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SHADOWS OF
EVIL

Cheryel Hutton

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Cheryel Hutton

Dedication

To my grandmother, who taught me the love of books and storytelling. I wish you were here to enjoy this wild ride with me. I love you, Nannie, and I miss you every single day.

I'd like to thank my husband and daughters for putting up with me, and my friends who helped me stay reasonably sane. And a special thank you to my editor who pointed out my goofy mistakes and helped me make this book the best it could be. You're a gem, Eve.

Prologue

April 1, 1872

Mary Strode gazed into her lover's eyes and knew that she should feel guilty. She was betraying her husband, right here in their marriage bed, but all she could think of was what a horrible mistake she'd made by marrying the harsh, violent man she shared an existence with.

Unlike her husband, George was sweet, loving, and kind. As he pulled her into his arms, she realized that being forced to live with a man like Zechariah Strode just wasn't right, no matter what anybody said.

George gently kissed her, and her thoughts returned to the man beside her. His green eyes sparkled in the radiance of the sun that was slowly sinking behind the mountain. His lips were full, his teeth white and straight. His smile captured her imagination, as she dreamed of better things and a life she knew she would never have.

"I love you," she whispered, then watched as George smiled softly. His eyes told her his happiness was tinged with worry.

"This isn't right," he said. "He has to let you go, so we can be together the way God intended."

Agony filled her heart as tears filled her eyes. "He'll never let me go."

George's hand traced the scar down the side of her face, the one she'd earned for not having supper on the table at the proper time. "We could run away. Go out west somewhere, where nobody knows us. We could find a preacher to marry us up proper. Then you'd be my wife and not *his*." The bitterness in the last word tore at her heart.

Sadness pulled her into its pit at the idea. "Your farm's here, your mother, your brother and sisters, your life."

"To hell with it all," he told her. "I want you to wake up beside me every morning." His hand encircled hers. "I want you to be safe."

Oh, if it could only be so.

“We could leave right now.”

She felt her eyes widen, as hope filled the long-empty place in her soul. “Now?”

He nodded. “You said he wouldn’t be back for another week. It’s the perfect time.”

“But there’s so much to think about...”

He held her chin in his hand carefully, as if she were delicate porcelain. “There’s nothing to think about. Just get packed.”

Trembling with the thought of freedom, Mary moved off the bed and began to slide her clothes on. Her mind raced with thoughts of what she should pack. What did you take when you left your whole life behind?

As if he were reading her thoughts, George said, “Just pack the things you don’t want to leave behind. I’ll make sure you have everything you need.”

She smiled at the man now pulling his pants on. So different he was from the bully she was wed to. Tears filled her eyes. How her life was going to change! Again she thought about how she should feel guilty, but she figured the hell she had lived in for the last year couldn’t be worse than what the Devil had in store for those who broke their wedding vows.

She was buttoning her dress when she heard an explosion at her right ear. Deafened for a moment, she shook her head to clear the shock and the headache the blast had left behind.

Then she saw the man she loved sprawled across the bed, dark blood spreading across his left shoulder. “George.” She started to rush to him, only to be stopped by a huge, rough hand on her arm.

“He ain’t dead,” the voice said. “That’d be too easy for the snake.”

Horror tore at her like she’d never believed possible. What was he doing home? She had just received the letter saying he would be gone for another week. “Please,” she whispered.

“Please what?” the voice said. “Please don’t kill your little playmate? Please don’t hurt my lying, cheating, bitch of a wife?” He jerked her around to face him. “What is it, Mary? What do you want your *husband* to please not do?”

“My fault.” George’s voice was weak. “I forced her.”

“No!” she screamed, looking over her shoulder to see him trying to stand. “I seduced him. I’m evil, like Eve. Don’t hurt him.” She tried to pull loose from Zechariah, ignoring the pain the struggle was provoking where he held her arms.

The laugh reminded her of the rumble of a gathering storm, and it sent bolts of fear down her spine. “Well, ain’t that sweet? The two adulterers begging for each other’s lives.”

He jerked Mary around and shoved her into a chair near the bed. She tried to stand up again, but was yanked back with a force that hurt her spine. Using quick, harsh movements, he bound her hands tightly behind her back.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that George had managed to get to his feet, though blood ran freely and his face was the color of wallpaper paste. She fought against the ropes, but they held her too tightly. Sweat gathered on her forehead, ran down her back. Tears formed in her eyes, but she refused to allow them to fall.

With one last pull at Mary’s restraints, their tormentor moved toward his other victim. He jerked George back onto the bed and tied his hands with another section of rope. George tried to struggle, but she could see he was becoming weaker all the time from the gaping wound. Then Zechariah went out of the room, leaving the couple to stare at each other.

“I’m so sorry,” she told him, as tears slid down her cheeks.

“I’m not,” he said.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.” It was louder than she thought he could have spoken, and the determination in his eyes stoked her own. She jerked and pulled against her restraints, ignoring the searing pain where they dug into her skin and the deep pain in her shoulder—she was pretty sure it was out of place. None of that mattered; she had to get loose and get George to a doctor. No matter what the consequences to her, she had to help him. She was the one who’d broken her vows, not the sweet man bleeding onto the sheets of the bed they’d so recently shared.

Then their tormentor was back, wearing a long black robe. Mary stared at the man she had lived with for three years but had never really known. What was this he was doing? What kind of monster had she stood before a preacher and vowed to honor and obey?

Zechariah lit black candles and began to smear what looked like blood on his forehead and on the floor. The gory stuff formed some symbol, something strange and ugly. As he began to chant words she didn't understand, the fear she had felt until now multiplied like the dust that gathered on everything she owned in spite of all her attempts to clean. Renewing the struggle with the ropes, she saw George doing the same. He looked so weak. *Please, God*, she silently prayed, *don't make me have to watch him die.*

Zechariah continued to chant, while Mary fought to hold back fresh tears. Slowly she realized that George, still struggling, was reciting the twenty-third psalm. She took a deep breath and then joined her voice to his, as she too fought against the restraints.

"Your god can't help you," the man she had married said, as he moved toward her. There was a knife in his hand, and she closed her eyes. But he only cut a stripe down her face. It stung like fire where it split her flesh, but she was still alive when he stepped away.

Then he turned to George, and her heart stopped for an agonizing moment. George pulled hard against the restraints as he fought to get away, but their tormentor had no trouble restraining him enough to make some strange mark on his forehead with the gory stuff he'd used earlier.

The tormentor stepped onto the middle of the symbol he had made in the center of the floor. He chanted more of those words she couldn't understand. Then he stopped, looked at George and moved his lips in a grotesque imitation of a smile. "You will be cursed—you and all your sons and your son's sons. You will hate the moon and all it brings for all time to come."

He raised the knife into the air. "I call on the one who rules the night. May he exact revenge on those who have betrayed me."

Wind blew through the house, shaking, howling, pulling at everything in its path.

Mary put her head down and closed her eyes against the maelstrom. Then, even over the wind, she heard an agonized cry.

Forcing her eyes open, she looked in the direction from which it had come. George was writhing on the bed. She froze in horror as his skin seemed to come to life. It moved. It shifted. He cried out again as he broke free of his restraints.

She was glad for a second—until she saw him collapse onto the floor. There his skin continued its hideous dance. Then, as she watched, his entire body began to re-form. Hair

sprouted from him faster than weeds in wet weather. Hands and feet became paw-like. Arms and legs grew longer and thinner. Even his head started to lengthen and narrow. Tears ran down her face as she watched her soulmate transform into a beast before her very eyes.

Then the beast turned his eyes on her. They were still green, but now they held none of the gentleness she had known from them. Only instinct remained.

And hunger was the strongest instinct of all.

She watched as the creature moved toward her, fangs long and dripping with saliva. It stopped to sniff the air and then moved closer. Now she understood; the blood dripping down her face called to it.

In the midst of the terror, she felt a calmness fill her. At least the end of her life wouldn't be at the hands of the ugly monster she had been so naïve as to marry. She would die in the grasp of the man she should have married.

The beast reached her, and she looked into eyes that were not quite animal, but not human either. "I love you," she said, just before agony ripped through her. She was smiling through her tears, as she felt her arm being torn off. Then blessed quiet overtook her, before she went willingly into the light that waited.

Chapter One

Present day

“Some wild animal is going to eat you alive.”

Kia Wolfe smiled fondly at the voice coming through the cell phone as she slowed her Jeep to make the turn into the long, tree-lined driveway of her new home.

Hers. The thought made her heart kick into a higher gear. Then the house came into view, and she gasped. “Oh my God.”

“What? Did something happen? Are you all right? It *is* a wild animal, isn’t it? Answer me, Kia!”

“It’s beautiful, Sydney. It’s more than I ever hoped it could be. I’ll talk to you later.” Kia clicked off the phone over her sister’s protests and slid out of the car to simply stand and stare.

“This place is fantastic,” she breathed, as tingles moved through her. Her very own home, the house that she had dreamed about for so many years. It was impossible to believe she was really standing there, admiring a literal dream come true. “What do you think, Dracula?”

Woof.

She smiled at the huge black lab. “Yeah, me too.”

Her gaze moved back to the white two-story structure rising regally in front of her. Built just after the Civil War, the house seemed to embody the pride of a South struggling to regain its place in the world. It was unusual for something this big and expensive to have been built so soon after the devastation, but the Strodes had managed it somehow. Her heart warmed as she stood admiring her very own piece of history. One deep breath of fresh country air, and she headed toward the house. *Her* house. A smile pulled at her lips. For the first time in her life, she truly felt at home.

For a moment, she caught a glimpse of what looked like a face in one of the second-floor windows. Then it was gone.

“Trick of light,” she said, and laughed at herself. All at once she realized that she heard no human sound, saw no human handiwork other than her own house and car. She was alone on the top of a sparsely populated mountain, five miles of very curvy road between her and the foot of the mountain, where the nearest town was located. Isolated. For one breathtaking moment, she wondered if she’d just made the biggest mistake of her life.

The phone in her hand rang and she jumped, provoking a bark from Dracula. Laughing at herself, she clicked the cell back on. “I’m fine, Sydney.”

“Are you sure?” her sister’s voice asked.

Kia looked once more at the gorgeous house in front of her and smiled. “Quite sure. Now I have to go and start moving into my new home.”

She clicked off the phone and marched across the lawn.

The only other time Kia had laid eyes on her new property, it had been in a serious state of disrepair. This had, in large part, been remedied. The exterior was a shiny white, courtesy of a fresh paint job. The formerly rickety porch had been fixed. The windows were new, as was the front door. She took a moment to run a hand over the fresh wood before she stuck the brand new key in the lock and opened the door. *Home*. The feeling sparked comfortable warmth inside her.

The foyer smelled of new wood. Kia took a moment to inhale the fresh, clean scent before she went over to gaze up the staircase—and forgot to breathe.

Made of polished oak, the work of art wound around the foyer to lead majestically to the second-story landing. Its beauty had been evident when she’d first seen the house. Now, with steps and banister repaired, it was as awe-inspiring as she had imagined it would be.

As crazy as it seemed, she knew this was where she was meant to be. From the moment she’d seen the tiny picture on her computer and realized it was the place she’d had recurring dreams about for years, she’d become all but obsessed by this gorgeous old house located miles from civilization, high on a mountaintop in Tennessee.

She smiled as the pride of ownership filled her, letting it sink into her bones. This was right, no matter what her friends and family thought.

As certainty filled her, she turned into the formal living room on the right. The moving company, following her instructions, had dumped her belongings into this huge room. It was

daunting to have all her worldly goods stacked, warehouse fashion, in one place. “Dang,” she whispered, “it’s gonna take me forever to unpack.”

Shaking off the specter of physical labor, she crossed the foyer again to the smaller room on the left. It had begun its life as a parlor, but it would now be her bedroom. Tucked under the stairs was a small bathroom, built in the fifties and now remodeled twice. The brightly colored kitchen was in the back, and behind it, a formal dining room with French doors opening onto a garden. Again, pride rose inside her. This house was regal.

She opened the doors long enough to drink in another long breath of fresh air—and realized once again just how isolated her new house was. Her address was Mountain Shadows, but the truth of the matter was that Mountain Shadows was actually a small town at the foot of the mountain. A touch of unease tingled up her spine, but she refused to acknowledge the feeling. Instead she focused on the odd familiarity of the yard, of the entire place. Like *déjà vu* on steroids, she almost felt she’d been there before. Spent time there. Felt connected to the house and yard. Maybe it was isolated, but that wasn’t such a bad thing, after all.

“I wanted privacy to work,” she told Dracula, who looked at her with big, brown, trusting eyes. “I wanted a new life, in a new place, without my family or Charlie telling me what to do and when to do it.”

The thought of her ex-fiancé brought with it a feeling of unease, so she pulled the door closed, headed back toward the foyer and climbed the stairs to the second floor.

There were four bedrooms upstairs, and a 1950’s-style bathroom with a 1970’s remodeled disco chic. She had asked that only structurally necessary repairs be done on the second floor, so being up there was a bit like walking back in time. The dust and cobwebs had been cleaned out, but were already beginning to reclaim the space.

There really wasn’t much to see, just empty rooms and ugly, yellowed wallpaper. A child’s room, a stark, masculine room, a room with a definite feminine influence—and the last room.

She frowned when she opened the door. Odd, she didn’t remember any bedrooms that hadn’t been updated a couple of times. This one, though, seemed frozen in the nineteenth century.

The furniture and wallpaper belonged to that time. A huge four-poster bed, a chifferobe, and a chair. Real antiques, it looked like to Kia's untrained eyes. Excitement rushed through her as she considered how the pieces would fit into the rooms downstairs.

Reaching to flip the light switch, she realized there wasn't one. Strange. Squinting, she took a couple of steps inside the room so she could see better. The area was cold, and the light from the window seemed muted. As she moved further in, the hairs on her arms stood up and she had a sudden urge to turn around and run.

The sound of whining caused her to look back. Dracula was standing outside the doorway, moaning and staring past her. "Drac," she whispered. But he didn't look at her. Instead he continued to stare into the middle of the room. And whine. "You're a big chicken, Dracula." A tingle of anxiety slid up her spine, but she ignored it. This was too much fun for that. It was rather like a roller coaster ride where there is the illusion of risk, but no real danger.

For a second she was sure she caught a glimpse of a black darker than the shadows in the room. Curious and a little freaked, she continued toward the center of the area. Sudden heat seemed to rise from the floor, surprising her enough that she took a step back.

"That's not good," she said, as she dropped to her knees to place a hand on the old, circular rug that covered the wooden floor. Nothing. She raised the rug to inspect the floor under it, and for just a moment she was sure she saw a red glow in the shape of a symbol she didn't recognize. Then it was gone, and she touched the boards themselves. Cold and hard.

She let the rug drop as she stood. There was a white shadow this time, and for a split second she could have sworn it was the shape of a woman. With the figure came a feeling of familiarity, of safety. Then the shadow vanished.

Pulling herself to her feet, Kia brushed off the knees of her jeans. "Let's go back downstairs, Drac. It appears your owner is a little too imaginative for her own good."

The dog licked her hand as she moved out the door into the hall, and together they went back down the stairs.

Kia's heart was pounding, her breath was coming in quick gasps—and she'd never felt so alive in her entire life. "Yep, this is going to be an interesting place to live."

Dracula barked in agreement.

Cheryl Hutton

Upstairs, Mary Strode listened to the intruder. It was starting again. How long, she wondered, could a woman alone survive in the shadow of evil?

Chapter Two

The next morning dawned clear and surprisingly cool. Kia snuggled under the blanket and wondered what the hell she'd been thinking when she decided to move from warm Savannah to the top of a mountain, where the temperatures could drop this much when summer wasn't even over yet.

An icy nose edged the cover away and slid over to press against her cheek. She shoved at the furry invader, but not only didn't he budge, he stuck out his cold tongue and gave her face a long, wet kiss.

She sat up, squealing and laughing at the same time. "Okay, okay, I'm up already."

Dracula barked, letting her know he didn't believe her. Sliding her feet onto the cold wood floor, she gasped. "It's freezing in here. How can it be freezing when it's barely September?"

The dog barked his amusement as she attempted to set a world's speed record at pulling on jeans. Then she wrapped the light cover from the couch around her, reached into the nearest box, and pulled out the first thing she felt—which turned out to be a pair of her panties.

Standing on the Victoria's Secret sale item, she jerked the tape off a box labeled "winter clothes". In there she found a flannel shirt and a pair of thick socks. Once those and a pair of sneakers were on her body, she took off to the kitchen.

Shivering, she set up her red coffeemaker and vowed to have it ready to go before bedtime from now on. As it worked its magic, she held her hands near it to warm them. "Don't look at me like that," she told the dog. "I know it isn't *really* that cold, it's just because I'm used to the weather being hot in September." He only stared at her, and she tipped her head and stared back. "You know what 'relative to' means, Drac?"

Woof.

"Well, that's what I'm talking about. Relative to hot, this place is cold." But she couldn't help to wonder at just *how* cold it was. When she opened the door to let the dog out, the warmer

air from the outside gave her pause. “The insulation of the house kept in the coolness of the night.” Then again, even saying it out loud didn’t allay the feeling of oddness.

By the time she had poured Dracula a bowl of food and freshened up, the warm, comforting smell of coffee was floating through the house. Leaning against the counter, she gulped the first cup, savoring the hot liquid as its comfort spread through her body. Finally warm, she poured herself a second cup and set to work.

Myriad boxes were scattered in what was supposed to be the living room. The night before, she had made a path to the couch and used it as a makeshift bed. The real bed was in pieces in the corner.

The logical thing was to get the bed set up and put her clothes away before they got wrinkled.

Kia had never been big on logic.

A sort through the cardboard maze resulted in five boxes with big purple smiley faces on them. These she moved into what was meant to be a formal dining room, and was now her office/studio.

As she’d hoped, the morning light came through the French doors at just the right angle to make for perfect morning work. She allowed herself to revel in the beauty of the day as she unloaded her supplies.

Once the drawing table was set up and the basics in place, she couldn’t resist drawing just a tiny sketch. Only to be certain of the light and placement of the table, she told herself.

Since her royalties from the Fuzzy Bunny series had enabled her to buy this house, it seemed appropriate to draw Fuzzy himself.

Affection filled her heart and pulled her lips into a smile as she shaded in the bunny’s familiar nose. Never had she imagined the books would be so popular, but she couldn’t have been more thrilled. That popularity insured that the series would continue, thus giving her the opportunity to continue getting paid to do something she loved. What could be better than that?

“A steady job with benefits and a guaranteed paycheck.” She could almost hear her mother’s scolding voice. The thought of her horrified expression when she’d told her mom she was moving to the mountain was enough to release the irritation.

She was chuckling softly when a banging sound brought her out of her work-induced trance, and she looked up to see Dracula beating his bowl against the floor. “You just had breakfast,” she told him, then noticed the light had shifted dramatically since she had started the sketch. A glance at her watch told her that she’d been working for hours, and that it was now lunchtime.

“Sorry, Drac.”

His expression seemed to be chastising, but when she moved toward the food bag, it quickly changed to anticipation.

Smiling, she filled the dog’s bowl and then made herself a sandwich. Her conscience whispered that she should get back to unpacking, but the bright sunshine called to her in an irresistible fashion. “Let’s go check out the town.”

She could have sworn the dog grinned.

The morning chill had dissipated, and the afternoon was warm and bright, once they got past the long, dark, tree-lined driveway. They drove with the windows down and Dracula’s head hanging out. As she drove the long, curvy road, she wondered at her decision to move to the top of a mountain. It might not be as big as some farther north where the Smoky Mountain range actually began, but it was an interesting drive. She just hoped she never had to get down this road in a hurry.

