

Two months after walking the stage and receiving her high school diploma, Jinxi was finally free. She took a last look around her bedroom. Except for two foster homes and three years in Juvenile Hall Girls Ranch, this had been her only home. If you could call it that. It was a place to sleep.

A few stuffed animals sat on the neatly made bed. Nothing left to shove into the bulging backpack. She slung the pack over one bony shoulder and nearly toppled from its weight.

The *thunk* of the pack hitting the worn kitchen linoleum floor echoed in the empty house.

“Mom,” Jinxi scribbled on the back of a discarded envelope. “I’m with Skeeter.” She chewed the end of the pen. What else could she say? Thanks for never being there? She flung down the pen with a curse. It rolled to the edge of the table, wobbled, then fell to the floor. Leaning over to retrieve the pen, she decided to at least try to put down a few more words.

“We’re heading to L.A. where his friends are staying.”

Skeeter had made some vague references to the place they’d be staying. He made it sound like a resort. She hoped it wasn’t one more of his lies. At least she’d be safe there. How cool to hang out with her BFF Savannah, or Savvy as she preferred to be called, and some of Skeeter’s friends. Kind of like a family. One she’d never really had. She hoped so, anyway.

The roar of a motorcycle pulled her toward the front door. The sound of freedom. Of change. Maybe even the beginning of belonging. What she wouldn’t give for a place to settle.

“Let’s bounce!” came the muffled shout from under her boyfriend’s helmet.

Jinxi donned her helmet and clambered onto the bike, wrapping her arms around Skeeter's skinny waist. Sweat formed on her body, then immediately evaporated in the blistering

wind. Bakersfield, California heat was a force to be reckoned with. At least Skeeter didn't demand she wear leathers like he did.

They roared down Interstate 5 toward Los Angeles, where their friends waited in an air-conditioned hotel room. Anticipation built the closer they got to the outskirts of LA. She'd finally be free from the dread that plagued her every time Mom brought home a new man. Jinxi laughed out loud, the sound snatched away in the wind. She was with Skeeter now, and she belonged with him.

After more than two hours, Jinxi was ready for an icy shower and a cold drink.

"You made it," Savvy exclaimed when they arrived at the hotel. Jinxi's best friend moved in for a hug, then pulled back. "Girl, you need a shower."

Jinxi laughed at Savvy's wrinkled nose.

Skeeter slapped Jinxi on the backside as she turned toward the bathroom. "Want me to join you?" he asked with a leer.

Jinxi felt her face redden as Savvy grinned. "No thanks. I'm good." Jinxi dragged her backpack through the suite toward the luxurious bathroom. A swimming pool-sized tub dominated one corner. Double sinks in dark granite. Little bottles of shampoo and body wash.

This hotel room was as different from her mom's house as Jinxi's dyed black hair from her natural white blonde. She should have decided to move in with Skeeter months ago. His drug business must bring more bank than she'd imagined.

With outstretched arms, Jinxi's fingertips barely grazed the sides of the glass-enclosed shower. Mint-scented shampoo and body wash frothed around her feet as the steaming water pounded her body. Twenty minutes of sheer luxury.

Jinxi returned to the main room of the suite, cleaned from the grime and sweat from the road trip. While she was in the bathroom, more people had shown up. Six or seven guys draped themselves over the plush furniture, holding a can of beer, bottle of booze, or a joint. A car race of some sort blared from the big-screen television. Jinxi paused to assess the room. She knew most of the guys were part of Skeeter's group, but some of the women were new.

"There you are," called Savvy from where she sat with some women at the elaborate dining table.

Before Jinxi could approach, a large girl rose and stepped into Jinxi's space. "What are you doing here?" she said with a sneer. "Aren't you supposed to be home with your mommy?"

Carmen had been trouble since the moment she showed up on the back of Butch's Harley. She outweighed Jinxi by at least a hundred pounds and stood six or eight inches taller. She'd made off-hand comments about Jinxi's child-like appearance whenever Skeeter was otherwise engaged.

Jinxi was used to bullies. Her mind replayed a scenario from middle school. A group of ninth graders enjoyed accosting Jinxi on the way to school.

