



Solstice Miracles
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Published by Purple Sword Publications, LLC

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ISBN 978-1-936165-67-4

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Chapter One

Natalie stared at the state of her new house. The white paint was peeling on the outside of the structure. Several of the shutters had fallen into the brambles below, making her wonder if she would be able to restore them. Some hung sideways on one hinge. Ivy mixed with morning glories and poison ivy wound around and clung to the picket fence and arbor. What once was a showplace for beautiful flowers had fallen into disrepair. Roses were interwoven with the nettles, poison oak, and God knew what else, that had grown into it.

The buzzing of bees perked her ears from a hive close by. *Good thing I have an Eppie Pen. Now I just have to remember where I put the darn thing. Was it in with the kitchen items or the bathroom ones? This place has a lot to get done to it. A month and a half before Christmas and I decide now to buy a house.* A headache was starting to form between her eyes from the lack of sleep, the long drive, and coming down from the sugar high she'd been on all day.

She would have to work for a year to get the house completely renovated. What she needed now were just the basics done to get her through the winter. Thank goodness she had some extra money to hire workers to do the restorations and help around the yard. The most important thing about the whole venture was that she was away from the bad memories and the arguments. Away from the fights that turned physical. So physical her last fight with her husband had sent her to the hospital with a broken wrist, cheekbone, and several large gashes across her face, neck, left arm and shoulder.

Michael had thrown her through a plate glass window and down their deck stairs. The doctors had told her she was lucky to be alive. One piece of glass had nearly severed the artery in her arm.

The physicians had called in the cops because they suspected domestic violence. The counselors talked to her. She hadn't denied

the fight, but none of their altercations had ever erupted in such violence. Natalie had never expected Michael's reaction. Hell, she had thrown a couple of punches on occasion. Their house was full of dings and dents from their quarrels. The last six months of their relationship their intimacy had dwindled, and she hadn't even slept with her husband. She should have seen the signs earlier that something was wrong, but she hadn't until the end.

Natalie sighed. The dwelling before her was a fresh start. It might be battered and run down. It might have some scars, but so did she. With the money from the divorce settlement and selling her old house, she had enough to fix up the place. The realtor hadn't jumped at the chance to show it to her. Natalie had seen the for sale sign at the last second as they had passed the place.

When she asked the realtor to return and look at it, she was reluctant and didn't think it was the right place for Natalie. It needed too much restoration because it had stood vacant for so long. She had given Natalie many excuses, but finally the woman drove her up the gravel drive. When Natalie got out and looked at the house up close, she knew this was where she belonged.

The view of the mountains was breathtaking. The land that went with the house flowed into a state park so she didn't have to worry about civilization encroaching. Where she had lived before, the houses crowded together, ten feet from one another. She could hear every little sound, curse word, and music taste through her walls. Here she had room to breathe. And breathe she did.

Natalie set her box down near the back door that led into the kitchen. The front door was too overgrown for her to attempt to use with all the boxes and furniture she had to move. Sliding the key into the lock, the satisfaction of knowing she was free swept over her. *This house is a brand new start just like everything else in my life. New home. New attitude. This time I'm going to do it the right way. And that means no men for a long time.* She jiggled the door. It was stuck. *Wonderful.*

Once she slammed her shoulder into it, the door swung open. The door hit hard against the wall and a bit of horsehair plaster

rained down from the loose spots near the ceiling. She spit out the bits, grabbed the box, and set it down on the black countertop. Black and white subway tiles adorned the backsplash. Above the counter, the cupboard doors were all faced with glass. The sink was cast iron. The floor was the same diagonal pattern of the tiles on the wall. Stale air permeated the whole place from being closed up. When the realtor had her first look at the place, they had breezed through the rooms. The one thing Natalie loved about the house was the large hearth in the living room. The wood matched the beams that adorned the living room ceiling. The kitchen and the sunroom were additions to the house, although they were done sometime in the past, but not in that century. She walked into the empty living room, passing through the hall that connected the living room, kitchen, dining room, and small sunroom. The railing leading upstairs was rickety, but the stairs were solid.

The inspector said the structure was sound. It just needed love, care, a new roof, some patchwork in the cellar, small plaster repairs where it was coming apart from the walls, a new electrical system, and all new pipes to be livable. The repairs were starting in three days. Before that, she had cleaning to do. The movers were coming in two days to deliver all of her heavier furniture, including the bed. Luckily, she had an air mattress to settle upon.

Natalie ran her finger over the mantle. She wiped the dust off on her jeans. *Gotta start somewhere. Might as well bring in the rest of the boxes and get to cleaning.* She surveyed the empty room and began envisioning where she would place the furniture. Once she had an idea, she headed back outside, propped the door open, and started unloading her small, but ancient Ford Ranger.

She'd had the pickup forever, but it had never died on her. Michael had always wanted her to get rid of the vehicle, but she defied him on that small point of contention. She loved to throw it in his face on how she kept it when his expensive BMW broke down almost every week. That was another sore spot that always got him riled up.

At first if they fought they always tumbled into bed having hot, mind blowing make up sex, or feisty, angry sex, but over time things had changed. The man she knew withdrew emotionally. He stopped sleeping with her. He would argue with her at the drop of a hat. But he'd never thrown any punches until the day he put her in the hospital.

All that's behind me. I don't have to worry about Michael finding me. Being in jail should keep him away. I even changed my name during the divorce. Natalie Bear. Guess I wanted to remember my ancestors. My parents would have rolled over in their graves knowing I was divorced. They were together to the end.

She wiped the sweat from her brow and looked at what she had accomplished. After three hours, she had brought in all the boxes from her truck, arranged them in the rooms they went in, and began to clean.

The scent of ammonia and vinegar filled the kitchen. Layered over that was pine and bleach, that made her sneeze. She had no running water yet, so she didn't think it was good to wash the floors. A cooler full of drinks and a box of pizza she'd ordered sat on the counter. The delivery boy was quite surprised when he opened the door. *Poor thing was paler than a ghost. Probably thinks this place is haunted. Silly. I don't sense anything here. Not like in Mom and Dad's old house.*

She shivered thinking about the cold breeze that would follow her around her old house when she was alone. Natalie had always brushed it off, not wanting to think about spirits even if her mother tried to tell her she should because they were part of her heritage.

The one experience she'd ever had in the house was coming home late one night while her parents were on vacation. She walked to the top of the stairs and didn't register the small boy standing there until she passed through him. When she realized what had happened, she whipped around only to find the boy staring at her. Her encounter had freaked her out enough she told herself she would ignore any other ghostly entities she bumped into.

Natalie delved into the pizza box and grabbed her fourth slice. Her muscles ached, and her back was stiff. The sinking sun streamed in through the windows. The rays caught a fracture in one of the panes reflecting a rainbow across the living room to the stairs. Natalie followed the array of colors and noticed a thin line in the boards under the stairs. *What in the world is that?* She ran her fingers over the crack down further and discovered an indentation the shape of a keyhole. She pressed on the door, but found it was locked. *I wonder why the inspector or the realtor didn't tell me about the hidden room.* After trying again, it still didn't budge. *Hopefully, I'll find the key and can explore.* Giving up for the night, she walked around the house to get a game plan for cleaning in the morning.

She inflated the air mattress with the air compressor that came with it. After she threw a comforter on it and a pillow, Natalie went outside and watched the setting sun. A cool breeze tickled her arms. In the sunlight the fall foliage was a myriad of colors against the horizon. Her first priority was getting the heat working.

After watching the darkness descend around her and hearing the chirping crickets, Natalie yawned. The weight of the day descended upon her. Her eyelids drooped so she started to head in. Off in the distance, something caught her eye. Small orbs of light rose off the mountain and began to dance around. The balls hovered a few feet above the mountain landscape swirling through the trees. The spheres twirled and wove around one another and then stopped when they noticed her. Natalie rubbed her eyes. The balls were gone. Then she thought she saw the outline of a large man staring at her intently from the fringes of the forest. When she blinked, the man was gone.

I'm tired and seeing things. Time for bed. I mean, why would a strange man be wandering around in the forest at this time of night?

Chapter Two

Natalie woke the next morning with a crick in her back from sleeping on the air mattress. The weather was pleasant outside with only a small chill. Some of the air had leaked from the mattress, but it wasn't flattened. She got up slowly and shuffled into the bathroom. She stared at her reflection.

Her eyes were honey colored in the morning light filtering through the trees into the window. The red hair she'd inherited from her mother was a mess. Her cheekbones were high and sculpted, showing off her Native American heritage. She had even inherited the bronze complexion. In the summertime when she tanned she became golden brown but broke out in freckles. Michael had called her his golden goddess.

After grabbing the bottle of water she left on the sink, she rinsed her mouth and spit out the coppery aftertaste of the tomato sauce from the night before. The wet spot left a mark in the dusty sink. *More to clean, but I figured that.* She closed her eyes and tried to push off the weariness of sleep.

More to do. Maybe I'll find the key to the strange door I found yesterday. It'd be neat to see what's on the other side. Maybe it's stuck somewhere in one of the drawers. I'm sure I'll stumble across it.

Taking in a breath, she patted her face dry on her t-shirt and looked in the mirror again. When she did, she jumped. In the mirror was the reflection of a little girl. No more than eight or nine, and dressed in a calico dress with brown hair, big brown doe eyes, and a smile on her face. She giggled.

Natalie stared at the little girl and turned toward the doorway. Nothing was there. She glanced back at the mirror and the little girl had vanished. *What in the world was that? This place can't be haunted. If it is, I'll just ignore it as I have in the past.* Shaking her head, she left the bathroom and headed down to the living room. Looking outside, she saw a white van in the driveway. The letters were faded on the sides. The roar of a chainsaw erupted in the yard. *Shit.*

I didn't think the workers would be here already. Damn is it early! Her stomach growled.

Quickly, she grabbed her jeans and fished out a smooshed granola bar she had in her backpack. Slipping her shoes on, she went into the kitchen following the sound of the chainsaw. Its ear piercing grumble was louder when she opened the backdoor. Her realtor had recommended a few local handymen and had given her their numbers. Natalie had called them, settled on one local contractor, and made all the arrangements by fax and email about what she wanted and how much she was going to pay. She had no experience with hiring workers, but the guy was nice on the phone, and they squared a deal.

She tried to remember his name. *Scott something.* The backyard was in even worse condition than the front. Three medium trees had fallen across the lawn. The garden was overgrown with weeds and the holly bushes were laden with berries, reminding her it would soon be Christmas.

So much to do. But it's a brand new start. It's what I need and that asshole doesn't know where I live. She sighed and ran a hand through her hair. Taking a step back, she studied the back side of the house. The left side of the house was a little different style than the front. The paint was brighter and not fading so much. *I wonder when they did the addition because it appears old as well.*

"Natalie?"

She jumped and turned. "Yeah."

The man wiped his arm across his tanned brow. He appeared to be in his mid thirties, stocky, average height, reddish brown hair, wearing black shorts and an inside out band shirt with cut off sleeves. He stuck out his hand. "Name's Jarvis. Scott sent me out here. He apologizes for not being able to come today. He had some personal business to take care of."

"Is everything okay?" She took his hand and winced at the force of his grip.

Jarvis chuckled. "Oh yeah. He's part of the local Cherokee tribe in town, so he's always off doing other things. Anyway, he sent me over to start on the trees. Just give me a yell if you need anything."

"Thanks."

"You didn't happen to see a little girl around here, did you?"

He gave her a questioning look. "No. Can't say that I have. I'll keep an eye out though."

"I'd appreciate that." *A kid could have slipped by him no problem. There is some other explanation than the place being inhabited by spirits.* She headed back into the house. A groan slipped from her lips when she saw all the supplies and the boxes. She had to get moving even if she didn't want to. The chainsaw started up again and nearly drowned out her thoughts.

First, she opened the windows to let the place air out. Then she grabbed the cleaning supplies and began on the living room. After the living room, she did the dining room, and worked her way into the sunroom. Then she scrubbed the downstairs bathroom. Once she was through with it, she checked her watch and saw it was well past lunch time. The roar of the chainsaw had stopped a couple of hours ago.

When she walked by the stairs, she heard a short creak. Natalie stopped. The door she had been unable to open last night slowly swung open. Her heartbeat picked up its pace. Her mouth went dry from the anticipation of what or *who* might be inside.

She opened the door a little wider and peered inside, scanning for any animals. The floor was dirt, and the air was stale with a slight scent of must. A few broken chairs lined one wall. A trunk with an old doll sitting on top of it took up another space. And a large fireplace was in front of her. Around the hearth were piles of bricks that could have come from the fireplace.

She picked up one of the blocks, noting the heaviness of it. *Why in the world was the fireplace dismantled? Maybe they took down the chimney when they put the addition on.* Shaking her head, she put the brick down and walked over to the doll. It had on a brown calico dress of the same fabric she had seen the little girl dressed in that

morning. Wispy strands of brown yarn clung to the doll's head. Its features were faded, but she could see a painted on expression and deep brown eyes.

Natalie placed the doll on the remnants of a chair and tried the trunk. She lifted the top easily. Inside was a large brown and tan blanket. She ran her hand across the fabric and came away with an itchy palm. The spread was wool. She began to pull the blanket from the trunk when she heard giggling. Dropping the blanket, she spun around and saw the little girl standing in the doorway.

Natalie froze. *I'm seeing things again. Or maybe she's lost. Or maybe a local girl whose playing a game on me. Haze the woman who moves into the new house. Even the pizza guy didn't want to come in.*

"Hi there."

The little girl smiled and pointed. Natalie saw she was pointing at the doll. She reached back, slowly took it from the chair, and went toward the little girl. She also held the blanket close to her chest. "Is this what you want? The dolly?"

The girl nodded.

"Why don't you come here and get it? I won't hurt you."

The girl's expression changed from amusement to fear. Her eyes widened. She motioned for Natalie to come out of the room, but didn't say anything. Her waving grew more frantic.

"Why don't you want me in here?" A cold breeze stirred her hair. A shiver played along her spine. It felt like someone was watching her from the shadows by the fireplace. Fear began to ride along her nerves making her hands tremble.

Natalie spun around, but didn't see anyone. She looked back at the door and saw the girl was still gesturing for her to come out.

"Okay. I'm coming out. But you have to tell me where you live so I can take you home." Sighing, she decided it was best to leave the room in case maybe there was something going on. When she got to the door, it slammed shut. Panic enveloped her. She grabbed hold of the doorknob and pulled. It was jammed the way it had been the night before. She pounded on the wood.

“Hello. Little girl, can you open the door please?” Natalie tried the knob again. It turned in her hand as if the child on the other side was trying to help. *Please, please, please. This can't be happening to me. No one is going to find me in here. I can't spend the night in here.*

The walls started to close in on her. She took a deep breath and tried to calm her nerves. *I'll be fine. I'll be fine. There has to be a way out of here.* The knob stopped twisting. She inhaled again and forced herself to relax.

Natalie looked around and noticed pinpoints of light coming through the cracks in the foundation. The harder she looked the more she noticed an outline of another door. A wave of relief washed over her. The door was the same size and on the other side of the fireplace. She couldn't find a knob or a keyhole. She pounded on it in several places and pushed on the wood. Nothing was giving.

“Just fucking wonderful.”

Natalie headed back to the other door and battered on it again. This time the doorknob didn't move. After trying for another few minutes and screaming for help, her voice was raw. She slumped down on the remnants of an old chair and covered her face with her hands.

Her stomach grumbled. Her throat was dry. A shuffling noise started in the corner closer to the stairs. She looked up in that direction. The noise stopped. The stairs creaked above her as if someone was walking on them. A door slammed somewhere up stairs. Heavy, fast footfalls of someone running sounded in the hallway above her. She heard lighthearted giggles upstairs. They were the same she had heard from the little girl earlier.

“Come on guys. This isn't funny. Scare the new woman in town. Ha ha. Now let me out.”

No one answered her.

Natalie beat on the door again until her fists hurt. Coldness took over the room until she shivered. The feeling someone's eyes were on her back increased. The heaviness of the stare that she was being scrutinized was getting stronger.

She checked the corners and no one was there. Natalie grabbed the doll and hugged it to her chest finding a little comfort in that. A tear slipped from her cheek. Her mental walls began to crack, and she was slipping back into the scared woman she had been during the last few weeks of her marriage, after she'd been discharged from the hospital, when she thought every night she was going to die.

Her ex had come home drunk and raving about something, so he had flung her into the closet and locked the door. She screamed and kicked at the door to get out, but it was useless. He was the only one with the key. She had lost a couple of fingernails that night and rubbed the skin raw on her hands from pounding so hard on the door.

She got up and began to pace the small room. The pinholes of light were not so bright anymore. The sun was setting. Her stomach gurgled. *This is it. I'm getting out of here.*

Glancing around, she saw the heavy pieces of the old chairs. She lifted an arm and took a couple of swings at the pile of bricks. The bricks didn't move. When she examined the wood, it had a few nicks in it. *I'll break the door down if I have to.*

For good measure, she tried the knob one more time. It turned, but the door didn't budge. She took one swing at the panel and felt the recoil along her arm. It jarred her bones and rattled her teeth. Natalie staggered backward and got a better grip on the club. She took aim and swung. Before the arm hit the wood, it opened. On the other side was a man dressed in cowboy hat, ragged jeans, worn in cowboy boots and a flannel shirt.

"Whoa there." He put his hand up and stepped out of the way.

"Oh shit!" She wasn't able to stop the momentum of the swing. She stumbled toward the door and lost her footing. Dropping the arm of the chair, she staggered over the raised step, right into the cowboy's waiting arms.

Chapter Three

Natalie's body pressed up against his. She inhaled the deep aroma of his sweat, grass, and horses. The warmth of his flesh seeped into her palm.

His body was hard, and he held her so close she could see the small freckles that dotted his forehead and around his eyes. His deep, sapphire eyes were the bluest eyes she had ever seen. Staring into them, she found the world fell away. A tugging started on her soul she couldn't explain. It ran deep through her and almost pulled a moan from her lips.

But besides that, a deep sense of calm washed over her. It was so strong, all her cares in the world washed away. She pushed that off and focused on the rest of his beautiful face. His eyebrows were golden brown. It made her wonder what color his hair was under his hat. His mouth was full with a firm jaw. She grabbed his shoulder and felt the muscles underneath.

Wow this guy's a hunk, that's for sure. Wonder what he would be like in bed. What am I thinking? Although it would be nice to be with someone after my lonely two year stint. But there's something about him, I can't put my finger on. Almost if I've known him all my life.

"Are you okay?" she asked him.

His smile widened. "Haven't been any better than this in a long time. Although, I reckon you want me to let go of you."

She glanced down and saw his hands were on her hips, and they had ventured no lower. Natalie took in a deep breath, feeling the rising lust in her. She might not want a relationship, but a tumble in the hay with him might be good. Pushing the thought aside because it would only lead to trouble, she met his gaze again. He gave her a dazzling, innocent smile. Placing one hand on his chest, she slowly righted herself and was able to stand. The room began to spin. He caught her arm and led her over to the stairs.

"Thanks. Can you get me some water in the kitchen, please? There's a couple of bottles in the ice chest."

“Sure thing.”

He left, and she covered her head with her hands. A headache was forming behind her eyes. Her vision was going blurry, too. She didn't need a migraine right now. They hit her when she was under extreme stress. The headaches had only starting occurring after her brush with death. She'd never had them in the past. She placed her hand on the wall and tried to stand, but the world pitched to the side. She stumbled. Her savior's hand caught and guided her back down.

“Ease up. I got your water. What else do you need?”

She pointed to the living room. “In the corner. Brown purse second pocket on the front. I need the pills inside there.”

“Okay. One second.”