Below, the tiny town awaited them.

The “Welcome to Mt. Shadows” sign was tilted a bit backwards, as if the wind was pushing against it. The outskirts of town were an eclectic mix. Huge old houses, some in good repair and some gray and boarded up. Nice new homes, shiny, modern, and middle class. Trailers, some clean with mowed lawns and flowers outside, some with blocks underneath, trash in the yard, and broken windows. All mixed together in a random pattern, as if a giant had been playing with Monopoly game pieces.

And the best part was that her parents would hate it. She should probably be ashamed of such a juvenile emotion, but that didn’t change the truth of the matter.

Main Street was lined on either side with old buildings not unlike those of a Hollywood Old-West movie set. Some were boarded up, but many were in use. Joe’s Bar, Harding Discount Furniture, Carol’s Flea Market. There was an intersection, then the businesses thinned and

became newer and obviously more frequented. There was Marshall Furniture City on the left, Betty's Beauty Shop on the corner, Carl's Shoe Tree in the middle of the block.

"Quaint little town," she told Dracula. "I have to remember to bring my camera next time we come down. There are just so many cool things to see—and draw later." She licked her lips in anticipation.

They were coming to the end of the business section when she spotted it. Wyoming Books. "I have to check it out, of course."

Kia parallel-parked her Jeep, rolled the windows down to provide fresh air, and put water in a pan sitting on the floor. "I won't be long, I promise."

The dog gave her an affectionate lick and then turned to the water pan.

Kia glanced in the rearview mirror just long enough to make sure her unruly black hair was as much in place as it ever was, and that the smidgeon of makeup she'd applied wasn't running down her face. The sight of the gray eyes that she and her sister shared had her musing. "My aunt says I have devil eyes," she told Dracula. "What do you think?" The dog growled softly, and Kia laughed. "I agree, she is a mean old broad, even if she is Dad's sister."

With that, she slid out, locked the Jeep, and headed toward Wyoming Books.

A bell above the door tinkled a cheery greeting. The sweet, comforting smell of books greeted her, and she inhaled deeply. There were comfy looking chairs in the corners of the store, soft lavender to complement the occasional stripes of purple, red and green that highlighted the mostly soft beige and brown of the store.

Wandering through the aisles, she glanced at the books covering the shelves. The place reminded her of a library or used bookstore in the placement of the shelves. No enormous displays promoting the latest bestseller written by a ghostwriter with a celebrity's name attached; the shelves were simple, inviting doorways to explore the world of the written word.

The aisles were clearly marked: History, Fiction, Romance, Self-help. And in a discreet corner, New Age. She stopped here and glanced at a couple of the covers. One featured the silhouette of a modern witch, arms reaching upward toward a bright full moon.

Kia chuckled. "Double, double, toil and trouble, fire burn and cauldron bubble."

"I generally prefer to use a stove."

Kia turned to see a young woman rolling up in a wheelchair. The woman's smiling face was small, heart-shaped and dotted with freckles. A mass of unruly red hair draped over her shoulders.

"Depends on what I'm cooking," Kia said.

The redhead nodded. "Yeah, I know what you mean. Like my ex-boyfriend, for instance, he could just skip everything and go straight into the fire."

"Maybe skewered on a stick?"

"Oh yeah. I'll bet he'd bubble like a marshmallow."

"We can always hope." Laughing, she stuck out her hand. "My name's Kia."

The woman took her hand and gave it an enthusiastic squeeze. "I'm Rusty, for the hair or the chair, take your pick." She indicated the bright purple wheelchair she was sitting in.

"Don't let her fool you," another voice said. "We call her Rusty because she's so extraordinarily picky that she rarely dates."

Kia turned to smile at the newcomer. Also female, she was dressed in a lacy, gypsy-style white blouse and a long, flowing green skirt. Her hair was mostly dark blonde, except for the two streaks of bright green down the front of each side of the waist-length tresses. The woman held out her hand. "Welcome to my store. I'm Wy, the owner."

"Kia." She gave Wy's hand a firm squeeze.

"Wy dates a lot," Rusty said. "Because she's not picky at all."

"Bite me," Wy said.

"You should have seen the last guy she dated," Rusty continued. "Uggo."

"You should have seen his bank account," Wy shot back. "Yummy."

"So, why didn't you marry him?" Rusty asked.

"Cause he's an uggo, of course."

Kia was laughing as she heard Wy ask, "Well, how picky are you?"

Narrowing her eyes, she considered the question. "Hmm, let me see. I like nice eyes, and strong hands." She smiled. "And he definitely has to have a cute butt." The other two were agreeing that a good rear was a definite asset on a guy, when the bell over the door sounded.

Wy tugged at her clothes as she turned. Kia watched, impressed with the way the woman had shed her laughter for the demeanor of a business owner in a split second.

A middle-aged man in an obviously expensive—and boring—brown suit strode toward them. “Tiffany, let’s get going. I have a cocktail party at nine, and I need to go over some paperwork.”

Rusty breathed a few choice four-letter words that only the other women could hear, then pushed past them toward the newcomer. “Coming, Dad.”

Kia watched as he held the door open and escorted Rusty out.

The door had barely closed when Wy said, “That overbearing jerk has a stick so far up his ass that I’m shocked he can walk at all.”

Not knowing these people, Kia wasn’t sure if wholeheartedly agreeing would come back to haunt her, so she settled for the noncommittal, “I see.”

Wy sent a sheepish smile her way. “Sorry, I never much liked him, and since Rusty’s accident he’s been a... Well, let’s just say I *really* don’t like the way he treats her.”

“Won’t let her grow up, huh?” Kia could relate to that.

“You got it.” Wy touched Kia’s arm. “Want some coffee?”

Kia shook her head. “Actually, I’d better get going. Dracula’s out in the car.”

Wy blinked. “Girl, you aren’t from around here, are you?”

“Savannah, but I’m moving here. Up on the mountain, actually.”

“Hot dog! Another cool person. Let’s see, that makes...” Wy counted on her fingers. “Well, three of us now.”

Kia was laughing as the bell tinkled again. She looked toward the door and caught her breath. The man who had just come in was dressed in jeans and a blue button-down. Tall, muscular, with light brown hair streaked blond by the sun. Broad shoulders, long fingers. Wide, sexy mouth. Tanned. Rugged good looks. When he smiled, she saw straight, white teeth. She licked her lips in appreciation.

“Hello, Garrett,” Wy said. “I’ve got those books you wanted.” She went to the counter and reached under it, pulling out two children’s books. “Here you go. I’m sure Zoë will love them.”

“Thanks, Wy.” He handed her money and took the bag—with big, strong looking hands. Then he turned his gaze on Kia. “Is that your dog in the Jeep?”

She nodded as she studied his bright green eyes with appreciation. “Yep. His name’s Dracula.” She heard a soft giggle from Wy’s direction.

“You know, it gets really hot in a closed vehicle, even with the window down.”

“Oh, don’t get excited. I was only in here for a minute. Besides, Drac is used to Savannah weather. He’s probably chilly.” *Pain in the butt probably never had a dog.*

“Still...”

“Okay, okay, I’m going already.” She waved to Wy. “See you around.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Kia went out the door, pausing as she did to glance back over her shoulder. “Yep,” she said, as she walked down the sidewalk. “Cute butt. Too bad he didn’t have a personality to match.”

Imagine jumping a perfect stranger’s case before you even knew what was going on. He probably ordered people around on a regular basis. *Just like Charlie.*

She slid into the driver’s seat of her Jeep, where she was greeted with a big, drooly kiss. She smiled and rubbed the dog’s head. “Happy to see me, Drac?”

He kissed her again, and she hugged him, then reached for a tissue in the box she kept handy on the dash and wiped her face. “Did you get too hot?”

Dracula wagged his tail, and she chuckled. “Guess not.” She gave him another hug before she shoved him over and attached his traveling harness to the seatbelt. “You know I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you, don’t you?”

Dracula barked and Kia laughed. “Glad to hear it.”

She pulled her own seatbelt around her, put the Jeep in gear, and pulled out onto the road. Her next stop was a couple of streets over.

“This should only take a few minutes, Drac,” she told him, as she pulled into a shady spot under a tree.

He barked his approval, and she hopped out.

Even though she didn't have an appointment, the smiling receptionist at McKnight Contractors seemed happy to usher her into the office of Landon McKnight, owner and president.

"Ms. Wolfe," he said, as he shook her hand with his work-roughened one. "Did you find the work on your house acceptable?"

She smiled with pleasure, as she took the seat he offered with a wave of his hand. "More than acceptable. Your company did an outstanding job. The repairs are strong and unobtrusive, and what you did with the kitchen is quite amazing."

His smile was wide as he leaned back in his desk chair. "I'm glad you like our work, and hope you'll think of us as you continue the remodeling."

"Of course I will. I do have one question, though."

He leaned forward in the chair. "Yes."

"Why was there no light switch installed in one of the bedrooms?"

For a split second, it looked like fear in his eyes. "On the second floor?"

"Yes, the front room on the right."

Landon McKnight stood and went to his office door. "Miss Adams, would you bring the Wolfe file in here?"

By the time he got back to his seat, the woman had the file on his desk. He opened it with a hand that seemed to have developed a slight tremor. "Ms. Wolfe, I have the documentation right here where we installed new light switches in each room of the house, to replace the older ones that were installed in the 1950's." He turned the file so that she could see it.

Papers or no papers, she knew what she'd seen. "There wasn't one at all. Not modern, and not 1950's. There just plain wasn't one."

"Well, I'll be happy to send someone out there, but I oversee the electrical work myself." He was giving Kia a look that made her feel like she had just been called into the principal's office.

Defensive, huh? She smiled. "Well, there isn't any hurry. I'm not planning on using the upstairs right now anyway."

"We want the customer to be happy." He stood.

Feeling herself dismissed, she stood also. “Oh, I’m happy.” She held out her hand. “Y’all do really good work.”

Mr. McKnight shook her hand, but his eyes betrayed wariness, and something darker, something that made her think he believed her. But how could that be? He seemed sure about the installation. Worse, she’d swear what she had said frightened him. Something wasn’t right here.

Shaking off the suspicion, she started toward the door.

About half-way across the outer office, she remembered the other reason for the visit and turned. “That’s beautiful old furniture upstairs in that same bedroom. I don’t remember it being there when I first looked at the house. Was it in the attic or something?”

Mr. McKnight stared at her for a long moment, and this time she was positive he was hiding something from her. “There wasn’t any furniture anywhere in that house.”

“But...”

He shrugged, as he held up his hands in an “I give up” gesture. His mouth smiled, but his eyes held a flicker of alarm. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Maybe one of the men found the furniture in the attic or something and took it down without consulting me.” He took a step toward the door, as if he were herding her. “Well, I have to get back to work.”

She smiled toward the receptionist and then walked out the door and toward her Jeep. She had some pondering to do, that was for sure.

She was opening her door when a blue pickup pulled in beside her. Glancing that way, she saw a familiar man with a cute butt get out. “Well hello, Garrett. Are you following me?” She tried to make it a joke, but she knew her irritation showed through.

“I work here,” he said.

“Y’all do a good job,” she told him. Irritated or not, she couldn’t help but notice how his blue shirt contrasted with the warm green of his eyes. There was a touch of dirt on his arm and the bottom of his sleeve, and that only seemed to make him sexier.

“Thank you,” he said.

She held his gaze as she climbed into her Jeep, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw that he was still watching her as she roared away.

“I hate to admit it,” she told Dracula. “But for a pushy varmint that is one sexy man.”

“Do you know her?” The voice startled Garrett enough to make him jump.

“I saw her at Wy’s shop earlier,” he answered. “Who is she?”

“Kia Wolfe.”

“Wolfe?” Shock blew through Garrett. “*She* bought the old Strobe place?”

“Yep.”

Garrett turned and stared hard into the older man’s eyes. “A *woman* bought that place?”

Landon McKnight held up his hands as if in surrender. “I have no control over who buys what around here. I’m just glad to get the work. That house was let go for years. It’s already kept us in the black for the quarter, and it’s gonna need more repair. You may not like it, but she seems to have the money and wherewithal to fix the place up.”

Garrett swallowed back his annoyance as he looked toward the road. “Does she know?”

“I have no idea.”

“Maybe somebody should tell her.”

“Why? So’s she can get her panties in a wad and hightail it outta here?” The man’s big hand gripped Garrett’s shoulder. “I told you, son, we need the work.”

“Is the money more important than her sanity—or her life?”

“Don’t you think you might be overreacting just a little?”

Garrett ignored the older man’s words, and the anger they provoked, as he took off into the office building. How the hell could his father be thinking of money when he knew what that house was, what it was capable of doing to those unfortunate enough to live in it? But then his father hadn’t seen it firsthand. Not like he had.

He dropped into his desk chair as he considered the curly-haired woman with those stunning gray eyes. He had to warn her.

Not that she was likely to believe him. What sane person would?

Chapter Three

Dracula's bark and cold nose roused Kia from sleep. "All right, all right," she told him as she sat up. The sun was way too bright and provoked an immediate headache, so she pulled the cover over her face and tried to lie down.

This time the cold, wet nose found its way under her T-shirt and against her bare back, provoking a squeal. Letting out a few choice words, she swung her feet off the couch and onto the floor—which felt like ice.

More choice words spewed from her mouth, but Dracula ignored her tirade. It took her a minute, but she slowly realized her socks were in the bedroom and she was in the living room where she had collapsed on the couch, fully dressed, around five in the morning. The sandals she'd had on yesterday offered little protection against the cold floor as she rushed across the house to pull on socks, more substantial shoes, and a flannel shirt.

Finally a little warmer, she gave into Dracula's demands and opened the back door for him to go out, feeling warmer air swirl inside. "That is so weird." She left the door open to warm the house. At this rate, it was going to cost a fortune to heat the place in the winter.

Before long her coffee was ready, and she sipped on the hot liquid as she headed back into the living room. Physical movement would warm her up, and make her new home more welcoming at the same time.

Dracula wandered in about the time she had convinced the dining table it wanted to be in the kitchen. "Don't know what I'd do without your help," she told the dog. He only flopped on the floor—right in her way—and looked up at her innocently. Sighing, she stepped over his bulk on her way back to the living room.

Since it was in the way, she tried to move the antique wardrobe she'd bought a couple of months ago, but it was just too heavy and awkward for her to manage alone. "Maybe Wy will come up and help me," she said, as she eyed the monstrosity that she had liked so much—back when she didn't have to move it. Maybe Wy would help move some of that great furniture down

from upstairs too. Frowning, she considered Mr. McKnight's reaction when she'd told him about the furniture. It was weird all right, but that mystery could wait.

She managed to put her bed frame together by lunchtime. Taking a sandwich and a Coke, she sat on the steps and breathed in the fresh, warm, air. The next time she went to town she was going to look into buying a couple of chairs and a small table. If she was going to use the porch as a second dining area—and that idea was appealing—then she might as well be comfortable doing it. Leaning against the support beam, she finished her lunch as she watched Dracula play. It was seriously warmer outside. How odd was that? “Maybe I'll just leave a window open all the time.” She shook her head in confusion.

Eyeing the big front windows, she considered how easy it would be for an intruder to cut the screen and step inside. She sighed. “Maybe not.”

The sound of an approaching vehicle caught her attention, and she looked toward the driveway. Through the thick pine that lined the recently graveled drive, she saw something blue moving. Before long, the blue became a pickup as it got closer to her house. Recognizing the face behind the glass, she smiled in anticipation in spite of herself. The driver slid his long legs out of the truck's cab and stood up. “Hello, Garrett.”

“Ms. Wolfe.”

Dracula barked his greeting/warning, and Kia watched with interest as man and dog came together. “Well, hello big fella,” Garrett said.

Woof.

The man held out his hand. The dog warily circled, then moved in for a sniff.

“You're a beautiful dog, you know that?”

Dracula wagged his tail.

“Boy?”

“Yes,” Kia told him.

“Gorgeous.”

The tail-wagging approached warp speed. *Woof.*

Garrett laughed. “You're welcome, boy. Didn't you say his name is Dracula?”

“Yes, I did.”

Garrett raised an eyebrow. “Interesting.”

“He’s an interesting dog.”

“I can see that.” Dracula came closer, and Garrett rubbed his head. The dog began to lick and slobber over the outstretched hand, and Kia smiled. If Drac liked Cute Buns, then maybe he was okay after all.

Still scratching the dog’s head, Garrett came toward the porch. Dracula walked along with him, and for a second Kia was actually a bit jealous of her dog. She wanted to feel those fingers on her too. *Down, girl.*

“I hope you didn’t come all this way over that silly light switch,” Kia said. “I told Mr. McKnight that I’m not using the upstairs right now.”

“McKnight Contractors never leaves a job unfinished.”

Something about the way he said that had her wondering if the words applied to other areas of his life as well. Like maybe in bed? “I appreciate the service.”

He inclined his head in an exaggerated gesture of servility. “Glad to be of help.”

She bit back the smile as she stood and went into the house. “The room’s upstairs, last room on the right,” she told him, as she gestured toward the staircase.

Smirking, she followed him up, enjoying the view as she went. Yep, definitely a cute butt. Plus long, sexy legs, and a muscular back that she would give a lot to run her hands over. All topped with hair that was a combination of light brown and sun-streaked blond. Yummy.

At the top of the stairs, Dracula all but ran Garrett over going into the room ahead of him.

“Hey,” she told the dog, “you wouldn’t even go in there with me.” Two more steps and she stopped cold.

The room was empty, and Garrett was flipping the light switch on and off. “Seems to be fine.”

She turned and sprinted down the hall, stopping at every door to look into the room and check for light switches and antiques.

When finally she circled back to where Garrett was standing in the middle of the hall, the hair on the back of her neck was standing straight up. Looking at him, she saw a worried expression. “I believe you,” he said.

Mixed fear and excitement tingled through her. “Wow! I had a real ghostly experience. Awesome.” She grabbed him and planted an impetuous kiss on his luscious lips—and discovered they tasted great. It was hard to force herself to pull away.

His fingertips touched his lips for a moment, as he stared at hers. All at once he blinked rapidly a few times and moved his gaze upward to her eyes. “Let me get this straight, you aren’t at all creeped out by the fact that you saw things that didn’t exist?”

“Of course I’m creeped out. What fun would it be if I weren’t?” She turned and went down the stairs, hearing Garrett follow as she went. Dracula blew past her and got to the bottom floor first.

“How can scared be fun?”

His worried and confused expression was highly entertaining, and helped her keep her mind off that mind-blowing kiss. She shrugged. “The same way a roller coaster or scary movie would be both scary and fun.”

He didn’t look convinced. “I guess.”

“Would you like something to drink?” He followed her to the kitchen where she pulled open the refrigerator door. “I have OJ, Coke, bottled water, and beer.”

“I’ll take a beer.”

She handed it to him and watched as he took a swig. “So why aren’t you freaked by disappearing furniture and electrical fixtures? You said you believed me, right?”

He took another swig before he answered her. “Yes, I believe you. And I am freaked, just not really surprised.”

“Not surprised, huh? Well, that opens up a whole new can of worms. Wanna elaborate?”

He shifted against the counter he was leaning on and took another swig before he answered. “Because of the history of this house.”

Interest grew large and demanding inside her. Kia leaned against the opposite counter and eyed the man in front of her. “Okay, so tell me about the history of my house.”

She sipped her own beer as she watched his expression. He was thinking about how much to tell her, of that she was sure.