"Dirty white girl," they called her. "White trash." They continued to bully her until Jinxi finally stood up to them.

The first punch had drawn blood from Jinxi's nose. She tucked herself into a small target, then exploded upward, kicking and scratching. Two more girls joined the fray until Jinxi lay on the sidewalk in a fetal position, unable to continue. She'd gotten beaten up but had earned their respect. Explaining her swollen and bruised face to her teachers had been a challenge.

When high school started, the group dissolved when two of the girls moved away.

When Jinxi didn't move or answer, Carmen stepped closer. Jinxi could smell Carmen's breath, hot and sour. "Answer me, little girl."

White-hot fury blinded her for a moment before she swung her fist at Carmen's face. Carmen ducked and grabbed Jinxi's hair and pulled her head back. Jinxi's head spun from Carmen's blow that landed squarely on her cheek.

The women left the dining table and surrounded them like hungry predators. Jinxi felt their tension as she tried to block Carmen's open palm.

"Hey! Knock it off!" Skeeter's voice was a knife, cutting through Jinxi's ears, still ringing from Carmen's first blow.

He shoved two girls out of the way to reach Jinxi and Carmen. Jinxi rubbed her tender scalp.

"No fighting." Despite Skeeter's diminutive size, he was clearly the leader of this gang. He got into Carmen's face. "Carmen, you're on probation. One more problem and you're out."

Butch made a move to defend his woman, but Skeeter stopped him with an outstretched arm like a traffic cop.

"No. Everybody go back to what you were doing. We have a shipment coming in later, and I need you losers to be ready."

The guys slunk back to the TV while the women whispered among themselves.

Skeeter laid a hand on Jinxi's arm. "How's my girl?" He lifted her chin with one finger to examine her bruised cheek. "Put some ice on that."

Jinxi nodded. She knew all about minimizing swelling after abuse to the face, thanks to school bullies and sometimes Mom's boyfriends.

Savvy pulled Jinxi toward the kitchen. She dumped ice from a plastic bucket onto a towel and held it out. “Here. This will help.”

“Thanks, Savvy,” Jinxi murmured, moving her jaw back and forth. Not broken. Just sore.

Savvy glanced back at the table and lowered her voice. “What did your mom say when you left?”

Jinxi shrugged, then winced. One of Carmen’s elbows scored a hit on Jinxi’s clavicle. “She wasn’t home. I left her a note.” As if Mom deserved even that.

“Sheesh. That’s rough.” Savvy helped Jinxi adjust the towel. “At least she didn’t kick you out the minute you graduated.”

Savvy’s stepmom had piled Savvy’s stuff on the porch the day after graduation. When Savvy staggered home after the all-night grad party, she’d discovered she was homeless. Sometimes life sucked.

As the months rolled from summer to fall to winter, the loosely formed group began to get on Jinxi’s last nerve. They’d moved seven times in five months, always one step ahead of some perceived threat.

Money flowed like water from Skeeter’s ‘business,’ but the threat of getting arrested hovered like a dark cloud on the horizon. He immediately dismissed anyone using more than marijuana. Skeeter kept strict control over his product.

Tension grew into petty squabbles among the women, egged on by the guys. Jinxi kept a low profile. At least Carmen was history, replaced by women like her. As long as Jinxi was under Skeeter’s protection, they didn’t dare bother her.

“C’mon, Jinxi. Hurry up. We’re heading to LA Bill to play some pool.” Skeeter picked up his leather jacket and swung it between two fingers. Everyone else had left the hotel.

Jinxi sat on the edge of the hotel bed.

“I have a headache.” The tattoo artist they’d used earlier that day was more heavy-handed than she was used to, and the neck tattoo itched like crazy. The thought of going to a noisy bar made her stomach roll. She dreamed of soaking in the sunken tub while escaping into a novel.

Skeeter’s face hardened. “You have to come. You’re my rainmaker.”

Since Skeeter and his guys taught her to play, Jinxi’d found something she was good at. The guys would take bets from other players who thought there was no way a little five-foot-nothing girl could beat them.