Her hands trembled while she twisted off the water bottle's cap. The pounding in her head was getting harder. Her stomach turned with nausea.

In the background, she heard the cowboy rustling around for her medicine. His hurried footsteps rushed back toward her. He took her hand, unfurled her fingers, and placed the bottle in her palm.

“Are you going to be okay?”

She nodded. “Ask me again in twenty minutes. Just have to take a pill, and it will help with the migraine.” She kept her head down and fumbled with the top of the bottle. Her fingers groped the lid, but she wasn't able to get it open. Without a good hold, she flung the bottle across the room. “Shit!”

“Calm down.” He left her side and then after a moment, she felt something small put into her hand.

A sense of relief washed over her when she took the pill and a sip of water. The liquid helped soothe her throat. Sitting with her head down, all she could do was wait until the medicine kicked in.

The heat of the man's body pressed against her. Knowing he was there helped a little, but she couldn't focus on that. He seemed to be a gentleman, but that didn't mean she trusted him even if he was dashing.

The hammering in her head eventually began to dissipate. Each thud of her heart was another beat on her skull, but was lessening the longer she waited. The nausea passed. She counted her heartbeats until she felt safe to open her eyes.

When she did, the room wasn't going dark the way it had been before. After a moment of blinking and focusing on the door, she looked at her rescuer. A smile of relief turned the corners of her lips. "Thank you for helping me. I was stuck in that room. And for sticking around through that."

"It wasn't a problem. I had to be sure you were okay. What were you doing in there anyway?"

"I was checking it out. The room was locked and then it wasn't. I wanted to see what was in it. There was this little girl, and she didn't want me to go in there, but with it being a new house and all, I wanted to see what was hidden in the nooks. Then I couldn't get out. Thank you so much for rescuing me."

He smiled. "I heard you yelling from outside."

"Outside? Wow. I guess I was screaming pretty loud."

"I have good hearing."

"Are you with the landscaping guys?"

"Landscaping?"

"Yeah, the ones working on the trees and the grounds."

"Oh no! I was walking on a trail, and I heard you. I didn't realize that the house had been sold. It's been vacant so long. It's good someone bought it. Maybe it'll change the feel of the place."

She looked at him, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Old stories about this place pepper the community. I'm surprised you haven't heard them."

She got up slowly and stretched. "I haven't. The realtor wasn't too thrilled that I wanted to buy it, but I saw the house's potential. Something about it just pulled me in. What are some of the stories?"

"Have you seen the lights on the mountain yet?"

She shrugged. "I saw some balls of light floating among the trees but figured it was gas or ball lightning. Are they ghosts or

something?" She walked into the kitchen and grabbed another bottle of water. She offered it to the man, but he shook his head.

"No, thank you. Yes. The legends say they are the ghosts of the people that were murdered along the trail. Others say it is the Native Americans who died here fighting for their land. This house used to be a stop along the stagecoach route back in the day. The owner would take in people to sleep for the night. There used to be an old barn back in the brambles where some of the men would sleep, too. You can see the foundation if you walk back there."

She took a sip of water, not sure she liked what she was hearing. Local lore was always great to hear, but it didn't brighten her mood when it came to spirits that she just wanted to forget. *Maybe I should keep an open mind considering the little girl that I saw. But there has to be a rational explanation for that, too. The same with the door slamming. It wasn't like something or someone was trying to keep me in that room. Was it?* "Huh. That's interesting. I didn't catch your name. I'm Natalie Bear." She stuck her hand out.

The man smiled. It brightened his face. Her body leaned closer to him. She was surprised at the automatic reaction. Heat flushed her cheeks when she realized she was attracted to him. Physical attraction was never a good thing. That's what got her involved with Michael. *I can't jump ahead of myself again.*

"I'm Dustin Carin. It's nice to meet you."

"Are you hungry? I can't cook at the moment, but I was going to have something delivered. I'm afraid all I have is a pizza menu."

"No. I'm fine thanks. I appreciate the offer, but I really should be going. I just wanted to be sure you were okay. If I were you, I wouldn't head back into the room."

"At least until I can get the door fixed anyway."

At that moment, she heard pounding footsteps rushing down the hall toward them. They stopped. Natalie expected that little girl to come barreling into the kitchen, but nothing happened. The footsteps went back down the hall and then up the stairs. She could hear them clomping in the bedrooms above her head. She placed

her water on the counter and rushed upstairs. Dustin grabbed her arm.

“Just let her be.”

“Excuse me? Please get your hand off me! Are you in on this, too? Maybe you were the one who was blocking the door. Then to make yourself look like a hero, you waited for me to panic so you could save me.” She wrenched her arm from his grasp.

Marching upstairs, she listened to the footsteps coming from the last bedroom at the end of the hall. The one she hadn’t gone into yet.

“Okay, little girl. I’m done with you playing around. I’m coming in there and you had better explain yourself.” Natalie turned the handle on the door and threw it open expecting to find the child running around.

However, all she found was an empty room with grime on the floor. Faint sunlight filtered through the windows. On the dust covered floor were small, perfectly shaped shoeprints. She stepped all the way in to the room and glanced at the floor, but there were no footprints leading to the closet. And when she opened the door nothing was inside except dust bunnies and an old box on the top shelf. She went to reach for it when she heard girlish giggling around her.

Spinning around, she saw Dustin in the doorway. “I told you to just let her be. She won’t hurt you.”

Natalie crossed her arms over her chest. “You know more than what you’re telling me. What the hell is going on? That little girl should be in this room, but she’s nowhere to be found. People don’t just appear and then disappear and leave prints in the dust.”

“No they don’t. The little girl’s name is Jeannie. She died here when she was nine. This was her bedroom. The other rooms were used for the boarders. She won’t hurt you. She’s just glad to have someone in the house again. She’s been lonely.”

“And you know this how?”

“Hello, Ms. Natalie, are you home?” Someone knocked on the door and called from downstairs.

She shook her head in disgust and pushed past Dustin. Heading downstairs, she saw Jarvis standing in the living room. He gave her an uneasy smile when he saw her. "I'm here. I thought you'd left for the day when I didn't hear the chainsaw anymore."

"I went through the trees no problem. I had to load some of the wood to bring it to the dump. Some of the smaller branches and stuff. I left most of it. Figured you might need some firewood in case you don't get your heat workin' in time. You got enough there to last you a couple of winters. I can come back and chop it for you as a side job."

She sighed. "Ahh yeah. That sounds great. We'll work out payment later, okay?"

The floor creaked above her. She glanced upstairs and expected to see Dustin come down, but he didn't. *Probably some backwoods psychic who thinks he can dupe the new chick into paying for his crystal ball. God, I'm such an idiot.* "Hey, can I ask you something?"

He glanced around and started to fidget with a hole in his t-shirt. "Sure thing."

"Are there any rumors around town about this place being haunted?"

He ran his hand through his hair and glanced at the floor. "Ahh, ma'am. I wouldn't know anythin' about that. Look, if that's it, I really gotta be gettin' on home." He turned when she reached out and touched his shoulder. He jumped away from her. "Don't do that."

"Well, I'm sorry, but I really need to know. Please tell me something. Am I the joke of the town because I bought a haunted house?"

His expression fell. "No. It's nothin' like that. Many people are glad that this place is goin' to have someone livin' in it. It's a nice old place. Many of us as kids used to come up here and sneak in to see if the stories were true. Look, I don't want to be speakin' ill of the dead or anythin' but this whole area is said to be cursed. Any person or animal killed on the land is trapped here. It was taken from the Native Americans, and they were all massacred back in

the woods there by the old stage coach trail. They hover where they were killed on the mountain in the forms of balls of light. This place was near the trail so people used to stay here back in the old days. A nice old family used to live here until the father went crazy and killed his wife, daughter, and all their guests. He burned down the barn with the horses in it. Their son was coming home from out west and saw the blaze.”

“What happened to the son?” Natalie asked, intrigued by the tale.

Jarvis shoved his hands in his pockets and glance down. “Stories say that he raced into the house to find his father completely insane and about to kill his sister. They got into a fight and he stabbed his father, buried him somewhere in the house. He was badly wounded in the fight. The neighbors saw the fire and rushed over. They found him, but he ended up dyin’ later. It’s said he watches over the place. But you know how people say things. I’m sure all the yarns people tell are just hogwash. Have a good night.”

“Yeah. Night.” Natalie watched him walk into the kitchen and then heard the door shut. *Gotta love local lore.* She and rubbed her hands over her arms to ward off the sudden chill. Heading upstairs, she went into the back bedroom.

“Dustin, about before. You—” When she got into the room, there was no one there. The closet door was closed and the doll she had left in the small room under the stairs was leaning against the door. *What the hell?* She spun around and began looking through the other bedrooms. Each was empty. *I couldn’t have missed him if he came down the stairs. I was standing right at the bottom.* “Dustin, you here? Come on. This isn’t funny.”

She stood at the top of the stairs and another bedroom door down the hall screeched open. A shadow darted through the opening. Natalie raced after it.

When she got to the door, she saw stairs leading up to an attic. They were in another bedroom but she had thought it was a closet.

She could barely see. Cobwebs brushed her face. What she could make out were lots of places to hide. Old furniture and trunks were hidden under the eaves for her to explore. *I wonder what all is up here?*

“Dustin, are you here? Quit being an ass and come downstairs. Please.”

No one answered her. She listened for any sound. A feeling of dread washed over her the longer she stood in the attic. She didn't think he was up there, but if that were the case, then where was he? He wasn't upstairs because she had checked everywhere, and he didn't come downstairs. *He couldn't have gone out a window because there's no first story roof for him to jump down onto.*

He can't be a ghost. There's no way. As she made her way down the steps, she heard more giggling and the light footfalls of the little girl she had seen earlier. She froze in her tracks when she stepped into the hall.

There was the girl. Behind her stood Dustin. Only this time, he was transparent like a mirage. Before she had time to react, they both disappeared.

Chapter Four

I know what I saw. They just disappeared in front of me. Her first instinct was to run from the house and never look back, but she pushed that aside.

Nothing is going to run me out of my home. She thought back to what Jarvis said about the story that occurred behind the house. It was creepy, but if they really were ghosts, then it seemed like they didn't want to hurt her. It's not like they've gone all Poltergeist on me and are throwing plates around. Maybe they want to be friends. Dustin did pull me out of the room. The ghosts at Mom's old place were never violent either.

She drew in a deep breath. "I'll deal with you later. Right now I'm going into town to get something to eat. If you really are here to watch out for the house, make sure no one steals anything," she muttered and went downstairs.

Natalie drove down unfamiliar roads and ended up in the small center of town where the buildings were half empty, and those that were occupied were going out of business. Small towns everywhere were hard hit because of the economy. She was lucky to sell her old house and get such a great deal on the one she had bought. *Now I see why it was a great deal.*

She drove through the town stopping at its one stoplight and then eased into a parking lot a few blocks down that was full of cars. It looked to be a bar, but she also smelled food. At least it was live people and civilization. That was all that mattered.

Once inside, she found the roadhouse to be filled with families and others line dancing on the small dance floor in the back. She sat at the bar and a waitress handed her a menu. She ordered a burger and a beer.

The big screen TV on the wall was showing clips from the NASCAR race that occurred earlier in the day. It didn't garner her attention long. Mostly she tuned out the noise, and her thoughts turned inward to what she had heard and experienced. For the first

time in a long time, she expected to be living alone in sweet, calm bliss, when she ended up with unexpected roommates. The waitress returned with her beer. She gripped the neck and took a long sip.

“When you’re done with that why don’t you try wrapping those lips of yours around something fatter?”

Natalie rolled her eyes and looked at the man leaning on the bar next to her. He was dressed in worn jeans, a raggedy shirt, and the grime of the day still on him. He was in his mid-twenties and tan from working outside. She gave him a small smile before answering. “I think I’ll pass. I can get more satisfaction from the beer than with what you’ve got. Do you mind?”

“What did you say to me?”

This is all I need. An asshole who assumes he can put me in my place. Why do all rednecks think they can boss women around? Natalie stared right back at him. “You heard what I said. I want to be left alone. I didn’t come in here to be picked up by some asshole. Now turn around and head back to the hovel you crawled out of.”

He slammed his beer down on the counter and pushed closer to her. The vein in his jaw throbbed. From the blast of his breath, it was obvious he was intoxicated. “You think you can insult me? You—”

A large hand clamped down on his shoulder. He turned and stared at the man behind him. Natalie noticed he was tall, over six feet, well built, but had an angry scar running down the left side of his face. His features were drawn with angled cheek bones. Short black hair was buzzed close to his head. He was dressed in black jeans and a leather vest. She noticed the tattoo of a feather and a wolf on his neck.

“Jimmy, the lady asked you to go sit back down and leave her alone. Can’t you see she doesn’t want some cow turd hitting on her? Go back over there before I tell your father you’re disrespecting women. I’ll bet he’ll tan your hide good once he hears about it.”

Jimmy didn't respond but backpedaled out of the way. The waitress returned with Natalie's meal. She took a swig of her beer and looked at the other man. He was waiting for her to say something to him. "Thanks. I'm not in the mood to deal with him tonight."

"You're welcome. I'm Scott Redhawk. You mind if I join you?"

She gave him a smile. *I could tell him to get lost, but I need to talk to someone living. I can't be dealing with the dead all the time.* "Sure. Why not? I'm Natalie Bear. I just moved into town."

He sat down and his face paled. "You're the woman that bought the old Carin place. There's been a lot of buzz about you. I'm your general contractor. Sorry I couldn't make it to the house today."

A light went off in her head. She remembered talking to him on the phone now. "That's right. No problem. Let me guess everyone wants to know if I've seen any ghosts yet, right?"

He laughed. It was deep and warmed her insides. "Yeah. There's been a lot of rumors already. Actually, I've had some trouble getting people to work on your place. They're all too chicken shit. But many of them need the money. They all want to leave before dark though."

This time, she laughed and nearly choked on her burger. "Afraid of Casper. Please. I've seen worse than ghosts in my day." She wasn't about to tell him the truth or verify the rumors. No one was going to call her crazy.

"I'm not afraid of what's up there. My ancestors' spirits reside there, trapped by things the settlers did to them. On the outskirts of your property line is a burial ground. Sacred ground. Some of my tribe has gone up there to try and make peace, but the land was cursed. Many of the spirits still remain. Actually, I was going to speak to you when I came to the house, but now might be a better time. Come on; let's get one of the booths."

She nodded. "Okay." She grabbed her plate and her beer and wove through the crowd to a semi-quieter part of the bar. Once she

settled down, she took another bite of her burger. As she swallowed, she eyed him. "So what did you want to ask me?"

"My sister's the tribe's healer. We were hoping that you'd continue to let us come to the graveyard and make offerings to our ancestors. It would mean a lot to us." He took a swig of his beer and didn't take his eyes from her. His stare bored into her soul and for an instant she felt some kind of pull toward him she didn't quite understand. Something tugged on her conscious telling her that she should know this man on a primal level. It was the same kind of connection she had felt with Dustin earlier. Although, Scott seemed more controlled than Dustin did. Whatever that edge was, she wanted to know more. The physical attraction she had for him set her heart pumping faster. Her palms began to sweat. He would be another one she could easily see herself in bed with to ease her dry spell.

Natalie pushed the lustful thoughts away and stared back without flinching. Because of her Native American heritage, she understood the importance of honoring family. Her mother and father had always taught her to respect the past. But she wasn't sure how well she liked the idea of strangers coming onto her land. Still it was for the good of appeasing the spirits.

God, what am I thinking? Here we go again about ghosts. Does that make my house and the land that goes with it spook central? "Look, I don't have a problem with you wanting to honor your ancestors. I'm a quarter Cherokee on my mother's side and a quarter Sioux on my father's side. So I get it. Both of my parents were very spiritual. The only thing I'm concerned about is having strangers on my land. Being new in town and not knowing who is who. I'm sure you can understand."

Scott nodded. "I can understand that. How about, in a few weeks, when you're more settled, I'll invite you to come down and meet everyone? Until then, I'll ask them to lay low. Some of the older members can be a little overzealous."

"Are you the chief or something?"

"No. I'm the shaman. The holy man."

Natalie choked on her beer and began coughing. She grabbed a napkin to wipe up the beer she spit onto the table.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Just went down the wrong way. So you can contact the dead and all?”

He chuckled and laid his hand on hers. “I can. Why? Did you have someone in mind? Someone in your house maybe?”

“No. I was just curious. But sure. After I’m settled in. Meeting everyone—that’s fine. It’d be nice to get to know some people around here. Is there a big Native American population here?”

“Big enough we get noticed. Not big enough we can run around scalping women who live all by themselves.”

Natalie drew back and pulled her hand away at his statement. “That wasn’t funny.”

His mouth pulled back into a frown. Small wrinkles appeared at the bridge of his nose. The scar on his cheek elongated from his tense expression. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Natalie stared at her half eaten burger, her appetite lost. She grabbed her wallet and threw down some cash. “Nice to meet you and all. Give me a call about meeting everyone. Excuse me.” She rushed out of the bar and into the night air.

For a moment, the look on Scott’s face had reminded her of Michael’s right before he got into a rage. Leaning against her car, she drew in a few deep breaths to clear her head. Her ears rang from the music volume and the cacophony of voices inside.

The night was much quieter. Hardly a cricket chirped. It helped to ease her anxiety. She felt a hand on her shoulder. Without thinking, she turned and brought her knee up into her attacker’s groin. With a low moan, the man hit the gravel. She fumbled for her keys when she glanced over to see Scott on the ground, clutching his balls. *Oh shit!* She knelt down to help him up.

“Oh my God! I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it was you. I thought you were the jerk who hit on me earlier.”

He grabbed the bumper of her car and hoisted himself up but leaned against the car. Tears glistened in his eyes. “You got one hell

of an aim." He took in a few more breaths before trying to stand upright.

"Sorry."

He rubbed his crotch. "I was coming out to see if you were okay. You seemed pretty spooked."

She lifted her hair off her neck and looked past him.

"Hey, what happened there?"

Quickly she pulled her hair back down to hide the blemish on her neck. "Nothing."

"That *nothing* looks like a nasty scar. Trust me nothing gave me this permanent beauty. Look, I'm not trying to interfere with your life, but if I were to guess I'd say you'd been put through the wringer. Here." He reached into his wallet and pulled out a card and handed it to her. "If you ever want to talk about anything. Just give me a call. Day or night. Of course, this would not be about the house."

She eyed the card and then looked back at him. "I'm not ready to get involved with anyone yet or even consider dating. I don't think that's a good idea."

He stepped forward and slid the card across the hood of her car. "No strings attached. Honest. Friends. We can all use some of those, right?"

She bit her lip, picked up the card, and slipped it into her pocket. "Yeah. We can all use friends. Thanks, Scott. Sorry I kicked you. It was nice to meet you." With that she got into her car and headed back toward the house. The toll of the day was weighing on her, and she wanted to sleep.

When she arrived, she went inside expecting to find the doors slamming or things floating in mid-air.

But a calm essence welcomed her. Getting ready for bed, she didn't feel anyone or anything around her. She wrapped herself in a sheet and shivered. The nights were getting colder. She had to get the gas turned on, but couldn't do that until Monday.

The movers were coming in the morning to deliver what little furniture she had. Mostly boxes of books, her bedroom furnishings,

a futon, and a few other things she was able to salvage from the house.

