

Black Velvet Seductions

Rally Fever



Crea Jones

Amorous Adventures

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Dedication

For Beth, who needed a friend to go to Sturgis with her to promote her rally mystery.

Chapter One

“I don’t like it when you go, Auntie Mo,” Peter whimpered.

“I know, baby,” Marly whispered, gathering the four year old onto her lap and laying her cheek on his silky head, breathing deeply of the scent of child and baby shampoo. “I don’t like it either, Petey, but I have to make money...you know...so we can eat...and maybe have a new toy.”

“You could just do the books.”

The children’s books, Marly wrote and illustrated through out the rest of the year paid their living expenses, food, clothing, and taxes on the farm. But it was Marly’s ten day stint at the Sturgis rally, air-gunning wolves, eagles, and buxom women on the back of leather vests and jackets, that paid for the medical insurance...expensive because of Petey’s frequent ear infections and her mother’s heart. It paid for medicines and even a few extras—like the second-hand car and the new tricycle that had so delighted Petey.

Petey pulled back and looked up at her from big, worried eyes. “Will my mama be there?”

Marly stilled. It had been nearly a year since Janine had flown in on the back of a Harley owned by some man Marly had never seen before, covered Peter with kisses, presented him with a second-hand teddy bear, borrowed fifty dollars from their mother’s purse, and roared away again.

“I don’t know, Petey. She might.”

“I don’t like her,” Petey whined.

Marly bit her lip; she wasn't sure she liked her sister either, but she didn't want Janine, should she ever choose to reappear, to know that. Marly lived in terror that some day her sister would come back and demand the boy Marly had cared for since he was a baby. "That's all right, Peter, but never tell her that, okay?"

"An...an...I don't like granma either!"

"Yes, you do, Peter."

"N, I wan' you to stay with me." He was close to tears now. If he made a fuss, Marly knew her mother would take it out on him in dozens of mean little ways.

"Peter, you have to be brave for me. And strong."

"I don' wan' to."

"If you do, I'll bring you a present." Bribes, Marly thought. That couldn't be good for him. But...she had to get him through these next ten days with as little stress as possible.

He considered, looking up at her through the beginning of tears. "What?"

"A surprise. But something really special. You just have to be real good for grandma."

"But I don' like grandma."

Marly felt the beginnings of panic. She'd planned so carefully, keeping Peter up all day so she could put him to bed early, and leave when he was asleep. But now he was so tired he was irritable. Marly hated to leave him, but she had to, and he just had to cooperate. "Please Petey. It's only ten days. We'll mark your calendar. Ten little bears." Marly leaned across to sketch in ten smiling bears on the calendar she'd taped by his bed. "Every morning when you wake up, you can put a mark...say a hat on one of the bears. When they're all wearing hats...well, then I'll be home. With your surprise."

Petey stared at her suspiciously. "What if you run off with some bad man like my Mama did."

Marly sighed. She knew that had come from her mother. "I'd never leave you, Peter. You're *my* little boy."

He sniffed. "Tell me about the butterfly again."

Marly tugged the drawstring waist of his dog-printed pj's down to reveal the odd little birthmark perched on the point of his hipbone. "You have this magic butterfly right here, and whenever you feel sad, you can just press it..." Marly punched it once with her finger and Petey giggled. "And it'll fly with you and carry you up and away right into our great big blue sky where everything is bright and happy. And you can soar with the eagles and the hawks and even other butterflies." She lifted him into bed and kissed his forehead. "I love you bushels and bushels, and I'd never leave you, Petey."

Petey smiled and turned on his side. "I know," he muttered snuggling into his pillow.

Marly waited until his eyelids slid down over the green eyes so like her sister's, then stood, went into her own room, gathered her bags, and carried them out into the living room where her mother sat on the worn avocado-colored couch beneath the mounted deer head her father had shot with bow and arrow some twenty years ago. Marly sighed and thought how she really should try to find the money to redo this place...at least by the time Petey was in school and bringing friends home.

"Well, I'm going now, Mom."

Her mother sniffed and muted the TV. "Do you think she'll be there this year?"

"I don't know. Be patient with Peter, Mom. Please."

"You spoil him."

"He's...just a little boy."

"He's always whining."

"No, he's not Mom. He's really a very sweet-natured child."

"I guess you think it's me, don't you? I guess you think it's all my fault."

Marly blinked guiltily. "No mom, of course not."

"Everything in this family is always my fault."

Marly reflected uneasily that she did rather tend to feel a vast majority of this family's problems were her mother's fault, but she wasn't about to say that particularly now when she

needed her mother's help with Peter. "Just do the best you can, okay, Mom? And then after...we'll do something special...go someplace special." Damn. Now she was bribing her mother.

Pale eyes flicked at her and then away. "You think it's my fault *he* left, don't you?"

"No!" Marly shook her head hard. "No, of course not. I certainly don't blame you for Daddy's leaving."

"It was your sister. He couldn't take her acting out and then just leaving like that. That's what it was. It broke his heart. That's why he left."

Marly felt tears threatening. She wanted to throw herself into her mother's arms and wail, "But I wasn't acting out, Mom. And he left me too. And I miss him every day of my life." But her mother would just sniff and push her away and say, "I do have a bad heart you know." And besides today of all days, Marly had to keep the peace.

"I guess you're staying with *her* again."

"Places are really hard to find during the rally, Mom, and Florence rents to me really reasonably."

"You call her Florence now?"

"Mrs. Walker, I mean."

"Call it like it is. Your father's whore."