Jinxi’s stomach churned, and her pulse pounded in her temples. She’d only had two migraines in her life, and they’d both been brutal. But not as brutal as an angry Skeeter.

“Wait here,” Skeeter commanded. He strode into the kitchen, returning a few moments later. “Take this,” he said, handing her a small white pill.

Jinxi stared at the pill, speechless. Skeeter never let his people sample product.

“What is it?”

“Something to help take the edge off.”

Jinxi hesitated. If she refused, would Skeeter kick her to the curb like a piece of trash? Then she’d lose the tenuous sense of security of being taken care of.

“It’s perfectly safe,” Skeeter said. “Hurry up.” He grabbed Jinxi’s chin and forced the pill between her lips. She tried to pull away, but his grip tightened. Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes.

Skeeter released her and reached for an open can of beer. Thrusting it toward her, he said, “Wash it down with this.”

Jinxi grimaced but obeyed.

Later at the bar, she and Savvy huddled in a corner booth while the guys congratulated Skeeter for winning a wad of cash. He got slaps on the back when Jinxi had won the pool games. Just once, why couldn't he give her credit? It was time for a new plan. One that didn't include Skeeter.

"Don't you ever get tired of it?" Jinxi asked, picking at a sliver in the wood tabletop. Even the slight dip of her chin made the room spin.

"Tired of what?" Savvy asked.

"This," Jinxi said, waving around the bar. The headache that had retreated to a dull ache behind her eyes threatened to roar back to life. "The constant moving, bar hopping, infighting."

Savvy laughed. "Give all this up? You're kidding, right?"

Jinxi shook her head, then regretted it as the room tilted again.

Savvy leaned over the table, ticking off the points with her fingers. "One, we have all the money we could possibly spend. Two, we stay in the nicest hotels. We can party all day and all night. Plus you don't have to dumpster-dive anymore for a bite to eat." She leaned back with a self-satisfied smile. "What could be better?"

Jinxi forced a smile. "You're right."

"Darn right, I'm right."

Jinxi agreed with Savvy it was nice not to worry about when she'd have enough to eat. Many times growing up, she'd gone to bed hungry. Things like regular meals weren't her mom's priority. Before Jinxi learned to steal, the free lunch at school had been her only meal of the day. When Steve, AKA Skeeter, had come into her life, he'd offered a way of escape. Jinxi didn't fool herself that she loved him. But what if she left Skeeter; started over somewhere else? What would it be like to live somewhere for longer than a few weeks. Get a dog. Put down some roots.

Who was she kidding, anyway? There was no place to go.

Sometimes she wondered if she'd exchanged one set of crappy circumstances for another. With Skeeter, she had a safe place to sleep without worrying some strange guy would sneak into her bedroom. Booze and pot were readily available to dull the sharp edges of reality. She was part of a group, a family of sorts. She belonged. For now, anyway. Unless she did something to tick Skeeter off. Or if he got tired of her. Jinxi would not let that happen.

The downside? Jinxi rubbed her sore jaw. Skeeter's temper sometimes flared and he had a habit of using his hand to lash out. The constant upheaval and trying to stay one or two steps ahead of the cops. Having to leave her stuff behind when things got dicey.

Jinxi now kept her backpack close by, stuffed with her favorite clothes and a few personal items from her childhood. Just in case.

As the months rolled by in blurred reality, Jinxi settled into the lifestyle. She slept late, partied even later, and learned to acquiesce to whatever Skeeter wanted. It was less painful that way.

"I have a job for you," Skeeter said one afternoon.

Jinxi squinted at him as he stood at the door of the hotel room. The sun shining behind him shadowed his face.

"What?" she asked.

Skeeter stepped into the room and closed the door. "Where is everybody?" he asked, glancing around.

Jinxi shrugged. She didn't know and didn't care. She was caught up in a book she'd picked up in the hotel lobby. A murder mystery in a small town in Oregon.

Jinxi sat with her back against the headboard, book propped against her raised knees. The bed dipped when Skeeter sat near the end.

“There’s something I need you to do.” He squeezed her leg for emphasis.

“Can it wait? I’m reading.” Big mistake. She should have known.