“People died here,” he finally said.

Now that was interesting information. “Really, how?”

“A father and two sons were attacked by an animal right in the front yard.”

“Thanks for the tip. I’ll watch out for marauding bunnies.” She took a long drink of her beer to hide the smile.

He sent a narrow-eyed look her way. “A couple who lived here in the seventies was killed by an escaped criminal.”

“I’m careful, and I have Dracula to protect me.”

The dog barked to second her assessment.

“Ms. Wolfe—”

“Kia.”

She heard him sigh. “Kia, I’m trying to tell you that you might not be safe out here alone.”

She put the back of her hand against her forehead and leaned dramatically against the counter. “I’m just a poor little woman in this big old house all alone. Oh thank you, kind sir, for trying to protect me.”

“It isn’t funny.”

She put her hand down, and saw irritation along with what looked like true concern on his face. “I’ll be careful, I promise.”

He nodded before he turned up the last of his beer.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the dreaded wardrobe smirking at her from the living room door. She took a pull on her beer to cover her smile. “Hey, cowboy. I bet all that physical labor you do makes you good and strong.”

He eyed her as if he didn’t trust her. Good instincts. “Reasonably.”

“Good, ’cause I need some help.”

“Does this ‘help’ involve heavy furniture by any chance?”

She nodded. “There’s this horrible old wardrobe that just won’t budge for little ol’ me.” She batted her eyes in his direction.

He sighed. “Where is it?”

She smiled her prettiest smile, and led him to the offending piece. “When I got this thing, I didn’t realize how heavy it was.”

He gave it an experimental push. "You're not kidding. What's this thing made of, lead?"

She took hold of the other side. "Yep, it's where I keep the kryptonite."

He caught her gaze and grinned. "Don't worry, honey. I'm immune."

"I wouldn't be so sure, cowboy."

It took a lot of struggle on both their parts to move the wardrobe twenty feet across the foyer and into the parlor/bedroom. They were both gasping and drenched with sweat when they were done. "You gonna pay for my hernia surgery?" he asked.

"No, but I will give you another beer."

"One's enough. I'll take some water, though."

"Coming right up." She went into the kitchen and took out two bottles. "Thanks for helping," she said as she handed him one of them. She hoped her true appreciation was showing through. Maybe he wasn't a pushy jerk after all.

"You're welcome." He gulped the water.

She smiled. How could drinking water look so sexy? "And for believing my ghost story."

He nodded.

"And for trying to warn me."

He looked at her then. "Even if you don't believe me?"

There was concern in his eyes again, and it tugged at her. "It's not that I don't believe you."

"You just aren't scared of ghosts?"

"Not really. I think they're kind of cool."

"Got a piece of paper and a pencil?"

She pulled a small notebook and pen from her purse. "Gonna write me up a bill for the furniture moving?"

He gave her a slow up and down perusal. "As intriguing as that might be, no."

"I appreciate your help." She felt a smile pull at her face, as her blood began to heat. *Wanna help with another little problem? Maybe something involving a bed?*

"You're welcome." He handed her back the pen and notebook. "That's my number. I only live a couple of miles from here."

Convenient. "In case the ghosts try to get me?"

“Yes.”

She looked into his bright green, way too serious, eyes. “Thanks, cowboy.”

He tipped a nonexistent hat. “Anytime, little lady.”

Kia watched as he sauntered across her lawn and climbed into his truck. The view was stunning.

“I do believe I’m going to like it here,” she told Dracula.

As he drove the two-point-three miles between Kia Wolfe’s house and his, Garrett considered what sort of person would move to the middle of nowhere, live alone, and actually enjoy encounters that would send most people running and screaming.

A sexy one, that’s who. Swallowing hard, he tried to ignore the heat that moved through him just picturing her body. The energy that woman had. And the fire. She would be an awesome lay, that was for sure. And she’d made it pretty clear she was interested.

So why wasn’t he in her bed right now? It was a man’s dream come true—a sexy woman ready to offer herself up without strings. He suspected that she’d be insulted by an offer of commitment.

So why not take advantage of the situation?

Because he was far from convinced that would be a good idea, that’s why.

The fact that she seemed thrilled to have bought a haunted house bothered him. Did he want to get involved with another screwy woman? Hadn’t his ex-wife taught him anything?

Not involvement, he reminded himself. What Kia Wolfe was offering was a roll in the hay. At least that’s what she seemed to be offering. You never knew with women. Again, there was his ex-wife as an example. Tricky creatures they were.

Then again, it had been a long time since he’d been with anybody. Kia was offering, and he was tempted. Fun, that’s what she wanted. And he could use a little fun. Short-term fun. Until the house scared her away.

If she was lucky.

Chapter Four

The little bell above the door jingled as Kia strolled into the bookstore the following afternoon. Wy was busy with a customer, but she looked up and waved. Kia waved back, on her way over to check out the “newly arrived” section. There wasn’t much to see on the shelves, they were almost bare. There were, however, boxes on the floor near the shelves.

A few minutes later, Kia heard the bell tinkle again as the customer left. “Well, hello there.” The skirt of Wy’s long green dress flowed as she waltzed toward Kia. She seemed so regal. Tall, sure, beautiful.

Kia shoved back a quick jab of envy and smiled. “Hello, yourself. I see you’re unpacking just like me.”

Wy sighed. “Yeah, and I’m doing it by myself, while also taking care of customers.”

“Rusty’s not here?”

Wy’s face immediately darkened. “No. Her father said he had too much to do to chauffeur her around, so she had to go straight home after her classes.”

“Classes?”

“Community college. She got into the university, but her father wouldn’t hear of her leaving Mountain Shadows. Said it was better for her to go to a smaller, cheaper place.” She rolled her eyes. “Translation: Where he could keep her under his thumb.”

They walked together to the counter.

“It’s none of my business,” Kia said. “But it seems that it would be easier if Rusty had her own car. If she can drive.”

Wy handed her a cup of coffee. “Yes, she can drive. She learned at rehab, and she has a car. Her parents refuse to let her put the hand controls in it she’d need. And since they pay her room, board and tuition, she pretty much has to go along with them. So she’s dependent on her dad driving her everywhere.”

“This is good,” Kia said, indicating the coffee.

“Thanks, it’s a special blend.”

“How does Rusty’s mother feel about all this?”

Wy sighed long and hard. “She was driving when they had the accident that paralyzed Rusty, hasn’t been behind the wheel since. Rarely even comes out of the house.”

Pain tore at Kia, and suddenly her life seemed pretty darn great. “How awful.”

“Yeah, it is.” Wy smacked the top of the counter lightly and smiled. “Enough sad songs. Time for happy talk.”

Kia smiled back. “Works for me.”

“So, what do you do for a living?”

“I illustrate children’s books.”

Wy’s laughter was light and musical. “Well, no wonder you hang out in bookstores. Do I have any of your work?”

“Yep. I do the Fuzzy Bunny series.”

Wy’s eyes widened in appreciation. “I’m impressed. Those things sell like pot at Woodstock.”

“Interesting analogy.”

“Yeah, and true too.”

The bell sounded, and Kia sipped coffee as Wy helped a woman find the perfect book for a birthday gift. Wy was still in the back when another customer walked in.

The woman was dressed casually, but neatly, though the clothes were a bit large and baggy. She had shoulder-length salt and pepper hair, and appeared to be in her sixties. Strangely, she looked familiar to Kia.

The woman’s gaze moved around the store, as if she were taking in every tiny detail. When the woman’s eyes met hers, Kia had the strangest feeling that her very soul was being x-rayed. What an interesting person.

“Could I help you with something?” Kia asked.

The newcomer raised one eyebrow and spoke with a slight English accent. “If you are quite certain you are finished with your coffee break.”

Kia felt the sides of her mouth twitch, and she fought the urge to smile. “I believe so.”

There was that gaze again, and Kia was pretty sure the woman knew she didn't work there.

"I ordered two books last week, and I would like to find out if they have arrived."

As she slipped behind the counter, she saw that Wy was coming toward the front. She just had to stall a little longer. "Name, please."

"Cole."

There were the books, a sticky note with the name "Cole" stuck on top of them. Kia pulled *Cannibalism in the Early Americas* and *Human Sacrifices as Religion* out from under the counter. "Here you go."

The woman gave Kia a look that seemed to dare her to speak, so of course she did. "Interesting books."

"Yes, they are."

Luckily, Wy had arrived back at the counter and was ringing up the previous customer's sale. Still intrigued, Kia turned over in her mind why the woman looked so familiar. Sudden recognition flashed in her brain. "Aren't you Diana Cole, the photojournalist?"

The woman looked warily into Kia's eyes. "Yes."

"I love your work," Kia told her, holding out her hand. "My name's Kia Wolfe. I'm an illustrator."

"Well, bully for you." She took Kia's outstretched hand and gave it a firm shake.

"I see you've met my friend Kia," Wy said, as the first customer took her purchase and walked out the door.

"Yes," Ms. Cole said. "She's pretending to be an employee of yours."

Wy chuckled. "I appreciate her help."

Ms. Cole seemed to be appraising Kia. "You're new to the area, aren't you?"

She nodded. "Just moved here from Savannah."

"Why on earth would you leave a nice place like that to move to a tiny little town like ours?" Wy asked, as she took Ms. Cole's proffered credit card. "Not that I'm complaining."

"Actually, I bought a house on the mountain. It's big and old and beautiful. Plus I got a killer deal."

Wy stopped in mid transaction. "Not the old Strode place?"

“Yeah, that’s what the realtor called it.”

Wy’s eyes widened, but it was the intense interest that crossed Diana Cole’s face just for a second that had Kia’s curiosity flaring. “Why? Is there something I should know?”

Wy glanced down at the counter, then back up. “That house has a bit of a history.”

Kia’s interest was rising like a helium balloon on a clear day. “You mean it might be haunted or something?”

“Actually, yeah.”

“Wow! This is great. Maybe I’ll get to see a real ghost.”

“If I were you,” Ms. Cole told her, looking for all the world like a teacher lecturing a not-too-smart student. “I wouldn’t be so quick to dismiss something I didn’t understand.”

Before Kia could decide on a rebuttal, Diana Cole had turned and marched out the door.

“Well, that was weird,” Wy said. “Even for her.”

Kia was still staring toward the front door. “I’ve read she’s a bit eccentric.”

“A bit?”

She looked at her new friend. “Down-right strange, huh?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I like the woman. And she can tell the most incredible stories.”

“She’s had a remarkable life,” Kia said. “I had no idea she was living anywhere near here.”

“Actually, I kind of think that’s the idea. She mentioned once that she’s writing a novel. I think she tried to find an out-of-the-way place to work. Somewhere she wasn’t likely to be recognized.”

“She seemed interested in my house.”

Wy nodded. “She’s into strange.”

“So my house is strange, huh? Details, give me details.”

Wy laughed. “Why do I get the feeling you like your life a little spicy?”

She smiled as the familiar frustration crept over her. “And already you know me better than my family.”

“Pains in the ass, huh?”

“Yep. The way they go on, you’d think I was seventeen, not twenty-seven.”

“So you moved to a haunted house in the middle of nowhere to prove you’re an adult?”

Pretty much. “What can I say, it was far away from the madding parents. Now what’s this about my house being haunted?”

Wy leaned against the counter and narrowed her eyes. “What are you doing Saturday afternoon?”

Kia, thrown by the abrupt change of subject, stared at the other woman. “Nothing, I guess.”

“During football season, Rusty and I get together to watch The Game. I thought you might be interested.”

Kia blinked, wondering if she’d somehow blanked out and missed part of the conversation. “What game would that be?”

Wy gave her a playfully shocked look. “The Vols, of course. You *have* heard of the University of Tennessee, right?”

Kia laughed. “Of course I have, I’ve just never been into football.”

“Well, it’s high time you were. Saturday’s the first game of the year. Interested?”

“On one condition.”

“If it’s info about your house, I’d be happy to oblige.”

“Then I’ll be there.”

“Great.” Wy wrote the directions to her apartment and her phone number on a piece of paper and handed it to Kia. “Game starts at twelve-thirty, and afterward we’ll tell ghost stories.”

“Sounds great. Want me to bring anything?”

“Six-packs of Bud Light and fattening snacks are always welcome.”

“No problem.”

Wy looked toward the boxes and sighed. “All those books, and it’s just me and all those pesky customers.”

“Pay me in merchandise?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then you have yourself a temporary employee.”

Garrett pulled up in front of the ugly green house and decided he had to offer a free paint job to his cousin. Again. Nick always turned down the offers, saying it didn't matter what the house looked like, that nobody ever saw it. Still, the place looked bad, and that tore at Garrett's contractor sensibilities.

He knocked once before he pushed open the front door. "Nick? Uncle Jason?"

"Come on in, Garrett," Nick's voice came from the back. "Want a Pepsi?"

"Sounds good."

He closed the door behind him as he stepped into the living room. The familiar smell washed over him. If he had to put a word to the scent, it would probably be old wood. There was more, though, a spicy undertone, and an animal smell that shouldn't be there, since no animal had ever lived in that house. In fact, he'd never seen as much as a squirrel in the Osborne's yard.

"How are you, Uncle Jason?" He walked over to the white-haired man in the ancient recliner.

"Same as always," Jason replied softly, not even looking at Garrett as he spoke. Wrapped in a quilt, house shoes on his feet, he looked old, worn out. Sad for a man who hadn't seen his sixtieth birthday yet.

Nick came from the back and handed Garrett a can. "We'll be right outside, Dad." The man nodded weakly, and Nick motioned toward the door.

The two moved out onto the porch, where Nick leaned heavily against the railing. Garrett sucked down some of the cola as he waited for his cousin to speak.

"He's worse," Nick finally said.

"Physically or emotionally?"

"Both, I think."

Garrett swallowed hard. "Is there anything I can do?"

Nick looked at him then. "He's dying of guilt and a broken heart. What can anybody do about that?"

"The medication isn't helping?"

"Not really. It just makes him more lethargic." He looked out over the yard. "His doctor is insisting he go see a shrink."

Garrett sighed as he leaned against a supporting post. "And that's not possible."

"No. Not so much." Nick whacked the rail with a clenched fist. "But that's what he needs, you know. He needs professional help getting past what happened."

"I'm sorry, Nick."

"I've used every resource I can tap, and still I can't find anything that might help Dad."

"And you."

Nick glared at Garrett. "I don't need help."

"But..."

"No buts. I'll never suffer like Dad is, because this curse ends with me."

"So you can control whether or not you fall in love?"

"Hell yes."

Garrett took a long drink of his Pepsi. He'd have been better off without falling in love with his ex, that was for sure. But could he really have controlled his emotions?

Deciding it was time to change the subject, he moved to the gossip of the day. "Did you hear you have a new neighbor?"

A wiry smile pulled at his cousin's face. "Wonder how long they'll last?"

"Not they, she."

Nick turned and stared at Garrett. "*She?* A lone woman is living in that house?"

"Yep. Do you believe it?"

"No, I don't, actually. I take it she doesn't have a clue what it is she's getting herself into?"

Garrett sighed as he leaned against the railing. "I tried to warn her, but she's rather headstrong."

Nick narrowed his eyes, and Garrett fought the urge to groan. "So, what does this stubborn chick look like?"

Garrett snorted. "She'd probably disembowel you for using the word chick."

"So she's a fat, ugly man-hater?"

"Nope. She's young, pretty and smart. And could give a mule a run for his money."

Garrett heard a chuckle. "Got a thing for her, huh?"

"No. I'm just concerned for her safety, that's all."

“Right.” Nick crushed the now-empty can in his hand. “Let’s go get things set up in the basement. It’s getting late.”

Garrett sighed, knowing he hadn’t heard the last of this, and followed Nick back into the house.

Kia had no idea moving a mattress was so difficult. She’d pull one end and the other would flop over like Drac when he was tired. How in the world could something stuffed be so heavy?

By sundown she was exhausted, but she had the beginnings of a bedroom. She ate a turkey sandwich on the porch while watching the sun slide behind the trees. The yard was washed with warm red and gold light, and Kia smiled contentedly. Who could ask for more than a show like this in her own front yard?

Dracula was chasing a rabbit, though catching it seemed not to be on his agenda. This was exactly what she needed, she decided. The fresh air and the live rabbit were great inspiration, and soon she was itching to grab paper and pencil and draw her favorite imaginary rabbit.

As soon as Dracula tired of playing, she headed directly into her new studio. All she knew was that Fuzzy needed a new hat, and she had decided just the kind to give him.

She was deep in a Fuzzy Bunny-induced trance, when a sharp bark caused her to squeal. Turning to the dog, she was ready to chew him out. But then she saw how oddly he was acting. He was staring toward the French doors, while he edged toward her with his tail between his legs.

“Chicken,” she teased. A glance at her watch told her it was almost three a.m., and it was getting chilly. Still, the big moon was bright, and she was too wound up to sleep. So she got her ratty old bathrobe from one of her boxes and went back to work.

Just as she was getting back into the swing again, she heard a howl echo through the mountain air. Dracula’s answering bark was followed by a whimper, as he curled up near her chair.

She shook her head in amusement. “It’s okay, it’s just a dog, like you. Maybe even a potential girlfriend.” The howling came again, and she shrugged. “Or maybe a wolf. Like me.”

Another howl echoed through the trees, and Kia felt the hair on her neck stand up. Dracula edged closer and whimpered again.

I need my head examined.

Garrett pulled his pickup into Kia Wolfe's driveway the next morning. Kia was a big girl. If she wanted to live in a haunted house in the middle of nowhere, it was none of his concern.

And yet, there he was pulling up to that monstrosity of a house. As hard as he tried not to care, he was worried about her.

"I don't know who's crazier, me or her," he grumbled, as he walked up the porch steps. Inside the house, he heard Dracula barking.

The door was thrown open and Kia looked up at him through half-closed eyes. "What are you doing here so early?"

He grinned. She was adorable with that crazy black, curly hair falling in intriguing tendrils over that cute little face. Her jeans and T-shirt were wrinkled, as if she'd slept in them, and there was a little red mark down her cheek, as if she'd lain against a fold in her pillow case. "I was on my way to work and just thought I'd check on you."

She looked at him for a moment, as if she was trying to bring his face into focus, and then stepped away from the door. She motioned for him to follow her as she went toward the kitchen muttering, "Coffee. Need coffee."

He chuckled as he followed her. Dracula poked his nose at Garrett's fingers, and he gave the dog the requested head scratch. "She isn't a morning person, is she?"

Dracula whined softly, and Garrett had to laugh. "I feel for you, buddy."

In the kitchen, he found Kia putting water in the coffeemaker. "I have got to remember to get this thing ready before I go to bed."

"I'm sorry," Garrett lied. "I didn't realize you were one of those people who slept until noon."

She glared, her pretty gray eyes turning dark. “I’m an artist. I keep weird hours. So sue me.” She turned to inspect the bubbling, sputtering machine. “Besides, some stupid dog had Dracula all upset last night. It’s hard to sleep with the canine neighborhood all charged up and howling.”

He concentrated on keeping his face unexpressive. “A full moon has a strange effect on animals.”

She turned, a frown pulling at her adorable face. Big eyes that odd gray color, sharp little chin, full lips. “If you say so.”

He wanted to pull her into his arms, to hold her, to kiss her, to protect her. He forced a smile. “Well, that’s the theory, anyway.”

She leaned her head to the side as she studied him. “Makes sense, I guess.”

“Listen, I’m sorry I woke you. I’ll just go and—”

“Don’t even think about it, cowboy. I’m up, I made coffee. You might as well stay and have a cup with me.”