"Oh Mom. She...was his girlfriend. She loved him and misses him as much as we do." *More than you, I bet*, Marly thought bitterly. Her mother's illness had always kept her from doing anything she didn't want to do, including inhabiting Smith Prescott's bed, for as long as Marly could remember. Still, her mother raged continually then and now about his Sturgis girl friend.

"That's one good thing about him running off with his young floozy, isn't it? Old fat Florence got hers."

"Oh mother," Marly whispered, and then louder. "Please. Just take care of Peter."

"Sure. You just go off and have your good time just like he did. Don't think about me."

"I'll be working!" Marly said through gritted teeth. "Working hard! It won't kill you to look after the boy for ten days!"

"You don't know that, do you?" her mother said haughtily. "After all, I do have a bad heart, you know." She punched up the TV sound.

"Damn," Marly whispered to herself. "Damn." She was trembling with anger. Don't say anything, she told herself. That will just make it worse. Just leave. She moved to the door then hesitated and turned back. "Please Mom!" she cried over the TV. "Be good to him."

"If your sister's there," her mother yelled back, "you can tell her, I haven't got much time left and tending her bastard kid is probably going to kill me."

"Mother!" Marly gasped.

"Ask her who the father is. Tell her we gotta have some help. Tell her, her behavior drove off your Dad. Tell her I can't do this every year, Marlene. I'm a sick woman."

"The doctor says if you take your medicine..."

"A lot he knows." Her mother turned the TV sound even higher and whined to it, "I'm just not up to caring for a kid."

"I've frozen meals for all ten days, Mom. The house is clean. All you have to do is...is..." her voice fell. "Be nice to him."

Her mother stared at a beaming Pat Sajak and didn't answer.

Marly hesitated and then went out letting the screen door slap shut behind her. Maybe next year it would be better. Wiley was trying to get her airbrushed vests and jackets into the Easy Rider catalogue. Maybe next year, she could afford childcare for Peter. She hefted her bags into the old Chevette already loaded with painted vests and jackets, her airbrush, and her paints. And maybe next year she could afford a car that wasn't on its last legs or tires or whatever. "Just make it there and back this year, baby," she whispered patting the rusty hood. "Please. Just this year."

She started to get into the car, hesitated, glanced up the

path that ran behind her mother's chicken coop, and then on impulse, left the car door wide to the evening breeze and walked up that path. One hundred yards beyond the coop was the small pit, Marly's father had dug for her vision quest. Her father's grandmother had been Sioux, and he'd grown up with endless stories of the Sioux ways, myths and history. In turn, Smith Prescott had related them all to his younger daughter. She'd been ten when she decided she wanted, just as a Sioux child would, to have a vision quest. So her father had dug the hollow, searched out a quilt that had been his grandmother's, and then late in the chosen day, Marly had caught him cutting tiny pieces from his arm and putting them into a hollow gourd.

"What are you doing?" she remember crying out, horrified.

"This is how it's done," her father had replied. "It's the duty of the parent or grandparent, Marly. It helps the visions come. They say Sitting Bull chipped a hundred pieces from his arms before he had the vision of blue-coated soldiers falling upside down from the sky. That's how he knew his people would win at the Little Bighorn."

But Marly had begun to cry and to protest that she didn't want her father to cut himself. He nodded and stopped, but always after, she remembered him like that, cutting himself for her, and always after, she'd tried hard never to hurt or displease him.

Marly knelt and touched the hot dirt in the small depression, remembering how her father had wrapped her in the quilt and settled her there as night fell, and she had lain staring up at the stars and the Sioux night sun, big and round and pale. Then finally, she slept and dreamed bright vivid pictures and then herself painting those same pictures. The next morning, she told her father she would be an artist, and he smiled and capped her head with his huge, warm hand. "Then my little Wonderkid," he grinned, "we better start saving for art school."

He took her into town and opened a savings account in her name, and every month the two of them had put in five

dollars until Marly started babysitting; then it was more.

When Smith Prescott had walked away without a word, Marly had used a little of the account to begin an art course down at the Black Hill's College in Spearfish. But when Peter came, every cent was needed for the medical bills from Peter's frequent ear infections and the tubes a surgeon had finally implanted to stop them.

She had felt as though the very threads of her being were entwined with those of her father and then he'd simply torn away and left her. That had been four years ago, and she'd just barely begun to heal. She stood abruptly, turned, and hurried back down the path. It was time to go, past time, and this wasn't helping a bit.

The Chevy sputtered and jerked to a start, shied a bit on the gravel road that led out of the hills, but settled into a rattling rumble on the county road that led into Spearfish. After a time Marly relaxed and let herself enjoy the long, late sun light that hazed the distant mountains, giving them that dark look that caused the Lakota Sioux to name them Paho Sapa, Black Hills, since their language had no word for mountains.

The sky was deep blue with lofty clouds piled in the west. An eagle wheeled slowly over a stand of burr oaks. Marly felt herself soften and fill with pleasure. It was so beautiful here, so quiet. She began to fill with peace. It would be all right. It was all going to work out. She would make enough money at the rally to cover next year's extras and Peter would manage with her mother and pretty soon he'd start school and have friends he might be able to stay with. She half-smiled and the tension in her shoulders eased until something, some uninvited feeling crept from the fringes of her mind. A feeling of unease, a feeling she hadn't had this strong since that terrible August her sister had run off and her father had disappeared. "Took off with one of his floozie's," Marly's mother claimed to this day. But...somehow...Marly couldn't quite believe it. There had been other women; Marly knew

that. But since Smith Prescott's wife considered herself an invalid, and since Smith was still a strong, healthy male, Marly couldn't quite bring herself to blame him. But her father would never have left her alone to deal with her mother. And he'd never have left the Meade County deputy sheriff's job he loved. But then he had, hadn't he?