The mountains stood out against the night. In the distance, the same little balls of light started to dance and twirl around the tree line. She observed them for a little while and noticed there were some even on the edges of the field. A shiver ran up her back. The heaviness of the atmosphere weighed on her shoulders. It was the same feeling she used to get when she was a child in her mother's old house. Sighing, it seemed there was no way around it. This place was haunted. *I guess what Scott was saying is true.*

Her heart thumped against her breastbone when she recalled staring into Scott's eyes. The pull she had toward him ignited inside of her again. Not sure of what it was or where it came from, she tried to shove it aside. Only this time the feeling wasn't going away. She started to imagine seeing him shirtless and watching his rippling muscles glistening in the sun. *I have to get my mind off him. What have I gotten myself into?*

Natalie settled down into bed and drew the sheet around her, wishing she had something warmer. The air mattress squelched the more she turned on it, trying to get comfortable.

She heard heavy footfalls. She waited for them to start running, but they stopped in front of her door. From the large crack underneath, she saw a shadow move.

Her curiosity almost got the better of her, but she wasn't going to get up and see who was on the other side. Fear took over, but she didn't hear any more footsteps, and no door handles rattled. *It has to be Dustin checking on me before I go to sleep.* She waited and resisted the urge to call out to him. Without another incident, she let sleep take over and drifted off.

Chapter Five

The next morning the sound of girlish laughter woke Natalie. When she opened her eyes, it took her a moment to realize she was nice and warm. A large brown and tan blanket was thrown over her. She ran her hand over the fabric and felt that it was wool. *This was in the room under the stairs where I dropped it.*

She heard running. Glancing over, she noticed her door was now open and a blur of brown was going down the hall. *The little girl. What did Dustin say her name was? Jeannie. That's right. Well, she and I are going to have to have a little talk about her running.*

"Umm...little girl," Natalie called.

The little girl continued up the stairs and past her room again completely ignoring her. *Kids.*

All of Natalie's bones hurt as she got up slowly, but she knew there was more to do. She pulled on some clothes and tugged a brush through her hair. Checking her cell phone, she saw that it was almost time for the movers. A whoosh of cold went through her midsection when she went onto the landing. She ran her hands over her arms and then gripped the banister.

"Okay, Jeannie. I understand that you're having fun, but I'm going to be having some people come to the house today and for the next couple of months to help me fix this place back up. I'm not going to be tearing anything down, but there's a lot in here that needs to be replaced or your house is going to fall down. So if you can cool the running and scaring people while they're here, I'd greatly appreciate it. And thanks for the blanket."

The pounding on the stairs stopped when she had started talking. Natalie felt another breeze. This time the presence felt heavier and stood behind her. She turned slowly and saw Dustin a few feet away. He looked solid. He was dressed in the same outfit as before. With the sun coming in through the windows, she was able to make out his golden brown hair and how truly handsome he was.

The same feeling she had the day before when she touched him came over her. A deep pull toward him erupted in her being. She took a step toward him, but stopped herself when she realized what she was doing. *I'm macking on a ghost. Get a grip.*

"You're welcome. About the blanket. It can get cold here at night if you're not used to it."

"Thanks," she whispered.

"I'll keep Jeannie in line. I hope you don't mind if she plays while you're gone. She loves to run."

She stepped closer to Dustin. He didn't waver or blink out. Her fingers slid along the banister until she was inches from his hand. She didn't feel any body heat coming from him, but he was there. He even cast a shadow. "No that's fine. We can work out a schedule. Can I ask you something?"

He smiled. "Anything."

"You were the one outside my bedroom door last night, right?"

He nodded. "I didn't want to frighten you, but I wanted to be sure you were safe. When you came home you were troubled. You never know who else is lurking around here."

"Do you mean other ghosts?"

Someone knocked on the door. The echo of the banging caused her to jump. She glanced downstairs, and when she looked back, Dustin was gone. *Why doesn't he stay around long enough so I can have a conversation with him?*

Downstairs, she opened the door and there was the truck with her things. Relief washed over her, because at least she would have more clothes. The men backed closer to the door and pulled out the metal ramp to start unloading the furniture. One man chewed on his pencil and eyed her and then the house. "Can we start unloading?"

"Yeah. Sounds great. Come on." Natalie waved them in. She glanced up at the house and saw Dustin staring down at them from the landing. She smiled up at him, but he was gone after a second.

For the next few hours, the movers moved the stuff into the house and placed her furniture where she directed. The chill in the air hadn't worn off.

Even though she was sweating from emptying out the boxes, she couldn't get rid of the chill. Toward the evening she was all alone again. It was nice to see the place start to have some life to it. All she needed now was to buy some essentials like a refrigerator and a stove.

She picked up her cell phone and ordered pepperoni pizza and a salad. She wanted to think long term. The delivery man was a different guy, but he wouldn't come into the house. When she dug into her pocket, she also pulled out Scott's card and thought about calling him, but decided against it. The kitchen was set up and her bedroom in some order.

Taking the pizza box upstairs, she munched on a piece. A portable lantern gave off plenty of light. She threw the blanket Dustin had brought up to her onto the bed. When she began unpacking one of her boxes, she found her small bag of stuffed animals. Giggling erupted all around her as the floor squeaked. She looked up to see Jeannie standing in the doorway.

The little girl bit her lip and looked at the bag of animals. Natalie smiled and took out one of her favorite white teddy bears. She knelt down and gestured to the child. Jeannie stepped into the room. Natalie set the bear down and waited. The ghost didn't do anything except stare.

"It's okay. How about I put these in the corner for now and you can play with them? Just not while I'm asleep, okay?"

Her lips turned up in a smile, and she nodded.

"Good. Why don't you take this one into your room? I don't mind. I'm going to bed."

She heard another creak and looked up. No one was there. She figured it was Dustin keeping an eye on the little girl. Natalie didn't see anyone lingering shadows. She took the bag of animals and put them in the corner. Then she turned the bed down and shut off the light.

She started to climb into bed when the floor moaned again. *It's very strange to think I have a guardian ghost.*

Her muscles ached from the day of lifting and moving things and the rest of the week was going to be more of the same. Her body hurt just thinking about it.

Running a hand through her hair, she sighed and for the first time, felt safe. The floor groaned again. She sensed someone there. Figuring it was one of the spirits, she didn't check behind her. The presence grew stronger, warmer than what she remembered. Something wrapped around her mouth. Hot breath blasted against her neck. Another arm slipped around her waist. She began to twist in her captor's grasp, but the hand tightened on her. A wet tongue licked her neck.

"Oh, you taste sweeter than a candy cane on Christmas."

She recognized the voice as the scum from the bar the night before. Natalie tried to get away but wasn't able to. *I'm not going to let this piece of shit get the better of me. I dealt with Michael. I can deal with this.* She forced her muscles to loosen up. The thought of his dirty hands touching her caused her to shiver. His unwashed scent and beer perfumed breath made her nauseous.

"I'm going to make you eat those words you said to me at the bar. I know you want me. I saw the way you were looking at me. Then you let that dick, Scott, touch you. I'm sure you already fucked him, too. I'll show you who's the better man."

Her eyes widened. She heard the squeak of a floorboard behind them. Jimmy's hand crept over her upper thigh and snuck under her t-shirt. A cold draft wove around her legs.

"Get out!" The firm command echoed through the room.

"Who the hell was that? You got someone else hiding in here? You're just the whore of Babylon aren't you?" His lips encompassed her ear. He tugged on the lobe.

A light appeared in the corner of the room. The blue orb expanded into the form of a man. The man's hand trembled against her flesh. The one from her mouth slipped off, but the one around her waist tightened so she couldn't breathe. She brought her arm

back and shoved it into his gut with all her might. That got him to release her. She moved to the wall by the window.

"You know all those rumors you've heard about this house? Well, they're all true. If you don't get out of here, then he's going to hurt you." Natalie stared at the form that solidified into Dustin.

"Bullshit. This is all some light show. You don't scare me!"

Dustin's expression hardened. His brow was furrowed, and his nostrils flared. Those blue eyes had darkened. "Get out!" He shouted and rushed toward the intruder. Right before he reached him, he disappeared.

The blast of the air pushed the attacker backward and left her with a shudder. Dustin had the man by the throat. Jimmy had his hands around Dustin's neck trying to pry him off. His face was red, and he struggled to breathe. His eyes bulged.

"Dustin, let him go!"

The ghost turned, his expression dark. His eyes glowed amber in the moonlight. His face had literally elongated. When he bared his teeth, they were sharper than before. It made him seem alien from the man who had helped her the other night. "He was going to hurt you. He should die for that."

The assailant wheezed.

"I know, but I think you've scared him enough. I doubt he'll come back here. Will you?"

"No," he forced out.

"Good because if you do or if you ever try to hurt me again or send any goons out here, the same will happen to them or worse. Next time, I might just let him kill you. Understand?"

He nodded. Dustin released him. He flew out of the house, down the stairs, and went off into the night. In the distance, she heard a truck engine start.

Natalie wiped her face and turned the light back on. Shivers wracked her body at the sudden realization of how close she had come to being beaten and raped. *Maybe I should've let Dustin kill him. I doubt that scum would've been missed. But then, if the stories Scott told me are true, his spirit will be stuck here, and I don't want that.*

She sunk down onto bed and felt the tears slip down her cheek. Natalie was suddenly thrown back into memories of the fights with her ex-husband. Her hands began to quake and the scars started to ache.

“Are you okay?”

She glanced up and saw Dustin standing at the door. He had an ethereal glow around him that made her gasp. She nodded and wiped her eyes. “Yeah. Thanks for helping me out.”

He stepped into the room and stood by the end of the bed. He gazed upon her with a softened expression, appearing normal once more. “You’re welcome. I couldn’t let him do that to you. No woman should ever be treated that way. I saw many horrors back in my day. Do you mind if I sit beside you?”

“No.” The weight of his body depressed the bed. She glanced over at him and smiled. Having him there made her yearn for comfort. Smiling, she tried to gather her wits. “I’m sure you’re time was very different than now. But you’re right. Women shouldn’t be treated that way.”

A cold zing went through her when he placed his hand on her cheek. His fingers made an indentation in her skin, and she could feel the reaction her body had to him. Her nipples hardened with his touch. Small bolts of pleasure began running along her nerves. Her heartbeat quickened. She didn’t want him to leave. That instinctive pull she felt for him ignited again from his touch. Natalie leaned forward, wanting more of him. Her resolve was crumbling. It was hard to fight the attraction she had for him. If she could name it, she would. The heat growing inside of her was hard to ignore. “Your heart has been hurt so many times. You bear the scars of a horrible marriage to a pitiful man who wasn’t worthy of your love. If you were mine, I’d never hurt you.”

The truth in his gaze burned through to her soul. She reached up and when her fingers slid over his hand, it was real. He was cool to the touch, but he was there. The glow around him dissipated, and the chill was gone in the room. “How can you be corporeal when you’re a ghost?”

He ran the back of his hand over her cheek. "The night that I found my father murdering my family, we ended up fighting in the room under the stairs. He stabbed me, and I shot him. My wounds healed with time, and now I'm in between. It would nice to be free of this hell. Maybe one day, be human again. I was caught in some limbo between life and death. It has something to do with the curse on the land, and my encounter with a wolf on the way home. It bit me. I can be physical if I want it. Like the day I heard you stuck in the room under the stairs. My father's spirit resides there. Don't go in there unless you have to. I can keep him at bay. He's not stronger than me. He hates that you've moved into the house."

"Was he the one who moved the bricks?"

Dustin nodded. "Yeah, he moves them back and forth the way he did in life. Promise me you'll stay out of there."

"I will." She didn't want to think about what kind of a hateful spirit was under the stairs. Hearing that Dustin wasn't exactly dead was reassuring, but it was also sad because she wanted to free him.

He took her hand in his and brought it to his lips. The brush of his soft mouth against her fingers made her bite her tongue. She couldn't remember the last time a man had garnered such desire in her. She was lost in his gaze.

"How come you make me feel this way?" she asked.

"What way?"

"I can't explain it. You make me feel calm. I have this draw toward you, like I've known you before. It sounds crazy, but when I think of you. All I want is to know you better. I never thought I'd say that about another man. Not after what happened. But I feel I can trust you. You make me feel safe."

"I, too, feel this pull toward you that I can't explain. When I'm with you, I feel whole."

Natalie thought about what Dustin said, and it made sense. Because that was the unnamed feeling she had as well. He made her feel complete. "Yes. That's it. I couldn't put my finger on it before."

He smiled. "May I kiss you?" He leaned a little closer to her.

She drew in a breath and noticed the tingling sensation that wound through her. The sound of her pulse thundered in her ears. She was slightly dizzy. Michael never had this effect on her. "Yes."

He tilted her head up so she could meet his lips. His mouth pressed against hers in a silken caress that was so sweet and gentle that it melted her heart. His kiss enhanced the calmness inside of her. One hand slid across her neck and touched a tendril of her hair.

He kissed her a little harder. Her heart ached; he had been alone so long. She got up the nerve to wrap her arm around his neck and ease him a little closer until he pulled away from the kiss. A soft moan escaped her lips when he did. Natalie yearned to feel his hard body against hers.

"I desire nothing more than to see you safe. I will not take advantage of my situation and push myself on you."

"You're not. I mean, I understand. Whatever this is between us, I feel there's more to it and..."

He ran a finger down her neck following the line of her shirt until it stopped at the top of her breast. "I would love nothing more than to lay with you, but I want to know that you're ready. Not acting on this attraction we have for one another. Tonight, you need someone to protect you. To be close to you." He kissed her lightly and then got off the bed, backing away.

"No. Stay with me."

"I will be here watching over you."

"Dustin, please. You're right. I need someone to be with me. I need someone close to me. Will you hold me? At least until I fall asleep." She bit her lip, waiting to see what he would do. He glanced at the door. She turned the covers down and slid underneath them. "Please."

He smiled. "All right." He took his hat off and lay on the bed next to her.

Natalie peered into his eyes not believing he was there. She touched his face, feeling the stubble of his beard. His hair was fine and seemed to be woven strands of copper and gold. She huddled

into the crook of his arm and laid a hand on his chest. Underneath her palm, she felt a slow heartbeat. His skin was warm, but not like hers. Being in his arms now, she felt whole.

She ran her thumb across his lips. Dustin slipped his arm around her shoulders and barely touched her, but eased her closer to him. She pressed her lips against his and ran her tongue along his bottom lip before pulling away.

“Thank you for protecting me. I’ve never had a guardian ghost before.” Her eyelids drooped, and she closed her eyes.

Dustin’s heartbeat lulled her into the dream world, and for the first time in a long time, she was able to completely relax.

Chapter Six

The next morning Natalie awoke in an empty bed. The images from her dream clung to her memory. She had been running in the snow. Alongside her were two wolves. One was brindle colored and the other was silver and black. They hadn't scared her and they were both familiar. When she tried to recall more of the night vision, it faded from her mind.

She ran her fingers over her lips and remembered Dustin's soft kiss. *He did say he didn't die. He got caught in some vortex...that he was in between the worlds. What must that be like?*

She stretched and glanced over at the other pillow. Laying on it was a single yellow rose. It must have come from the rose bushes that ran wild over the arbor out back. Bringing it to her nose, she inhaled the scent and thought about what Dustin had said. He didn't want to push their relationship. He was old fashioned.

She hadn't intended on getting involved with anyone, but it was hard to deny the attraction she had for him. It was so primal and the way he made her feel was unlike anything she had experienced. It was new and exhilarating. To dismiss their budding relationship would make her a fool. Her head said to take it slow, but her heart was winning the battle.

After getting dressed, she laid the flower back on the pillow and went outside. As she pulled out of the driveway, a white van drove in. Jarvis waved his hand at her. She waved back and continued into town.

While doing her tasks, Natalie let the events of the night before slip away. She didn't think her attacker was ever going to come back into the house with Dustin there.

Natalie spent the rest of the day wandering around the mall, buying clothes. She ended up in a lingerie store and bought a couple of things, not sure why she was purchasing them. It wasn't like her ghostly protector was going to be taking advantage of her. He did watch her, but she wondered how closely he watched. That

fact creeped her out a little, but he had been so genuine the night before, she decided he wasn't intruding on her private moments.

By the time she got home, it was getting dark. She had leftovers from the mall, so she didn't have to worry about dinner. When she pulled in, she saw a parked black pickup truck and a man knocking on her door. She grew rigid. After getting out of her car slowly, she slammed the door. The man turned around.

"Can I help you?"

"Natalie, I was just going to write you a note."

He stepped off the porch and came towards her. She took a step back, but when he got closer, she saw that it was Scott. Her guard came down when he stretched out his hand. It enveloped hers. When their hands touched, the instant attraction she had for him when they first met at the bar came over her again.

For a second, she flashed back to her dream with the wolves. The eyes of the black and silver wolf reminded her of Scott's. Her body responded to him the way it did when she touched Dustin. Even though she tried to ignore it, something in her wanted to know more of him. *This is nuts. I meet not one, but two guys who I'm drawn to.*

"Were you coming here to ask me about having the tribe come over? Or something about the house? Did you need to look at something?"

He ran his hand through his hair and glanced at the ground. "Actually, none of those. First, I wanted to see if you were all right. I stopped in at the bar and heard Jimmy going on about how scared out of his wits he was about coming over here and being run off the property by some ghost. I know how he gets when he's drunk, and I wanted to be sure you weren't hurt. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Fine. Someone tried to break in last night. I was kinda out of it from unpacking all day and stuff. I appreciate you coming out here to check on me. What was the second thing you wanted to ask me?"

He scuffed his boot through the dirt and then gazed back up at her. "I was wondering if you wanted to go to dinner. Somewhere quieter than the Road Barn. I could cook if you're up for it?"

She put her hand on her hip and stared at him. "I thought last night you just wanted to be friends?"

"I do. Look, I don't normally do this kind of thing, but I figured we gotta eat, and I'm a great cook. You still don't have any power. Come on. Don't tell me you couldn't use a shower and a good, hot meal. Besides friends have to get to know one another."

Natalie sighed "Okay, but let me put this stuff in the house first and grab a few things. You want to come in?"

He nodded. She took her bags out of the truck then opened the front door. Scott held it for her. Once she entered the house, a cold wind met her. She didn't get the sense of the happy household she had last night. Walking by the door under the stairs, she saw it was closed. "Um, I'll be right back. Do you mind waiting here?"

"Of course not." He gave her a small smile.

She took her bags upstairs. After she put her things away in her closet, she turned around to get her backpack when Dustin stood before her. She grabbed her chest and jumped back. His eyes were scrunched up at the corners. The frown on his lips gave away his mood.

"You're going with him?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Yeah. I am. He's a nice guy, but that doesn't mean I'm going to sleep with him."

"He could have other intentions, and I wouldn't be able to protect you away from the house." His expression melted when he said that. He reached over and took her hand. He brushed his lips across her knuckles, and she laid her palm on his cheek. "I don't mean to sound possessive. It's been a long time since I've come to care about someone."

Hearing his confession softened her heart. She smiled and leaned up to kiss him, but bumped her forehead on the lip of his hat. "You don't have to worry about me."

She pressed her lips against his and was glad he was solid. His arms wrapped around her and drew her close. Dustin's mouth was hungry against hers. His tongue pushed against her lips, seeking entrance to her mouth. She obliged him and met his tongue with her own.

They caressed and touched one another until she raked her fingers down his shirt and pulled away. The fire he ignited inside of her was too much for her to handle with Scott waiting for her.

The bond between them began to take hold of her mind. All she could think about was making love to him. But she gathered her wits and rested her head against his chest. After drawing in a few breaths she could focus again. He kissed the top of her head.

"I'll worry about you anyway, but I trust you. Go and have fun."

She nodded, and he was gone. After packing her clothes, she went downstairs. Scott was in the living room examining the brick work of the large fireplace. "See anything interesting?"

"I was looking at the bricks. These are old. Well, this whole place is. You know it's going to need a lot of work. Can you handle that all by yourself?"

"I'm going to try. I needed a fresh start. So, ready to go?"