“I’d like that,” he admitted.

She handed him a mug and took one of her own. “Sugar? Cream?”

“Black’s fine.”

“So, that howling mutt thing, it happens every full moon?”

He forced himself to keep his expression impassive as he looked her straight in the eye. “Yeah, it does.”

She shrugged. “I guess I’ll get used to it.”

He nodded as he took another sip of coffee. “If you stay here.”

“Garrett, I’ll be okay.” She smiled sheepishly. “The real reason I didn’t get to bed at a decent hour was that I was drawing. I get caught up and forget how late it’s getting. My parents and my ex-fiancé were always giving me hell for being lazy and sleeping in so much.”

“Ex-fiancé, huh? Did he break your heart?” Why did that thought make him want to hunt the guy down and beat him to a pulp?

“No. It just didn’t work out.”

He covered her hand with his own. Hers was soft, delicate, and warm. The feel of her had his heart kicking into a higher gear.

“I’d better be getting to work.” He set his empty mug on the counter, gave her a smile, and headed toward the front door. Dracula intercepted him en route, and Garrett took time for a head scratching and to tell the dog how good he was.

What he really wanted to do was grab the dog’s owner and hold her close, but he did the right thing and went out the door.

After a quick trip by his house, Garrett drove down the mountain, still wondering why he’d felt the need to go by Kia’s house. Granted, checking on her wasn’t a bad idea, but he knew it was more than that. He was attracted to her. She intrigued him, and he’d better get the hell over it.

Giving himself a mental shake, he pulled out his cell and hit the speed dial. “I’m running a little late, Dad. Things went fine last night. I just got a slow start.”

He closed the phone and concentrated on the curvy road.

Saturday’s drive down the mountain was relaxing. It was cool enough to drive with the windows down, and a late summer breeze brushed Kia’s cheeks. The light shooting from between the trees made her fingers itch for a sketchbook. With a sigh, she realized it had been a long time since she’d done a drawing just for the hell of it. And she hadn’t painted in years.

It was true that commercial projects paid the bills, and she seriously loved Fuzzy and the other little creatures she drew for children. But that wasn’t the same as art for the sake of art. Not the same as making something to fulfill the yearning in her heart. Not like reaching deep inside and creating something she had no idea was there—something unlike anything that had ever existed before.

By the time she’d pulled into Wy’s parking lot, Kia had made a vow to take time to do a few projects for the simple joy of art. She had the freedom to do that sort of thing now, without anyone looking over her shoulder or telling her she “should” be doing something else. A long, happy sigh of relief escaped her. She was her own person now. She could do what she wanted without comments from the peanut gallery.

Wyoming Cawood-Brown lived in a moderate sized apartment with the requisite white walls. The colorful and eclectic pieces, though, turned what could have been a boring home into a showplace that mirrored the owner's personality.

Rusty was already there, sitting in her wheelchair next to a couch covered in a bright purple spread. On the couch, a huge, gorgeous cat was sprawled. The animal was the color of an ice cream sundae—white with swirls of caramel over his adequate, very fluffy body. He looked toward Kia, and she saw his eyes were round, clear pools of emerald green.

“Max, move and let Kia sit down.” Wy went over and slid the cat's bulk into her arms. “You'll have to forgive him. He thinks he owns the place.”

Kia reached a wary hand out toward the animal.

“He won't let you touch him,” Wy said. “He won't let anyone...oh my God!”

Kia was stroking his head with two fingers. “You're a beautiful boy. May I draw you sometime?”

Meow.

“He's never let a stranger touch him. Ever.” Wy looked at Kia with wide eyes.

“That's true,” Rusty said. “My cat climbs on me all the time, but Max barely lets me touch him. He's a one-woman kitty.”

“Apparently not anymore.” Wy scrunched up her nose as she aimed a look in Kia's direction. “And you're a *dog* person.”

“I'm an animal person. I don't discriminate. Besides, he's gorgeous. I'd seriously love to draw him sometime.”

“You hear that, Max? Kia wants to draw your picture.”

Max curled up in the chair his owner had put him in and began to purr loudly.

Wy laughed. “I think he likes that idea.”

Kia sat on the couch and did an immediate double-take at the snack-filled coffee table in front of her. Formed from what appeared to be random pieces of wood nailed together in an asymmetric pattern, the soft beige piece was covered in beautiful, hand-painted decorations. “I love this.”

Wy's face went crimson. “Thank you.”

“She made it herself,” Rusty supplied.

“Well, you did a fantastic job. You didn’t tell me you’re an artist too.”

“Not like you.” Wy’s face was all but glowing now.

Kia smiled softly at the woman’s modesty. “Not from lack of talent.”

“I keep telling her that,” Rusty told her, as she maneuvered her wheelchair, pulled the armrest up, and gracefully slid her body over and onto the couch to join the other two.

Kia watched in admiration at the effortless way the younger woman moved. “You have that down to a science.”

Dark anger flashed across Rusty face. “It’s not a talent. It’s just life in the gimp lane.”

Kia’s heart dropped to her knees as she felt her face heat. “I’m so sorry. All I meant was that you move so gracefully. That’s not a talent I have, trust me.”

The expression in Rusty’s big brown eyes moved from angry to sheepish. “Sorry, it just gets old, you know, people being all excited that I can actually feed myself and crazy stuff like that.” She looked away quickly, but Kia saw the sheen of tears. “Mom sits around grieving like I’m dead. And Dad keeps saying, ‘You’ll walk again someday, I’m sure of it.’ Can’t they just be happy I’m okay? Can’t they just accept me the way I am?”

Kia reached toward Rusty, not sure if she’d allow the comfort. To her surprise, the young woman accepted Kia’s hand on her arm. Kia opened her mouth, but then closed it. The last thing she wanted was to say the wrong thing again.

It was Wy who spoke. “They’re your parents, it’s hard for them.”

“I know,” Rusty said. “But it makes it harder on me when they act so creepy.”

“That’s what your friends are for,” Wy said. “To accept you the way you are.”

“I want to accept you,” Kia said. “Will you teach me how?”

A smile crossed Rusty’s face and lit up her eyes. “Sure thing.”

“It’s almost time for kickoff,” Wy said. “I’m going to pop some popcorn.”

Unsure of protocol, Kia asked, “Is there anything you need me to do?”

Wy narrowed her eyes speculatively. “How much do you know about football?”

Kia shrugged. “A bunch of guys in tight pants play with a ball and slap each other on the butts.”

“Well, she’s got the basics. Rusty, will you fill her in on the rest?”

“Football 101 coming right up.” She patted the seat beside her, and Kia slid over.

By the time the game started, Kia had gained enough knowledge to follow the action on the screen. It was more fun than she thought it would be, especially after downing a couple of beers and way too much junk food. By the end of the third quarter, Kia was yelling right along with the other two, usually at the correct times. “This is awesome.”

“I told you,” Wy said, as she passed the popcorn bowl.

Two minutes before the end of the game, the score was tied and Kia was on the edge of her seat. With one unexpected movement, a UT player grabbed the ball, and ran.

Forty, thirty, twenty, ten, touchdown.

The crowd, and the women, went crazy.

The extra point was good, and the other team got the ball back.

But it was far too late. The UT Volunteers held them solid, and the score ended at twenty-one to fourteen.

Kia and Wy danced around the apartment, while Rusty did her own version sitting on the couch.

“Wow!” Kia said. “I can’t believe that was so much fun.”

“I love UT football,” Rusty said, grabbing the Oreo package and shoving the last one in her mouth.

“Nothing better,” Wy said. “At least with your clothes on.”

“Get your mind out of the gutter,” Rusty teased.

“How can you expect me to sit here and watch four hours of men in tight pants and not think about sex?” Wy asked.

“She’s got a point,” Kia said. “Lots of primo cabooses on that field.”

“You two are bad,” Rusty told them.

“You betcha,” Wy said, as she grabbed a handful of chips. “And you know what they say about bad girls.”

“That is so not what I meant, and you know it too.” Rusty tossed a handful of popcorn at Wy.

Kia held a beer can up to her mouth to hide her smile, as she put out a feeler. “Speaking of cute butts, that Garrett dude has one.”

“He’s a nice guy.” Was that protectiveness in Wy’s voice? “And he got screwed real bad by that bitch of an ex-wife of his.”

“Oh, chill out, Wyoming,” Rusty said. “She just said he’s got a cute rear. He does.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve known Garrett since we were both in diapers, and I guess I think of him as a brother.” Wy met Kia’s gaze. “I’d hate for him to get his heart broken again.”

“Well, you have nothing to worry about from me. I just want to admire his ass.” Boy, she was putting her foot in her mouth so much tonight, it was amazing she’d been able to eat so much junk food.

“She doesn’t see what we do,” Rusty said. “I guess it’s ’cause she thinks of him as a brother.”

“I feel sorry for her,” Kia said, and meant it.

“Yeah, me too.” Rusty said.

“Bite me,” Wy told them.

Deciding that changing the subject would be prudent, Kia launched her fact-finding mission. “You promised me info about my haunted house.”

“Huh?” Rusty was staring.

“She bought the old Strode place,” Wy told her.

“You’ve gotta be kidding.” Rusty’s eyes suddenly seemed to be the size of ping-pong balls.

“It’s true. I was playing around with the idea of getting a place of my own and on a real estate website I saw a picture of this beautiful old house on top of a mountain. It was love at first sight. And I couldn’t believe the price.”

“I’ll bet,” Wy said.

“So…” Kia prodded.

“Well,” Wy began, “the story goes that a couple living there in the seventies was killed by an escaped convict looking for a hideout.”

“I won’t be opening the doors to strangers, that’s for sure. I heard something about an animal attack.”

“Yeah, in the fifties. From what I’ve heard, something killed the man and the son. There are still people who swear it was some man-beast thing. But most people figured it was a bear.”

“That’s not so scary,” Kia said.

“If you say so.” Rusty’s eyes were wide. “You know, over the years there’ve been rumors of lights and weird noises there. Most people believe the stuff’s caused by drifters or teenagers or something, but some people swear they’ve seen ghosts there.”

“Garrett believes it’s haunted,” Wy told them, which raised Kia’s interest flag quite a bit—and answered a few questions.

“Too bad the Ghostbusters didn’t find out anything,” Rusty said.

Was she kidding? “*Ghostbusters?*”

Wy explained, “In the mid nineties, ghost chasers from some university up north heard about the rumors and set up shop at the house. They were determined to prove once and for all whether or not there was something supernatural going on. Nobody knows what happened, but they were gone the next day, along with all their equipment and cars and stuff. The newspaper later reported they weren’t returning phone calls.”

“Guess you must be braver than the ghost chasers,” Rusty said.

“Nothing to be brave about.” *Except maybe disappearing furniture.* “I love the place.”

“Maybe the ghosts like you,” Rusty said.

“Probably ’cause it’s a boy ghost with a well-toned tush,” Wy said.

“Not that I’ve seen, darn it,” Kia said, laughing. “So who built my house anyway? Either of you know?”

“Personally, I think that’s a much more interesting story than criminals or bears,” Rusty said. “A man named Strode built the house for his young bride back in the 1800’s. The wife disappeared, and the husband said she went back to Kentucky to her sister’s for a visit. The thing is, nobody ever saw her again. Rumor has it that he went crazy and killed her.”

“Crazy? Why would anyone think that, just because he dragged his wife out to the top of a mountain and made her live out there away from everybody?” There was sarcasm in Wy’s voice, but then she gave Kia a sheepish smile. “No offense.”

“None taken. Different time, and besides I don’t live with a crazy man—unless he’s a ghost, of course.” She shoved more chips into her mouth. These women were a blast to hang out with.

Wy sighed. “Ghost or no ghost, that house sure has a reputation.”

Kia smiled. “That’s one of the things I like about it. I’m a sucker for kick-ass movies, roller coaster rides, Halloween, scary books, and haunted houses.”

Wy tipped her head, as if in thought. “You know anything about witchcraft?”

Kia frowned. “Well, I know that there are two kinds, the devil kind and the new age kind.”

“What do you think of the new age kind?”

Something in Wy’s expression had Kia’s interest rising. “I think it’s cool, why?”

Wy sent a questioning look toward Rusty, who gave a short nod. “Well, I’ve been reading up on witchcraft, and I think it’s amazing stuff.”

“Me too,” Rusty said.

“We’ve been casting circles sometimes,” Wy said. “And doing spells.”

Tingles of excitement crawled up Kia’s spine. “Sounds exciting. Any results?”

“Nothing yet,” Rusty said, “but it’s a blast.”

“We do have a good time all right. Not to mention eating way too much junk food,” Wy said. “Think you might be interested in joining us sometime?”

“Sure, why not?” Well, this wasn’t at all like the boring life she’d lived in Savannah.

“We’re planning a circle Tuesday night. We have to watch the noise level ’cause of crabby Mr. Farber downstairs, but we still manage to have a lot of fun.”

“Why don’t we do the circle at my house?” Kia watched as two pairs of wide eyes turned on her. She shrugged and tried to look innocent. “Well, we wouldn’t have to worry about neighbors, and the ambiance is certainly appropriate.”

Wy and Rusty looked at each other for a moment, then smiled in tandem. “Let’s do it,” Wy said, and Rusty nodded.

This was going to be fun. “See you Tuesday, then?”

“We’re going to have a fantastic time,” Wy said.

“I hope the ghosts approve,” Kia said, then turned and walked toward the door. Out of the corner of her eye, she got a glance at the expressions on the other women’s faces. Priceless.

She chuckled all the way to her car.

Chapter Five

Three days later, Dracula watched from the sidelines as three women formed a circle in the living room of his new house.

Wy raised a double-bladed knife in the air. “This circle we have formed is a barrier to all, both good and bad, both human and spirit. Into this circle only those who we have invited may come.” She lit a large white candle in the center of the area. “We invite the Goddess to enter.”

“Come to us, she who is the mother of all; come to us, hear our call,” they chanted together.

“Now...” Wy smiled. “This is where we do spells and ask for stuff.”

Kia frowned. “Isn’t it bad to ask for personal gain?”

“That’s just on TV,” Rusty told her. “The real thing is, ‘do what you will, harm none’. So we can ask for anything, as long as it doesn’t hurt somebody.”

“And it ain’t hurting anybody if I’m rich and famous. So that’s what I’m asking for,” Wy said. Raising her arms above her head again, she stretched the knife high. “Goddess who is the mother of all, it is to you I direct my call. I wish to be rich and famous.” She cocked her head and directed a wide-eyed gaze toward the heavens. “Can you do that for me?”

Together they chanted, “As I wish, so mote it be,” several times, until they all collapsed into laughter.

“Now you.” Wy indicated Kia.

“Okay.” She thought for a moment. “I wish for Fuzzy Bunny to outsell Harry Potter.”

There was the laughter again as they chanted.

Finally, it was Rusty’s turn. The younger woman’s expression lost the levity that had so far colored the ritual as she reached toward the heavens. Kia realized the woman’s hands were trembling, and there was the glint of tears in her brown eyes. “Goddess who is the mother of all, it is to you I direct my call. I wish to have freedom from my parents’ grip.”

The other two women joined in the chanting of, “As we wish, so mote it be,” and there was no laughter. Arms raised, Kia reached for whatever power there might be out there in the

universe. For that sweet woman who sat near where she stood, she wished for a life, a chance. “As we wish, so mote it be,” she chanted, and meant it. A glance at Wy told her she wasn’t alone in her desire.

The chant seemed to rise along with the lifted arms. Kia almost felt as if electricity were rising from the ground, through her body, then reaching into the air. Just for a second, she was sure she saw shimmering around her.

Lightning and thunder simultaneously lit up and shook the house. Three squeals blended with a loud bark, as Dracula bounded over, all but knocking his owner to the ground.

“There wasn’t a cloud in the sky,” Rusty whispered.

“Must have been a sudden storm,” Kia said. She started to go over and look out the window, but an icy chill stalled her, rather like a cold, wet cloth in the face. *Close the circle*, a voice seemed to whisper in her head.

“Aren’t we supposed to close the circle?” she found herself asking, as a prick of apprehension touched her.

Barely paying attention as the Goddess and elements were thanked and dismissed and the circle closed, Kia told herself that it was all a coincidence. Odd, but definitely not supernatural.

When she finally looked out the window, she saw rain pouring from the sky. “It’s a mess out there.” She turned to look at her friends. “I vote it’s junk food time.”

There was quick agreement, and with three of them, it didn’t take long to straighten up. In no time the coffee table was back in place and covered with packages of cookies, chips, dip, and Cokes. They dug in with gusto.

“What’s wrong with me?” Wy asked. “I never eat this much sugar.” She shrugged. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“I felt like I needed it,” Rusty said. “Like my body was depleted or something.”

“I just plain like to eat sweets,” Kia said. But in truth, she had felt the need too. Like an emptiness in her middle. Weird.

The sound of the rain brought with it a hushed, mellow felling. Voices were muted, conversation brief. Before long, the siren music of the downpour drew the women, and they sat

on the porch to watch the water cascade from the sky. “Why don’t you two spend the night here?” Kia suggested. “There’s no reason for you to go out in this.”

“I have to get home.” The fear in Rusty’s voice was evident.

“I’ll take her,” Wy said. “I’m not sweet enough to melt.”

“Boy, that’s the truth,” Rusty said, but the humor didn’t quite cover the apprehensive undertone.

“This was the best time I’ve had in years,” Kia told them. “Thank you so much for including me.”

“Thanks for the use of your house,” Wy said.

Wy and Kia got Rusty’s chair down the steps and loaded in the car. They took off while Kia waved from the porch.

An hour later, Kia had dried herself off and was lounging on her couch when her phone rang. The sound startled her into sloshing her drink over the top of the glass and onto her hand. Laughing, she reached for the cell.

“Just wanted to let you know we got home okay, and to thank you again,” Wy’s voice said. “I had a great time tonight.”

“My pleasure.” Kia smiled. “Wasn’t it kind of spooky, that storm hitting when it did?”

“Yes it was, and I’ve got another one for you. The rain stopped less than a mile from your house. It was almost like a switch flipped. Raining, then not. The road wasn’t even wet. Very strange.”

Jittery chills ran down Kia’s back. “That is weird.”

They said their goodbyes, and Kia leaned against the back of the couch. Dracula rubbed his snout against her arm, and she rubbed the soft fur of his head. “I like my new, cool friends,” she said.

Dracula whined, and Kia smiled. “I still love you, silly,” she told him, as she closed her eyes and relaxed. Moving here had accomplished what she had intended. Adventure, privacy to work, good friends, and inspiration—all far from the oppressive parental units. What more could a girl want?

Chapter Six

Bright early-morning sun shot rays through the French doors, illuminating the sketchpad in front of Kia. Whether it was the residual effects of that incredible ritual or the excitement of being with friends who accepted her eccentricities, she'd been so wired that she'd finally given up on sleep and decided to get some work done instead.

Or at least that had been her intention. Her next project was a book written for middle-school children, which meant the graphics would be fewer in number but more detailed and sophisticated. Her plan had been to do a couple of preliminary sketches, but somehow she just didn't care what the little boy found in the creek, or how much he longed to return home after he got lost in the woods. Her focus seemed to be off, her thoughts shifting rapidly from one subject to another. It wasn't easy to get anything done in such a state, so she did what she usually did. She let her pencil think for her.

At first she doodled lines with only a vague idea what whispered to her to draw it. But before long the doodles became the form of a young woman. Pretty, sad eyes, dressed in long skirts. Kia had no idea who the woman was, but she seemed very familiar.