At Spearfish, she pulled onto interstate ninety and was immediately surrounded by Harley Davidson motorcycles, two abreast, all rolling toward Sturgis, all huge and ridden by mostly hairy men. They reminded Marly somehow of the buffalo that used to roam here.

Marly sighed. Another rally. Every August, the little town of Sturgis, South Dakota shut down its businesses, emptied its stores of dresses, shirts, hardware, and rented every inch of space to vendors from all over the world, selling leathers, T-shirts, exotic foods, rally beer, motorcycles, and every motorcycle accessory known to man. The Buffalo Chip, Hog Heaven, and other, smaller campgrounds hauled in hundreds of porta potties and booked famous rock bands. The highway patrol moved half of its staff to the West River area; hundreds of police from other towns took their vacations and drove to Sturgis to earn the big bucks the Sturgis force paid for extra Rally policing. And then the bikers arrived. For one week, the population of Sturgis went from five hundred to two hundred thousand plus.

The money, bikers spent in a state with a severely depressed economy, would keep a good number of locals going through the rest of the year—Marly included. Most of the bikers worked as doctors, lawyers, construction workers; but then there were The Hell's Angels, The Devils' Disciples, The Yonkers, all the outlaw gangs. Not just everyone could afford the gleaming \$25,000 Harleys and all the painted leathers and chrome attachments. It was a pricy hobby...or occupation. Marly hit her right turn button and took the Sturgis exit behind a biker with a buxom blond in string bikini clinging to his leather back. His babe was going to have one miserable

sunburn tomorrow.

Marly turned into Florence Walker's driveway, pulled out a shopping cart and loaded it with leathers, paint, and airbrush. Florence came out and stood on the front porch. "Room's all ready, Marly."

Marly smiled and nodded.

"You hear from your father?"

"No." Marly murmured. Growing up, She'd heard the whispers. Florence had been Smith Prescott's lover for as long as Marly could remember; she knew her father would have left her mother for Florence if it hadn't been for his daughters. This part of South Dakota was traditional; men stayed with their families...and besides, their dad had loved them. And Florence. And had gone off with someone else?

Florence came down the three steps from the porch to whisper to Marly. "They rented their back yard for three hundred dollars." She pointed with her chin to her neighbor's back yard where three tents were already in place. "Kin you believe that? Three hundred dollars! Jus fer a scrap a grass ta stick a flap a canvas. They rented the drive fer another two...n' the poor suckers gotta go in and use the town porta potties. They're not even lettin' 'em use their john."

"Florence, the two hundred, I pay you, really isn't enough. I mean for the driveway and the room..."

"No, now baby. I'm not about to rent to those bikers. Who knows what they might do."

Florence represented that part of the locals who locked themselves in their houses for the rally duration; another part, set up stands, rented rooms and yards, and came away with a tidy little nest egg.

"You want a glass a sweet tea?" Florence asked wistfully.

"No, I'm going to get this down to Wiley's before it gets too late."

"Oh honey, you shouldn't be out alone."

Marly smiled. "I'll be okay, Florence." She didn't point out that even though the rally didn't officially begin until

tomorrow, the streets and sidewalks were packed with bikers and tourists and locals. Every year Florence made Marly watch a video of an old fifties movie, *The Wild Bunch*, in which a motorcycle gang takes over a town and menaces it's pretty young women. Marly understood that for Florence every Rally was just one gigantic Wild Bunch, and, so for a long ten days, she worried constantly about Smith Prescott's daughter.

* * * *

Marly walked down Main Street, narrowing her eyes against the glare of late sun flashing from the chrome of several thousand motorcycles. Revving motors thundered about her. Gas and oil fumes filled the air. The crowds on the sidewalk were so dense, she could hardly push through. Marly had to admit that she, like the town, was ambivalent about the rally. When it started, she always grew uneasy and often ended the ten days with shaking hands and fierce headaches. Never had there been a rally where at least one person hadn't died. But Marly didn't feel physically threatened.

No. It was...something else. It was such a very different world. The town had been overwhelmed by the 50th anniversary rally back in 1990. The great hordes of people who descended on the small, quiet town had left behind hills of garbage and other unpleasant messes. Public nudity and similar displays of questionable taste had had the town up in arms. A community standards letter had been mailed to all vendors, property owners, and the local newspaper. A community standards committee had been appointed as well as a rally committee that had created newer, stronger rules. Taxes and levies were set on vendors so the town would benefit. And now a peace of sorts existed between the two sides. But the flash, the glitter, and yes, the violence, was still part of the rally...and all of it was underscored by a restless, sensual, sexual energy.

The motorcycle babes wore string bikinis or fringed leather halters or tight t-shirts that they flipped up at the drop of a

lug wrench revealing full, white breasts. And the street booths were full of t-shirts and bike stickers with biker messages and biker humor. Messages that seemed to speak of some hidden war between the sexes: "Women: you can't live with them, can't shoot them." "I'm not a bitch. I'm *the* bitch." "Never trust anything that bleeds three to five days a month and doesn't die." "Get on, hold on, shut up." "BLOW ME!" "It isn't how deep you fish, but how you wiggle your worm." It seemed to Marly that perhaps sexuality was something angry and hard. But then too were the messages of their life philosophy. "Every day we make it, we'll make it the best we can." "If you have to ask...you wouldn't understand." "If you get the urge, do it in Sturg." "If you can't rock and roll, don't fuckin' come." "Born to ride." "Crashing sucks." "It's a sick world, n' I'm a happy guy."