Scott nodded. She followed him out and climbed into his truck. While they turned out onto the road, Dustin appeared at the edge of the property line, watching her go. They rode a distance in silence with Scott fiddling with the radio. She could tell he was nervous. All the station changing made her antsy. She clamped down on his hand. Her pull toward him blazed along her flesh. He glanced at her.

She wondered if he saw how she reacted to him. Already her panties were soaked from her thinking about seeing him naked. His eyes once again were amber in the moonlight. Their sudden change in color snapped her out of her reverie. He flashed a nervous smile.

"What's the deal? You weren't so jumpy before."

"I'm not sure you really want to know."

“I’d rather you tell me than me trying to read your mind. Look Scott, if something is bothering you, please tell me.”

“It’s about your house. There are many unquiet entities there. Some of them roam in between the spirit worlds. Honestly, I’ve never been inside, but today, I could feel one in particular that’s trapped. It’s almost like he’s not really dead. And when you were upstairs, I heard you talking to someone. I know you’re alone, so I can only assume you do believe in ghosts now.”

She sighed. “Yeah. You probably heard me talking to Dustin. He’s a little protective and wanted to be sure you had good intentions.”

Scott’s laughter boomed in the truck. He pulled up outside of a modest cabin. The light was on inside. She slid out of the truck and followed him inside. Glancing around, she saw a mishmash of different things hanging on the wall from stuffed animal heads, to woven blankets, to paintings of landscapes. The atmosphere was warm, inviting and comfortable. He started moving around in the kitchen and getting out pots and pans. “The shower is down the hall if you want to hop in. Once you come out, we can eat. I hope you don’t mind, but all I have is water and beer to drink.”

“Water is fine. Thanks for the shower.” She walked down the hall and into the bathroom. Setting her bag down, she went into the shower and let the hot water wash over her. It was nice to be clean.

After stepping out of the shower, she dressed in the pair of jeans and t-shirt she packed. Brushing her hair out quickly, she left the bathroom and smelled a variety of herbs and the distinct aroma of cooking meat. “Whatever you’re cooking smells awesome.”

“Hope you like venison. I went hunting the other day. I have a ton of it.”

“I’ve never had it, but I’m willing to try anything. Do you need any help?”

“Nope. You’re my guest, so sit down and relax. You’re water is on the table.” He flashed a smile and then went back to cooking.

Natalie took the water and went into his living room. He had a stone fireplace with a large mantle. On it, he had several old

photographs of other Native Americans. She figured they were his family. A large medicine wheel hung above the chimney.

Her gaze went over the shelf he had filled with books; crime novels, history, biography, books on herb lore and shamanism.

“Ready?”

She jumped when he popped into the living room. “Yeah. Thanks.”

He led her to the table and pulled out the chair for her. Along with the venison, he had mashed potatoes and a mixture of vegetables. She dug into the meat and savored everything. “This is really good. You should go professional.”

He smiled. “I am. Or well, I was.”

“Seriously? Why did you stop?”

“Long story. Family stuff. I do some catering on the side though. It keeps me busy.”

Natalie laughed. She enjoyed having him for company. He was easy to talk to. She took a few more bites. “So I take it you’re all right since I kicked you.”

Scott choked on his food and had to take a sip of water. “Ahh-yeah. Sorry I wasn’t expecting you to ask me about that. Everything is functioning properly. And what about you? Do you enjoy living in a haunted house with a defensive ghost?”

“I don’t mind it. I’ve lived in haunted houses before when I was younger. I just tried to ignore it now that I’m older. At the house, you said the place was filled with an unquiet spirit, as if he wasn’t dead.”

“Yeah. Your protective spirit is strong. It’s like he’s stuck. Why?”

She poked at her potatoes. “Hypothetically, if a person was near death, but didn’t die and got caught up in a curse on the property, kinda like being sucked into another dimension like *Poltergeist*, is there any way to bring that person back?”

He leaned back in his chair and stared at her. “There’s a ceremony that can release spirits so they can continue on to the

other side, but I don't know about bringing them back. Is that what happened to the spirit in your house?"

Natalie nodded. "That's what he told me."

"Natalie, you have to be careful. Spirits are tricky. They can lie to you so they can take advantage of you. They can draw off your energy and manifest themselves to make them appear to be flesh. I wouldn't put my faith in what he says. A lot of tragedy has occurred on your property. I would be wary of doing or saying anything to the ghosts that appear before you."

"What about your ancestors? You trust them, don't you?"

"That's different."

"Really? How is it different? They are specters aren't they? They could appear to you and lie about what they're doing."

He set his fork down. A cold gust swept over her and then a shiver ran down her back. "Let me see your hand."

"Why?"

"Because it will let me see what path your life is going to take. It will help me figure out what we need to do with your house."

She stretched her hand over the table. When Scott touched her, a pleasurable zap went along her skin.

She drew in a quick breath and watched his expression change. It seemed something, or someone else, inhabited the same space he did. He looked at her with his eyes, but also ancient ones. The being sitting inside of him had long silver hair and Scott's facial features began to change. He grew older. Her breath caught in her throat. The tiny hairs along her arms stood up.

"Child, you are of the spirit people. Your ancestors watch over you. You come from a troubled past to a troubled land. The path ahead of you is laden with great joy and hardships yet to come. Two wolves walk beside you. You are drawn to them, but do not know which one to choose. Together and not apart is where you will find absolute harmony. Even if they fight this revelation, it is what must happen for your lives to be balanced. Before this can be realized, you must face the darkness to step into the light."

“What about the spirits on my land and the ones in my house. One is trapped who shouldn’t be. Can he be freed?”

The ancient spirit inside of Scott gripped her hand tighter. “He can be freed, but it is up to you to cross into the spirit world and bring him back. Once you do that, he will be as he was. You can only do this when the night surrenders its fight to the day and the sun starts its reign in the sky once more. That is your journey. Once you do, all others will be free. And then you shall be able to look toward a joyous future. May we meet again, Granddaughter.”

Scott drew in a deep breath, and slowly, his features began to return to normal. When he did, he gave her small smile and ran his hand through his hair. “I was channeling a spirit, wasn’t I?”

“Yeah. He called me Granddaughter and told me in order to free the spirit I had to step into the spirit world myself then all the phantoms on the property will be free.”

“That doesn’t sound too appealing. Although it might be the only way. Of course, you’ll have to have someone there to bring you back. We might be able to arrange that.”

“I’m not ready to go traversing some other plane. I was only wondering if it was possible to free him. That’s all.” She got up and went into the living room. Hearing Scott tell her how she could free Dustin was a little unnerving. She didn’t know how to take the knowledge.

She felt his hand on her shoulder. Turning, she looked into his dark eyes. The primal urge she had to be closer to him kicked in. She drew in a deep breath and looked back. He steered her all the way around and ran his hand along her cheek. His fingers trailed lower to her collarbone over the scar. The feel of his finger on her flesh hammered her heart. It stole her breath. Her panties were already wet. It was hard to stay focused.

“What happened to you?”

“Ex husband sent me through a plate glass window. I almost died from blood loss.”

“That makes sense then.” He drew her a little closer.

“What does?”

“I saw you among the spirits. Not the ones at your house, but the ones who have passed on. You were touched by their gifts when you returned. Your destiny changed. The bonds were broken from your husband and you were set upon a new path. One where you are now intertwined with me and another. I’ve seen you in my dreams, Natalie. I didn’t want to believe you were the one, but you are. There’s another connected to you, too. I’m not sure who it is, but all three of us are meant to be together.”

“What are you talking about?” Natalie tried to make sense of what he said. It rang true in her mind for some reason, but she wasn’t sure why.

“I’m babbling. I’m sorry. It’s just so hard. When I saw you in the bar, I knew immediately who you were.”

Natalie watched his lips move. They were full and enticing. The heat from his body warmed her. The food made her sleepy. His dark eyes bore into hers and his kindness drew her to him. She leaned up a little more to taste his lips. He pressed his mouth against hers in a light kiss, but pulled away before she had time to enjoy it.

“This isn’t right. I want you, but I can’t take advantage of that. The spirit in your house already has a mark upon you. I don’t want to tear your heart in two, but—” He began to back away, but she grabbed the front of his shirt and yanked him toward her.

Natalie couldn’t explain it, but she also felt she was connected to him too; the way she was with Dustin. She knew now from touching him that things weren’t going to be the same. There was more to it when he took her hand and contacted the spirit world. She knew that. Both men had a place in her life. Her dream flashed in her mind, only this time the wolves were gone and in their place were Dustin and Scott. *Maybe Dustin is the other he’s talking about. Maybe we’re all three supposed to be together.*

He collided with her lips, and she kissed him hard. Her arms wrapped around his neck. Kissing him felt right. The way it had with Dustin. His hands slid over her sides and along her back until he broke the kiss again.

“Why?” Scott asked.

“Your dream was right. I had a similar one last night. With two wolves standing beside me. Only one of them reminded me of you. We’re connected in a way I don’t understand.”

“How could any man share you? I won’t take any liberties, not until we know this is certain.”

“But you just said we were meant to be together. Isn’t this what you want?”

“It is, but I won’t push fate. I think I should get you back home.” He collected the plates and set them in the kitchen. Sadness weighed on her soul when she left his house. She didn’t want to be parted from him. The more she contemplated his words, the more they made sense to her.

During the ride back, neither of them said anything. The closer she got to home, the more she wanted to see Dustin. Her attraction to Scott was more than that. She could tell. *God, I’ve never wanted two guys before at the same time. I move up into the mountains to escape my life, and I find a whole other side to me.*

Scott stopped outside of her house. A light was on in the kitchen window, but her power wasn’t on yet.

“That’s him, isn’t it? The one in between.”

“Yeah. Dustin’s a good guy. I don’t get any bad vibes from him.”

“Well, trust your gut then. Have a good night, Natalie.”

She went to open the door, but instead kissed him lightly. “Think about what I said.” She climbed out of the truck and headed into the house. When she got there, the door opened by itself. A bitter wind blasted through the kitchen and hit her. The sense of sorrow and anger weighed on her shoulders.

“Dustin, please come out.”

“I saw you kissing him.” His voice boomed through the entire house. The anger in it cut her to the quick. “I thought you had pledged yourself to me.”

“I have. I did. Please, it’s complicated.”

Coldness swept all around her. Doors slammed upstairs. The front door opened then it banged shut. Then silence. She didn't sense anyone or anything at all.

With a sigh, she decided it was time to go to bed. Climbing the stairs, she thought about the events of the night and understood why he would be mad at her. She would have to explain that she wanted them in her life. And she had a way to save him.

Chapter Seven

For the next week, the house was silent of any ghostly activity. Her refrigerator, washer and dryer, and the new stove arrived along with a dishwasher. Once she had them installed and all of her utilities were turned on, she was happy to have them in working order.

The house was still empty. Every day she walked by the door under the stairs she shied away from it, remembering Dustin's warning. The contractors showed up and began to work on the house. Jarvis had cut all of her firewood. She had completely unpacked.

At first, the workers were renovating the outside and some were going to start in the house. She was waiting for Scott to show up, but he hadn't yet. Being apart from both men had given her time to think.

A hollow ache had begun to form in her heart. For so long she had been opposed to getting involved with another man and assumed she would be a spinster the rest of her days. Now, the craving to be with Scott and Dustin ate away at her.

She'd had more dreams about her and the two wolves. Each wolf had morphed into Dustin and Scott. She didn't understand the wolf significance, but seeing the two men bare-chested in her dreams was damned sexy. Trying to fight the attraction she had for them was getting harder. The more she tried to rationalize it away, the more her heart overrode her head. The connections were starting to consume her. Her daydreams flowed from having one of them in bed with her to having the two, sharing their lovemaking.

The heat those visions inflicted upon her made her lust. A deep seated itch began in her soul. No matter how much she tried to deny it, she wasn't going to be able to stay away from them. Her ideas of not desiring a relationship were fading away and being replaced with dreams of finding a way to make a relationship work with two men.

Another week went by. Natalie sat outside watching the spirit lights and feeling the emptiness of the house. Thanksgiving had come and gone, but she hadn't celebrated the holiday. The spirit hadn't moved her.

The only thing she missed was the people around her. She missed Dustin's presence, and she also pined for Scott. Thinking about them now, a tear slipped from her eye. She had angered Dustin, but he had to understand there was a link between them. Natalie took a sip of her water and set it down on the table next to her.

In the distance, she heard the whinny of a horse. She glanced in that direction and saw the ghostly remnants of a barn. Atop the horse was Dustin. She walked toward them. He had on his long jacket, cowboy hat, boots, and looked so handsome. Her cowboy took her breath away and tipped his hat to her.

She smiled.

"Hi."

"Hello, Natalie."

"Are you back now?"

"You know I can't leave the property."

"That's not what I meant. I'm sorry about Scott, but there's something between us I can't explain. It's the same with you. I've been dreaming about the three of us. I'm not exactly sure what it means. When I had dinner with Scott, he said there might be a way to free you from the limbo you exist in." She reached out to touch the horse, but her hand passed right through it. A pang of sadness wound through her heart. "Please come inside. I miss you."

The horse snorted. Dustin wasn't moving. The look in his eyes hadn't changed. He wasn't going to bend. She sighed and shook her head.

Natalie headed back into the house and closed the door. She wiped her eyes and splashed some water onto her face. *He's a ghost. I'm not sure why I've been thinking I can have something with him. I don't need to be torn between any men. I need sanity.*

"Natalie."

She turned from the window and saw Dustin standing in the doorway. He was dashing in his duster, hugging jeans, his open shirt, and the hat. "Is everything okay?"

"I've been a fool."

Natalie wasn't sure what he meant, but when he walked over to her, cupped her face, and drew her to his lips, it didn't matter anymore. He kissed her softly. Everything in her froze once his lips touched hers. She responded to him slowly and pressed against him, trying to feel the contours of his body. The longer she was around him, the more the craving to be in his arms took hold of her. He broke the kiss and then trailed his finger down her neck.

"I wanted to apologize to you. I didn't mean to be so cross. I was angered when I saw you with him, but I didn't have the right to do anything. You have the privilege to choose whatever man you wish. These two weeks, I have watched you from the shadows and heard you sobbing. It hurt my soul seeing you crying. Your fingers brushing the spot on your bed where I had lain next to you. I brought that pain upon you, and that was never my intention."

She touched his face. "What would you do if I chose each of you to be in bed with me? If I needed the both of you for a relationship?"

He winced at the comment. "I'd have to think about it. I would have to meet the other man. It is not in my nature to share the woman I care for."

"You care for me?"

"For the longest time, I wasn't sure if I'd ever be able to love another again. But with you, my heart has reignited. That was the reason I returned to this place from the West. I was betrothed, but she died of the pox. By the time I got back, I found my father had killed the family. The barn was ablaze.

"After we fought, I tried to put the fire out. The horses were screaming. The spirit balls surrounded me, and I felt light. I couldn't describe it. The next thing I knew I was here and yet not here, trapped on the land. I could interact with my little sister and the others, but I could also manifest with practice.

“Soon I was able to be flesh. You were the first one I was able to trust with showing myself. Besides you moving into the house, I saw your spark on the other side. You burn so bright I had to see what you were all about. And then I heard the hurt in your soul. I watched you and my heart warmed. When you were gone that night, it made me realize I hadn’t felt that way about anyone since I was alive. I wanted you. That was why I lashed out. I’m sorry.” He kissed her and trailed his fingers down her throat, causing her to shiver.

“I’m sorry to hear about your fiancée. I —” She couldn’t form words from the thoughts floating through her mind. He said he loved her. She didn’t think that anyone would ever truly love her. Michael never had. He wanted her for arm candy to show off at his business meetings, to parade around that he had this beautiful thing and no one else could touch it.

“You’re trembling.”

Natalie tried to smile, but everything in her still ached from her thinking he might evaporate. “Must be the chill in the air. It’s going to be winter soon.”

Dustin inched nearer until his body almost touched hers. “The weather in these mountains can be unpredictable. It’ll be beautiful one moment and horrid the next, with snow flying everywhere. I can start a fire for you or keep you warm myself.”

He stole her breath. Staring at his lips again, the faint lines in them enticed her along with their shape. The small scar he had at the top of his upper lip enhanced his ruggedness. She tried to stay calm, but her heart thundered against her ribcage. Natalie placed her hand on his chest, grasping for something solid to hold onto and remind her that this was all real.

“I think you already have. I want you, Dustin. Will you make love to me?”

He studied her eyes. His cooler skin grew a little warmer. “Is that what you wish? To have me for a lover?”

“You said the other night you wanted to be sure if I was ready.”

“Yes. And you would choose me over the other man?”

“No. I choose both of you. I don’t really understand it, but I feel that we’re marked for one another. That sounds strange, but I don’t know how else to explain it. I ache to feel your lips on my breasts. To feel your hands running along my body. For your cock to be buried inside of me.” Natalie lifted his hat and brushed her lips across his. She tried to understand the inflaming desire that ignited inside of her. It was this way even with Scott. The need to be near him and Dustin. Now that he was only inches from her, it soothed an ache. He made her calm and feel protected. She could hardly draw a breath. His masculine scent mixed with the tang of his horse settled in her nose.

The two weeks without him around had been hell. She’d day dreamed about him claiming her and that was one reason she had cried herself to sleep. The loneliness of not feeling his presence made her crazy.

“Having that pull doesn’t surprise me. I reacted badly before to it. It happens, or so I was told. If we lay together, then there is no going back. I will claim you for my own. If that happens then I will need to talk to this other man you also desire. I am not opposed to being with another man. Although it would be an adjustment after so many years.” His hand slipped along her side and cupped the side of her breast. Her nipple hardened and jutted into his palm. Her breathing intensified. She slid her hand lower on his chest, feeling the muscles underneath.

Her hand continued lower until it cupped his erection. Dustin moved his hand ever so slightly until the heel of his palm pressed against her nipple. He began to knead it slowly, exerting a gentle pressure. Natalie breathed in time to his fondling. Small tingles of want sliced through her. Her eyes half closed as she gave in to the pleasure. Dustin kissed her throat, lightly nipping on her skin. His breath was hot against her flesh and stirred the small hairs all over her body until they rose. Wetness gushed between her legs.

“Do you ache for me?”

A small moan left her lips. Dustin kissed her neck and plunged his tongue into her ear. She jumped from the wetness but that brought her closer to him. Natalie squeezed his crotch harder as she tried to hold back her control. The orgasm was on the verge of taking her to new heights. Her head spun. Moving to her other breast, he began to entice her nipple. He bit the underside of her jaw. The pain was a pleasure she'd never had before. Her clit ached with unspent longing.

"Do you want me to claim you?"

"Oh God! Yes." She groaned.

"Close your eyes."

She did as he asked. His arms enclosed her. She felt his cock press against her backside. The air was suddenly sucked from her lungs, and her whole body doused in freezing water. Her skin went rigid. Her heartbeat became erratic as she tried to break away from him, but his arms tightened on her.

"Calm yourself. You'll be warm again in a moment."

Before she could protest, Natalie opened her eyes; they were in her bedroom. Dustin's hat, jacket, and boots were gone. His shirt was all the way open. "How did we get up here, and where is your jacket?"

He flashed a lopsided smile. "Being in the spirit world has some advantages. The laws of nature are somewhat different." Holding her face, he brought her lips to his. With his kiss, warmth began to flood back into her arms. A fire inside her started to consume her soul. Natalie went on tiptoe and hungrily kissed him. She slid her hands underneath his shirt and over his nipples. He broke their kiss and squirmed. Dustin stepped back.

"What did I do?"

"Nothing. I'm ticklish." He took his shirt off and dropped it to the ground. Once it hit the floor, it vanished. She stepped out of her shoes and began to undress. When she was down to her bra and panties, Dustin laid a hand on her arm. "Allow me."