Shrugging, she began shading in the skirt, then abruptly stopped. The woman's clothing was white. She knew this as well as if the model for the drawing stood before her. As she drew in the intricate lace around the collar of the figure, she wondered how it was that she could know so many details without having a clue who the woman was, or where she'd seen her before.

Dracula's sudden bark startled her enough that she jumped. "We need to talk about this propensity for jump-starting your owner's heart," she told him. He ignored her as he rushed toward the front door.

A glance out the window revealed a familiar blue pickup. Smiling, she pulled open the door. "Hello, cowboy. I didn't report any disappearing electrical switches, honest."

The sound of his deep chuckle seemed to resonate low in her abdomen. "Actually, I was just in the neighborhood and thought I'd drop by and say hello."

She was thrilled by his actions—until a thought slid into her. “Wait a minute. Didn’t you say you live near here?”

“Sure do.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but wouldn’t that mean you’re in the neighborhood on a daily basis?”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t stop by and say hello.”

It was the twinkle in his eye that got to her. He was trouble for sure—and the knowledge sent tingles of excitement up her spine. “Come on in. I haven’t made coffee yet.” She’d been so keyed up she hadn’t even thought about it.

He followed her toward the kitchen. “That’s fine. You got a Pepsi?”

“Nope. Got Coke though. “

“Oh, one of *those*.”

She stopped and turned, hands on her hips, struggling to keep from smiling. “One of what?”

The smile pulled at his full lips. “No wonder you have so many red things.”

He’d noticed. “I like red. And Coke.”

“Pepsi’s good too.”

“Not as good as Coke.”

He laughed, showing his straight teeth and the cute little dimples on each cheek. He had a fascinating mouth, and that quick kiss she’d laid on him told her it tasted pretty good too.

That thought made her hungry for more.

“I’ll get the drinks,” she said, and turned to do just that.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched him go into her studio. “This is nice,” he said.

“It isn’t really set up yet, but I keep getting distracted.”

She took the glasses into the room, and saw that he had picked up the new sketch. “You’re good.”

“Thank you.”

“Who is she?”

She handed him his drink. “Beats me. I saw her in my head and had the urge to sketch her.”

He frowned. “Strange.”

“Not really. I probably met her someplace, or I saw her picture in a book or something.” *And remembered so many details so clearly without remembering where she’d seen her?*

He put the sketchbook down. “Let’s get out of here. If I spilled this on your work I’d never forgive myself.”

“That’s okay, you’d be too dead to feel bad.”

His eyes widened, his lips seemed to edge toward a smile, then back, as his brows pulled together into a frown.

“Think I’m joking?” she asked.

“I don’t want to find out,” he said, as he hurried out of the room.

She motioned toward the kitchen table, where they sat and sipped the colas. She considered what she wanted to say for a moment, then pounced.

“Were you just trying to freak me out when you told me what you did about this house—the deaths and stuff?”

For a moment, she thought he was going to choke on his drink. “Why in the world would I do that?”

“I don’t know. Some people have a strange sense of humor.”

He leaned toward her, his expression serious. “I don’t consider scaring women living alone in spooky old houses funny. In fact, I don’t think living alone in a place like this one is at all amusing.”

She was really getting tired of this subject. “Maybe you don’t think much of my decision to buy this house, but I’m happy. I love it here.”

He seemed to consider that. “You really do, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.” She looked around her, taking in the big, bright kitchen. “It’s a wonderful place to live.”

“I agree, it’s probably the nicest house on the mountain. An area I love, by the way. But what I told you is true. Check the newspapers if you don’t believe me.”

She tilted her head as she considered his expression. “I believe you. But stories tend to get exaggerated. Rumors become fact. The tales get bigger as they go from one person to another.”

His neck reddened just a touch as his lips tightened. “The old newspapers are on microfilm at the library. Go and check it out for yourself.”

“I think I might just do that.” His quick, angry intake of breath had her feeling repentant. She smiled softly. “It’d be cool to research the history of my house.”

“You’ll find out that I’m telling the truth. No rumors. No exaggerations. People have died here.”

Propping her elbows on the table, she leaned forward. “Oh, I never believed you were lying. I just think you’re overreacting. After all, you don’t know me all that well. Yet.” She slowly, deliberately ran her tongue over her lips, and watched his eyes widen. “Thank you for your concern, sir. But I think I can take care of myself just fine.”

His Adam’s apple moved as he swallowed. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it again.

“Something wrong, cowboy?”

“Not a thing, ma’am.” He reached his hand out, touching her arm with the tips of his fingers. “Feel free to call on me anytime. For whatever you need.”

Her arm tingled where his strong, work-roughened fingertips touched it. “I appreciate that. A talented man does come in handy sometimes.”

“I have many talents,” he whispered, as he slid his fingertips up and down her arm slowly, gently, leaving warm tingles in the wake of his touch. Her breathing hitched up a notch, as she imagined other things he could do with those fingers.

He leaned just a bit closer. She felt her mouth relax in anticipation of the kiss. Closer, closer.

An odd, instrumental version of “Born to be Wild” rang out.

Her heart all but jumped out of her chest. When she looked at Garrett, she saw her reaction mirrored and they both started to laugh. “My phone never rings,” she told him, as she stood to get her cell.

“Saved by the bell,” he said. “Or in this case, canned music.”

She was thinking just how much she didn’t want to be saved, as she clicked the cell phone on. “Hello.”

“Staying out of trouble?” a familiar voice asked.

“Yes, thanks to you. Damn it.”

Her sister’s laughter came through the line, doing nothing to appease Kia’s irritation.

“I’ll call you back,” Kia said, and hung up.

She looked up to see Garrett standing two feet away and looking entirely too amused. “It was my sister,” she told him. “Her timing always was atrocious.”

He chuckled. “Where were we?”

Before she could answer, he had closed the gap between them and put his hands on her shoulders. Then those sexy lips were touching hers. Firm. Hungry. Luscious.

She felt her knees buckle as his tongue slipped inside her mouth. His arms wrapped around her, his hands warm against her back as he pulled her close to him.

She slid her hands around his broad shoulders. His muscles were firm under her fingers. She arched her back to rub her breasts against his chest, her nipples responding immediately by coming to attention. One of her legs wrapped around him and the sensation of slowly sliding it up and down his was akin to heaven. She had begun to think about suggesting they retire to the bedroom, when he pulled away.

She stared up at him, shocked, cold, and hungry for his touch.

“I think I’d better go.” His voice was deep and dangerous.

He turned, and she watched his sexy rear as he walked out her door. “A cowboy and a gentleman,” she whispered. “This could get *very* interesting.”

Smiling, she went back to her studio. She didn’t draw, though, she simply sat and stared out the French doors into her side yard—and thought about the man who’d just left her house.

Garrett drove home wondering why in the world he’d just walked away from the best offer he’d had in a very long time. His cell rang, and he pulled it out of his pocket. When he saw the number, his felt his forehead pull into a frown. “Is there something wrong, Nick?”

“Sorry to bother you, Garrett. I was checking the equipment and one of the chain attachments looks sort of bent.”

“I’ll get another one today and come up after work to install it.”

“Thanks. I hate that you have to do so much for us.”

The sound of the sadness in Nick’s voice had Garrett swallowing hard. “No biggie. You know I don’t mind helping you and Uncle Jason out. You’re family.”

“I appreciate it.”

“See you later today.”

Garrett closed his cell and the question of why he’d walked away from Kia was answered. She had no idea the risk she was taking, not only from her house but from other threats too. The woman was sitting on top of some sort of unnatural hotspot, and what he needed to do was convince her to leave—not give her another reason to stay.

The next morning found Kia at the local library looking through the microfilm newspaper files. The pretty young librarian was very helpful, and it didn’t take Kia long to find what she wanted. A newspaper article from 1996 made great fun of a group from a university in Ohio coming to “ghostbust” the old Strode house. The article said that the entire bunch had been gone the very next day, along with all their equipment.

Chickens, she thought, as she took out that microfilm roll and replaced it with another.

On January 23, 1952, the local newspaper’s front-page story was the death of three people at “the old Strode house”. The sheriff at the time had speculated a grizzly had done the man and his two boys in, though no bear was ever found. The picture of her house, surrounded by cars and men in uniform, was a little creepy.

The picture of a severed arm gave her stomach a quiver, but it was the quotes from the sole survivor that sent a chill up her arm. “Howling. Howling. When the moon was full. Heard it in the yard. They went out to see.” The reporter described the woman, wife of the man and mother of the two boys, as having a wild expression. “It was a wolf,” the quote continued. “But it had the eyes of a man.” The article went on to say the woman had been taken to an asylum. Kia made a note to see if she could find out what finally happened to her.

The last microfilm roll was from June 1977. The picture was graphic. A man and woman lay in a pool of blood. Kia swallowed hard. It was her foyer they were sprawled in. Familiar. Horrific. A chill rushed up her spine.

It took a few minutes to pull herself away from the sight in front of her, but eventually she forced herself to read the article.

A prisoner had escaped from Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary and had gone through the mountains to avoid the authorities. From what could be pieced together later, it appeared the prisoner had come to the house in search of shelter, food and money. The couple had been armed, and there was a shootout. The prisoner had eventually been found almost a mile from the house, torn apart by some animal.

Kia's heart was racing as her gaze returned to the photo at the beginning of the article. Something about it bothered her, but she couldn't quite figure it out. Then she saw it. In the black-and-white photo it was just a gray area. But to her eyes it looked a lot like the shape of a woman.

Sitting back, she looked around the room, trying to give her tired eyes a break, then she looked at the picture again. It was still there. Teasing her. She made a note of the roll and page number, so that she could get the librarian to make a copy for her.

She was ready to pack up and go home, when the librarian came to her saying that she had found something about the original family.

Kia thanked the woman, then slid the microfilm into the reader. There were no pictures, not even much information, just a society column saying that Zechariah Strode had married Mary Evans, and the happy couple had moved into their recently built house near the top of what was known among the locals as Lone Mountain.

Leaning back in the seat, Kia tried to imagine living in the middle of nowhere with no phone, no running water, no electric lights, no quick transportation. It would have taken some hearty people, that's for sure.

Kia waited for the librarian to make the copies of the articles for her, thanked the woman, and headed out the door.

The warm sunlight was welcome after the long morning in the air-conditioned library, but walking the all-but-deserted streets of Mountain Shadows was rather like perusing a ghost town. Most businesses were closed, and the ones that were open had few, if any, customers. Strangely, it was more home to her than Savannah ever had been.

She stopped in at Carol's Flea Market and was pleasantly surprised at what she found. While there were some of the expected mismatched plates, ugly lamps, and clothing she hoped nobody ever bought, most of the store resembled a craft fair more than a yard sale.

She left the store smiling and clutching a bag with a set of gorgeous hand-painted wine glasses, and went back the way she'd come. It always amazed her, the richness of small Southern towns. The variety of people, the different way of life. She'd been to the North, the West, and to Europe and Asia, but she wouldn't trade her South for any of them.

Wy had a pot of coffee on when she got to the bookstore, where her fellow amateur witches were discussing options for the next ritual. Kia sat with them and sipped the excellent drink as they told her their ideas, and together the three of them brainstormed more. The excitement of the other two was contagious, and by the time she drove up the mountain toward home, she was looking forward to trying a major spell.

At first, she thought she was seeing things when she spotted the car in her driveway. Then a smile pulled at her face as she realized the cute little red BMW convertible was for real. Pulling in behind it, she got out and walked over to the other vehicle.

A dark-haired woman slid long legs out of the car. "I thought you'd never get home."

"Hello, Sydney." Kia hugged her sister. "I told you I'd call you back. You didn't have to come all this way."

"I wanted to see this house of yours."

"Then come on in," Kia said.

An onlooker might have thought he was seeing double, as Kia and her identical twin sister greeted Dracula at the door.

In an upstairs window, for just a second, that same onlooker could have seen something that looked a lot like a face.

Chapter Seven

“Well, it’s beautiful.”

The compliment surprised Kia, but she tried not to show it. “Thank you, Sydney. I really love it.”

“But it’s going to cost a fortune to fix up. And it’s so far away from everything.”

She should have known. “It’s quiet. I can work without interruption.”

“Well, that’s true, but...” A wistful look crossed her sister’s face. “But don’t you get lonely?”

“I have the ghosts to keep me company.”

The expression on Sydney’s face caused Kia to smile. “For somebody who writes books about vampires and werewolves, you sure are easily spooked.”

Sydney’s chin edged up. “For somebody who illustrates children’s books, you have weird tastes.”

Kia laughed as she dropped into one of the kitchen chairs. “Where *should* children’s book illustrators live?”

“Well, not in a spooky old house, that’s for sure.”

“But kids love that stuff.”

“Kids like to eat cookies for breakfast too. That doesn’t mean chocolate chips in the morning are the way to go.”

“We tried every chance we got.” Warm memories washed over her, diluting the residual anger.

Sydney smiled. “We drove Mom and Dad crazy, along with a slew of nannies.”

Kia stood to grab the package of chocolate chip cookies she’d bought on her way home, then took her seat again. “Not to mention all the neighborhood kids who got into trouble because they did something we told them to.”

Sydney took a cookie from the package. “We were so bad.”

“But we had a lot of fun.”

Sydney looked into Kia’s eyes. “I miss you, sis.”

Kia felt her heart wrench. “I miss you too. That, actually, is the only thing I don’t like about living here.”

She watched as her sister took a slow, deep breath. “So, tell me about your new house.”

“Actually, the reason I was out was that I went to the library to do some research on the previous owners.”

“Find anything?”

“Yeah, actually I did.” Kia got the materials she’d brought back from town and put them on the table.

Sydney flipped through the stack of papers, then whistled softly. “This stuff would make a great basis for a novel.”

“I was planning on getting on the Internet to see if I could find more information. Wanna help me?”

Interest sparkled in Sydney’s eyes as she nodded. Smiling, Kia got out her laptop and hooked it up to a telephone jack on the wall near the table.

Most of the next few hours were spent chasing one red herring after another. Kia was intrigued, though, and didn’t even think about the length of time, until a glance toward her sister reminded her that Sydney had driven for hours to get there.

“I’m sorry, I’m not being much of a hostess.”

Sydney smiled. “Don’t worry about it, this is fun.” Gray eyes much like her own settled their gaze on Kia’s face. “It’s great just being with my sister again.”

“Hungry?”

“You know, I think I am. I don’t suppose there’s any pizza delivery way out here?”

“No, but we could go pick one up.”

“That would be a lot of trouble.”

“It’s no big deal. You relax, and I’ll go grab dinner.”

Sydney’s eyes widened, “No way, José. I’m not staying here alone.”

Dracula’s bark provoked a giggle. “I’m sorry; I know you’d protect me.”

Drac barked again, and Sydney scratched his head while Kia called the pizza place.

In the end, all three of them rode down the mountain in search of sustenance. Kia ran into the restaurant to get the food, while her sister waited in the car with the dog. All the way back up the mountain, Dracula tried to outsmart Sydney and grab some pizza. Kia laughed as she navigated the curvy road, while watching the contest out of the corner of her eye.

The sun was dropping behind the mountains as they turned the last corner and started down the long, tree-lined driveway. Kia was looking forward to sprawling in the floor and giggling like teenagers well into the early morning hours. It had been way too long since she and her sister had taken the time to just hang out. She needed this, and she was pretty sure Sydney did too.

“Kia.” Her sister’s voice interrupted her contemplation.

“Hmmm?”

“Did you leave a light on?”

“Yeah, why?”

“On the *second floor*?”

Kia frowned as she looked up and saw there was a flickering illumination in the window of the second-floor corner bedroom. “No, why would I? I’m never up there.”

“Maybe you left it on when you first moved in, and just haven’t noticed.”

Kia nodded as she pushed her uneasiness back. The last time she’d been upstairs was when Garrett was here to check out the disappearing light switch. She was pretty sure it had been turned off, but maybe they’d forgotten. As she watched, she realized there was something strange about that light. It almost looked like a flashlight—or candlelight.

“There’s somebody in there.”

Kia aimed an annoyed look toward her sister. “Sydney, it’s just a light, that doesn’t mean—”

“No. I saw somebody in the window.”

“I was looking and I didn’t—”

“*Downstairs.*”

Great, now her sister was spooked. Maybe Sydney coming here wasn’t such a great idea. She saw movement at the living room window.

Pulling the Jeep over to the side of the driveway, Kia sat and watched. The outline was faint, but there was definitely a human form inside her house.

“Call the police,” Sydney squeaked.

“Okay.” The picture of the couple lying in their own blood haunted her as she reached for her cell, but didn’t feel it in her purse. She dug around unsuccessfully for a moment, then started dumping things out. No phone. Had she dropped it in the floor of the Jeep? She had used it just before they left to call Charlie’s Pizza Palace. And that had been where? She pushed back her anxiety and tried to focus. In the kitchen. And then they’d wrestled Drac into his leash. And then they’d left.

She groaned. “Damn, I left my phone in the house.”

“We have to get help.”

Garrett.

The thought was only logical, she told herself. He had been nice, and he said he lived close by. The problem was, she had no idea where. They couldn’t just drive around trying to find him. Probably the best thing to do was go back into town to the sheriff’s office.

Then her gaze took in the thick hedge separating her property from that of her next-door neighbors. She had never met them, but maybe it was time to get acquainted.

The Jeep turned easily, and she headed back toward the main road. A plain black mailbox marked the entrance to the driveway leading to the next house. Like hers, the long driveway was unpaved. This one was longer, though, and the trees were even thicker, lending a dark, menacing feel to the journey. Or maybe she was just already spooked.

The sun dipped lower, and Kia flipped on the Jeep’s headlights. Was the driveway ever going to end?

And then it did. The architecture of the house was a lot like hers, except this place needed some serious TLC. The porch drooped, and the whole thing could have used a coat of paint.

But the ill repair wasn’t what drew Kia’s gaze. That would be the familiar blue pickup parked near the house. “That weasel.” She jerked her vehicle to a halt.

Leaving Dracula and Sydney in the Jeep, Kia stomped across the yard and up the steps to the front door of her neighbor's house. *He said he lived a couple of miles away, not right next door. Lying scum.*

She hadn't quite reached the house when the porch-light flicked on and the door opened. "May I help you?"

The man who peered through the opening had green eyes like Garrett, but there the similarity ended. Where Garrett had sandy brown hair, this man's was dark brown. Unlike Garrett, who was tall and muscular, this man was shorter and smaller built. And as far as she knew, he wasn't a lying scum. His expression wasn't very friendly, though.

"I'm Kia, from next door," she said.

The man's face instantly became more welcoming, though still wary. "Hello, I'm Nick Osborne. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Actually, I'd like to use your phone. I think there's somebody in my house."

Nick's eyes widened and he turned and yelled toward the back of the house. "Hey, Garrett, I think you'd better come out here." He motioned her inside.

The house was clean, but crowded. Lots of knick-knacks, things that seemed oddly unrelated, just shoved together. Pieces of delicate china were sitting on shelves next to yard-sale finds. The couch, which appeared to be an antique, was carelessly draped with a cheap polyester throw. A variety of small rugs were scattered willy-nilly on the beautiful hardwood floor. There was a smell too, more odd than unpleasant, but somehow unnerving. A white-haired man sat in a recliner, staring into space. He looked toward her and frowned, as if he was trying to place her.

"Hello," she said.

He simply frowned more deeply.

Then Garrett came loping into the room. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and there was water all over the front of his shirt. "I'll never get your sink fixed if you keep interrupting me." He stopped and looked at Kia, and a smile pulled at his mouth. "Well, hello."

"She says there's somebody in her house," Nick said.