It all made Marly uneasy, even frightened, but more too. She felt something lacking in herself...the ability to give up control, to take the chance of crashing. If it was a sick world...well, then she was not a happy girl. And part of her wanted to be...happy? Free? Something.

She felt a bit like her mother's hens in the spring when they grew broody and the blood pooled in the skin of their chests, and they turned endlessly in the new grass and weeds until finally they created a nest and settled to lay and hatch a new family. Yes. That was it. Increasingly, the rally made Marly feel broody, and that was what was frightening. She wasn't about to climb on the back of some sleek, leather-covered biker's hog and head off into the sunset leaving her devastated family behind as Janine, her sister, had done. Yes, damn it, just as Janine had done...and...worse...her father.

But if Marly left, there would be no one left to pick up the pieces and no one to care for Petey. And he didn't deserve that. She would never do that to him. Still she wanted...something...more. Something she knew was out there...beckoning...or...perhaps threatening.

Marly found herself remembering the woman who'd been

strangled and dumped out on the county road, after the rally when Janine had disappeared. A woman who looked so much like Janine that the sheriff's substation in Deadwood had called the number on the posters Marly and her father had stapled on poles all over Meade County. Marly had been seventeen when the call came in, but her father had looked so white and sick, she'd insisted on going with him and on driving.

"Deputy Prescott," A respectful, young officer murmured, looking honestly sad. "I hope it's not your daughter."

Her father just nodded, unable, Marly suspected, to speak. The officer led them back to the body. Marly heard her father gasp as the young man reached to pull back the sheet; quickly she put an arm around his waist.

And then it wasn't Janine. Just someone who looked very like her.

But her father stood for the longest time, staring down at the pale, heart-shaped face, the tangled red hair.

"It's not her, Daddy." Marly whispered.

"Sure does look like her."

"Yes...but...it's not."

Smith Prescott's eyes moved from the face of the stranger back to his youngest daughter's. His eyes were odd, troubled. "Some big coincidence."

"Yes, it is, Daddy."

"Odd," he muttered, turning abruptly and striding away so fast Marly had to run to catch up.

"What's the matter?" She gasped catching at his arm.

He hesitated and then smiled down. "Nothing, baby. Nothing. Don't worry that pretty head." And then within the week he was gone. Just disappeared.

"Run off with his floozy," Marly's mother said over and over. But Florence was still there in Sturgis.

He'd been so pale and gasping for breath as they'd sped toward Deadwood. He could have had a heart attack somewhere isolated and just never been found. But then Chris Stokes, his fellow deputy, partner and friend, pointed out that

his car was parked at the McDonald's in Spearfish. "You think he had a heart attack and then walked off so far we couldn't find him? Doesn't work that way, Mar."

"Well then, maybe foul play," Marly ventured.

And Chris started laughing. "You've been reading too many detective stories, honey. This is South Dakota, you know." And later, he'd brought word that one of the deputies had seen Smith Prescott with a young thing over in Pierre. Later word came that someone else saw him in Wall. So then he'd just walked away? And never once so much as tried to contact his family...contact her? It was a sick world, and Marly was not a happy girl.

She tightened her grip on the cart handle, and moved faster through the crowd. Most just stood staring out into Main Street where the huge Harleys, many painted or chrome decorated, roared up and down Main Street which hadn't yet been officially closed to car traffic, though it might as well have been. One biker rode with a blow up doll tied behind his seat; another sported a cage with a real, live hamster, but most carried scantily dressed "biker babes."

Marly's eyes drifted forward and caught on a pair of steel grey eyes that fixed on hers. The owner's monster Harley was parked in the line that fenced the side walk. The owner sat one foot on the black gas tank, an arm draped over the propped knee. He wore not the usual bikers' cap or bandanna but a leather hat that was half-biker, half-cowboy. Marly's steps faltered, then stopped. For an instant, their eyes locked; Marly swallowed. He really was rather magnificent; wide shoulders and narrow hips all encased in glove-soft, black leather that bikers wore for protection should their skoots skid out. His face looked...grim, she thought. Something about the distance in his eyes or the set of his jaw...perhaps fierce was more accurate. Then with his eyes still holding hers, his finely chiseled lips curved into a mocking half-smile that made him look...dangerous.

Marly found herself shifting in a small half-circle. Just

like a broody hen, she thought with disgust and jerked her eyes away right onto a scantily clad young woman perched up on a counter, selling T-shirts emblazoned with, "There's nothing like an eight hundred pound vibrator," beneath a picture of a huge Harley. Marly's face burned and her eyes shot back to the man in black. He was grinning now and looked a little less like some hero from a spaghetti western, but Marly wasn't fooled. This was just the sort of man Janine would have leapt on behind, her hands running up and down that leather-gloved body as they rode off into the sunset leaving everyone else to clean up her messes.

Well, Marly was not her sister. No way was she going to tie up with some biker who'd leave her alone in the ashes of a ruined life, no matter how pretty his eyes or how his hair curled on the collar of his jacket. In fact, he needed a haircut. She walked faster, jerking the shopping cart behind and knocking into even more pedestrians in her flight as she fought an urge to look back...just once. "I'm not my sister," she muttered into the motorcycle roar. "I am not my sister." She hesitated, then added, "Or my father."