Trailing his thumbs along her spine, he followed the natural curve until she trembled all over. Her panties were drenched.

When he came to the small of her back, he slid his thumbs along the elastic until his hand cupped her sex through the thin fabric. The other hand undid the small hooks of her bra. He kissed her shoulders and pushed the straps down, running his tongue along her scars.

“You’re so warm and wet for me already. I can taste your desire on your skin. I’ve forgotten what it’s like to be human and have this. The ache of being close to a living person. For the need to feel. Taste. You make me want all those things again.” He dipped his fingers inside of her panties and slid them along the lips of her sex until he found her clit.

Once he touched it, the hunger to have him inside of her flared. Her moan echoed in the room. He worked her slow and steady, bringing her to heights of bliss.

Dustin removed one breast from the lace bra and cupped it in his hand. He held her and rocked with her, teasing her more with his hard dick encased in his jeans.

Natalie tried to keep her breathing at an even pace, but the gentle way he manipulated her was more than she could handle. “Dustin, please.”

He kissed her shoulder. “You’re almost there. Let yourself go.” He breathed into her ear and tugged on the lobe.

She squeezed her eyes shut. She pushed his hand to her breast and wrapped her fingers around his neck. Her head hit his chest. Black dots started to appear before her eyes. A long cry that couldn’t have come from her left her lips, but he had teased it from her. Dustin didn’t increase his pace. He exerted a little more pressure and rolled her nipple, pinched it and pulled it. The sweet stabs of pain combined with her cresting orgasm were enough to sweep her over the edge.

“Yes. Ohhh yes.” Natalie let her herself go and still he continued to manipulate her, slowly easing her down. Now she needed him inside of her. He released her breast and slipped the straps of her bra all the way off.

“You taste so good.” He slid his finger along her lips so she could taste herself. She sucked in his finger and wrapped her tongue around it, hoping she could do the same with his cock. Her cowboy chuckled. “Go over to the bed and get on your knees.”

Natalie slipped off her panties and did what he asked. She settled on the bed so her ass faced him. She turned and watched him disrobe completely. His cock was hard and ready.

He ran his hand down its length and smiled at her. Dustin settled his hands on her ass and squeezed the cheeks before pushing her legs a little further apart. Natalie jumped when she felt his tongue began to lave at her wet sex. One of his hands slid along her side and clutched her breast. He plunged his tongue between the folds of her pussy. The feeling of being worshipped nearly swept her into another orgasm. She clutched the sheets and began to cry out.

“Please. Need you.”

Dustin obliged and eased his cock into her. Her cowboy’s hands clutched her breasts. He kissed her shoulders. His hot breath blasted against her nape. His added weight was welcome when he began to thrust, traveling a little deeper each time he entered her. He squeezed her nipples harder. The pain sent bolts of bliss to her clit, and she ground her ass against him, needing all of him.

His heavy breathing filled her ears. Squeezing her eyes shut, she lost herself in the rhythm of their lovemaking. Never before had she been able to give up complete control. The pleasure washed over her. He was building her to a peak that would take her away to another world.

Screams filled the room. She barely recognized them as her own. Dustin pounded into her harder, riding her. He groaned and then slid into her one final time. She felt him release inside of her and then rest on her back for a few minutes. His fingers slid from her breasts and touched her clit.

“What are you doing?” she asked, pulling in a breath.

He didn’t answer her but began to rub her once again. Natalie cried out from the swiftness of the bliss that captured her. Dustin

thrust into her a couple more times, heightening the experience with her muscles clutching him. He continued to fondle her until he brought her down, and she was out of breath. Then they collapsed on the bed together.

A smile stretched on Dustin's lips while he looked at her. "I'd forgotten what that was like." He traced her lips.

She blushed. "I hope it was satisfying for you."

He inched closer to her and kissed her lightly. "It was more than satisfying. It was wonderful. You're a beautiful woman and you deserve to be treated as such. You deserve to be told the truth, too."

Hearing his last statement brought a pang of dread burning through her. "What do you mean?"

"I haven't been completely honest with you. I didn't think you'd understand or accept me. I can't claim you completely for my own unless you know the real story."

She sat up and pulled her shirt on. "What is that exactly? You're really some demon that wants my soul now."

"No. I don't want your soul. Your love and trust, yes. You see the marks on my leg." He pointed to large slashes on his left calf. "Those were given to me by a wolf. I got them riding in the Oklahoma plains on my way back here. I was at my campfire one night and out of nowhere this wolf came upon me. It lunged at me. I shot at it, but even though I hit it, it didn't go away. It latched onto me and began to pull me back into the grass. I fired again. This time, it released me. I bound the wound and treated it the best I could. On the way here, a full moon rose on the horizon. My wound was healing okay, but on that night, I turned into a wolf."

"You're a werewolf?"

She got up from the bed hardly believing her ears. *I can deal with him being a ghost, but now he wants me to think he's a werewolf!*

She stared out the window and at the land around them. The mountains loomed in the distance. The bed creaked. She ignored it, but then she heard a large growl. Natalie whipped around and saw a large, brindle colored wolf on the bed. Her legs grew numb. It

was hard for her to draw a breath. It seemed her heart stopped. The animal glared at her with a hungry look in its eye. She pressed herself against the wall and waited for it to spring, but it didn't.

Gathering the courage to move, she grabbed her pants and pulled them on. The wolf jumped off the bed, but remained a few feet from her. *It can't be him. Can it?*

Her mind went into overload. Instinct kicked in. Once she had her jeans completely on, she bolted from the room, grabbed her keys, and went out the kitchen door. She hopped into her car and sped out of the driveway.

Chapter Eight

Natalie didn't know where she was heading. She just drove and eventually recognized the area. A route had been etched into her mind. When she stopped, it was outside of Scott's house. She sat in the truck for a moment and stared at the light inside. *I can't go in there and tell him what happened. He's going to think I'm crazy. I can't go back to the house. I need to think this through.*

She rested her head on the steering wheel and felt tears sliding down her cheeks. When she heard a knock on the window, she jumped. Glancing up, she saw Scott staring at her. She opened the door and slid out of the truck.

"Natalie, what are you doing here?"

She couldn't speak and threw herself against him. His arms wrapped around her automatically. Natalie held onto him tighter, needing to know he was real. She inhaled his scent. He smelled of pine and sage. The night had grown cold around her.

"Hey. It's okay. Come inside out of the snow. My God, you're shaking something awful."

Natalie followed him into the house. Once she was inside, he put on a kettle to heat some water. He led her into his living room and seated her in front of the hearth where a fire blazed. Scott sat next to her, but she couldn't stop shaking. The image of the wolf was burned into her mind. She couldn't wipe it clean. The disbelief of what she had seen hadn't worn off. Almost immediately, her mind flashed back to her dreams of the men being wolves. Dustin had been the same brindle colored one from those visions.

Scott put a hand on her knee. "Tell me what happened."

"H-he was there and then he wasn't. God, its teeth. And those burning eyes. I couldn't stay there. I had to get away. I had to!" She stared into Scott's eyes and tried to make him understand.

He sighed.

She wanted to tell him what she had seen, but the words wouldn't come out. He slipped off the couch and knelt before her.

He took her face in his hands and gazed into her eyes. His gentle touch helped to ease some of her confusion and shock. "The ghost in your house. He did something?"

She nodded.

"Was it the one in the room under the stairs?"

"No."

"Okay. So it was the unquiet one. Dustin."

She nodded again.

"He did something that obviously frightened you. Did he threaten you?"

The tea kettle began to sing. Some of her shaking had subsided and she was warming up. Natalie drew in a deep breath and tried to calm down. Her heart was no longer beating erratically, and her mind wasn't blank anymore. "No. He didn't threaten me."

"Let me get the water, and I'll be back."

She didn't respond, but stared deeper into the fire, entranced by it. She replayed the events of the last couple hours through her mind. Her body still sang from their lovemaking. Everything about Dustin was perfect, or so it seemed. He had made her feel ecstatic and jubilant. And then the mood had been broken.

Scott returned with a cup of tea. He placed it in her hand. Wrapping her fingers around the mug, she let the warmth seep into her skin. The aromatic steam filled her nose and helped to clear her mind even further. After a few minutes, Scott sat next to her on the couch again. She looked at his concerned expression, and it dawned on her how she appeared. *He must think I'm a total freak now running over here not put together.*

"What happened?"

Natalie grimaced. "You'll think I'm nuts if I tell you."

"Try me. I do deal with the spirit world on a regular basis."

"Dustin told me he was a werewolf and then turned into one on my bed. It was the same wolf I'd seen in my dreams."

"What was he doing on your bed?"

Natalie heard a small hint of jealousy in Scott's tone and was surprised by that. She took a sip of the tea. It was lavender and

mint flavored. "We had just finished..." She blushed and looked at the dark liquid in her cup. Small leaves floated around in the brew.

"You let him touch you? You let him make love to you?" Scott jumped off the couch and grabbed onto the mantel. His back was to her, but she could see his muscles bunch underneath his shirt.

"Yes."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"It was nice—why are you asking me about that?"

"Did he bite you?"

"What relevance does this have to me saying he turned into a werewolf?"

Scott spun around and grabbed her wrists. Natalie jumped, sending the cup of tea splashing into his face. He screamed and covered his face with his hands. Scott sunk to the floor. Natalie raced into the kitchen and got a cloth with some cold water and a dry towel. When she got back, he was breathing hard and still held his face.

"Let me see." She slid down next to him. She tried to pull his hand away from his face, but it took all her strength to do it.

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine. We have to get you to a hospital. Here." She went to exam the extent of the damage and saw that his face was red, but only as if he had a mild sunburn. She pressed the cold cloth against his face.

"Ahh. That feels good. I'm sorry I asked those questions before. It's none of my business if you slept with him."

"Forget about it." Natalie began to pat the rest of his face with the cold cloth. His hand slid over hers. She felt her heart skip. Her attraction to him flared to life in that moment.

Scott opened his eyes; they glowed amber. She gasped, but he held fast to her hand. The skin on his face was starting to return to normal color before her eyes. He leaned in closer to her. "Don't be afraid of me."

"What are you?"

"I'm like the ghost in your house. Werewolf. I can still smell him on you." He ran his nose along the side of her neck. He growled a little. "But I also smell you." He licked her flesh and bit down on it.

Natalie dropped the cloth and placed her hand on his chest. Her heart throttled against her ribcage. Scott's hand cupped her breast and pinched the nipple. She arched closer to him. Her breathing doubled. He nipped along her throat to her cheek and stopped inches from her lips. His eyes were a deeper amber. He slipped one hand over hers on his chest. His other he laid on her chest. His heartbeat was steady and hers erratic. "Frightened little rabbit. Beautiful woman. Do you know how much I want you?"

"N-no."

He slid their combined hands down to his crotch and held them there. Natalie felt his growing erection. "I've patrolled your house at night. Making sure you've slept soundly and the spirits have not harmed you."

"I-I didn't see you." Her mouth went dry as she stared at him. Feeling his growing cock aroused her. She couldn't help rubbing it, unable to deny the attraction she had for him, too.

His eyes fluttered. He threw his head back and moaned. This was an unreserved side of Scott she hadn't seen the other night at dinner. She wasn't sure what to make of it. If he was going to act on his instincts or not. *It can't be possible that they're werewolves, and they're so close to me. Scott said he was drawn to me and another. It has to be Dustin. I've dreamed about them. It has to mean that I'm supposed to be with them.*

"You wouldn't. I circled around the perimeter and then closer to the house just to be sure. Your resident spirit doesn't like me encroaching on his land. He approached me in wolf form. At first, I thought he was a spirit of my ancestors warning me of something, then I realized who he was. What he was."

"Why are you telling me all of this? Why didn't you tell me the other night?"

Scott pressed his lips to hers. She melted against him. Already the passion she felt earlier in the night enveloped her.

"You can handle this. We wouldn't have revealed our true selves to you if you couldn't. Your dreams of us as wolves and men have been sent to you so you'd know what to expect."

"How do you know?" Natalie started to quake, but this time it wasn't from fright. Desire ran rampant through her. Leaning a little closer, she took his face in her hands. His eyes widened. She scooted closer to him and straddled him. She pressed her lips to Scott's and plunged her tongue into his mouth. He raked his fingers down her back and groaned when he pulled away from her.

"Because you're doing this. Something inside of you knows we're not going to hurt you. With our kind, we know our mates by touch. If you were a wolf, you would've known the moment we were in the bar the first night I met you. I did. But you weren't a wolf, and I didn't want to scare you off."

Natalie rested her forehead against his, trying to stop her head from spinning. There was no running away from this. If she did, it would only hunt her down. She couldn't run from her desire.

Her ex, he had been the monster. These men appeared to be the complete opposite. Her instincts said to trust them. Dustin told her he loved her. *How I can be sure this is all real?* Her heart said that it was. But her head was fighting against all of it, trying to find the logical solution. "I felt some unnamable pull toward both you and Dustin when I first touched you. I didn't understand it. Is that what you mean about knowing instantly?"

"Yes. It's instinct."

Scott kissed her throat and pulled the skin between his teeth. She moaned. Everything in her wanted to be with him right then, but she couldn't. She needed time to process what had happened. What she had learned.

"This wolf thing. Does it run in your family? Or were you bitten like Dustin was?"

"It's hereditary. All the shamans in my family have been shifters. Half of the tribe is. That's another reason your land is

sacred to us. It's our hunting ground. Or it used to be, along with the mountains." He kissed down her shirt and brushed his lips across one of her hardened nipples. He drew it into his mouth and began to suck on it.

She moaned from his wet lips on her hardening bud. But she had to keep things straight. "So how does this work? Do I become a wolf like you two to be considered your mate?"

"It's not mandatory. You can remain human. Only it would be hard for us not to indulge in you. One bite or scratch would turn you into one of us. I wouldn't do that against your will. God, I want you so fucking bad. Can't you feel it?"

Natalie could. She ground against his hard length for a moment, almost succumbing to the passion coursing through her. He growled. Natalie heard the deep rumble in his chest, and this time it didn't scare her. She wanted to hear more of it. "I can. But I have to go back. It wasn't fair of me to run out on him the way I did."

"And it's fair to leave me hanging to go back to him?"

"You said yourself that you saw me and another. That other is Dustin. I'm not playing favorites. Please believe that. Honestly, I never thought I'd find one man who could fill my heart the way you do, but I've found two. If you truly want me, then you're going to have to accept him too. I'm a package deal. At least that's what I think. I dream about having the two of you making love to me."

She got up and straightened her clothes. Scott grabbed her around the waist and slid his hands over her stomach and along her thighs. She whimpered. The pit of her stomach dropped when he began kissing her neck. His fingers began to fondle the zipper of her jeans. Her need for him made her wet, but she pulled out of the haze when the image of Dustin as a wolf flashed through her mind. She had to make one thing right before she could venture further into the relationship with Scott. Natalie backed away, trying to catch her breath.

"I have to. I'm sorry. I have to apologize to Dustin. But that doesn't mean I don't want you."

Scott clenched his fists. His expression hardened. "I understand. I'll be at your place in the morning to work."

She nodded and left the house. On her drive back home, she began to process everything they had said. She'd never considered werewolves before tonight, but what she had seen with her own eyes was short of a nightmare.

Now her life had been turned upside down. She couldn't deny the desire she had for Dustin and Scott. The yearning to be with each of them was unraveling her nerves even now.

She pulled into the driveway and got out of the car. Snow had dotted the landscape and was still falling. Glancing at the windows, she didn't see Dustin in any of them. Rubbing her arms, she went into the house and sensed the eerie silence. No one was there.

"Dustin." She listened and waited to feel a cold blast of air or his anger, but nothing. The house was still. Heading upstairs, she went into her bedroom and saw the bed had been made and there were coals burning in the fireplace.

"Please, Dustin. I'm sorry I ran out on you. I know how you must think of me. I was scared. Give me a break."

He didn't answer her. Sighing, Natalie went to take a warm shower. The hot water worked deep into her muscles. When she was done, she wrapped herself in her fluffy robe and went back into the bedroom. Sitting before the coals, the floorboards creaked. Glancing up, she saw Jeannie creeping over to the stuffed animals. The little girl smiled at her and then laughed.

"It's okay if you play with them. You wouldn't happen to know where your brother is, would you?"

The little girl nodded and motioned for her to follow. Natalie got up and went after her. They walked down the stairs, and Jeannie pointed to the door under the stairs. When she did that she faded away. The door wasn't open. She went over to it and listened. More scraping noises sounded along the floor and she figured bricks were being moved. Natalie pressed her ear to the door and suddenly a large impact made her jump back and cry out.

"He's rather rowdy tonight."

Natalie glanced over and saw Dustin leaning against the wall, arms crossed over his chest. His serious expression seemed to put a wall between them. The longing to go to him overwhelmed her. She reached out, but her hand passed through his arm. He looked at it and then back at her. "You're keeping him contained."

"Yes. You should go back to bed." His tone was cold.

"Didn't you hear me calling for you? What I said?"

"I heard."

She glanced at her bunny slippers. *He's pissed. I don't blame him.* "I-I went to Scott's because I was afraid. He told me he was like you. And that wolves know their mate at first touch. I felt something immediately for you when you first touched me. I don't know how that works. Anyway, what I never did tell you was that, when I went to dinner with him before, he said there's a way to free you. It's something about all the spirits can be liberated when I enter the spirit world when the day starts to reclaim the night. Or something like that."

Another thump sounded on the door behind her. Natalie jumped and spun around. There was a definite indentation in the wood this time. She ran her hand over the door and felt the jutting wood. If a few more bricks were thrown, the wood would break.

"He's pissed off."

"I can tell. Why?"

"Because he's an asshole. Because he can't get out and do the things he wants to you."

"What things does he want to do to me?"

"Go back to bed, Natalie. He's not getting out even if he breaks down the door."

She ached to touch Dustin. She approached him and tried to touch his cheek, but her hands passed through it. Tears came to her eyes.

She turned and went up to bed. When she crawled under the covers, she felt the weight of the mattress depress beside her.

"I'm not mad at you, love. It took a lot of energy for me to make love to you, and then shift while keeping corporeal form. I

understand you were terrified of me. And this is all much for you to take in. But I need to watch him tonight, and it takes less energy to manifest. Please understand." He brushed a kiss across her cheek which made her feel somewhat better.

"I just don't want you to hate me."

"I could never hate you. We'll figure this out. Now get some sleep. Jeannie's watching you for me and playing quietly in the corner. I'll be here tomorrow."

Natalie shut her eyes and drifted off.

The next morning, she got ready for the day. She wanted to sleep later, but the banging of the contractors and the buzz of the saw kept her awake. Outside, two trucks and a van were parked next to her Ranger. One of them was Scott's.

A thrill went through her thinking about him. Having slept on everything that happened to her, it had started to make more sense. She'd had the same dream about her men turning from wolves into men while she walked between them in the snow. It didn't make her any more comfortable with the idea though. She began to make breakfast and there was a knock on the door.

She opened the door to Scott with a clipboard in his hand. "Good morning."

His eyes had returned to normal. His bronze skin glistened in the early light. The sun reflected off the inch of snow that had fallen outside. The open door let the cold in. She blushed from staring at him too long, remembering how she left him last night.

"Hi. Come in, please."

Scott came in and closed the door. She went back to stirring her scrambled eggs and flipping her sausages over. The smell made her mouth water. Then again so did the sight of him. It took everything in her to focus on not burning her breakfast. "Would you like some coffee or something to eat?"

"No, thank you. I was hoping we could discuss some of the repairs you needed on the house."

She nodded. "Sure." She switched off the stove burner and grabbed a plate. Her hand shook when she set it down on the table.

“Hey.” His fingers lifted her chin.