The smile fell off Garrett's face. "Let's go."

“I just wanted to use your phone to call the sheriff,” Kia told them, rather amused at the macho display.

Nick frowned in Garrett’s direction. “Sheriff?”

Garrett shrugged. “Maybe. We could try.”

Kia stared as Nick nodded and took off toward a table where he checked the phone book, presumably for a number, then dialed the phone. In a moment, she heard him telling someone the situation and her address.

She turned back to Garrett, realizing she still didn’t know if he lived here or what. “So, you’re a plumber?”

“I dabble.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” His grin blew heat through her. *The rat.*

She opened her mouth to ask him straight out if he’d lied about where he lived, but Nick came back before she could. “The sheriff is on his way.”

Garrett nodded. “We’ll meet him there.”

Nick went over to the man in the recliner and gently pulled the afghan over him tighter, “I’m going out for a bit, Dad.” Then the two men took off out the door, with Kia right on their heels.

She headed back toward her Jeep, but before she could pull out, Garrett had spun his pickup around and was heading down the driveway ahead of her.

“I’m beginning to see your fascination with living way out here,” Sydney told her.

“Oy!” Kia breathed, as she focused on keeping up with the taillights in front of her.

Before long, the truck came to a halt near her house, and she stopped right behind it. The two men ran toward the front, and Kia had started to follow them when she felt a touch on her arm. She turned to look at her sister.

“The upstairs light,” Sydney said.

Kia looked, and sure enough, there wasn’t one. Nor was there any movement or shadows in the living room.

This time she did swing open the door of the Jeep. “I’m going in with them,” she said.

“I’m not staying out here by myself,” Sydney told her, as she dove out too.

Dracula beat the women to the porch, where the men were just returning from circling the outside of the house. Kia went straight to the front door and wiggled the doorknob to verify it was secure before she stuck her key in the lock.

She started to open the door, but strong arms pulled her back. She said an obscenity as a sexy body pushed by her on his way into the house. Dracula followed on his heels.

“Sorry,” Nick said, as he too went by her.

“Maybe we should stay out here,” Sydney said.

“And let them have all the fun? I don’t think so.” Kia marched into the house. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sydney follow—though trepidation was evident in her face.

Every light in the house was soon turned on, and the place was searched thoroughly, top to bottom. Garrett even took a flashlight and peered up into the dust and cobweb-filled attic. Kia stood at the bottom of the ladder as he backed down. In spite of the situation, his tight jeans had her licking her lips. “Nothing?”

He shook his head. “Nobody’s been up there in a *long* time.”

“Thanks for coming to my rescue,” she told him.

His smile did strange things to her heartbeat. “No problem,” he said.

“Damn it!” came from downstairs.

Kia looked at Garrett, he looked at her, and together they rushed toward the voice.

Nick, a pained look on his face, was standing in the middle of the living room, and Sydney was near him. “What did you catch it on?” Sydney was asking.

“I don’t think I caught it on anything,” Nick replied.

“You had to,” Sydney said. “Scratches don’t just appear out of nowhere.”

“What happened?” Kia asked.

“He caught his arm on something,” Sydney told her.

“There was nothing to catch it on,” Nick said.

By this time, Kia had gotten a good look at the injury on Nick’s arm. Three long scratches.

“I hate to say it, but maybe some nails didn’t go all the way in,” Garrett said.

“Three right together? I don’t think so,” Nick said.

“Well, what do you think it is?” Garrett asked, irritation filling his voice.

“I don’t know, but I wasn’t that close to the wall anyway.”

Kia edged a bit away from the two men, pulling her sister with her. Let the boys get it out of their systems and then maybe they could get back to checking out the house.

“He’s cute,” Sydney whispered.

Kia ignored the remark as she watched the two men argue. This was not turning out to be a good night.

“You could introduce me, you know.”

Kia aimed an irritated glance toward her sister, and was considering why the idea bothered her so much when the men, apparently finished arguing, came over to them.

“I don’t have a clue what it was,” Garrett told them.

“I’m Sydney, Kia’s sister. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Kia turned to see her twin holding out her hand to Nick. Relief swept over her, and she didn’t want to figure out why.

“I’m Nick Osborne,” he told her as he took her hand in his. “I live next door. And I’m fine.”

She gave Nick a big smile before she turned to the other man.

“I’m Garrett McKnight,” Garrett told her.

“Nice to meet you both.”

McKnight?

Kia watched as her sister gave the men her biggest, flirtiest smile. And they smiled back. Just why did that bother her?

“We left the pizza in the car,” Kia announced, as she turned to go retrieve it.

She was barely out the front door when she became aware of someone beside her. A glance confirmed what she already knew. It was Garrett.

“I can get the pizza by myself,” she told him. “I don’t need a bodyguard.”

“You sure about that?”

There was something about his tone that made her glance around nervously. “There you go, trying to scare me again.”

“I’m not trying to scare you.”

Kia jerked the door of the Jeep open and grabbed the pizza box. “Look, I know you think you’re all macho and stuff.”

“I’m just concerned about you, that’s all.”

She turned to stare him straight in the eye. “Is that why you neglected to tell me that you’re a McKnight?”

“I never lied. I told you I worked at McKnight Contracting. I do.”

She leaned against the side of the Jeep, and wondered how she could have missed the resemblance. “Landon is your father?”

“Yeah, we run the company together.”

“And you do plumbing on the side?”

He took the pizza box out of her hand. “Not if I can help it. Nick’s my cousin. I was doing him a favor.”

“Cousin, huh?”

“Distant. His mother and mine have the same grandfather.”

“And you live...?”

“About a mile that way.” He gestured in the opposite direction from his cousin’s house. “I’ll take you out there one day. You can meet my dog.”

She blinked. “You have a dog?”

“Yep. Dachshund. “

“Ah, snack for Drac.”

He chuckled. “Nah, Daisy can hold her own.”

Kia thought she’d choke on the barely repressed laughter. “*Daisy?*”

“Yeah, what about it?”

She studied Garrett’s impassive face. “You’re putting me on.”

He held up one hand. “Scout’s honor.”

“You were never a Boy Scout.”

“Don’t be so sure.” He moved just a bit closer. “Besides, you never told me you had a twin sister.”

“State secret. If I’d told you I’d have had to kill you.”

He leaned toward her.

She met him halfway, their lips coming together gently, yet with a shock that rocked her entire being. Reaching for him, she leaned against his tall, strong body.

When his warm fingers touched her back, she felt tingles. But that was nothing compared to what she felt as he deepened the kiss. He explored her mouth with a finesse that made her knees weaken.

Giving him back as good as he was giving was a pleasure the likes of which she had rarely felt in her life. He responded to her efforts with a gentle moan that caused her to smile softly and pull him closer.

The corner of the pizza box was poking into her side, but she couldn't have cared less. She was too busy enjoying the way Garrett would sweep her mouth, then pull back to gently nip at her lips, then return to the entanglement of their tongues. It was teasing at its finest, and she never wanted it to end. Sighing, she gave herself over to his efforts.

The scream tore them apart and had them sprinting toward the house.

Back in the living room, they found Nick sitting on the couch holding the side of his face, while Sydney stood off to the side, fists clenched in front of her mouth and trembling. "Something attacked him!" she shrieked.

"I'm okay," Nick told them. "Except for being seriously weirded out." He pulled his hand away to reveal three scratches on his face.

Garrett turned on Sydney. "Did you do that?"

"No!" Angry gray eyes shot fire toward him.

"Those are fingernail scratches, just like the ones on his arm." His glare took in both Nick and Sydney. "What kind of game are you two playing?"

"Game?" Sydney took a step toward Garrett and poked at his chest with one finger. "Are you crazy? Something's in here. Something attacked Nick. You should be looking for it instead of accusing me of being a pervert."

Kia shook her head to clear her thoughts a bit, then turned to Nick. "Did you see what hurt you?"

He shook his head. “I was sitting here, talking to Sydney, when suddenly I felt pain down my cheek.” He winced as he touched the wound. “And I have no idea how these scratches got there.”

“Like the others?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

She looked at Garrett, who was chewing his bottom lip. “Are you sure you didn’t see anything, Nick?” he asked.

“Positive.”

“Let’s check the room.” He went to the couch and started moving cushions.

Kia went to the other side of the room and bent to look under the furniture. She heard her sister tell Nick that he needed to clean the wound, then she heard their footsteps as they went toward the back of the house.

“Careful,” a voice said, and she glanced over her shoulder to see Garrett looking at her. “It could be a rabid squirrel or something.”

She edged back from the chair she was looking under, then continued the search with more caution. There was no sign of any animal but Dracula, who was lying on a rug and contemplating the crazy humans. “If there was a squirrel in here, Drac would be barking his fool head off.”

“I know,” Garrett said.

She turned to look into eyes filled with worry. “So, what do you think it was?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You think it was a ghost.”

He crossed his arms and stared at her. “Do you have another explanation?”

“No. But I’ve lived here almost a month and nothing’s bothered me. Why would it attack Nick?”

“I have no idea.” But he didn’t meet her eyes when he said it.

So, he’s still keeping secrets. Sighing, she dropped into the nearest chair. “We need to find out who the ghost is—or was.”

“Doesn’t scare you, huh?”

“I don’t scare easily.”

He laughed softly. "Trust me, I've noticed."

"So don't bother trying."

"Wouldn't think of it."

The knock startled them both. Kia went to the window, saw the man in uniform, and wondered how she could have forgotten. "Well hello, sheriff," she said, as she pulled open the door. "Come on in."

"Someone reported an intruder." The man made no move to come inside.

"They appear to have left already," she told him.

"Maybe you should have driven a tad faster, Hal," Garrett said.

"Well, Garrett, fancy seeing you here."

Garrett came over and draped an arm around Kia's shoulders. "Kia's a neighbor. Somebody's gotta keep the neighborhood safe."

The older man raked Kia's body with his eyes. "You do that, son."

Kia felt her blood boiling as she stared at the middle-aged man standing in her doorway. Superficially, he resembled Santa Claus, with his graying hair and his chubby belly. But the resemblance ended when she looked into his eyes. It was hard to imagine the mythical children's hero with that leer on his face. "We got home and saw someone's shadow in the living room."

He lifted one eyebrow. "You and Garrett?"

She blew out her frustration. "My sister and I. We'd gone to get a pizza."

A growl at her side told her that Dracula didn't approve of the new arrival any more than she did.

Hal stepped back. "Is that dog on a leash?"

"No. He's in his own home," she told him.

"You still have to keep him under control."

It was all Kia could do to keep from smiling at the man's obvious fear. "He'll only attack if he thinks I'm in danger."

"I take it you decided there wasn't anybody in here," Hal said, his eyes never leaving Dracula.

“She came over to Nick’s to call you,” Garrett told him. “And by the time we got back here, whoever it was had gone.”

“If there ever was anybody here.”

Dracula’s growl backed the sheriff up another step.

“Oh, there was somebody here,” Kia told him. “Garrett and Nick must have scared him off.”

Surprise crossed the man’s face. “So, Nick’s here too. Imagine leaving his daddy like that.”

The sarcasm in his words danced on her last nerve. “Sheriff, I think the crisis is over, if you have other things to take care of I’ll understand.”

Hal smirked. “I believe you might have a point there, little lady. I’d better get back down the mountain and make sure them midget whores on third ain’t trying to kill each other again.” The leer was back. “It’s always interesting watching ’em though.” Turning, he wasted no time heading out to the patrol car in the driveway and taking off down the road.

“I don’t like him,” Kia whispered.

“Welcome to the club,” Garrett said.

Kia took a deep breath and turned to see the other couple standing in the doorway to the hall. “Let’s warm up the pizza.”

There was agreement, so she took the box toward the kitchen.

Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw a figure just for a second, but quickly pushed the idea away. There’d been entirely too much excitement tonight. She didn’t need to be imagining any.

Mary Strode watched the humans who had invaded her home. They weren’t frightened enough to leave yet. But she was positive they soon would be.

It was hard to believe a woman owned the house. A woman who seemed to have no fear. If a ghost could sigh, she would have. It wouldn’t be easy to scare her away, and that was a shame. There’d been so many deaths already. She hoped the fearless woman wouldn’t be the next.

Chapter Eight

It was almost one before the men left. Kia and Sydney curled up on the couch and chatted amicably for a time. It didn't take long for Sydney to conk out, and the warmth radiating from the fireplace soon had Kia getting groggy as well. As she floated between awake and asleep, she considered the night's events, especially Garrett and his talented lips.

As she drifted off, she made a mental note to torture him until he gave her a straight answer about why he'd felt the need to conceal the fact he owned a company. For a second she thought she felt a touch on her shoulder, then it was gone. As she smiled at her imagination, sleep overtook her.

Kia was having an interesting dream involving Garrett wearing nothing but a tool belt. And he looked rather good in it, too.

A scream tore her awake.

"What happened?" Her muddled brain slowly woke up enough to register her sister sitting on the couch, hands over her heart, staring toward one corner of the room. Kia looked in that direction, but all she saw was the little table her aunt had given her.

"There was a woman there, I saw her."

Kia sighed. "You dreamed it, Syd."

"No." Sydney's eyes were huge. "I felt something touch me, and it woke me up. There was a woman standing beside the couch. I watched her as she walked over to the corner and disappeared. Then I screamed."

Leave it to the writer's imagination. "We were up late, and it was a pretty interesting evening—"

“I don’t believe this.” Sydney nailed Kia with her eyes. “You’ve gone on and on about living in this creepy house, but God forbid somebody else sees *your* ghost.”

Kia shook her head to break loose the cobwebs. “I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just that logically—”

“Screw your logic.” Sydney stood, pulled the cover they had both been using from the couch, wrapped it around her like a shawl, and marched toward the kitchen.

Kia leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Well, she had wanted adventure and change, right? Forcing herself to her feet, she shivered as she headed toward the bathroom. The fire had gone out, but least she was still completely dressed, although the thin T-shirt offered little protection from the chill.

After freshening up and finding a flannel shirt, she went into the kitchen. Sydney had put the coffee on, and had even fed Dracula. She was currently sitting at the kitchen table and staring down the coffeemaker as it slowly dripped brown liquid into the carafe.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too.” Sydney turned sincere eyes on Kia. “I saw her. She walked to the corner and just disappeared. Weird thing was that I wasn’t scared until she was gone.”

“I believe you,” Kia told her.

“Really?” There was challenge in the voice.

“Yes, really. Last night...well, early this morning...just before I went to sleep I felt something. It felt like somebody touched me, but I decided it was my imagination and ignored it. But maybe it was her.” She shrugged.

Sydney shivered. “I don’t see how you can live here.”

“I love this house.”

“It’s dangerous.”

Kia laughed. “Oh come on, you said yourself that you weren’t even scared until the ghost disappeared. I don’t think she’s dangerous.”

“Okay, assuming the ghost isn’t dangerous—although I kind of think Nick might disagree—you did the research on this place yourself. It’s isolated and on the top of a mountain. The perfect

place for escaped criminals and marauding grizzlies. Forget the ghosts, the humans are scary enough.”

“Grizzlies aren’t human.”

Sydney rolled her eyes. “You’re my sister. I don’t want you to wind up a news story in the local paper.”

The love in the voice made Kia smile. “I know.”

“Come back to Savannah with me.”

“No.”

“Please.”

Kia saw tears fill her sister’s eyes, and her heart twisted. “I’m happy here. This is my home.”

Sydney wiped at her face. “Why do you have to be so blasted stubborn?”

“You’re going back, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” Again she saw tears swim in her twin’s eyes. “I don’t want to leave you, but I can’t stay here.”

“I understand. Honest. When do you want to leave?”

“After breakfast.”

So soon? Kia nodded as she fought her own tears. “I’ll go down the mountain too, and we can stop in Wy’s store. You’ll like her. She and Rusty have been really nice to me since I moved here.”

“Boy, for somebody who tends to keep to herself, you haven’t wasted any time making friends.”

“I guess it’s just my charming personality.”

Sydney snorted. “Yeah, right. I’m going to get freshened up and pack.”

“I’ll cook breakfast.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

Kia smiled as she pulled out a frying pan. She loved her sister, even if she was a wimp.

The bacon and eggs were finished, and Kia was waiting for the toast when she heard her sister come out of the bathroom. She walked through the kitchen and continued on into Kia's studio.

The toast popped up and she put the pieces with the rest of the food on the table. "Breakfast's ready."

"Coming," Sydney said. "This is a beautiful studio."

"One of the best things about this house." She opened the fridge in search of orange juice. She had remembered to buy some, right?

"Oh my God!"

Kia slammed the appliance door and rushed toward the studio. Sydney was holding her sketchpad and staring wide-eyed at it. "You okay?"

"It's her."

"Her who?"

Sydney's gaze met hers. "The ghost. This is a picture of the woman I saw this morning." She turned the pad to face Kia, and she saw the drawing of the woman she'd felt compelled to draw.

The excited smile pulled Kia's mouth wide. "Well, I'll be damned."

Chapter Nine

Kia opened the door to Wyoming Books, motioned her sister inside, and followed close behind. The expression on Wy's face when she looked up and saw Kia and Sydney walking in was priceless. There was a quick blink as if she thought she was seeing double, then wide-eyed surprise, followed by a smile that slowly crossed her face.

"You didn't tell me you had a twin," she said—as she looked straight at Kia. Then she turned to Sydney and held out her hand. "Hello, I'm Wy."

The two shook hands. "I'm Sydney, and either you're one of those people we simply can't fool, or you have amazing luck."

Wy grinned. "Honey, I get lucky on a regular basis. But I recognized your sister's attitude."

Kia watched as Sydney eyed her speculatively. "Bad?"

"Different."

"True."

"Well, if you two are finished dissecting me, I smell coffee." Kia glanced toward her sister. "Wy makes the most incredible coffee."

"Ooh, I can't wait to try it."

They walked toward the counter, where Wy poured the three of them cups of wonderful-smelling liquid. Kia simply enjoyed the smell for a moment before she took a careful sip of the hot drink.

"This is superb," Sydney said. "You should sell this stuff, you'd make a fortune."

Wy chuckled. "I'd much rather sell books. The future of our world is between the pages, you know."

"That's a wonderful way of putting it, and I absolutely agree." Sydney held up her cup in a toasting fashion.

"Where's Rusty?" Kia asked. "Class?"

Wy nodded. "So, why didn't you tell me you had a sister?"

Kia shrugged. "It just didn't come up."

"Well, I feel loved." Sydney took on an exaggerated hurt expression.

"It's just that we were busy discussing other things."

"Oh really? Like what?"

Kia shrugged. "Well, there's men."

"Of course."

"And football."

"*Football?*" Sydney raised one eyebrow. "Since when do you care about football?"

"Since I was shown how interesting watching men in tight pants could be."

"It figures."

"And then there's witchcraft."

Shock crossed Sydney's face as her hand trembled, and for a moment it looked like she was going to drop her cup. "*What?*"

Kia noticed the wary look in Wy's eyes, but she ignored that in favor of the fun of riling her sister. "We cast a circle and everything. Right in my living room."

Sydney set the cup down, and Kia saw her hand was shaking. "Well, no wonder you have ghost problems. You two are playing with powerful forces."

Now it was Kia's turn to stare in shock. "What do you know about it?"

"I write paranormals, remember?"

"But you always are so...well...chicken."

Sydney's gray eyes shot arrows at Kia. "Just because I don't enjoy having frightening experiences, that doesn't mean I don't know anything about the field. Again, paranormal romance novelist here."

"Wait, wait." Wy was waving an upheld hand. "Sydney. Wolfe. You're *the* Sydney Wolfe?"