Skeeter grabbed the book and slung it across the room. “You think you’re smarter than all of us because you’re *reading*.”

Jinxi froze, heart pounding against her ribs, waiting for his anger to escalate. She didn’t have to wait long. His eyes narrowed to slits.

Skeeter slapped Jinxi on the side of her face. Her ear rang from the impact.

“I’ve got something I need you to do. Now.”

Jinxi nodded, holding her stinging cheek.

Skeeter got up and picked up a package he’d tossed onto the coffee table on his way in. “Go downstairs and take a left when you leave the lobby. There’s a park a couple of blocks down. Wait by the basketball court until my guy comes. He’s gonna give you an envelope, and you give him the package. Got it?”

Skeeter thrust the package into her lap. What could it be this time? Probably another scary meeting with another scary dude.

“Good girl.” Skeeter towered over her for a moment. Jinxi studied the slashes in her jeans, counting the moments until he’d leave her alone. He grabbed a pack of cigarettes and tapped one out. Once it was lit and he’d taken the first draw, Jinxi slid from the bed.

“Where you going?” Skeeter demanded as she padded toward the bathroom.

She pointed toward the commode. “I need to go.”

Skeeter made a sound between a snort and a laugh. “Go ahead. I know what you’re going to do.” He made a slashing movement with his hand on the opposite arm.

Jinxi face flushed. There were no secrets when they lived this close together.

She closed and locked the bathroom door before pulling out the blade she kept tucked in her boot. The first slice brought relief from the shame of being slapped. The sharp pain helped deflect the emotions she dared not let escape. The second slice brought a rush of endorphins, enough to carry her through Skeeter’s task.

Skeeter barely spared her a glance as Jinxi shoved the package into her backpack and slung it over one shoulder and headed out of the hotel room. The door closed behind her with a decisive click. She inhaled, then took the stairs down to the street, turning left as Skeeter had instructed.

The smell of freshly mown grass filled the air as Jinxi approached the park. A few kids climbed a play structure while bored moms stared at their phones, glancing up every few minutes to check on their offspring.

Jinxi sank onto an empty bench near the basketball court and pulled out her phone. She’d missed a text from Savvy.

Savvy: *You shd b here. Shopping for a new bike*

Jinxi chewed her lip. How much to tell her friend? Skeeter hadn’t said anything about this errand being secret. Someone else usually handled product deliveries. Why’d he suddenly make her do it?

Jinxi: *Busy. Errand for S*

Savvy sent a thumbs-up emoji.

Jinxi sighed, hoping whoever she was meeting knew what she looked like. In the meantime, her eyes darted around the park, looking for the guy who matched the description Skeeter had given her.

Sitting outside, smelling the grass, and hearing the shouts from the kids playing, felt like visiting a foreign country. She didn't belong in this place where moms in yoga pants watched their kids climb and swing. The whine of sirens in the distance was at odds with the peaceful scene in front of her. The nagging sense of unease she'd endured for as long as she could remember returned with a vengeance.

Where *did* she belong?

'Home' was a myth. Between Mom's drinking and the revolving door of boyfriends, the house became the occasional place to crash. Home with Skeeter was a nomadic life of hotel room to hotel room. Not just any hotel, but the nicest ones Los Angeles had to offer.

With the money Skeeter brought in, they'd been more than once to Disneyland, Six Flags, Raging Waters, and Medieval Times. But they spent most of their days and nights in bars or hotel rooms. Skeeter insisted their group was a family, with him the patriarch. Her position was tenuous at best. There was little she could do to keep her position except do what Skeeter said. If Skeeter got mad enough, he could kick her to the curb. She had no Plan B.

Anxiety clawed at Jinxi's insides as she considered the possibility Skeeter had sent her on this errand, intending to ditch her. Would she return to the hotel room to find it empty, like the time she got home from school to find Mom gone? Her skin prickled as the hollow feeling of being left behind returned.

What then?

Before Jinxi could formulate a plan, a well-groomed man approached. His sport coat looked expensive and fit his frame like it was custom-made for him. Creases in his trouser legs looked sharp enough to cut steak. This must be the guy. He fit the description.