Natalie couldn't ignore the compulsion to be in his arms and wrapped him in a hug. Scott chuckled and held her for a moment before peeling her off of him. “Sorry. I—”

“No need to apologize. You caught me off guard last night. Seeing you so frightened kinda kicked in my mating instincts to protect you. I keep the wolf under control. As much as I love you in my arms, I don't think it's a good idea for my crew to see me fraternizing with a client. They might get the wrong idea. And aren't you worried about what Dustin will think about seeing us together?”

“I hadn't thought about that. I'll discuss it with him later.” She backed away and then sat down. “So what else needs to be done to this place?”

“Well, you need a new water heater. The chimney has to be fixed. You need to get a new roof, but that can wait until next spring. Some of the insulation needs to be redone. And I would suggest getting a decent out building for tools you'll need around here. The rest of the repairs are done.”

“Is that it?”

“There's a list of things I'll leave with you that you can decide to do now or later.” He handed her a piece of paper.

She looked it over and saw the price. It was a little high, but then she looked at the list of things he had. She knew about some of them. Others she didn't, but they weren't major. “Let me think about it. I can write you a check for a good portion of it now. And we can hash out the other details later. Say over dinner tonight at seven. If you can get away, that is.”

“I think that can be arranged. Oh, my sister would like to meet you.”

Her eyes widened. “Why?”

“I think she wants to inspect my new mate.”

“You told her about me?”

“Not in so many words. I told her I met someone. That and she said one of our ancestors came to her and told her about you. I think the spirits here like you.”

“Okay. But I don’t want to meet her tonight.”

“Not tonight. Seven it is.”

Scott got up and glanced outside. He leaned over and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. She blushed and watched his fine ass as he walked out the door.

Chapter Nine

The house remained quiet all day. Natalie didn't hear or sense Dustin. The workers were around. Some were in and out. She spied Scott around the property. Sometimes he was hammering something and working hard. She had to keep from staring at his bunching muscles. The sight of him made her wet.

To get away from him for a little while, she went into town and went grocery shopping for dinner. When she was done, she decided to head over to a small craft store she spied next to the supermarket.

Inside, she was met with the smell of sage. The walls were decorated with paintings of wolves and landscapes. Medicine wheels hung from the ceiling along with dreamcatchers for sale. There were leather works in the back. Rows of jars filled with herbs lined one whole wall. Painted masks hung in between the art. Baskets were displayed on a couple of shelves. She ran her hand over a handmade rug and thought the colors would look great in the living room before the large fireplace.

"Hi. Can I help you?"

Natalie turned and saw the woman before her. Her copper skin and high cheekbones told her she was Native American. Her black hair was cropped short and hung right below her ears. "I was just looking, thanks. Everything in here is awesome."

"Thanks. The majority of it is handmade."

"I can tell."

"You're Natalie, aren't you?"

"How did you know that?"

The woman smiled. "Word travels fast around a small town. Besides, Scott Redhawk, is my brother. I'm Scarlett Redhawk. It's nice to meet you." She stuck out her hand.

Natalie glanced at her hand. Her nails were evenly rounded and painted dark blue. Silver rings adorned her fingers, and a large silver and amber bracelet hugged her wrist. She took it and was

struck by the firmness of the handshake. "It's nice to meet you. He said this morning you wanted to meet me."

"Yeah. I spoke to him last night. He told me about your dream about the two wolves. And the cowboy in your house. You really stirred Scott up. I've never seen him like that. That's a good thing."

She laughed. "Really. Why?"

"Scott has always been very focused. He didn't want to step into the role of shaman for our tribe, but our destinies choose us. The way you were chosen to be his mate and the cowboy's you have in your house. Your home sits on sacred land."

"I know. Scott's told me about your ancestors being trapped. So you're a wolf, too?"

"I am. It runs strong in our family. And you're completely human. At least for now. Although I would say you have some Native American in you."

"My mother was half Cherokee and my father half Sioux. My mother tried to stay more to tradition than my father. Yeah, I'm a melting pot as my father would call me. And no offense on the whole wolf thing, but I'm not ready to turn into Lon Chaney."

Scarlett laughed. "I like you. You're going to make a great sister-in-law. Take these herbs and burn them when you have your two mates together. It might make things a little more lucrative and ease the tension between them. I think your cowboy is also an alpha. I've sensed him on your property before. Seen him wandering in the mist in his spirit wolf form. He is strong." She handed her a sachet filled with herbs. "Just throw a palm full in the fire. Works every time."

Natalie clutched the bag and smelled it. Lavender, jasmine, sage, lemon and a bunch of other scents she wasn't able to discern. She took the rug and handed it to her. "Can I buy this before I go?"

Scarlett took it from her, and she paid for it. "It's one that Scott made."

"Really? I didn't realize."

"There's a lot to my brother. He's good with his hands. Have a good time tonight."

Natalie left the store and went back to the house where she spent the rest of the afternoon cooking. Toward the end of the afternoon, she carried in some wood and placed it in the large fireplace. She laid the rug over the couch and started the fire with some kindling. The house was getting cold and the wooden boards were chilly underneath her feet. The fireplace would warm the room nicely.

She'd already written Scott a check for the majority of his improvements and other repairs that had to be made around the house. She had agreed to most of them, but there were a few she would wait on. Her dining room table was in the other room, so she set the table and put a large candle in the middle of it.

Once seven rolled around, she was antsy to have Scott come over. Making sure everything was perfect first, she ventured upstairs after a few adjustments and changed quickly into a black dress and pulled her hair up into a clip so it was off her shoulders. Looking into the mirror, she didn't mind that her scars were showing. She wasn't ashamed of them because they reflected what she had been through and had survived. *If I can survive Michael, then I can survive anything.*

There was a knock on her front door. She raced downstairs to get it. Before she opened it, she smoothed her dress and made sure her hair was in place. Outside, Scott stood with a bouquet of flowers. He handed them to her. She brought them to her nose and inhaled the aroma. When she looked at them, she saw they were a mixture of roses and tulips. She hugged them to her chest and led him down the hall into the kitchen. Scott shut the door and followed her.

After putting the flowers in a vase on the table, she went back into the kitchen and started preparing for dinner. She pulled out a salad and the bowels, her tongs and the dressing to go on it. Her hands shook with every move she made.

"Hey, what has you so jumpy?" Scott placed his hand on hers. She gave him an uneasy smile. "Nerves. Sorry."

He took her hands and pulled her to him. She noticed he was dressed in a nice pair of jeans and a collared shirt. He ran his hands along her arms. "You have nothing to be nervous about." He stepped in closer and lowered his lips to her. She was swept up in his kiss and began to relax in his arms. His warmth helped her remember he wasn't going to hurt her. However, she didn't know how Dustin was going to react when he saw them together.

The oven beeped, telling her dinner was done. Natalie separated from him and grabbed the oven mitts. She took out the chicken pie and set it on the stove.

After taking a moment to let it cool, she lifted it up and brought it into the dining room. Scott followed with the salad and the other implements to go with it. After he set it on the table, he began to laugh.

"What?"

"God, you bought that old rug?"

"I bought it at your sister's shop. I thought it'd look nice in here."

"You should put it on the floor and not on the back of the couch. It's been collecting dust in her shop for years. I don't think I've made a rug in almost five years."

"Why not? It's beautiful. You should make more."

"I have more important things to do with my hands now than weaving rugs. I prefer carving. Maybe I can show you sometime. You might find it soothing."

Natalie smiled. "Maybe. I hope you're hungry."

"I'm a wolf. I'm always hungry."

They sat next to one another and began to eat. Natalie focused on her plate, not sure what to say to him. The intensity of the moment was growing on her. The silence loomed. She sensed that Scott wanted to say something, but he seemed to be waiting for her to make the first move.

She waited for Dustin to appear at any moment. She didn't know what he would do. Maybe he would come out and say boo.

Maybe he would let out his crazy father. Maybe do something else. It was all too much for her to think about, and it put her on edge.

She picked at her food. Her stomach was in knots. When Scott dropped his fork, she jumped in her seat and felt that she nearly had to be scraped off of the ceiling. He glanced at her and laid a hand over hers.

“What’s the matter?”

“I think she’s waiting for me to show up and do something ghostly.”

Natalie glanced over. Dustin sat on the chair across from her and next to Scott. She took a sip of her water and coughed. She got up from the chair and stood with her hand against the wall. Before turning to the men at her table, she drew in a few draughts of air.

“Do you want something to eat, Dustin?”

“No. I’m good. Thank you though, darlin’. So we meet at last, man to man this time instead of wolf to wolf.”

Scott crossed his arms over his chest. “So it seems. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were trying to have a pissing contest to see who wins.”

Dustin growled and bent a little over the table. “This is my house! I’ve been here for over a century. I saw her first. Smelled her first. Touched her first. By all rights, she’s mine.”

Scott leaned over the table a little bit more. “This might be your house, but the land was mine long before your family moved here and kicked my tribe out! You might have made love to her, but you haven’t bitten her and claimed her for your own. By all rights, she should be mine. She’s tied to the spirit people. To my people. Cherokee blood runs in her veins.”

Natalie covered her face with her hands. “Enough! I’m not some toy that can be tugged on to see who wins the right to play with it. I’m a human being. I might be connected to each of you, but that doesn’t mean I have to choose.

“Dustin, you wanted Scott here. Scott, wanted to meet him. I didn’t invite you over here to tear one another apart. I’ve dealt with

enough controlling shit in my life. Now, excuse me! I'm going outside to get some air. Work this out."

Natalie marched out of the living room and then outside. The cool air felt wonderful against her flushed skin. Everything in her knew that the confrontation was going to happen tonight. She was just waiting for it. It had built up and built up until she had the outburst. Off in the distance, she watched the spirit lights bob on the wind. The longer she watched them, the more she thought she heard the sounds of drums. They were soothing.

She began walking toward the sounds. It was past where the barn had once been. The closer she came, the brighter the lights got. The drumming grew louder. One of the spirit balls came toward her and hovered. She reached out for it, and it stayed within inches of her fingertips. After a moment of dancing around her, it elongated into the form of a wizened, ancient woman.

She was Native American and dressed in a deerskin dress. Other spirit balls gathered around her. Their forms shimmered. For a moment, they were human and then they transformed into wolves. She gasped. The old woman approached Natalie, and the wolves followed.

They surrounded her. The wise woman took one of her hands and motioned for the other. Natalie could feel the silky smoothness of them along with the warmth of her skin. She looked into her butterscotch colored eyes.

"The gift of the wolf is not a curse. The pain it brings reminds us of the hardships we have endured. The joy it brings lets us know the wonder of what life is. It brings us closer to the Creator. We are all part of nature. You must not fear the wolf. Your mates will do as you wish, but it is inevitable you will become as they."

"But I'm not sure that's what I want to be. I have a hard enough time just being me."

"When the time is right, you will know when to accept the wolf. You will be the matriarch. We are happy to have you among the clan. Be kind to the others when it is necessary and show no mercy when the time dictates. That is how the wolf rules. Never let

it control you. If you do, you will end up like the dark spirits who wander the wood. We stand here and protect this site for our children and the rest of the tribe. The path you were set upon is here.”

Natalie wanted to talk more, but the woman shrunk away into a spirit ball and the others threw back their heads and howled. The song was eerie, but it made her want to go back inside and face the two men. She shouldn’t be mad at them. They were only reacting because they were coming together for the first time as men, and she was the center of their conflict.

Like the old shaman had said, she shouldn’t fear the wolf, and she ruled the roost. It was her house and they were going to listen to one another. The howling slowly stopped. When she looked around, she was alone in the field, but she could still feel the presence of those around her.

“Amazing.”

Natalie turned and saw Scott and Dustin standing behind her. They had their mouths open and were staring. She smiled. “I take it that was a good sign?”

It took him a moment to speak. His eyes were alight with excitement. “Yes. The ancestors never show themselves to anyone outside of the tribe. The woman has only ever come to me in dreams. Many of my tribe used to come here looking for answers. Hoping for a blessing from the past. They might get something, but hardly anything from her. She has given you advice and has welcomed you into the tribe. It must mean great things are coming.”

Natalie blushed, not sure what to make of his exclamation. It was obvious he was in awe. She was awestruck too. Especially when she was trying to remember the ways that her mother had taught her. It was all in the back of her memory, and the time had come to resurrect those lessons.

Seeing the two men before her, the wise woman’s words ran through her mind. *I can handle this. I can handle them.* She might not be ready to become a werewolf, but she was ready to show the two

men that they were going to have to come to an understanding. *I'm not going to be torn apart by them.* She was going to temper their anger. Thinking of that, she remembered the sachet Scarlett had given to her was above the fireplace. This would be the chance she had to make her dream come true. That all three of them would be together. This was what was supposed to happen between them.

"Well that's nice to know. I don't know about you two, but I'm going inside. I'm getting cold." She walked back toward the house and didn't have to look behind her to know they were following. Natalie could feel them. That was a strange difference, but she felt a little more open to everything now. She walked into the kitchen and then stood before the large hearth. The men were a few steps behind her.

Acting fast, she poured a palm full of the herbs into her hand and threw them into the fire. She quickly placed the sachet back on the mantle. The instant smell of pine and sage filled the room along with some white smoke. It dissipated when a large gust came through the room. The screen door slammed.

"What's that smell?" Dustin asked.

"Just some incense I bought the other day. Smells good, doesn't it?"

"So did you guys work out your differences? Or are you still going to be arguing over me like a piece of meat?"

Both men glanced at one another. They looked down at their feet and then back at her. Scott's muscles were bunched in his neck. Small lines had formed around Dustin's eyes. Each of their mouths was set in grim lines. The tension between them wasn't as bad as it was when Dustin first appeared.

"Look guys, I get that you want me. All three of us are connected. Dustin, you said you would consider sharing a bed with another man. Scott, what about you?" She traced her finger down the neckline of her dress. Their eyes followed it. Dustin licked his lips.

Scott said, "I would do anything to make you happy. I know Dustin is the other piece to you and me. Your dreams prove it. And

so do my visions. I am not opposed to being in bed with another man."

Biting her lip and reaching behind her, she unzipped her dress. Turning, Natalie walked toward the stairs. She slipped her shoes off at the bottom and then a few steps later, she slid her dress off her shoulders and let it fall onto the stairs.

The floorboards groaned below her. She peeked down. They were following. A smile turned up the corners of her lips. Getting to the top of her stairs, she took off her bra and dropped it to the floor. When she reached her bedroom, she slipped out of her panties and waited for them by the bed.

It took a moment, but they entered the room. Each had pieces of her clothing. They came in and set them down on the chair. She smiled and went to Scott first. She wrapped her arm around his neck and pressed herself against him. He drew in a long breath and looked into her eyes. He smelled like sage and pine. The scents enticed her. They reminded her of a deep forest. The perfume filled her nose and helped her relax.

"Do you desire me?" she asked.

His hand ran down the curve of her spine. "Yes," he hissed. She pressed her mouth against his and swept her tongue over his lips. She ran her hand over his erection.

Dustin trailed his finger over the top of her shoulders. She turned to him too, feeling the coolness of his body. "We can come to an understanding." She cupped his face and felt the stubble of his beard pressing against her palm. He caught her chin and kissed her deeply. Natalie stood on tiptoe to get to him better. Scott pressed against her so she could feel his need for her.

Scott slid his hands over her ass and clutched her buttocks. He nipped her throat. "I agree with Dustin. We don't want to do anything that will jeopardize our relationship."

"Well then, boys, I think we can work things out." Natalie eased out from between the two of them and beckoned them to the bed.

Chapter Ten

"So how are we going to do this?" Scott asked.

Natalie looked between them. "I want both of you. No arguments." She wrapped her arm around Scott's neck and kissed his jaw while unzipping his pants. Tugging on his ear, she bit his throat until he growled. "I need both of you touching me while I fuck one of you and then the other." She caressed his hard shaft and freed it from his boxers. His breathing increased. His hands roved across her stomach and cupped her breasts. She slipped her hand lower and squeezed his balls until he groaned.

"Fuck."

"Exactly."

"What about me?" Dustin whispered in her ear. He spun her around and she noticed he was already naked.

"What about you?" Natalie pinched one of his nipples.

"What if I want you riding me first?"

"Sorry. Woman's prerogative. You've already had me." She plunged her tongue into his mouth and squeezed his ass before pulling away, enticing a moan from his lips.

When she turned back around, Scott had completely undressed and stood before her. His chest was riddled with scars. His tanned skin glistened in the firelight. His muscled arms were large from all the construction work that he did. *All man. Just the way I like them.* She licked her lips and noticed the girth of his cock. It was bigger than any she'd had before. But she was always up for a challenge.

Natalie placed a hand on his chest and began tracing some of his scars. Most of them reminded her of claw marks. They were all old and smoothed over. She lowered her mouth to one of them and trailed her tongue over the lines, feeling the smooth skin. Scott's fingers trailed over her back until she shivered.

The coldness of the air was starting to get to her. He was warm and she needed him. Their closeness made her wet, and the smoke from the herbs floated upstairs. It filled her nostrils and made her

lightheaded. Natalie pressed against him and took his hand. Bringing it to her lips, her tongue wrapped around his finger. She slipped his middle finger between her lips and tasted him.

"You taste good. I need you, Scott. Make love to me." She led him over to the bed. Scott said nothing when she pushed him down on the bed. Straddling him, she wove her fingers through his hair and kissed him gently. His hands rested on her hips. One roved across her belly and slid over her downy curls.

His thumb found her clit. Scott began to rub her slowly. His mouth found her nipple. He bit down on it and started to fondle her harder. Natalie cried out. Her hips rocked forward, feeling the hardness of his cock.

A gush of wetness dampened her pussy while the pleasure began to build inside of her. Scott bit down harder. She pushed his head against her breast and held him there. Dustin sat on the edge of the bed. He traced the curve of her shoulder. She felt his lips on the side of her neck. He clutched the curve of her ass. The sensations of each man touching her at the same time drove her wild. It was better than any daydream.

Scott looked up at her. His eyes turned golden. She loved the look of them against his copper skin. "God, you feel so good. So perfect." He stroked her quicker. Natalie couldn't contain the fervor any longer. She screamed. At that moment, she felt Scott slip his dick inside of her.

"I want you, Natalie. I want to make you mine," he whispered against her ear.

"I'm already yours." She drew him into her and began to ride him. Her cresting orgasm was going to come sooner than she thought. "Dustin." She looked behind her and reached for him.

He slid his hand along her back. The instant contact made something in her click. He lowered his lips to hers and kissed her with a hunger she hadn't sensed the other night. "I love how you're riding him. Makes me want to know what you can do to me." He bit along her shoulder blade.

Natalie couldn't contain the feelings rising in her anymore. When Dustin, cupped one of her breasts, she felt everything exploding inside of her. Scott rose up against her once more and rested his head on her chest, breathing heavily. Her cowboy planted kisses and nips along her flesh, keeping her aroused. Scott glanced up. She saw him through hooded eyes. Dustin began fondling her nipple harder and slid his other hand along the outside of her thigh. Scott's fingers found her moist slit again. His thumb hit her clit, and she began to grind against him.

"Please!" she moaned.

"Please what?" Scott asked.

"You enjoy torturing her, don't you?" Dustin chuckled.

"Oh yes."

Natalie raked her fingers down Scott's back. She came for the second time. He was still hard inside of her, but the yearning for Dustin was also upon her. Kissing Scott, she untangled herself from him.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. This is quite stimulating, having the three of us together."

"Good. Because I don't see this stopping anytime soon. Dustin, baby, come here." Natalie laid back on the bed and spread her legs for him. Scott came down beside her. She trailed her fingers over his chest and waited for their mate to join them.