Sydney's face abruptly went pink. "Yeah, that's me."

"Wow, I love your books."

Kia stared at her new friend. "You read *romance* novels?"

Sydney gave her a dirty look.

“Sure. I’m a sucker for a happy ending,” Wy said. “Add in a pinch of weird happenings and I’m as happy as that dude on Jeopardy when he passed two mil. And Sydney’s stuff is awesome.”

“Glad you like it,” Sydney said, as her face passed pink and began to glow red.

“You’ll have to autograph one of your books for me.”

“It’d be my pleasure.”

“Great.” She rushed over and took a book off a shelf, grabbed a pen from the counter, and shoved them both at the still-red Sydney. “Wyoming, just like the state. And feel free to put things about good friend, wonderful, beautiful, fascinating, whatever.”

Kia smiled. This was a side of her sister she rarely saw. It was always a bit odd, seeing Syd as an author signing books and being complimented on her success. Odd and pretty fantastic. Pride had her mouth pulling into a huge smile.

“So Kia told you about her ghost?” Wy asked, as she took the signed book and put it under the counter.

“Yes, I was introduced,” Sydney said.

Wy stopped in mid movement to stare. “Introduced? What did you see it or something?”

“Yeah, actually I did.” She aimed a glance toward Kia. “You couldn’t pay me to live in that house.”

“I love it there,” Kia said, thorough clenched teeth.

“Look what happened to poor Nick.”

“Happened? What happened?” Wy’s gaze was bouncing between them like a tennis ball.

“He was attacked,” Sydney informed her.

“Attacked?” Wy’s eyes were wide. “The ghost attacked somebody?”

“Maybe.” Kia was not at all comfortable with the direction of the conversation. Oddly, it felt like a personal insult. “It kinda looked that way, but there might be another explanation.”

“Details. I want details.” Wy looked like she was going to grab somebody and start shaking.

“The guy from next door got scratched. There was no good explanation,” Kia said.

“Guy next door? Not Nick Osborne?”

Okay, first the sheriff, and now Wy. Did the man just never leave his house? “Yeah. He and Garrett came over because we thought somebody had broken in.”

“But apparently that was just the ghost,” Sydney put in.

“Garrett too, huh? Interesting.” Wy sent a questioning glance in Kia’s direction.

“Well, he was at Nick’s house when we went over there to use the phone,” Kia told her. “Of course, being men, they got all macho and went in defense of the women.”

“I’m surprised Nick left his dad alone, especially at night.”

Kia frowned, as interest spiked inside her. Maybe this was an opportunity to get some information. “That’s what the sheriff said. What’s going on with his dad?”

Wy leaned back in her seat as she slowly shook her head. “Sad stuff. Sad family, actually.”

“How so?”

“They were always reclusive people. Then Nick’s mother disappeared while he was in high school. There were all kinds of rumors about what happened to her. Best I could put together, she simply vanished one day, never to be seen again.”

“How horrible!”

“It was pretty bad. Anyway, after that Nick’s dad never left his house at all. Nick wound up quitting school to take care of him. I think he got his GED, but I’m not sure. All I know is that he comes into town for supplies and that’s the only time anybody ever sees him.”

“What are they doing for money?” Sydney asked.

Wy shrugged. “Nobody knows. There’s a lot of speculation, though—most of it involving illegal means—but there’s no real basis for that theory.”

“Nick seems nice.” There was a wistful smile on Sydney’s face.

“Oh, he is,” Wy told her. “He just keeps to himself. And he’s a bit strange.”

“Strange how?”

“Not sure I can put my finger on it.”

The bell over the door tinkled, and Kia looked up to see Garrett walk into the store.

Garrett met Kia's gaze as the male part of him reacted in typical fashion to her sexy little body. He smiled. The woman sure was something.

"What's this I hear about you and Nick doing some macho posturing last night?"

It took him a moment to focus on what Wy had just said. "So they told you, huh?"

"Well, yeah. You should know by now that I put truth serum in my coffee," Wy told him. "Want some?"

He chuckled as he leaned against the counter. "Sure. I'm not afraid of you and your tricks, you little witch."

Wy raised an eyebrow, but kept quiet as she got his coffee. He turned to look at Kia and Sydney. Identical. Well, almost. Sydney was a bit thinner, hair a bit more styled. Kia had more curves, her hair was wilder, and she was sexier. He couldn't resist a big smile.

"You find me amusing, do you?"

"Not a bit. Fascinating, exasperating, crazy making? Yeah. Amusing? No."

Kia's lips curved up a bit at the corners. "I could say the same about you."

Interest slid through his body. "Really?"

"Really." She leaned against the counter, which allowed her low-cut sweater to pull open to reveal some very interesting cleavage.

A sharp poke at his shoulder brought him out of his sightseeing daydream. He looked up to see Wy glaring at him. "If you get your mind out of the gutter, you'll be less likely to pour coffee all over yourself."

"As much as I'm enjoying this," Sydney said. "I think I'd better get going. It's a long drive home."

"Stay." Kia's voice was so sad Garrett wanted to cry just hearing it.

"I can't." Sydney hugged Kia, said a quick goodbye to Wy and Garrett, and the sisters went toward the entrance.

He looked at Wy and saw her giving him a narrow-eyed stare. "I'm a red-blooded American male," he said, quietly enough the other two couldn't hear. "Do you really expect me to not respond to a sexy woman?"

"Just don't break her heart."

“That’s...um...not the part I’m interested in.”

Wy narrowed her eyes and seemed to study him a moment, then smiled knowingly. “Whatever you say.”

A customer came in as Sydney went out, so when Kia came back to the counter, they were alone. Of course she was sad, and he wanted badly to make her feel better. “I wish she would have stayed.”

Black curls bounced as she nodded. “Me too. Pain in the ass ghost.”

“She left because of the ghost?”

“And I guess I can’t blame her, seeing as she actually saw the thing.”

“Nobody would blame you either, if you decided to go home. I’d miss you though.” He hadn’t meant to say that.

“I’m not going anywhere.” She turned a smile on him. “I *like* strange, remember?”

He grinned at her impish expression. “I don’t know why I even brought it up.”

“Me either.”

“Are you hungry?” She lifted one shoulder, and he took that as a yes. “I know this exclusive place that serves wonderful chicken salad sandwiches.” He touched her cheek. “How about it?”

She cocked her head and narrowed her eyes. “Oh, why not?”

“It’s on the mountain. You can either ride up with me and I’ll bring you back later, or you can follow me.”

Her forehead pulled into a frown. “On the mountain?”

“Yep.”

“Strange place for a restaurant.”

“Exclusive, like I said.”

Her mouth moved in a half smile, and he was sure she was on to him. But then she stood. “I’ll follow you.”

They waved toward Wy and her customer as they went out. He got into his truck, waited until she was ready, then started up the road. As he drove he watched behind him to see Kia following in her Jeep. Well, he’d convinced her to come with him. Now all he had to do was figure out what to do once they reached their destination.

Kia was certain Garrett was trying to pull one over on her, but spending time with him sounded so much better than going home and missing her sister that she'd decided to let him get away with it.

As she drove up Lone Mountain, following Garrett's truck by a couple of car lengths, she thought about Sydney leaving—and lectured herself to keep from crying. When she'd made the decision to move here, getting away from family had been one of the reasons. And as much as she loved her sister, she needed her own space too.

A couple of miles from her driveway, Garrett turned onto a gravel lane. As she followed, she began to wonder if she'd been wrong about him. There was a tiny gas station/country store on the right. Maybe there was a mini town up here too.

A few feet further he turned onto a dirt road, and a smile pulled at her lips when she saw the little beige house at the end of the road. That was no restaurant, exclusive or otherwise.

He parked his truck next to the building, and she pulled in beside him. "Your house?" she asked, as she slid out of her Jeep.

"I told you the place is exclusive."

"You're incorrigible."

His dimples flashed. "So I've been told."

His hand touched hers, and she grasped the strong fingers. His smile sent her heart into overdrive as they walked toward the house. Shivers tingled through her when she thought about what those hands would feel like touching more intimate parts of her body.

As they walked up onto the porch, Kia heard the barking of what sounded like a huge dog. "Daisy?"

He nodded. "She doesn't like that I leave her alone during the day."

"I don't blame her."

His glance allowed her to see the surprise and then the heat in his eyes.

When he opened the door, a dachshund the size and shape of a mailbox with legs was waiting for him. The animal gave him a good barking at as he petted and talked to her. Then the dog turned her attention to Kia, wagging its tail and looking up at her with an expression that begged for attention.

“Well, you’re a cute little thing.”

“Daisy’s a sweetheart.”

Kia knelt on the floor to play with the dog, who climbed into her arms and honored her with a barrage of kisses. “You’re adorable.” Entranced, she watched as the dog ran around the room, wagging its tail, barking, then returning for more attention.

“So,” she asked Garrett, who had lowered himself to the floor beside her, “wanna tell me how you wound up with a dog named Daisy, of all things?”

A stab of pain crossed his face. “She’s my daughter’s dog.”

Daughter? Kia’s heart stopped, then started again with a huge jump. “You have a daughter?”

He nodded sadly. “Her mother took Zoë with her when she left, but she wouldn’t let her take Daisy.”

Her heart twisted and all but broke into pieces at the pain she saw in Garrett’s eyes. “How long?”

She saw him swallow before he answered. “Two years. She left just before Zoë’s fourth birthday.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Daisy jumped up to kiss Garrett. He made a show of pushing her back and saying, “Down, girl.” But Kia saw his smile and the love in his eyes. He was crazy about the tiny canine, and not just because she belonged to his kid. That said something about a man’s character—something that Kia liked.

He stood and reached for her hand. “I promised you lunch.”

“Yes, you did, and I’m starving.” He pulled her to her feet so fast and with such strength it almost seemed like she flew. There, face to face with him, the warmth of his hard body radiated.

Her hand moved of its own accord to lie flat against his chest, and under his shirt she could feel the coarse hair that covered his chest. Questions swirled through her. Was the hair on his chest sun-bleached like the hair on his head? Maybe. He was obviously outdoors a lot. Did he work shirtless? Did the tan she could see on his face and arms extend to his chest? The feel of his rock-hard muscles under her palm made her want to explore. Just how much of his body was hard like this? The thought made her smile.

“What are you grinning about?”

“About how hungry I really am.”

His green eyes grew dark and stormy. His gaze held her as he leaned in and captured her lips. Her knees promptly went weak, and her arms flew around him. His hand slid down to her butt. When he pulled her closer, she felt his obvious desire for her. Sliding her tongue into his mouth, she tasted the spicy sweetness that was Garrett.

Somehow he had worked one hand under her sweater, unfastened her bra without her noticing, and pulled both bra and sweater up to give him an unobstructed view. Strong, work-calloused fingers slid over her delicate nipples, arousing her almost beyond the brink. Jerking his shirt from his pants, she burrowed her hands under it to better feel his furry, firm chest. Hands shaking, she began to unbutton his shirt, never once taking her mouth from his. A quick glance told her that he did indeed work shirtless at times.

“In a hurry?” he whispered against her lips.

Her jeans were being unzipped. That realization sucked a moan from her. Then a big hand slid down into her panties and touched the delicate mound between her legs. “You’re good with your hands.”

“Honey, I’m just getting started.”

Trembling, she grabbed at his shoulders to keep from sliding to the floor. The movement brought her bare nipples against his furry chest, and the sensation ripping through her body brought her so close to the edge she gasped.

Barely realizing they were moving, somehow she found they had entered a bedroom. She knew this because the back of her legs had just bumped into a bed.

He stripped off her top and bra. Moaning, she jerked off his shirt. Then she was falling backwards, but it was okay. Garrett was going with her.

Then his hands were sliding her jeans and panties off, and the brush of air against her already damp privates had her gasping.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered, and her heart kicked into high gear.

Forcing herself to focus, she grabbed at his belt buckle with both hands. Then his jeans and briefs were sliding down his legs. Grabbing at Garrett’s bare body, Kia ran her hands over him as if she were blind and trying to see him with her fingers. All her questions were answered; he was tanned to the waist and hard all over. Every inch of him. Smiling happily, she reached for those last few inches. Her hand claimed his huge erection, and she heard him gasp. “Like that, huh?”

Then his mouth covered hers and his tongue claimed her hard and fast. One hand squeezed and rubbed at her breasts, while the other slid between her legs. A finger entered her, then two. She pulled at him, wanting him closer, wanting him inside her. While his mouth continued to ravish her, long legs pushed hers apart, and she grabbed at his butt to encourage him to complete the act. “Please, Garrett. Now!”

And then she felt him enter her. She had to break the contact her mouth was making to gasp for air before she broke into a half-scream, half-moan. When he moved she thought sure she’d lose consciousness. Lifting her hips, she forced him to bury deeper and deeper into her. Her legs wrapped around his back as her body gripped his huge member. She heard him groan just before he took her lips with his one final time. Then they plunged off the cliff together.

Garrett rolled to his back, pulling her on top of him. She lay against his shoulder as she struggled to catch her breath. “That was awesome,” he said, his voice rough and his breathing hard.

She chuckled. “I concur.”

“You got me so wound up I forgot to use protection. I’m sorry.”

“I take birth control pills,” she told him as her eyes closed in total contentment.

“Do this a lot, do you?” There was a hint of pain mixed with the humor in his voice.

She raised her head enough to look into his eyes. “No. I take the pill because I have heavy, very painful periods.” She touched the cleft in his chin. “So unless you just gave me some dread disease, we’re safe.”

He shook his head. “No disease. I promise.”

“Okay then.” She rose up to kiss his full, sexy lips. One leg sprawled across him, and she rubbed her body against his like a cat in heat.

“I thought you were hungry.”

“I am. For you.”

Suddenly he flipped her on her back and shook her with a deep, arousing kiss. His hand went between her legs, and she jerked with the sudden jolt of his touch against her already alert nerves. To be fair, she decided he needed some fun too, and reached between them to take a certain part of him in her hand. Rewarded with the sound of his gasp, she began to move her hand. He was responding nicely, and she wanted to continue the trend.

He took her nipple in his mouth, and she bucked with pleasure. He sucked and nibbled at the same time his fingers were doing interesting things between her legs. “Take me,” she gasped. “I want you inside me.”

“In a minute.” Then he was sliding down her and his mouth took over for his fingers.

Screaming with sheer pleasure, Kia came with an intensity she had never dreamed possible. The world blackened for a moment, then came back into focus as Garrett’s face appeared over her. He chuckled. “So you like that, huh?”

All she could do was nod as she felt him enter her. This time he was slow and gentle as he took her. He sucked her nipples, he kissed her thoroughly, touched her all over. Once again, he took her over the edge, and this time he went too.

Pulling her close once again, he gently kissed her forehead. “You’re one special woman, Kia Wolfe.”

“You ain’t so bad yourself, cowboy,” she told him, as she slid into contented slumber.

Garrett lay watching Kia sleep. He hadn't wanted to admit to her that she had been the first—the only—since his ex-wife. He wasn't a one-night-stand guy, and after the mother of his child had put him through hell, he had vowed never to get involved again.

He knew Kia wasn't interested in a commitment. And, God help him, that hadn't been his intention. A little flirting, a roll in the hay before she was out of his life and back in Savannah. But he had a feeling it wasn't going to be that easy. Not with Kia. She was an enigmatic imp who challenged him on many levels—and enjoyed doing it.

As he gently stroked her cheek, she smiled without waking and snuggled closer. Protectiveness barged in on him like an unwelcome visitor. How could he possibly protect a woman who deliberately put herself in danger? Who ignored every attempt to reason with her? Whose own sister had been unwilling to stay with her because of where she chose to live?

That loathsome, rotten house. There was evil in that place. And danger. The attack on Nick was proof of that. It still shook him, thinking about those ugly scratches on his cousin's arm and face.

No, he couldn't protect her from something he didn't understand and she refused to believe was dangerous, but the thought of her all alone in that house shook him to his very core. Somehow he had to make her listen to reason.

Even if that meant she left and never returned.

Sighing, he pulled her close.

Kia woke to the sight of gorgeous green eyes. "Hello."

"Hello, yourself." Garrett edged her closer and began to run his hand up and down her naked back.

Slowly she realized that the shadows in the room were the long, lazy ones of late afternoon. "I need to go."

Garrett groaned. "Now?"

She smiled toward the handsome man propping himself on one arm. "I need to get home to feed Dracula."

“I think I’m jealous of your dog.”

She propped herself on one arm in order to kiss him properly.

“Just a little while longer,” he whispered.

An hour later, they managed to get to his front door. The thought of leaving had Kia feeling empty, but staying wouldn’t have been an option even if Drac weren’t waiting for her. That was her one unbreakable rule: never stay all night—or allow them to. Generally speaking, she hated rules. But that one had worked well so far. She’d never broken it either, not even to save herself from Charlie’s wrath.

Daisy was barking and jumping at Kia’s legs, so she bent to pet the little dog. The dachshund promptly rolled over on her back and wiggled.

Kia scratched her belly for a bit before she stood up and met Garrett’s gaze.

“I promised you food,” he said.

“Oh, you satisfied my appetite.”

“I’m glad.” He kissed her, then pulled back. “But that wasn’t why I brought you out here.”

She smiled. “You really are a gentleman, aren’t you?”

He returned her smile. “I don’t know about that. I just wanted to make you one of my world-famous chicken salad sandwiches.”

“World famous, huh?”

“Absolutely.”

“How about another time?”

“It’s a date.” He pulled her toward him and kissed her until she wasn’t sure she could drive. Then he let go of her, and she danced out to her Jeep.

All the way home, she wore a silly grin. She knew this from the glimpses she caught of herself in the rearview from time to time.

As she drove through the reddening twilight, she thought about the experience she’d shared with Garrett. She’d never felt the things she had with that man. And they weren’t all physical. Being with him had awakened parts of her she thought she had closed off completely. He was dangerous, that was for sure, the irritating hunk of sexiness.

As soon as she pulled in her driveway, she heard Dracula's barking. "Coming, boy," she yelled, knowing that whether he heard her or not, he wouldn't stop until she let him out.

She pulled the door open, and a huge furry mass flew past her. Feeling like she was walking on air, she went into the kitchen and poured food into his dish.

"*Whore.*"

She stood so quickly that dog food scattered over the floor. Her heart caught in her throat as she turned to see who had spoken.

No one.

She sat the dog food bag on the table and rushed into the living room.

Nothing.

"Who's here?" she yelled.

No answer.

Just then, Dracula came in and rushed right by her on his way to the food dish.

Kia stood in the middle of the living room and tried to convince herself that she'd imagined the whole thing. Or that she'd misinterpreted some other sound. It couldn't have been a voice. There was no one here.

If anyone else was in the house, Dracula would let her know. She should just forget the whole thing.

Except she knew what she'd heard.

Chapter Ten

“I love you, Daddy.”

The sweet little-girl voice brought both a smile to Garrett’s lips and tears to his eyes. “I love you too, Zoë. And first grade will be fine, I promise.”

“Are you sure? ’Cause Mary Jo won’t be with me. And she’s my best friend, you know, and I miss her. She moved ’cause her daddy got tran-fer-sed.”

He had to swallow the painful lump in his throat before he could speak. “I’m sure, honey. You’ll make new friends. You love school. You’ll be fine.”

“Okay.” There was a pause. “Mommy says I gotta go now. Bye, Daddy.”

“Bye, sweetheart.” He hoped his daughter didn’t hear the catch in his voice.

There was the sound of the phone changing hands and then a woman’s voice came on the line. “Thanks for talking to her, Gar.”