They made eye contact. "Do you have something for me?"

Jinxi nodded. Sweat broke out under her arms. Skeeter hadn't said anything about a secret code word or a name. What if this guy took the package and ran? She'd have to go back and face Skeeter's wrath. She'd be toast for sure.

Jinxi stood and pulled herself up to her full height, drawing on the bravado that had helped her survive the two years at the Girls Ranch for Juvenile Delinquents.

"Do you have something for *me*?" Jinxi asked. She put one hand on her hip and gripped the strap of her backpack with the other. Her heart pounded so hard she was sure the guy could hear it through her hoodie.

Jinxi froze as he reached his right hand into the inside of the blazer. Did he have a gun? Would he shoot her and steal the package? The edges of her vision darkened.

She flinched as he pulled a fat envelope from his jacket. She focused on him while she unzipped her backpack. He tossed the envelope on the bench next to her.

Sirens wailed in the distance. Jinxi and the man turned toward the sound. At that moment, Skeeter's motorcycle screeched to a stop in front of the park.

"Get on!" he shouted.

Jinxi grabbed the envelope and stuffed it in her backpack. She took off running before the guy could react. She jumped on the back of the bike, with barely enough time to wrap her arms around Skeeter's middle. Skeeter raced down the street with Jinxi pressing her bag between her

stomach and Skeeter's back. She glanced back to see the guy skid to a stop at the sidewalk while two police cars came to a halt where he stood.

Skeeter slowed the bike a few minutes later to allow Jinxi to thrust her arms through the backpack straps and fasten on a helmet.

“Where are we going?” she shouted over the roar of the bike as Skeeter accelerated.

“San Diego,” he replied. “Someone turned the cops on to our drop.”

Jinxi’s nerves tingled from the narrow escape from the law. It could have been her, hands shackled behind her back and thrown into a cop car. She knew from the past it was not a warm and fuzzy experience. At least Skeeter’d returned for her. This time.

Two hours later, they pulled onto a dirt road that wound through scrubby trees. The ocean glistened in the distance, a blue expanse ribboned with white froth. Skeeter brought the bike to a halt in front of a log house. Jinxi recognized a few bikes parked haphazardly on the asphalt pad in front of a double garage.

She dismounted and stretched her arms above her head, inhaling the tang of salt and wild sage.

“Where are we?” Jinxi asked, admiring the view.

Skeeter removed his helmet and rested it on the bike’s handlebars. “It’s a friend of a friend’s place. He said we could hang out in his cabin until things calm down in LA.”

Jinxi’s mouth fell open as she gaped at the house. Although it appeared to be made of logs, it was nowhere near a cabin. The second story rose above the place, dormer windows like friendly eyes. A picture window along the left side of the entrance stretched practically from floor to ceiling. The front door was tall enough to let someone as tall as Shaq pass through without ducking.

“Wait till you see the inside,” Skeeter said with a grin.

Jinxi had never seen her boyfriend as excited as when he ushered her into the house.

A short hallway opened into a great room overlooking a meticulously landscaped open space that blended with the surrounding area. Savvy, Butch, and a few others lounged on sofas, watching a movie on a big screen TV that filled one wall.

“Hey, girl.” Savvy rushed to hug Jinxi. “Have you seen your room?”

Jinxi shook her head. “Just got here.”

Savvy smiled. “It’s amazing.”

“I’m giving her the tour,” Skeeter said, tugging Jinxi in the direction of the stairs.

Skeeter’s enthusiasm was contagious as he opened each bedroom and letting Jinxi admire the furnishings.

“Look at this!” he’d exclaim as each door revealed a different décor for that bedroom. One room resembled a medieval castle with canopied bed and heavy furniture. Another room was modern and minimalist, all chrome and black furnishings. Jinxi hoped that wasn’t to be their room. She wanted color and texture; things she didn’t have at her mother’s house.

At the end of the hall, Skeeter opened the final door with a flourish.

“This is the master bedroom.”

Jinxi's breath caught in her throat. A picture window framed the distant ocean. She leaned against the window trying to drink in the fantastic view and save it for ugly sights she knew lay ahead. "It's beautiful," she whispered.