Dustin's eyes widened. He slithered along her body and licked her stomach before taking one of her aching nipples into his mouth. One hand slid along her thigh with barely any pressure, on the verge of tickling her. She wound her fingers through Scott's, needing to feel his warmth. She met Dustin's lips and slipped her tongue between them. Their tongues met, fondling, embracing one another.

"So beautiful. And you're ours," her cowboy murmured in her ear.

He trailed his fingers over her scars. She shivered when he came to the one on her neck. It was still the tenderest. Having both

men revere and love her was something she was still trying to wrap her mind around. After Michael and all their chaos, even their chaotic lovemaking, this was heaven. They had to understand their arguing would tear her apart. She hoped they were over it and this would be the beginning of something wonderful.

Dustin slipped his cock inside of her. She twisted a little to accommodate him. Scott rubbed her ass. A giggle burst from her lips when he found her ticklish spot, but was soon focused on Dustin pushing inside of her pussy and hitting her g-spot. Natalie broke her grip with Scott and wrapped her arm around her cowboy's neck and clutched him with her legs. They began a slow tempo, but she was already starting to build toward another orgasm.

Dustin began to plunge into her faster, making sure they were going to come together. Scott kissed her left buttock and nibbled on it. She moaned when he slipped his finger deep inside of her anus. When he began to exert a gentle pressure inside of her, she cried out in pleasure, "More!"

Each of her mates responded. Dustin plunged into her faster. Scott slipped another finger inside of her asshole. He kissed the side of her neck and bit gently on her shoulder. They were both bringing her to heights she had never fathomed before.

White light appeared before her eyes. Her moans filled her ears, but beyond that she also heard drumming. The steady beat of the same drums she had heard outside from the spirits. But she realized these were the beatings of all their hearts, beating as one. The white light burst into a thousand stars and she let the bliss take her away.

Sometime later, Natalie roused from a sound sleep. Scott was snuggled on one side of her. Dustin had remained and was on the other. She smiled, seeing the two of them both lost in dreams.

Working her way out from them, she was careful not to wake them and shivered from the chill in the air. Natalie grabbed her robe and pulled it on before stoking the fire. All of her muscles were blissfully happy, but she was wide awake.

She headed out into the hall and down to Jeannie's room. The ghost girl wasn't there, but the stuffed animals on the guest bed had been rearranged.

Downstairs, the fire had died down, but there were still a few coals. After placing a small log on the fire, she sat on the couch just watching the flames slowly ignite.

She didn't feel like she was alone. Natalie got up and walked to the front door. She peered out the window and didn't see anything in the front yard except more falling snow. When she went to the backdoor, she opened it to get a better look at the road.

Down at the very end of her driveway was a truck. She stepped out onto the stone stair and shivered from the snow touching her bare feet. Flipping the light on, she tried to see.

The vehicle wasn't one that she recognized. Natalie slipped on a pair of old shoes by the door and began to walk toward the truck. Whoever was in the automobile saw her coming. They gunned the engine, peeled out of her driveway, and took off down the road. *Maybe it's that creep who broke in here and tried to attack me? I'll tell the guys in the morning. No need to wake them now.*

Natalie watched the snow fall with the feeling of unease dissipating. It was close to Christmas. She had gotten so caught up in getting the house ready and shopping, she didn't realize it had snuck up on her.

In the past, Michael never made a big deal about Christmas, but she had always loved it, even as a child. Her mother adored the holidays, and her father had always made a point to decorate the house. Some of the old decorations were in the attic. Maybe she'd go get some down and decorate.

Inside, she shut and locked the door. Natalie headed up into the attic and turned the light on. It flickered a few times. Looking around the other piles of boxes, she heard the floorboards shifting. Not knowing who it was, she grabbed the first thing she could find. Spinning around, she went to face the intruder.

"Boo!"

Natalie jumped when Dustin appeared out of thin air. She nearly tripped over one of the boxes until her mate caught her. His strong arms wrapped around her waist and righted her. She nestled in his arms before pulling away. Then she hit him hard on the shoulder.

“You shouldn’t sneak up on people like that.”

“I only do it with you. I saw you had gotten up. Is everything okay? What are you doing up here?”

“Couldn’t sleep. I went downstairs and had a strange feeling. I checked out the backdoor and there was someone sitting in a truck, watching the house, but I couldn’t see who it was. Once they noticed I saw them, they peeled out and left.”

Dustin’s expression darkened. “I knew I should’ve been more diligent. I didn’t sense him.” He began to flicker.

“Whoa! Calm down. Please.”

He looked back at her and his expression softened. “I’m sorry. I just don’t want anything else to happen to you.”

Natalie kissed him lightly. “I know that and appreciate it. But you can’t be everywhere all the time. Besides, I needed you with me. Thank you. I know it’s not easy sharing me with Scott.”

He moved a strand of hair from her face. The soft caress made her sigh. “Scott’s not such a bad guy. Watching you with him made me want you even more. Ever since I met you and understood you’re my mate, my need for you has been insatiable. I want to make love to you all the time. I love the feel of your body. The softness of your hair. The tone of your voice when you call my name. It gets me hard thinking about it. I have to fight this lust that starts to consume me. I’ve never felt anything like it before. Seeing you with him, I realized he felt the same way I did. He worshipped you. As long as you’re in the mix with us, I’ll do anything to make you happy.”

Natalie ran her hands along his chest. His small nipples hardened under her palm. He moaned. “Anything?”

“Yes.”

She opened his shirt and flicked her tongue around one of his pert buds. Slowly, she licked a line down his stomach. Dustin drew in a long breath. Coming to the waistband of his jeans, she undid them and held his hard cock. He had talked about fighting his voracious urges. Only her mates didn't know that she was the one who was unquenchable.

Whenever they touched her, the yearning to have them enveloped her. To be in their arms was all she wanted. The lust they culled was unbelievable. Natalie couldn't think straight. All that mattered was sating the urge they had ignited inside.

She drew his dick between her lips. His spongy head bobbed against the roof of her mouth the more of him she took in. Her tongue traced the pulsating vein on the underside of his cock. His tangy taste filled her mouth and urged her on when he began thrusting his hips against her. She took him in until he hit the back of her throat. Her lips touched his pubic bone. Pulling away, Natalie scraped her teeth along his sensitive skin. Each small inch she moved, he groaned.

Natalie cupped his balls and rolled them in her hand. His fingers wound in her hair. He forced her to look at him. Their eyes met. Dustin's eyes had darkened and knew the wolf was close to the surface. Just the other night she had learned she was mated to two werewolves, and it had scared the shit out of her. Now it turned her on.

She wanted more of him. She wanted to hear him howl for her. Natalie sucked him in a little more, snaking her tongue around his shaft. Michael had never let her perform fellatio on him. That was one thing she loved about men was their cocks. How soft they were. How good they tasted when they came. The way they could grow hard and give women pleasure.

"Love. Ahhh. That's it." He plunged into her, and she increased her speed until he shot his seed into her. She swallowed him down and continued to lick him clean. When he was done, Natalie wiped her mouth and kissed him.

"Do you like it?"

“You don’t have to ask that. I love it. I want to fuck you again.”

She laughed. “Later.”

He frowned and then sighed. “Fine. Now what did you want me to do?”

“I didn’t just do that to get you to do something for me.”

He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her into him. She squealed. “Oh, I know that.” He released her and zipped up. Natalie tightened the belt on her robe.

The boxes were in the corner. “Can you help me carry those downstairs?”

Dustin went over to them. “Christmas decorations. Planning on getting the place done up?”

“Yeah. Figured it might be good. Maybe put up a tree. Who knows? Maybe even cook a dinner. I haven’t really had anything to celebrate for a long time. Now with you two in my life, I have a reason.” Picking up one of the boxes, Natalie went downstairs. She deposited it in the living room and opened the box. After a few moments, Dustin came down with the other two boxes.

He kissed her lightly. “Thanks. I should go and patrol the house. Just to be sure that no one else is around here watching you.”

“Okay. Thank you again for tonight.”

“Anything for you.” He brushed her lips and then slowly faded out.

Natalie smiled and began looking through the decorations. She slowly began to hum some of the old tunes her mother used to sing to her. All the while, she was thinking about what the coming holiday season would bring.

Chapter Eleven

It took Natalie a moment to open her eyes. A blanket covered her. The fire had died out sometime in the night, but the living room was decorated with some of the decorations she had brought down from the attic.

Natalie pulled her robe close to her and walked into the kitchen. Scott was in his boxers, standing before the oven using one of her frying pans. The aroma of eggs and sausage filled the room. She glanced at the table and saw it was set already with juice and milk sitting on the table.

“Good morning.”

He turned and smiled. “Morning. I was a little disappointed to find you on the couch this morning. Did I snore too much? Scarlett used to say I could wake the dead if I wanted.”

“No snoring. I couldn’t sleep so I decided to decorate the place for Christmas. Breakfast smells good. I’m surprised that you haven’t left yet. You know with your crew coming over later and all.”

A strained expression passed over his face. “Yeah, well. I figured after last night I don’t really care much who knows I’m dating you. The whole tribe will know if they don’t already, thanks to my sister.”

Natalie slipped her arm around his waist and kissed the side of his cheek. A flame of lust ignited inside of her from the small touch.

She buried her head in his shoulder and moaned. Her hands slipped over his shorts. His cock was already hard. It took everything in her to pull away and walk across the room. The separation clawed at her. Even only being a few feet away, her very being cried out to go back to him.

“How do you handle this?” she asked. “All I want to do is be around you. When I touch you, all I want to do is fuck you. What’s going on?”

Scott left the stove and took her in his arms. "Hush. It's okay. You're adjusting to what your body wants. You're listening to instinct which is one thing the wolf does. Our emotions are heightened, and you're starting to react to that even though you're not one of us yet. I know it's overwhelming, but you'll get used to it. I'm here, and so is Dustin. If you need us, we're not going anywhere. He told me about the truck last night, by the way. Do you know who it was?"

"No. I figured some yokel being nosey or that ass who tried to attack me the other night."

Scott gave her one final squeeze. "No one is going to hurt you. We'll figure it out and make sure you're safe."

He left her and went back to cooking breakfast. He set everything on plates and brought them to the table. Natalie's stomach growled. She dug in and savored the taste of the fluffy eggs. Scott ate slowly and when they were done, he even did the dishes.

"I should get showered and grab the clothes I have in the truck."

She smiled. "Feeling like you were going to get lucky last night?"

"Ha. I hoped, but no. I keep a spare set just in case I get caught away from the house during the full moon. Having no clothes with you after waking up naked in the center of town can really put a damper on your social life. Luckily, people chalked it up to me getting too drunk the night before. That was a long time ago."

Natalie chuckled. "Want some company?"

"You don't even have to ask that." He threaded his fingers through hers, and they went upstairs.

In the bathroom, Scott got the water running while she disrobed and looked at her scars in the mirror. As she traced them, she flashed back to Michael standing over her with the glass in his hand, threatening to kill her no matter what. She snapped out of it and stepped into the shower. Scott was soaping his stomach with a washcloth. The hot water hit her and trailed over her body. She

slipped her hands over his pelvic bone until she cupped his cock. It stirred in her hand. Scott groaned.

“God, Natalie. The stories don’t even come close to how you make me feel.”

She kissed his shoulder. “What do you mean?” She squeezed his dick and slid her hands along his sides until she pinched his nipples.

“Doesn’t matter now.” He turned and wiped the soap from his eyes. “All that matters is that I need you.”

His hand delved between her legs. She half expected him to start fondling her buried bud, but instead he slipped his fingers inside of her. Natalie moaned. His other hand found her breast. He kneaded it until her nipples hardened and throbbed with pleasure and pain. Her mate pumped in and out of her.

Scott watched her. She tried not to give in to the sensations coursing through her body, but soon she was panting. Natalie didn’t close her eyes; she was going to come any minute.

“Each time we’re together, this pleasure gets deeper and more consuming .Why?”

“The longer we’re together, the more our bond forms. Soon, one touch is all it will take and you’ll feel the ecstasy flow through you. I can already feel you’re there.”

He claimed her lips. Natalie enjoyed the sweet taste of him. Scott lifted her leg and wrapped it around his waist. With one quick lift, he plunged his cock into her and held her against the wall. She groaned when he took her nipple into his mouth and began to suck.

It was all that she could do to hold on to him and her reason. It was true. Each lovemaking session she had with one of her lovers, it was getting easier for her to lose herself and let the bliss of their union take her over. What would it be like with just a touch or two causing an orgasm every time? How intense would that make their sex lives?

He drove into her harder. When he did, he hit her clit with his cock at the right spot. Digging her nails into his back, she cried out.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed the side of his throat. The instinct to bite down on him and taste his blood ran through her, but she couldn't bring herself to bite him that hard. Natalie did sink her teeth into him.

"Harder."

Doing what he asked, she bit him harder, but not as hard as she could. Instead she gnawed at his throat. "Oh Scott. That's it."

At that moment, the wave of the orgasm swept her over and she gladly let it take her under. She closed her eyes and let him hold her. She could barely breathe. Everything about her shook. The intensity of the moment nearly short circuited her brain.

Her senses were starting to function. When she was able, she stood on her own. Scott gave her a beaming smile and kissed her before stepping under the shower. When he was done, she got under the hot spray and let the water wash over her. Everything that had occurred in past twenty-four hours ran through her mind. It tried to absorb all of the changes, and it was all sinking in.

Dressed for the day Natalie started looking around the house and thinking of what else to get. A tree was definitely in order. She'd love to decorate the exterior, but with all the work still going on around it, she didn't think that was a good idea. *What would Scott and Dustin like?*

Shaking her head, Natalie went downstairs to find Scott lacing up his work boots. She pulled out the check that she had written for him.

"I think I owe you this."

Scott took it and glanced over the amount. "I take it you want most of the repairs done."

"Yeah, for now. Also do you know where I can get a good Christmas tree? Any place local that sells them?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll get one for you. How big are you looking for?"

"Five or six feet. Something to fit in the living room by the fireplace."

"Okay."

"I don't even know if you celebrate Christmas or not. Do you have any plans?"

"Only seeing you and my sister. And yes, I celebrate it. It goes along with the Winter Solstice for me. The time when the day starts to take back the night."

Natalie stopped. "What did you say?"

"I celebrate both."

"No about the day taking back the night?"

"It's a time when the veil is thin between worlds. We give homage to our ancestors. I was hoping you wouldn't mind having the tribe come here and perform a few ceremonies. I haven't gotten a chance to ask you yet."

"No, it's fine if they come here. I figured I'd have to meet them eventually, dating you and all. When you took my hand at your house, that was what the spirit said. That is the night when I have to free Dustin."

"We're more than dating. We'll figure out how to get Dustin out of the spirit world. Us coming together now is a sign that things will be set right. I just know it. And the tribe is going to love you." He kissed her and ran his tongue over her lips. Natalie sighed when he pulled away. "I have to get to work. Go out and enjoy the day. By the time you get home, you'll have a tree all set up."

"Thank you."

Scott got his things and left the kitchen. Sitting at the table, she wrote out a list of what she wanted to buy and what she was going to do. Today was a beautiful day to go shopping. Natalie was feeling good about herself, and she had two men who loved her and looked out for her.

After driving to the mall and looking around, Natalie lost herself in shopping. It was mind numbing, and it felt good to be among people again. It made her want to get back into the workforce. But with the changes she'd been experiencing, she wasn't sure if she should wait or not. Her nest egg would last a little while.

While she perused the window displays all done up for Christmas, a man resembling Michael was reflected in one of the windows. When she looked back, he was gone. *I'm just imagining it. My brain just can't get him completely out of my life. I have to get over it. He's not coming back. The judge said he was going away for ten to fifteen years for what he did to me. By that time, he won't even know where to find me.*

When she got home, the men were just about finishing up for the day. It had begun to snow again. Scott's truck wasn't in the yard. The crewmen waved to her while she got up and began carrying her packages into the house. Going inside, she was immediately hit with the smell of pine.

In her living room, was a freshly cut tree already rigged up in a stand. She ran her hands over the needles and smiled. He had kept his promise to her.

After getting the rest of her packages from the car, she took everything out and began to decorate the tree. While she did, Jeannie's laughter filled the house. Dustin was around, but not showing himself.

The rest of the night, she spent working on the tree. While she did, the ghost under her stairs made it known he wasn't too happy about her having a good time. Large thumps came from his hiding place. Natalie ignored them, knowing that her cowboy would keep the spirit in line.

Chapter Twelve

Over the next couple of weeks, the repairs on the house were completed. Natalie and her men fell into a routine of seeing one another. Sometimes she went to Scott's house and spent the night or other times Dustin stayed with her. When she needed to be alone, they left her be.

If she needed anything, they were there for her. Ever since that night, she hadn't seen any more trucks in the driveway and she hadn't seen anyone else following her.

Scott took her out to the restaurants in town, and Scarlett told her that everyone was talking about the new couple. Natalie enjoyed spending time with Scott's sister and was learning more about the Cherokee tribe they were a part of. What would her life be like if she became a wolf? She hadn't gotten the courage up to ask his sister or him, but the more she mulled it over, the more she realized it didn't scare her so much anymore.

That night she had invited her mates, Scarlett, and a few members of the Native American tribe to her home for Christmas dinner to introduce herself and give them a definitive answer that they could come onto the land whenever they wanted. The snow starting falling again. The weatherman had predicted that it wouldn't stop snowing for two days.

Heading outside, she needed to restock on some firewood just in case she lost power. The one good thing about the large hearth was that she had gotten some cast iron pots to cook with in case the power went out. Once she got to the stock of wood, she saw footprints in the snow. They were all around the house and leading toward the edge of the driveway. *Must be Dustin or Scott keeping watch on the place.* Not giving it another thought, she went back inside and set the wood by the fireplace. More banging came from under the stairs.

When she went to investigate, she found the door open. A slice of dread went through her. If it was open, then Dustin's father

might be out and about. She went to close the door, but it wouldn't budge. A cold draft of air blew in the face, so she stumbled backward. Her back hit something solid. At first, she thought it was Dustin, but when a hand came around her mouth, cold terror washed over her.

"Hush now! Don't want to alert one of your beaus."

The voice sounded similar to her ex-husband's, but there was a different lilt to it that wasn't his. She stomped her foot down as hard as she could on her assailant. He yowled in pain. Once she elbowed him in the stomach that got him to release her. Natalie bolted down the hall and into the kitchen. Her keys were still in her pocket. She struggled with the door, but it wasn't opening.

"Dustin!" she screamed.

"You're little lover boy isn't in the house. He can't come and get you."

Natalie spun around. Michael stood before her. He was six three muscular frame blocked her way. Blue, piercing eyes bored into her soul. The hatred in them was his, but the smirk and the darkness hovering around him wasn't. Her ex husband had been a disturbed soul, but something else was attached to him. Natalie could see its dark aura surrounding him.

"Michael, I know that's not you."

He wagged his finger at her. "Think again, Natalie. Do you know how long it took me to find you after I broke out? Smart move changing your name. But I knew eventually, I'd figure out where you were. Then I saw you with those two men. You just confirmed everything I ever thought about you. You're a whore."

She gritted her teeth. "You don't know anything."

His smile spread wider than humanly possible, curling into his cheeks. The darkness around him grew and stepped away from him. It took on the form of a man. The evil radiating from the being overwhelmed and choked her. This was Dustin's father.

"What do you want?" she whispered.

A low chuckle sounded in the kitchen. "Why, you, of course. You're ex-husband here provided the perfect vessel to free me. He's

been hiding under the stairs for a couple of days now. Snuck in while your cowboy was fucking you. We bonded over that time. We're in agreement on the things we want to do to you."

Her gaze flicked to Michael. He nodded. He enjoyed watching her suffering. "You have it coming to you. Once we're done with you, we're going to move on to bigger and better things."