Chapter Two

Marly paused outside the shop where Wiley Witterford had rented space for this year's rally then jerked her cart over the threshold. "Hey kiddo," Wiley called. "Lookie here. I got your table set up right there in the window. Been selling at Sturgis for over ten years now. Guess as how I know the game. I loaded that camper with twice the leather jackets, vests, and pants, I usually bring, and all the way up from Georgia, I knew this was gonna be our year."

Marly grinned remembering how last year, a full year ahead, he had reserved the window booth in the hardware store right on Main Street. "Better be, Wiley. This ten foot square is going to cost you several thousand dollars.

"Yeah, some a the other vendors are complainin' a exorbitant rents, but hey I import my leathers cheap from China and with yer paintin' n' yer looks, doll, profits from this week're gonna be big."

"I sure hope so, Wiley."

"Well, I know so, kiddo. Lookie here. I got your table set up right there in the window." He grinned widely, "And I got you this thing." Wiley grabbed a bag and dragged out a strange woven garment. "There's a guy down the street's wearing one and he has hisself these sheep horns on his head bigger than my daddy's old bull. Looks odder than Dick's hat band. But on you now... He calls 'im body webs. Sellin' like popsicles in hell, an' the rally ain' even officially started yet. I

figure you in this in that window, an' we're gonna do us some business, big time."

It looked like nothing so much as some giant, string shopping bag. Marly stared at it appalled. "I can't wear that, Wiley."

"Ah sure you kin, Sugah. All up and down Main you got babes in them butt cutters sellin cigars or porno calendars...and yeah...leathers. We gotta meet the competition...and you kin even beat it. You got that sweet little lady face stuck on that killer body. Every man's fantasy."

"Wiley, I'd feel so...so..."

"We both need the dough, Babe."

"I'd like my sales based on talent, Wiley."

"Sure, sure. But you got that in all sorts a fields, doll. Let's just use it. This place is costin' big time. I don' make the sales this year, I might not be able to afford to come back next."

Marly stilled and stared at the wizened little man. How would she keep it all going if she didn't have this? Maybe she could get on with another leather vendor...but most already had their own airbrush artists. She needed Wiley...at least until she made some sort of name for herself. She hesitated, then reached out and took the garment.

"And wear yer hair down," Wiley said.

Marly looked at him. She would look like all the other biker babes rolling down the street out there. She would look like...Janine.

"And some make-up. You got the building there, kiddo. Let's give'er a coat a paint."

The next morning, Marly put on the body web and then turned to the mirror and began to brush out the wild black curls she usually kept in a bun at her neck. Suddenly she stopped, the brush hovering. The black web covered her from wrist to ankle like a second skin, revealing graduated ovals of flesh that marched up her legs, thighs and body, then circled her breasts in a low, wide neck line. While the web revealed

less than a string bikini, its strings woven close over breasts and bottom; still, it was subtle, and suggestive and hence perhaps more disturbing. "I can't wear this," Marly told the worried-looking girl in the mirror. "I look like...like..." Worried grey-blue eyes looked back at her, full lips moved slightly. "Like Janine."

But of course she didn't. Janine was red-headed and had green eyes. No, she just looked like someone like Janine. Someone all dressed up for...for trouble...rally trouble. She found herself thinking of that spaghetti western hero watching her with those fierce, dark eyes.

She grabbed her hair and twisted it into a tight bun, then slid into a T-shirt that covered her to the knees. She could do hair and make-up at the store. And sit up there in that window, day after day, selling her painted leathers with her painted self? "Well, you have to," she whispered to the mirror. "You have people depending on you." After work, she could wash her face, do up her hair, put on the shirt for the walk home. After work, she could be herself again...Couldn't she? "Just ten days," she told herself. "You can do this for ten days. You can."

* * * *

Marly sat in her window, her airbrush misting out veils of paint. She tried to loose herself in the work and ignore the men passing her window, and more often than not stopping to stare and not at her work. A number came in to buy, a vest, a jacket; business was brisk. A number of customers lingered to talk.

"Marly," one said reading the signature below his eagle. "Marly what?"

"Just Marly," Wiley cut in quickly. "It's her professional name...like Cher or Madonna."

"Does Marly have a telephone number?"

"Not this week, she don', Mister. Try askin' when rally's over."

Her admirer went off mumbling. The window was hot

and bright. Marly felt exposed—vulnerable. She was a shy person who loved still, quiet places where she could work and dream. And yet too...there was always that shadow of wistful longing.

She looked up, and he was there. Outside her window. Staring in at her. Her hand began to tremble, and she shut off the machine and picked up a brush to add detail to the gray wolf she'd painted on the back of a vest. Wolf eyes formed beneath her hand. Marly tried to fix on the work but found her eyes slipping toward the window. He was still there, rearing back slightly, his hands in his back pockets. He nodded toward her wolf and smiled. She saw it then. Somehow she'd begun to add his features to her wolf's face. Those fierce dark eyes. The grim set to his mouth. "Damn," she whispered.

"What?" Wiley asked.

"Nothing." She leaned a little to shield the painting from his eyes.

"I think I'll go grab me some lunch, Doll. Less you wanna go first."

"No, you go ahead, Wiley."

Wiley stepped out of their space and joined the throng moving through the store. And a moment later, the stranger came in and leaned on the counter.

Marly moved carefully off her stool and came to stand across from him.

"Can I help you?"

He nodded toward her table. "Finish the vest. I want to buy it."