“Check this out.” Skeeter flipped on the lights to reveal a massive bathroom. A spa-sized tub sat beneath another window with the same view as the bedroom. A tiled shower in one corner

looked big enough to hold ten people. Double sinks and a separate space for the toilet finished up the atmosphere of luxurious comfort.

“Who’s your friend,” Jinxi asked. Who could Skeeter possibly know who owned a place like this?

Skeeter shrugged and plopped onto the massive king-sized bed. “Just some movie producer who needs a continual supply of what I have to offer. He likes to keep his ‘actors,’” Skeeter used air quotes, “compliant.”

Jinxi’s stomach churned. They were staying in the home of a porno movie producer. The gorgeous view and luxurious accommodations lost their allure. All the stuff they did paled in comparison. She’d drawn an invisible line in her head. *Their* activities were okay, but this wasn’t. She shrugged off the irony of her thinking.

Skeeter patted the comforter. “Come sit with me.”

Jinxi swallowed her disgust and settled onto the bed. Skeeter kissed her long and hard. “Good job keeping the stash and the cash.” He chuckled at his rhyme. “That poor schmuck wasn’t expecting to get taken by you.”

Skeeter stroked her hair. “Let’s have some fun,” he said, pulling her down.

"Let me take a shower first. Wash off the road dust." Skeeter didn't stop her from jumping up.

He grinned. “I’ll be waiting.”

Jinxi took a long shower, enjoying the fragrant body wash and shampoo provided by their host. It almost made up for his occupation. Almost. She climbed out of the shower and wrapped a towel around her. Peeking into the bedroom, she sagged with relief that Skeeter was gone.

She dressed in clean jeans and a long-sleeved tee-shirt, opting for flip flops instead of her usual Doc Marten boots. The window seat overlooking the rolling hills called her name. Jinxi curled up on the seat and gazed at the sun as it sank into the Pacific.

Too bad this gorgeous place belonged to such a lowlife.

"Suck it up, buttercup," Jinxi muttered to herself. This place was much better than a hotel room, no matter who owned it. Here she'd have some privacy while still being a part of their dysfunctional family.

Over the next couple of months, the group fell into a routine. A cleaning crew arrived every Monday to dispose of the previous week's mess. The women took turns cooking, which often meant having to call for take-out from a restaurant in town. Jinxi had never learned to cook anything more than Top Ramen, and apparently, the other two girls had a limited working knowledge of food prep as well.

Skeeter left from time to time to check on his business, while the other guys played video games or rowdy competition of Corn Hole in the back yard.

"I could get used to this," Savvy said, leaning on the counter bar while Jinxi prepared some boxed mac and cheese and hot dogs.

Jinxi swung around to face her. "I know what you mean." Since they'd been in the 'house on the hill,' as Jinxi called it, Skeeter had been more relaxed. More gentle. Perhaps they could actually settle down and be a real couple. Have their own home. But she'd never, ever have kids.

She'd never do to her kid what her mom had done. Letting Jinxi be taken away by Social Services. Bounced to different foster homes. Letting her run wild until her vandalism burned out of control, and she was sent to the Girl's Ranch for two years.

Jinxi could count on one hand the number of times her mom had visited her. She'd never do that to a kid.

“You agree, right?” Savvy’s voice cut through Jinxi’s thoughts.

“Huh?”

Savvy chuckled. “You weren’t even listening, were you?”

“Sorry, no.”

The smell of burning food penetrated Jinxi’s nose.

“Oh, snap!” She muttered an expletive and whirled toward the stove. She yanked the pot off the burner and inspected the sticky mess. “It’s not edible.”

Savvy came around the island and inspected the remains of the mac and cheese. She wrinkled her nose. “You’re right.”

Jinxi pressed her lips together and drew them to one side. “Guess it’ll just be hot dogs tonight.”

She and Savvy jumped when the front door was flung open and slammed closed. They froze, waiting for the storm to enter the kitchen.

Skeeter strode into the room, spewing swear words.

