shook his head. "Bad move, dude."

"Calm myself!" She pushed a finger into the man's chest. "That creep grabbed me and wouldn't let go." She showed the officer her arm and it was already starting to bruise. Emma thought she heard Tom growl. "Then the man I love came in and defended me. He got him off me." She pointed to the man still bleeding on the floor. "That's the guy you should be arresting. Now put those fucking handcuffs where they belong."

The officer looked back at Carrie. "Charlie, Ms. Nillson is telling the truth." She pointed to Tom. "That's her boyfriend." She leaned closer and whispered. "He's the Stryker Jeans spokesman."

The man's shoulders slumped. He looked out at the lobby and spotted a number of people filming the goings on with their phones. "Well, shit." He let Tom go and leaned over the bleeding drunk. He pulled him to his feet and cuffed him. He led him out of the shop to the applause of many of the restaurant patrons.

Tom pulled her aside and away from the still recording iPhones. He looked around and found a door that led to the shop's office and closed the door behind them. "Let me see your arm." He looked at it and this time she was sure he growled. "I should have broken more than his nose. Let me get you back to the hotel and we'll get some ice on that."

"Me? What about you?" He flinched when she touched his chin.

"So we both need ice." He sighed and sat on the edge of the desk. "Em, I'm sorry about what happened."

"What? Why are you sorry?"

"I came barreling in and made a mess of the guy. I know you're a very strong, independent woman and capable of taking care of yourself."

Emma threaded her arms around his neck. "What in God's name makes you think that? I was so relieved when you came to my rescue."

"All those phones, it will make the news."

"Guaranteed."

"The Stryker people will be pissed."

"Are you kidding? They'll love it. Tom, even if they were I wouldn't care. I was really scared of that guy. Then I saw you and I knew I'd be okay." She grew quiet. "With you I always feel safe, protected." She looked into his eyes. "I feel loved."

He smiled. "What was that you said to the officer?"

Emma blushed. "You mean when I told him you're the man I love?"

"Yeah, that."

"It's true," she whispered. "I'm in love with you. I think I was the moment I saw your beautiful eyes. I don't know what you want to do with this bit of information, but it's true. I'm in love with you, Tom."

He gave her a kiss. "That's good, because I'm love with you too."

"Yeah?" she grinned.

"Yeah. It took me a little longer to figure out. I knew when I looked at my sketches of you. I knew the only reason I could be inspired to be that good was because I'm in love with you."

Emma pulled him into a passionate kiss that might have gone on longer but for Mama Rosa pounding on the office door.

"Are you two okay?"

Tom smiled and opened the door. "Yes Rosa, we're okay."

She wrung her hands and looked at her shop. "I'm so sorry for all this."

"It wasn't your fault," said Tom. "I'll give you my address and you can send me the bill."

"No. That fool Jerry will pay for any damage." She saw the bruises on Tom's chin and Emma's arm. "Oh God, you're hurt. Let me get some ice."

"No thanks, Rosa. I'm want to get Emma back to our hotel."

"Okay, I'm just so sorry."

"Don't worry, Rosa," said Emma. "We don't blame you." They started to leave when Carrie stopped them.

"Ms. Nillson. Don't forget your earrings."

Tom reached for his wallet but Rosa stopped him. "No. Let me do at least this." She handed the earrings to Emma. "Please."

Emma smiled and hugged the woman. "Thank you."

Rosa pushed the crowds back as they made their way to Tom's bike. "Are you ready?" he asked.

She touched his face and smiled. "For anything."