She hesitated. "That will take another thirty minutes or so. You can come back."

"I'll wait."

She sighed and returned to her stool. After a moment, he came around the counter and stood behind her, watching.

"I've always wanted a vest with a wolf wearing my face."

"It...it does not."

But it did, more so with every stroke she made.

“Marly,” he said softly. “What’s the rest of it?”

“That...that’s it. A professional name. Like...a...Cher.” She debated, then asked softly, “and yours?”

“Lukas.”

“First or last?”

“Just Lukas. It’s a professional name.”

She heard the laughter in his voice, and she wanted to give the wolf a sty or warts, but then he probably wouldn’t buy it, and they needed every sale.

A finger slid into one of the web openings just below her shoulder blade and stroked the skin there. She drew in a sharp breath. “Please don’t do that!”

“Yesterday’s little caterpillar became quite a butterfly.”

She shrugged back a shoulder to knock away his hand.

“Still...I rather liked that shy, little wrapped-up creature. I sensed something in there. But now...” She turned abruptly and caught the slight half-smile. “Now it’s all out here. They’re stuffing bills into the bikini of the cigar girl down the street. Maybe you should try that, just-Marly.” She felt her hand flying up at him. He caught it in mid-air and then stood there staring down with those dark, hooded eyes.

“You okay?” The voice came from behind Lukas’s broad back. “Is there a problem here?” Lukas turned slowly, drawing to one side until Marly could see the tan-uniformed man standing behind him.

“Chris!” Marly cried leaping up and flying to give him a hug.

“Marly?” Chris drew back to look down at the web. “Jesus, baby, what’s happened to you?”

Marly smiled at her father’s one-time partner. “What happened to you, Chris? Last I heard, you’d scored a job as detective on the Pierre force.” Chris was twenty years younger than her father, but his curly blond hair had begun to recede slightly and he’d acquired a slight paunch. He looked...safe. Teddy bear safe, and she was glad to see him. Maybe because of the dark man who stood watching them with a narrow-

eyed stare.

"This guy bothering you?" Chris glared back.

Marly's eyes slid uneasily to the stranger and then away. "No," she mumbled. "Just...a customer."

Lukas's lips moved in something that might have been a smile. "I'll come back for the vest," he said and strode off into the crowd. Marly felt both relieved and let down.

"Damn bikers," Chris muttered.

Marly touched the emblem on his shoulder. "Are you back for good?"

"No. Just one of the rally fill-in-staff."

"A detective?"

"Bunch of them here, Mar. Gets you away from the desk. Sort of a paid vacation."

Marly nodded and swallowed. "Well, it's good to see you, Chris." There was a time when Chris Stokes had fairly lived at their house. A time when she'd thought he'd be her brother-in-law. And then Janine had met her biker. And now her one time pal was eyeing her web-covered body. "Jesus, Mar, I always thought Janine was the family beauty, but you've got her outclassed and then some."

Marly blushed. "It's the web," she muttered. "Wiley thought it would be good for business." She went back to her stool.

"I guess." Chris cleared his throat. "Say...a...speaking of Janine, you seen her this rally?"

Marly shook her head, took up a brush, and outlined the wolf's tongue. "Why do you ask?"

"Guy here this year..." Chris came closer and stood watching her work for a moment then he fished a paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and smoothed it out on her table. Marly turned her head and stared down at the grainy picture.

"It's Janine," she said, bewildered.

The black block printing over the picture offered a ten thousand dollar reward for any information leading to the location of this woman. Below the picture: "Janine Prescott

Grey. 5'10" tall, red hair, green eyes."

"Grey?" Marly asked frowning.

"Married name."

"She really married him then?"

"I guess."

"She said she did when she brought Peter to us, said he died in an accident here at the rally, but..." Marly hesitated.

"But she lied a lot," Chris finished in a flat voice. He of all people would know.

"Sometimes she did...Sometimes she told the truth. You never knew. The rally accident thing felt a little false to me. You know how she did like to invent glamorous lives and give herself starring roles. I doubted it...but mainly because she didn't tell us his name, and none of his people ever tried to contact us...about Peter. I just assumed..."

"That he was illegitimate?"

She nodded once.

"I could do some checking if you'd like."

Marly hesitated. The thought of finding someone who might want to take Peter away was terrifying. But still...the memory of the very unhappy little boy swamped her. The child deserved more than she was able to give him. Her mother was right about that. "Please Chris. I'd appreciate it."

"Let's have supper tonight. I'll tell you what I find."

"It will have to be late...after Wiley closes the booth."

"That's fine." For just a moment, Chris's hand rested on her shoulder and then he left. Such a nice man. Why couldn't her heart stutter at his touch instead of...of... Marly looked into the eyes of the jacket wolf. Instead of this creature.

Chapter Three

Marly painted as if in a slow dream for the rest of the afternoon. The wolf came together with glittering teeth and a moon over one shoulder.

Afterward, Wiley wanted her to do some big-boobed biker babes on rearing Harleys. These were always some of their biggest sellers. Marly painted full lips, streaming hair, just as she had a hundred times before, but somehow today it made her uneasy. She found herself licking her own full lips or stroking back her own wild black curls. And she couldn't seem to stop glancing up at the glass and the crowd milling beyond it. She knew she was looking for the wolf man. He'd promised to come back for the vest.

Wiley came and looked over her shoulder. "Hey kiddo, that's the best one you've ever done."

"It is?" Marly murmured, staring at the sultry blonde she painted.

"Yeah. She's got the look."

"The look?"