Adrenaline coursed through Jinxi’s veins. She cringed away from him, not wanting to be on the receiving end of that wrath.

“What the heck is wrong with you people?” he demanded. His gaze swept from Jinxi and Savvy to the two guys relaxing on the sofa in the great room. “Can’t anyone follow directions?”

The guys jumped to their feet. “What’s up? What happened?”

Skeeter was so angry he practically growled. “The LA cops have gotten wind of our little setup. How did this happen?” His whole body shook with rage.

Savvy took a step back and tiptoed down the hall. Jinxi was a statue holding the pot of burned pasta with one hand.

“What the heck is this?” Skeeter said, peering into the pot. When Jinxi didn’t answer, he backhanded her across her face.

Tears sprang to her eyes. The pot slipped from her fingers and hit the tile floor with a clang. Clumps of dried pasta flew in every direction. Skeeter yanked Jinxi’s arm, pulled her to him, and hit her again.

“Clean this crap up,” he demanded, shoving her to the floor. A well-placed kick landed on her lower back Jinxi curled into a ball, hoping to avoid more abuse. Skeeter snorted in disgust before turning to deal with the wide-eyed guys across the room.

Jinxi waited to drag herself up to the counter until she heard Skeeter yelling at his friends. She’d be bruised for sure. Both cheekbones ached, and her back burned. Splashing cold water on her face washed away the hot tears, but nothing could remove the humiliation except the feeling of a blade slicing into her skin. She eyed the knife rack. Did she have time to grab one and dash to the bathroom?

Skeeter shouted something about getting back up to Los Angeles as he slammed out the door. His motorcycle roared, gradually fading into silence. Her hand shook as she reached toward the rack.

The guys conferred, heads close together, glancing furtively at Jinxi. Her arm dropped to her side as she waited to see what they’d do.

A few minutes later, they stomped upstairs, followed by Savvy and Johnnie’s flavor-of-the-month girl. Something was up, and Jinxi hoped it didn't involve her.

Since she didn't expect Skeeter back any time soon, Jinxi left the mess on the floor for the cleaning crew.

She filled a plastic bag with ice and alternated resting it on each cheek. "Snap, that hurts!" she murmured. She should have stayed out of Skeeter's orbit.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

She'd been crazy stupid to think she'd have a normal life with Skeeter. His temper increased each time he got angry enough to hit her. But he hadn't broken any of her bones. Yet.

Thinking about leaving him both terrified and exhilarated her. She'd be homeless, but she'd be free. Or would she.

Jinxi huffed a humorless laugh. She was a prisoner in a jail of her own making.

A commotion on the stairs caught her attention. Butch, Johnnie, Savvy, and whatever her name was thundered into the entry and opened the front door. They all carried a bag or a backpack.

"What's going on?" Jinxi asked. Alarm jolted up her back.

Savvy looked over her shoulder as she walked out the door. "Sorry."

Before Jinxi could react, two motorcycles roared to life. She jumped up and ran to the door. All she could see was the dust billowing out behind the bikes as they buzzed down the dirt driveway.

Jinxi bounded up the stairs in a panic. She stuffed her clothes into her backpack and practically tripped going back downstairs. The chatter of the two cleaning ladies on the landing forced Jinxi to move. If the police showed up, it would be better if they thought everyone had left at the same time. She stepped onto the front porch and closed the door behind her.

Staring out at the evergreen trees, she contemplated her situation. Skeeter was gone with no talk about when he'd be back. Her so-called friends abandoned her. And there was the very real possibility the cops might show up at any minute. As the 'last man standing,' she'd be the one arrested.

Maybe jail wouldn't be so bad. "Three hots and a cot," she'd heard Skeeter joke.

Or ... perhaps this would be her time to get away. Escape the soft prison of life with a drug dealer. See if she could make it without him. The few dollars she'd squirreled away would at least get her started until she could figure something out.

She'd always wanted to see San Francisco. Now was the time.

Jinxi pushed both arms through the straps of her backpack and set off, walking down the driveway to where it met the road. Her steps picked up in anticipation of being free, which brought both terror and excitement. At least for now, her future was in her own hands.