"Michael, no. He's a dark spirit who's manipulating you. If you ever loved me, let me go."

"But I never loved you, Nat. You were just arm candy and barely worth fucking. You deserve what's coming to you."

The dark spirit came at her. The evil descended. The air was pulled from her lungs. Coldness wrapped around her flesh, causing goose bumps to rise on her skin.

Natalie tried to move, but was transfixed to her spot. The world around her had stopped moving. The entity reached out for her. The ghost's fingers slithered around her skin and wrapped her in his grasp. A strangled gasp left her lips. Her vision began to blur. Her hands went to her throat while she tried to pry off the ghost's hands. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jeannie peeking around the door. She tried to tell her to find her brother, but wasn't able to.

Michael's laughter filled her ears. All of her worst fears were coming true. He had threatened to come back for her and now he had. The darkness wrapped her fully in its grip, bathing her in its presence. Natalie fought against the dark spirit, but his influence was like nothing she had encountered before. Without being able to stop, she followed the darkness down and lost consciousness.

The next time Natalie opened her eyes, she discovered she was tied to her bed, naked and spread eagle. She glanced around and didn't see Michael or the dark spirit. The stuffed animals moved in the corner. *Jeannie*.

"Sweetie, I know you're there. You gotta find your brother."

Michael came into the room. The toys stopped moving. The sinister spirit wasn't around. "Talking to thin air is never a good sign. Has all this time by yourself gotten to you? If anyone wonders

where you are after tonight, I'll just tell them you'd started talking to yourself. No one is going to believe your stories about ghosts."

"Michael, untie me."

He ran a finger along her inner thigh. Cringing, she wasn't going to show him any more fear. Natalie had spent years doing that. For so long, she had lived under his shadow even if she had provoked some of their arguments.

It was all too late. The damage had been done. He had shoved her down the stairs. She had nearly died. When she had woken up in the hospital, there was a cop waiting to take her statement. Natalie had given it willingly. He had threatened her at the hearing. She never thought it would come down to him breaking out of jail and coming after her.

Glancing around the house, she noticed it was night.

Michael's leering grin was the same one he had right before he pushed her through the glass window. That smirk told her he was going to do horrible things to her. She tugged against the rope as his fingers walked across her stomach and slid over her breasts. His touch disgusted her and turned her stomach. "How could you let that ghost possess you?"

He shrugged. "It was quite easy. We have a lot in common. I think we can work well together. It was very simple to break in here and hide out. I had to listen to you fucking one of your men. He warned me about the spirit in this place. The one you've attached yourself to. I guess that makes you a whore for the living and the dead. What's it like having his cold prick inside of you? Does it make you feel all tingly? Does it get you hot? How does that work?"

Natalie gritted her teeth.

A car door slammed outside. The crunch of snow under heavy boots sounded outside. *Scott*. He was supposed to come and take her out tonight with his sister. Michael looked between her and the window. He hugged the wall and looked through the glass.

A knock sounded downstairs. Natalie's looked longingly in that direction. Her ex-husband walked across the room.

“If you say one word, I’ll slit your throat.” He withdrew a knife from the back of his pants and held it up to the light. She winced, but it only bolstered her courage. No one was going to get hurt on her account.

Downstairs the door opened. She’d given Scott a key in case something happened. “Natalie, you here?”

Michael looked between her and the door. He held the knife up higher and made a slicing motion across his throat.

She took in a breath. “Scott! Help! I’m upstairs. He has a knife. Be care—” Michael covered her mouth and nose with his hand, suffocating her. Footsteps pounded up the stairs. He pressed his hand over her harder. Her attention flicked to the doorway. Scott was barely visible in her periphery vision. Her head was starting to spin. She struggled to take in air.

“One more step and your bitch here won’t be taking another breath.”

“Whoever you are, let her go. I’m sure we can come to a reasonable solution here.”

Michael laughed, but he didn’t remove his hand. He pressed it down harder. “Reasonable? I guess the little bitch never told you about us. I’m her husband.”

Natalie struggled to say something, but she was losing consciousness fast. Michael pushed the knife against her throat and pressed down. The sharp sting of pain sliced her flesh. He laughed. Scott said something. She saw a blur of movement, but after that, she was able to breathe. Snarling erupted around her. Michael laughed. She tried to see what was going on but her vision was growing dark. Her body was getting cold. And then everything was light. She found herself outside of her body watching Michael and Scott tussling in the corner. Her ex-husband had the knife and was slashing at a wolf.

Natalie was in awe at the magnificent wolf that stood there defending her. He was all muscle, silver and black in the moonlight his hackles were raised and he snapped at Michael. Natalie wanted

to stay and watch, but she felt someone tugging on her hand. She glanced down and saw Jeannie. The little girl felt real.

"I found Dustin. Come on."

Natalie looked back at the two fighting and realized that her body was on the bed. She was either dead or in the spirit world. Jeannie yanked again. She was dressed in a white gown. Following Jeannie down the stairs, Natalie saw Dustin pinned against the wall by his father. In this realm, the dark spirit was six feet tall, had a scruffy gray beard, and wild looking brown eyes. He was muscular with the beginnings of a belly.

Natalie went to rush at him, but Jeannie grabbed her hand. "You can't. He'll hurt you."

"I can't let your dad hurt Dustin. I have to do something."

"You think you can win, son. After all this time, you've had me locked away. I've grown powerful."

"You'll never win. I'll make sure you rot in hell before you hurt Natalie. I won't let you kill anyone else." He shoved his father into the windows. Glass broke. Jeannie pulled her away.

"I know someone that can help."

Natalie glanced at the two of them fighting. She desperately wanted to assist them, but if she was dying then how long could she have? The little girl ran through the living room wall.

Here goes nothing. She closed her eyes and ran after her, feeling a small resistance of the wood when she passed through it.

The sensation was strange, but not uncomfortable. Once they were outside, Natalie saw dozens of other spirits gathering around the house. Some were deceased Native Americans. Others were those who had died on the land and remained because of the curse. Further back on the property she saw the outline of a barn and heard the horses neighing.

Jeannie pulled on her again. They wove through the people until she came to the same spot where she had run into the wise woman before. Only this time she was solid.

"You have come for our help."

"Yes. I can't let anything happen to them."

The ancient woman handed her a dagger. There was writing etched into the handle she couldn't read. "Plunge this into the dark one's heart. Once he is gone, part of the curse on this land will be lifted. Those who wish to pass over will be able to. Some may choose to stay."

"What about Dustin? He's not really dead. He's stuck. Scott told me I was the only one who could pull him out of the spirit world. How do I do that?"

The woman gave her a sly smile. "That is part of your destiny. Once you pull him from his world, he will resume his life. Now go." The woman disappeared. Natalie spun around, looking for her, but she was gone.

What does that mean? She clasped the dagger in her fist. Nothing mattered at that moment more than making sure Dustin and Scott were safe.

She rushed back toward the house. Jeannie was right beside her. Natalie walked through the wall and found that her cowboy had his father restrained against the door underneath the stairs. A woman screamed. Jeannie rushed over to the woman in the kitchen. Natalie glanced between the woman and the girl and realized this was Jeannie's mother.

"Dustin."

He glanced over. His father took advantage of his distraction, swung his fist, and caught him on the underside of his jaw. Her mate staggered backward and hit the wall. He slid down and slumped to the floor, stunned. The dark spirit turned his sights on her and smiled.

"Thank you for that. Now it's your turn. I'll throw you in that pit and you can be stuck there forever." He lunged at Natalie.

She jumped back and held onto the dagger for dear life. He chased after her, but she ducked back into the kitchen. The dark spirit blocked her path. She dashed around the kitchen and then went back into the living room. Natalie glanced around for him, but she didn't see the dark spirit. Jeannie and her mother weren't there either.

Upstairs, there were more sounds coming from her bedroom. A cold draft whizzed by her. She spun around. Nothing was there. Laughter echoed in the room. He was toying with her.

“Come out, you bastard, and face me like a man. Stop hiding in the shadows like a coward. I bet that’s what you are. You had to kill your wife and your family to show that you were such a powerful man. Look where it got you. Stuck in this house for almost two hundred years. What kind of a man is that?”

“Shut up!” The yell blasted by her ear.

Natalie laughed. “I’m not afraid of you.”

“You should be.”

A bolt of pain went across her face, and her head was turned to the side from the force of the punch he’d dealt her. He pushed the weight of his body into hers and clasped her wrist. His painful grip twisted her wrist. He crunched the bones together in her wrist.

With a yelp, she dropped the knife onto the floor.

“Afraid of me now?”

Natalie tried to answer him, but he had her around the throat. His hard cock pressed against her thigh. She tried to kick him and aimed for his groin, but he pinned her with his body weight. “You’re still an asshole.”

“Maybe, but when you’re completely dead, you’ll be mine to play with. That will be fun. I’ll lock Dustin in the dark and torment you every day.”

“I don’t think that’s going to be happening.”

Behind them, Dustin had the dagger. He raised it over his head and plunged it into his father’s back. The dark spirit went rigid for a moment and then struggled to pull the blade out. Dustin’s father released Natalie.

She drew in a large breath. His father floundered around for a few moments and then he fell to the floor, motionless. Natalie rushed into Dustin’s arms. He embraced her tightly.

Natalie kissed him, glad her cowboy had come through and saved her. The sounds had stopped upstairs, so she assumed Scott

had taken care of Michael. She didn't think Michael was dead since she hadn't seen him in the house.

"You shouldn't be here."

Natalie snuggled into him closer. "I don't think I have a choice." Her hand passed through his face. Panic seized her. She glanced at her hands. They were transparent. She tried to focus back on her body, but wasn't able to feel it. "What's going on?"

Dustin eyes were full of sadness. "You're dying."

Upstairs she found Scott pressing something to her neck, but it was already soaked with blood. He had untied her and tied up her ex-husband in the corner. Tears streaked down his face. Scott looked up when she got closer to the bed. He could see her.

"You can't leave me."

"I don't want to go." Natalie reached out to him but wasn't able to touch him. The edges of the room were starting to blur and grow white. She tried desperately to stay focused on them.

"I've tried. But you've lost too much blood."

"You can bite her." Dustin said next to her.

"It might be too late. I don't know if it'll work."

"It will turn me into a wolf, won't it?" she asked.

"Yes."

I can't be a wolf. But if they don't then I'll die. I don't have a choice. I can't leave them. They said one bite or scratch would turn me. It's my only chance. "Why don't the both of you bite me? You're both my mates. It only seems fair."

"It might make the transformation go wrong. I won't risk it," Scott explained.

"We don't have time to argue. This is what I want. Please."

Dustin nodded. He left her side. Scott looked up at her. His eyes were amber. Dustin knelt next to the bed. A tugging on her soul for her to leave them started inside of her, but she held on with everything she had.

They kissed her cheeks. Scott lifted her left hand and brought it to his lips. When he bit down, her body twitched. She felt a burning pain shoot up her arm. Dustin pressed his lips to her right shoulder

and bit down. Another searing jolt speared her body. The room went white, and it blurred completely around the edges. Natalie reached out to her mates, but they vanished before her eyes.

Chapter Thirteen

It was the thumping that Natalie heard first. She thought it was the drums of the spirits on her land, leading her into the next world. However, the longer she listened, the more she came to realize that the drums were real. They had a deep echo that resounded in her soul. The thunder of the drums was followed by singing and chanting. Each note drew her closer until she opened her eyes.

When she did, Scarlett was there pressing something against her forehead. The smell of mint and lavender along with sage invaded her nose. The air was heavy with the perfume. Natalie tried to move, but everything hurt.

“You should remain still.”

“What day is it? What happened? Where are Scott and Dustin?”

“Hush. It’s Christmas Eve. The tribe has gathered to remember their ancestors and guide you back from the world of the spirits. Scott thought it might help bring you back. The Elders are downstairs. I hope you don’t mind. I think they’ve invaded your kitchen. My mother loves your fireplace. She’s been cooking for two days now.”

Natalie laughed some, but it ached. Her throat hurt where Michael had sliced her neck and the wounds on her shoulder and hand throbbed where her mates had bitten her. “That’s fine. Tell them I said thank you.”

Scarlett pressed the cloth to her head and then laid her palm on her cheek. “You’ve come out of the transformation fever remarkably well. Your wounds are almost healed. By tomorrow, I figure you’ll barely have scars. The full moon is in a week, so I’ll let them show you what to do when that comes.”

“I’m a werewolf now?”

Scarlett nodded. "Yeah. We just don't know which one you'll take after because they bit you at the same time. Smart move. I think that's what saved you."

Natalie heard the floorboards creaking and glanced at the door. Both men stood there waiting for the okay to come in. A smile turned up on her lips. They both grinned and rushed over, each taking a side of the bed. They started to speak, but Scarlett spoke first.

"Gently, guys. She isn't completely healed yet. You only have a few minutes then I'm going to kick you out. Understand?"

"Come on, Sis. We need time to be alone."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. Come get me when you're done. But nothing kinky. She still needs to rest."

"Thank you," Dustin replied.

Scarlett left the room and closed the door. Natalie needed to be with them. The overwhelming urge to be in their arms was stronger than it had been a few days ago. They picked her up together in their arms and hugged her.

Natalie snuggled into their combined embrace and felt at home. Their scent filled her nose. It also triggered the need to make love to both of them. The longer she was in Dustin's arms, the more she realized he was warmer than he had been before.

"You're warm." She pulled away. "Does that mean...?"

He nodded. "I'm no longer caught in between."

"How? What happened?"

"After he bit you, you opened your eyes and grabbed me. A larger presence filled the room. It was like a cleansing breath blew through the whole house. My mother was gone. My father was gone, but it didn't blow me away with it. Instead, I was able to cross back over. You kept me here. Thank you."

He brushed his lips across hers. He began to pull away, but she wrapped him in her arms to feel his solid form. She deepened the kiss, wanting so much more, but pulled away after she was out of breath. Her shoulder hurt.

Scott guided her down on the bed and sat on the chair Scarlett had occupied. He kissed her forehead and then her lips, sweeping his tongue across her mouth. The need to taste more of him threatened to overtake her, but everything started to go a little fuzzy around the edges.

“What happened to Michael?” she asked.

“Called the sheriff who is a friend of mine. Belongs to the tribe so we left out certain details about you being nearly dead and Michael covered in blood. He was arrested for breaking and entering while you weren’t home. He’s being shipped back to prison. You don’t have to worry about him again.”

“Thank you both for saving me.”

“You’re welcome,” they said in unison.

Natalie tried to keep her eyes open, but it was impossible. She was warm and felt the bites starting to tingle. Without fighting it, she slipped into a blissful sleep.

When she woke up again, the house was silent. The place still smelled of sage, but it wasn’t as strong. Her stomach rumbled. After getting up slowly, she headed into the bathroom. Once she was done, she wanted to examine her wounds.

Carefully pulling back the bandage on her throat, she traced the pink scar with her finger, but it looked like it was already months healed and not just a few days old. Her old scars remained. She took off the bandages from her mates’ bites and underneath them was smooth skin. There was no sign they had ever bitten her.

Deciding to shower, she got under the hot water and let it massage her muscles. The way the water felt on her skin was different than before. It sunk into her pores and warmed her from the inside out. She could even smell the chemicals in the water. Come to think of it, she could taste the dust on her tongue and the minerals that were in the droplets.

Once she was done, she dried off. Her normally soft towels felt scratchy now. She inhaled and smelled food cooking downstairs.

Listening, she could hear the sizzle of meat hitting a pan. She got dressed and before she left her room, she heard Jeannie giggle. The little girl appeared before her and waved. Natalie waved back.

When she walked into the kitchen, Dustin was standing at the stove cooking. Warmth shot through her at seeing him there in his plaid shirt and jeans. He didn't have his cowboy hat, but he was in his boots. She snuck up behind him and ran her hands down his thighs. Natalie pressed her breasts against his back.

"Howdy, cowboy." She licked his ear.

A contented growl came from his throat. He spun around and had her pinned to the wall before she could blink. His mouth pressed against hers, kissing her fully. His hands clutched at her breast with a frenzy she hadn't sensed in him before.

She began to pant from the sudden lust he had ignited in her. He licked and nipped her throat on the unscarred side and claimed her lips. Natalie began to lose it. She moaned and pushed against him. His cock was starting to harden. Raking her fingers down his back caused Dustin to hiss in a breath.

"That's enough, you two. Presents first. Sex later." The blast of cold air from the door closing snapped her out of her passionate haze. Dustin backed away trying to catch his breath. Scott came in carrying a bundle of wood and placed it by the fire. His hair and shoulders were dusted with snow.

"It's Christmas?" she asked.

"Yeah. We were hoping you'd wake up." He set the wood down in the living room and came back into the kitchen. "How are you feeling?" He pulled her to him. Her lust was set ablaze again. But she was also comforted by his arms.

"Fine. Wonderful actually. Still kinda sleepy. What happened to everyone who was here yesterday?"

"Once we knew you were past the rough spots, they finished their ritual and went home. Your fridge is stocked with plenty of casseroles, and the tree is filled with presents from the tribe."

"They didn't have to do that."

"I think they wanted to say welcome or thank you for letting them back on the land."

"Well, they're welcome anytime." She wrapped her arms around his neck and formed her body to his. Natalie noticed his scent was stronger now. He pulled in a labored breath when her nose traveled along his neck. She licked his flesh and enjoyed the taste of his skin. "Hmmm. You both taste so good."

He stepped back. His eyes had turned amber. "I promise I'll make love to you after. But first, I wanted you to open your presents from us."

Her eyes widened, and his comment helped bring her back into reality. "You guys got me presents? You didn't have to do that."

Dustin knitted his fingers with hers and led her into the living room. The room had been transformed. The tree was adorned with ornaments. The rest of her decorations were up. The old star was up on the tree, and underneath the tree overflowed with packages.

Before she sat down, Natalie dug into the back corner to find the two things she had gotten for them. She handed them their gifts and then sat down between them. Scott opened his first. It was a painting of a wolf playing in the snow, painted on a slab of wood.

"I hope you like it."

He kissed her. "I love it."

Dustin opened his next. Inside was a figurine of a cowboy riding a bucking bronco. "I saw it and thought of you. The whole cowboy thing, you know."

He kissed her, too, and slipped her a little tongue. "It's perfect. Now open ours."

Natalie opened the present in her lap. Inside the box was also a figurine. When she pulled it out she saw that it was three wolves all standing together and howling. It reminded her of her dream. Tears came to her eyes.

"You like it?" Scott asked.

She nodded. "It's beautiful. It's all of us together."

"That's what I thought, too."

She hugged the both of them and then set the statue on the mantle. Her fingers ran over the backs of the three wolves.

Her mates looked at her expectantly. Both of them had saved her from death and from the evil monsters that had haunted her. Together they were a miracle.

Everything was right with the world. Natalie no longer needed to fear her past. Dustin had driven the ghosts away, and Scott had taken on her ex. They could do anything, and she looked forward to seeing what being a werewolf would be like and enjoying the many nights in the coming winter with the two men she loved.

The End

About the Author

Crymsyn Hart is a bestselling author of Erotic Romance. Her worlds are filled with luscious vampires, gorgeous gods, quirky witches, and everything else that goes bump in the night. Crymsyn worked as a psychic for many years in Boston while attending Emerson College. She graduated with a BFA in Writing, Literature, & Publishing. When she gets bored, she sneaks away to local cemeteries and coffee shops to find peace and quiet. Crymsyn shares her life with a small zoo, two playful puppies and her hubby Mark. If you come after dark, you're more than likely to find her snuggled up with a gory horror movie, or a bloody vampire movie. Crymsyn has a collection of Living Dead Dolls and five bookshelves overflowing with books. Of course there's always room for more.

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