"Like them Georgia peaches that grow on my tree down home. There's a fullness er a blush er somthin'...you jus' know they're ripe n ready fer pickin'." Ripe for the picking, Marly thought. That's what it is with me. A season. A maturing. But I'm not just one of nature's creatures. I've got a brain, a will. I'm not about to give in to this...this...whatever the hell it is. Her eyes slipped across the bikers passing her window

and came back to the vest she worked on.

“You ever think about Tarantulas, Wiley?”

“Believe it or not, Sugah, No. I don’ spend me much time meditatin’ spiders.”

“Oh,” Marly turned the airbrush back on to shade in Georgia peach’s breasts. “Just that I read somewhere that when they’re grown...they don’t eat, they don’t sleep...they just live to procreate.”

“Don’ say?”

“Well actually that’s just male tarantulas.”

“Figures.”

“And it kills them.”

“Figures.”

“But we’re more than that, Wiley. We’ve got brains and wills.”

“Got us a lot less legs.”

Marly painted for a moment, then said to the blond on her board, “My sister was really selfish.”

“Yessir, she was,” Wiley said, and Marly knew if she looked at him he’d be nodding vigorously. “You still raisin’ that kid a hers?”

Marly lifted her head and looked at Wiley. “He’s mine now.”

“Yeah. I guess carin’ and doin’ does tha’.”

“And that’s not at all like tarantulas.”

“What’s this hitch with spiders, kiddo?”

It was just a little broody hen, spider thing, Marly told herself. And even as she thought it, she felt her eyes drifting again toward the window. She sat straight with a jerk that almost tipped her off her stool. There, staring right in at her, was her sister.

“Janine!” Marly gasped loud enough to be heard through the glass.

Janine’s big green eyes rounded in sudden surprise. She didn’t even recognize me, Marly thought. She slipped off her stool and headed for the door. Outside on the packed sidewalk,

she caught a glimpse of Janine's bright red hair disappearing behind a towering man wearing a cap made from a real raccoon skin complete with feet, tail, and black-eyed face.

"Janine!" Marly yelled again into the motorcycle roar. She pushed between leather-clad bodies, slipped through the glittering line of parked bikes then hurried in the direction her sister had gone. Why was someone offering ten thousand dollars for information about Janine. Janine Grey. Grey. What if it was her dead husband's family? What...if they wanted Peter? Heat and noise and flashing chrome assaulted Marly from all sides, and she hesitated. Well, they couldn't have him! Four years with no word from them. He knew no other parent but her. But then again, maybe they could take him at Rally time. And he should know his family. She should ask Janine about them. But Janine was running from her? Why?

Damn the woman owed her at least a few answers. Up ahead, Janine darted out of the crowd and into the street where the bikers profiled their Harleys slowly back and forth. A red bike with double chrome pipes slowed and Janine leaped on behind a huge man with tangled brown hair hanging over shoulders covered with several snake and swastika tattoos and an open leather vest. The monster Harley had the high, wide, ape-hanger handle bars that set the rider's arms above his head. The man turned full around to holler at another biker, and now Marly could see the Lucifer Lovers printed across the back of the vest.

"Colors," Marly whispered. Janine was riding with someone wearing the colors of an outlaw biker gang. A bad one, if the rumors she'd heard about Lucifer Lovers were true.

The bike moved slowly toward her, part of the steady stream. "Janine!" Marly shouted and darted through the west-bound bikes, into the line of Harleys parked down the middle of the street. The crowd and motor roar absorbed her cry. The bike passed, and Marly ran after it.

Chris saw her and dashed out into the street. "What's the matter, Mar?"

Marly gestured.

“Jesus! It’s her,” he said above the roar.

“Janine!” Marly shouted again.

This time she heard and turned. Her eyes rounded, and she said something to the Lover in front. He looked back, then revved his motor and shot forward, nearly hitting a fringed woman on a pink and white bike. Several bystanders yelled at him. Chris half drew the pistol at his side. Another Lucifer Lover shot out of the line of parked bikes and bore down on Chris. He leaped aside and it kept on coming straight for Marly. “Jump,” people around her screamed. But she seemed frozen, stuck there forever, staring at the huge glittering machine looming at her.

Suddenly arms circled her waist and jerked her back. The bike shot past, close enough that she felt it slash across her knee. The biker glared back once then shot away between the slow moving profilers—turning down the first side street.

Marly felt herself begin to tremble and the arms drew her back tight against a hard chest.

“Is she all right?” Several bystanders asked.

“What a jerk!”

“She need a doctor?”

“Yeah,” Marly’s rescuer muttered in her ear. “A jerk.” Then louder. “No, she’s fine. Just give her a minute.”

Marly stiffened, shut her eyes, ducked her head. It would have to be him, she thought, trying to still her trembling. The way her luck was running today, who else would it be? “Mr. Lukas,” she said.

“Friends call me Luke.”

“Well, Mr. Lukas, you can let me go now,” she said shortly.

“No, ‘My Hero’ or even a little thank you?”

“Thank you, Mr. Lukas.” Marly tried to pull free but when Luke had grabbed her and pulled her out of the motorcycle’s path, he had caught the turquoise ring he wore in the strings on the front of her web. Moving away pulled the strings taut.

“Ouch!” he snarled. “That garment of yours is lethal.”

“Oh here, let me,” Marly cried turning to face him and leaning into his hand. She frowned slightly as she tried to unwind the strings. His fingers straightened so the tips brushed just below her breast. Something within her stumbled then slowly righted. “Please don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

She didn’t look but she knew somehow that he was smiling. “You know. That.”

Now his finger reached up to the a hole on the full lower curve of her breast. “That?”

She swallowed and didn’t answer but pulled harder at the cords that connected them. A breeze lifted her hair and laid a lock across his face. He made a soft noise deep in his throat, and when she looked up, he lifted his free hand and brushed a strand from his lips.

“So what were you doing warring with a Lucifer Lover?” he asked softly.

She blinked, shook her head. “Oh...him...he...I think his problem was with Chris. I just got in the way.”

“Chris? The cop?”

“Yes.”

“So what’s Chris to you.”

“A friend.”

She freed one of the threads just as Chris came up. “I called it in,” he said, and in one quick, smooth movement, Luke pulled out a large pocket knife, flicked out a blade, and cut himself free.

“No!” Marly cried. “Don’t! Oh, you’ve ruined it.”

“So we’ll go down the street and get you another.”

“I can’t afford another one. I’ve got a child to raise,” she cried angrily.

“My treat. But we best get on it. I think you’re unraveling.”

Marly glanced down and wailed, “Oh no!” He was right. The shorn cords slowly unbraided up toward her breast and down her side. With a grin, Lukas slid out of his leather

jacket and set it over her shoulders. She sighed and held the front together.

Chris glared. "Get your hands off her."

Lukas lifted his hands, held them palms up. "Sorry fella."

"Chris, don't. He pulled me out from in front of that biker. Look...I do have to go get another web."

"Why are you wearing that thing anyway? You might as well be naked."

Marly stared at him, appalled and deeply hurt. "Wiley bought it," she cried. "He...it helps sales."

"You might just as well go the next step and sleep with them!"

Marly stared at him open-mouthed. Tears filled her eyes, and she ducked her head so he couldn't see them. She knew he was upset about Janine and the Lucifer Lover, but it wasn't fair to take it out on her. Luke's arm slid around her shoulder. "Common Marly. Bad vibes here. Let's go get your net." He towed her away. "I tell you, honey, that guy doesn't know he's just a friend. If looks could kill, I'd be a goner right now."

"Luke?" Marly murmured.

"Yeah?" He leaned closer so he could hear.

"Do you think I look..." her voice failed her.

He stopped and turned toward her laying his palm along her cheek. "Ah pumpkin, you look as good as a spring sunrise over mist-covered mountains. Don't let that guy...spook you."

"Do you think...I look...naked in this."

"Well," he reeled her close and parted the jacket lapel for a quick peek. "Humm, you look good, sugar, but...not that good. I do hope that I don't have to wait too long for that further pleasure."

Marly felt her face burning, and tried to pull free. "You don't have to go with me. You can pick up the jacket at the stand."

He looked down her body. "You have ninety dollars hidden in there somewhere?"

She gave her head a little shake. "Damn. I have to go back

and get my purse.”

“Not now, web stand’s right up ahead. I’ll pay. No strings. You can take it off the price of my wolf vest.”

She bit her lip, debated, then nodded.

“So...you’ve a kid?”

She nodded. “Peter.”

“Amazing. You seem so...untouched.”

Marly swallowed and tried to find the breath to tell him Peter was her nephew.

“And the name,” he muttered. “Who the hell named you Marly. Wasn’t that some ghost in Scrooge?”

Marly shrugged. “I guess.”

“Not that you aren’t other-worldly. All that black curly hair and those big, light eyes. I keep expecting you to unfurl some hidden gossamer wings and take flight for say the Irish woods or the New Orleans swamp.”

Marly’s eyes caught on his; she licked her lips. His gaze dropped to her mouth. “Actually,” she murmured, and he leaned close to catch her words in the street noise. “Actually it’s Marleen.”

He reared back and barked laughter. “Like that’s a lot better?” He turned her and steered her into the web vendor’s booth. The vendor wore a web himself despite the fact that he’d a considerable paunch and gravity had begun to call to his body. On his head he wore a helmet with a set of horns that spanned a good four-feet. Luke and Marly took a moment to observe this and then Luke gestured to Marly. “Lady had a little accident and she needs another of your wonders.”

The vendor noting the tell-tale threads on Luke’s hand, laughed. “Got you caught in her web did she?”

“You might say.”

The vendor gestured to his assistant, a blonde, hired perhaps because she had a body to do the web justice. Marly watched Luke observing the assistant all the way over to the stacked webs, and she was suddenly furious; she should have gone back to the shop for her purse and been done with this

man.

“Tarantulas,” she muttered through her teeth.

“What?” Luke took the new web then steered her toward one of the tiny makeshift changing booths.

“I said tarantulas,”

He grinned and held back the curtain. “Whatever. Toss in anything, and we’ll work the conversation around it.” He waited until she entered the booth and then reached to slip a hand inside the leather jacket. “I regret I ever cut myself free. You...wouldn’t consider a reattachment would you?”

Marly had what she deemed a major attack of tarantula. She jerked the web from his hand and swept the curtain across the door. Three minutes later, she’d changed and came back out carrying his jacket. He was signing a credit card receipt, and she went up hoping to catch a glimpse of his name. He caught up the carbon and shoved it into his pocket. “No fair.”

“You are really childish,” she snapped crossly.

“And you are really beautiful.”

She looked up at him feeling suddenly lost.

“Let’s see,” he said working his fingers into the strings at her waist. “Now how did I do that?”

She pulled free and turned on her heel. “I’ve got to get back to work,” she called over her shoulder. She headed into the crowd muttering crossly to herself.