How he hated that nickname. How many times had he told her that a gar was a fish, not a man? And she always laughed. “Not when it’s pronounced with a shorter A,” she’d say.

He swallowed his irritation so he could speak. “I’m glad to talk to Zoë anytime.”

“She’s such a pain when she gets like that. She got that stubbornness from you, you know.”

He wasn’t so sure about that, but saying so wouldn’t be wise. “Let me know how it goes today.”

“Oh, sure. We have to go. I have an early meeting.”

The line clicked, and he was once again cut off from the little girl who meant everything to him. He sighed as he returned the cell phone to his pocket.

How could Susan be so cold as to move two thousand miles away and effectively deny father and daughter regular contact?

Selfish, cold, driven, stubborn. That was his ex. What had he seen in her? Why had he thought she was so wonderful?

He knew why. She was attractive, her independence had appealed to him, and her sense of humor had sucked him in.

Now he saw her in an entirely different light. A woman who used her good looks to further her career. A person who put her desires first. And when had she lost her sense of humor?

Shoving back his anger, he determined to focus on work. McKnight Contracting had a major renovation to do. Hard, physical work, that's what he needed. That's what had kept him sane since he'd found his wife in bed with her boss. Since the divorce that he had thought would never be over. Since Susan had taken their daughter to California, where "the prospects are better".

Since his world had come apart.

"You okay there, McKnight?"

He forced himself to smile toward Connor Leif, a new employee and one hell of a carpenter. No sense taking out his frustration on an innocent person. "I'm fine, just ready to strangle my ex."

Leif smirked. "I know that feeling. My old lady's always calling and demanding child support that I ain't about to give her."

Garrett felt his stomach twist. "You don't pay child support?"

He shook his head. "Not if I can help it. That bitch has enough money, she don't need mine."

"We'd better get back to work," Garrett said. As he followed the man back to where walls were being torn down in preparation of remodeling, he considered what kind of man would shirk responsibility for the precious life he'd fathered. Susan made several times what he did, but he always paid his child support—and many times sent extra money so Zoë could have special things. He would have preferred being there, but at least he could do that much.

Forcing himself to ignore the knot in his gut, he considered his options. He'd make sure to check the man's records when he got back to the office. There was probably nothing he could do, but it was worth a try.

Before his phone had rung, he'd been pulling down drywall, and he was glad to get back to it. The work soothed him, as it always did. He knew from experience that hard work was the best

way to deal with pain. It was the way he'd dealt with it for the last two years, and how he would deal with it in the future.

But to what future? To years and years of coming home at night to an empty house? To scratching his itch with women who were no more interested in marriage than he was—like Kia? To always feeling lonely and empty?

“It's preferable to feeling your heart ripped out and handed to you,” he muttered, as he jerked at a stubborn piece of drywall.

Kia was having a hard time concentrating.

Thoughts of a hard, naked male body did interesting things to parts of her. The longing to touch him again—and have him touch her—was so strong she caught herself going for her cell phone. But she refused to give into the temptation. Her motto was “leave *them* wanting more”, and she was determined to do just that. Besides, she seriously had to work. Her editor had called and asked her to send her preliminary sketches in by next week.

She had done these middle-school age types of books before, and enjoyed the work. But today her mind and fingers just refused to cooperate.

Eventually she got into the groove and did a couple of quick outlines of a horse that was pivotal to the plot, then of the mother of the main character. About half-way into the drawing, she realized there was something oddly familiar about the woman.

It only took her a minute to figure out that the sketch was of the woman she'd drawn a couple of days before—the woman Sydney swore was the ghost.

Frustration sucked at her middle as she realized work was going to be impossible. Uttering a few colorful words, she went in search of her laptop. Trying to chase down a ghost might not be the most useful way to spend her time, but there was nothing else she could think about. Except, of course, for a tall, handsome man.

Groaning, she booted up the computer.

She was no closer to answers when Dracula started barking to let her know she had a visitor. She heard the knock just before she got to the door. A glance out the window had her hurrying to open the door. “Hello, cowboy.”

“Hello.” He leaned toward her and kissed her until she had to grab at him to keep from melting onto the floor.

“I’d have called,” he told her, “but I don’t have your number.”

She narrowed her eyes and pretended to be thinking about it. “Well, you already know where I live, so I guess it couldn’t hurt.” Hoping her still-wobbly legs would hold her—and berating herself for getting so excited over his presence—she got her purse and pulled out a pad and pen.

When she turned back, Garrett was standing beside the couch where her laptop sat. “So, you’ve been doing research on your house.”

“Actually, I’ve already done quite a bit.” She handed him the slip of paper with her number, which he stuck in the pocket of his jeans. “It’s pretty interesting.”

He picked up some of the printouts scattered over the couch. “Interesting? I’m not sure I’d use that word.” He looked through the sheets, only seeming to glance at most of them. Then he pulled out one and studied it. “You’re good.”

“Thank you.” A shiver of pride tingled through her.

“I’ve done research off and on for years, and never thought to find out what happened to the mother.”

“When I read that she’d been committed to an asylum, I wanted to know if she’d ever managed to rebuild her life.” She pointed to the end of the article. “She swore it was a man in the shape of an animal who killed her husband and son. And she was still swearing it when she died—even after several shock therapy treatments.”

“Oh, I’m sure she convinced herself of that. People don’t think straight after they’ve suffered a terrible tragedy. And the primitive psychiatric treatments of the time probably didn’t help.”

Garrett had looked away, so she moved right in front of him so she could look into his eyes. “So why do *you* believe her story?”

One side of his mouth pulled into what looked like a grudging smile. “You *are* good.”

“Damn right. So spill, cowboy.”

He seemed to consider for a moment, then parked his cute butt on the arm of her couch. “Okay, the story is that somewhere in this area is a man who can change into a beast. There have been several credible eyewitness accounts over the years.”

“Werewolf?”

He shrugged. “I guess you could say that. It’s a story that’s been bouncing around the mountain for as long as I can remember. But who knows what the truth is. You know how rumors tend to get more and more exaggerated over time.”

She propped her fists on her hips and glared at him. “Hey, wasn’t I the one saying that?”

“Point conceded.” He pulled her hands from her hips and took them in his. “The bottom line is that, strange things seem to happen in and around this house. You’ve seen that yourself.”

Irritation pricked at her, and sarcasm escaped her lips. “And you want me to agree to let the big, strong man protect me?”

“Actually, what I’d like is for you to agree to get the hell out of here.”

Anger blasted through her, and she jerked her hands from his. “This is my home, Garrett. I’m not leaving.”

Sadness crossed his face. “I know.”

His expression was of concern, she could see that. How could she make him understand? “I love it here,” she told him.

“I know you do. But this house is evil.”

She stared at him, unable to believe the B-movie line he’d just used. “It’s a building, made up of boards and nails and stuff. How can boards be evil?”

His bright, intelligent eyes looked into hers for a long moment. “I don’t know what’s going on in this house. I just know that there’s a feeling of malevolence here.”

There was something else. She was sure of it. “And?”

He sighed long and hard. “I told you about the man-beast thing.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s been seen several times near this house. Some sightings within the last few years. Tradition claims that the house and the animal are linked.”

“So?”

He rubbed his forehead as if a headache was bothering him. “Look, I don’t have any answers, just a lot of questions and concerns. Bottom line is that I’m worried about you.”

“That’s sweet and all, but I’m not leaving.”

“I didn’t think you would. But I had to try.”

“Thanks for caring.”

“You’re welcome. Now tell me about that ghost your sister saw?”

“You’ve been talking to Wy.”

“Guilty as charged. Now tell me. Please.”

“Sydney said she saw a female ghost walk over to the corner, then disappear.” Her gaze moved in the direction she pointed, and she saw the little table that had belonged to her aunt. Thoughtfully, she turned to look at the papers Garrett had laid on the couch beside him. They had been there, on that table, two nights ago. Did ghosts read?

“Anything else?”

She pulled herself out of her contemplation to nod. “You remember the sketch I did of the woman? Long skirts, big eyes?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, Sydney saw it and freaked. Said it was the ghost.”

He was looking at her with a worried expression, but didn’t say anything, so she plowed right along. “This morning, I was trying to work and I caught myself sketching her again. So, I decided to see if maybe I could find a picture of this Mary Strode person.”

“Because you think she’s the ghost?”

She shrugged. “Given the clothing, and the fact she doesn’t seem to be anybody else, it’d make sense. I won’t know unless I can see a picture. I called the librarian, and she said she’d let me know if she finds anything. So far I haven’t heard from her, and there doesn’t seem to be anything on the Web—not that I really expected there to be.”

She paced as she considered. “You know, if the Strodes were local people, there’s probably some family still around. Maybe I could check with them and see if somebody has a picture.”

“I’ll ask my mom if she has one.”

Kia abruptly stopped pacing and spun to stare at Garrett. “Your *mom*?”

“Yeah, my mother’s a distant relative. In fact, her maiden name was Strode.”

“And you didn’t think you might mention that?” Frustration twisted her heart, followed closely by anger. The man obviously intended to give out information bit by tiny bit. “Come to think of it, there’s a lot you’ve been reluctant to talk about. Like your last name, that you have a daughter. Anything else you don’t think I need to know? Like maybe you’re married?”

He came to his feet with unmistakable anger on his face. “I’m divorced, and you didn’t exactly break your neck telling me about your twin sister.”

“Point conceded.” She said between clenched teeth. She wanted to scream, but managed to hold herself back.

“I’d better go, I have work to do.”

“Me too. Fuzzy Bunny waits for no one.”

He walked out the front door, and Kia stood staring after him.

Woof.

“You can say that again, Dracula.”

Turning, she went toward her studio. She had work to do, though she doubted she could concentrate on it long enough to make much progress.

It was almost midnight when the phone rang. Kia, who was sprawled in bed reading the newest Stephen King novel, was not amused by the call. “Hello, Mom.”

“I hope I didn’t wake you. This is the first chance I’ve had to call, and I know you stay up late. How are you?”

“I’m fine. I’m really enjoying my new house.”

The conversation continued, not that Kia actually did much talking. It was the usual lecture: buying a house was a ridiculous thing for an unmarried woman to do, living alone in the middle

of nowhere was ludicrous, she should have been a better girlfriend to Charlie, and, of course, there was this really nice man she needed to meet.

She kept her teeth clenched so tightly that when she got off the phone, the clench didn't completely let go. The result being that the next morning she woke with a sore jaw and a headache.

By noon, she was no closer to getting any work done than the day before. And still steaming over the phone call. She hated having to defend herself, especially to her parents. And her mom had been in critical mode overdrive.

She was pretty sure Sydney had reported to their parents—minus the ghost, they wouldn't have believed that—how isolated and old the place was. Her mother had lectured her for an hour on the financial burden of owning an old house. Then she'd spent another hour on the problem of getting things you need when living in a rural area. Like Kia needed Prada shoes anyway.

The whole thing had her so tied in knots that she finally gave up and went to town. She thought the drive would relax her, but it didn't, and she plowed into Wy's bookstore ready to take on the world—or at least the part of it that was giving her headaches.

Wy and Rusty were at the front talking, and both turned to greet her. Kia ignored the words as she marched over to them. "Why didn't anybody tell me that Garrett's mother was a Strode? Didn't either of you think it might be important?"

"Not really," Wy said.

"How about that he has a daughter—and an ex-wife."

"That was Garrett's call, not mine."

"You're my friend, or I thought you were."

Wy came out from behind the counter. "That's not fair, and you know it."

"But I live in that house. With a ghost. Don't you think any information about the place might be useful?"

Wy's face was red. "First of all, you've always said you enjoy living in a haunted house. Second, Garrett's mother is only a distant relative. Third, this isn't about Garrett's mother, it's about Garrett's ex." She stood, arms crossed in front of her, staring hard.

Kia opened her mouth, then closed it again and rubbed her aching head. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Rusty was looking back and forth between them as if she were watching a tennis match. “Garrett’s mother is a Strode?”

Wy and Kia broke into laughter, and Rusty rolled her eyes. “Yeah, laugh all you want, I think all the connections are interesting.”

“It’s a small town,” Wy told her. “Everything’s connected.”

“Still...”

“You’ve been studying too hard,” Wy told her. “What you need is a good, relaxing ritual. There’s a full moon coming up, you know.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right.” Kia leaned against the counter. “So what’s the plan?”

“Rusty and I have been talking about it. And...” Wy reached behind the counter and pulled out a box. Inside was a double-bladed knife with a beautiful white handle. “I got a new athame.”

Kia touched the beautiful object. “Nice. But wasn’t that yours we used in our ritual?”

“Yeah, but I saw this on the Web and couldn’t resist.”

“You’re really into this witchcraft thing, aren’t you?”

“It’s more fun than sitting home alone, waiting for Mr. Right’s car to break down in front of your apartment building.”

“Can I see it?”

Kia handed it to Rusty. They were admiring it when the bell over the shop door rang. Rusty put the athame in her lap and covered it with her hands, and Kia angled her body so that the customer couldn’t see.

Diana Cole breezed in and handed Wy a piece of paper. “Don’t suppose you have any of these in stock, do you?”

Wy took the paper and turned to her computer. “No, but I’ll see how long it would take to order them.”

“And what did you order from these charlatans, a love spell?”

Ms. Cole was holding the box the athame had come in.

“Love spells are dangerous,” Wy said.

Diana regarded the shop owner over the top of the reading glasses she had donned. “Well, I’m glad you have *some* sense. What did you purchase then?”

Rusty held out the knife. “An athame.”

Ms. Cole snorted. “Let me see.” She took the knife in her own hands and turned it over, and over. “You need to dull the edge more,” she said. “And dedicate it.”

“I know,” Wy told her.

Again she regarded the younger woman over her glasses frame. Then she handed the knife to Wy. “It isn’t good to allow others to touch your athame, especially after you’ve dedicated it.”

“But it isn’t dedicated yet. And besides, Rusty and Kia are... They’re my...”

“Your *coven*?”

“Yes.” Wy stood just a hair straighter. “My coven.”

A half-smile touched Ms. Cole’s face. “How charming.”

“We’re serious,” Wy told her.

“Oh, I’m sure you are. But you still shouldn’t let others touch your ritual items—even your coven.” Ms. Cole pulled the box Wy had returned the knife to toward her. “It isn’t a real athame, you know.”

“Of course it is, it doesn’t matter what company you order from or what it’s made of, or what it looks like.”

“Actually, true athames don’t exist anymore.”

“Huh?”

Ms. Cole smiled smugly. “It’s possible to instill power into a modern day athame. But at one time, athames were forged with power in them.”

“That’s not possible,” Wy said. “Power can’t be built into an object.”

“Not anymore, no. We’ve lost that ability.”

“Then how do you know it was ever possible?” Kia asked.

Ms. Cole’s bright brown eyes looked into Kia’s, and a smile grew. “Because I saw one. Many years ago, in Ireland.”

“So they *do* exist.” Kia knew she was baiting the woman, but was enjoying the feeling too much to stop.

“One. Years ago. I don’t know if there were any others, or if the one is still in existence.”

“How do you know power wasn’t instilled in the athame? How do you know it was built in?” Kia asked.

A tiny smile pulled at the woman’s still beautiful face. “It is quite obvious—to someone who knows what to look for.”

“Like you?”

“Yes.”

“I should have your books in sometime next week,” Wy said.

“Ring me when they arrive.” Ms. Cole started to leave, then turned and aimed a sweeping look over the three women. “You’re more powerful than you think. And one of you bears the gene. I would advise respect. And caution.” With that she was gone.

“Dramatic much,” Wy said.

“What if she’s right?”

The other two turned to look at Rusty. “Would you like to elaborate?” Wy asked.

“Well...” Rusty shrugged her shoulders. “It’s just that I felt some kind of power or something when we did that ritual last week. Maybe... I don’t know...”

“Maybe Diana Cole’s full of shit,” Wy whispered, before she turned to greet a customer who had just come in.

Kia reached a hand out to touch Rusty’s shoulder. “I felt it too,” she whispered. Rusty smiled, and Kia waved before she went out the door. She had a deadline, and she was behind.

The sun was setting the next evening when Kia heard Dracula’s bark, followed shortly by the sound of a motor. She pushed the half-finished sketch of the new book’s young hero aside and went to see who was giving her respite from the work she loved but couldn’t seem to concentrate on.

She wasn’t at all surprised to see Garrett getting out of his blue truck. What did surprise her was the fact that he had a pizza box with him. He came toward her and stood at the bottom of the steps, holding the box out as if it was an offering—or a barrier. “I brought dinner. Truce?”

“Sure.” She couldn’t resist the soft smile. “Come on up.”

He sat the pizza on the little table she’d bought after leaving Wy’s store the day before. He’d also brought Cokes and a manila envelope. Dracula was nosing around him, and he pulled a chew toy out of his pocket. Dracula took the gift off to the other side of the porch and stretched out.

“Bribing my dog, huh?”

His expression was sheepish. “I’m serious about making up. I guess it does seem I’ve been holding back. I didn’t mean it that way. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Sydney. It’s not like I’m ashamed of her or anything—well usually, anyway. The subject just never came up.”

“And it’s amusing to watch people’s reaction when they see you together?”

“That too.”

He handed her a Coke, then opened the pizza box. “I didn’t tell you I’m a McKnight because I’ve always been known as Landon McKnight’s son. You know how the South is; it’s all about who you’re related to. I was enjoying just being me for a change.”

His words struck a note of understanding in her, and the remainder of her irritation slid away. “I understand that, I feel the same way sometimes. Maybe that’s one reason I didn’t mention Sydney. I just wanted to be me, not one of the Wolfes from Savannah.”

He smiled, and the two sexy dimples on either side of his mouth sent tingles through her body. Shoving the hormonal response back, she asked, “And why didn’t you tell me about your ex, and your daughter?”

“It was none of your damn business.”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I *did* tell you, when it was important for you to know.”

A little worm of irritation twisted inside her. “So, I’m on a need-to-know basis, huh?”

To her surprise, a sad look crossed his face before he looked down at his feet. “It’s not easy for me to talk about Zoë.”

She reached a hand out to touch his arm. “I’m sorry, Garrett. I was mad and said things I shouldn’t have. You don’t have to tell me the story of your life.”

“Have you ever been married?”

The look he nailed her with surprised her with its intensity. “No,” she told him. “But I did live with a guy for a while, back in college.”

“And you didn’t feel the need to tell me that?”

She let the air out of her lungs as she leaned back against the chair. “I’m sorry; I know that even in a casual relationship it’s important to talk about former partners.”

“Casual relationship, huh?”

She looked at him, but he was intent on getting a slice of pizza out of the box. “You don’t think it’s casual?”

“I was hoping maybe we could be friends, not just convenient bed partners.”

She was still deciding on how to answer that when he handed her the manila envelope. “Strode family photos.”

Still a bit thrown by the conversation, she barely glanced at the yellowing photos in her hand—until she came to one of a couple. The man sat in a chair, the woman stood beside him with one hand on his shoulder and the other gripping what looked like a wadded up handkerchief. Kia sucked in air. The woman was the same as the one in her sketch. Flipping the photo, she saw that someone had written “Zechariah and Mary Strode wedding day, June 8, 1870”.

“Oh my,” she breathed.

“It’s her, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” For some reason she couldn’t fathom, tears were filling her eyes. Blinking to clear her vision, she looked harder at the image in her hand. Mary’s gaze was to one side, unfocused, and sadness radiated from her pretty face.

Finally pulling herself from the photo of the woman who was now a ghost, she looked at the face of the man. His mouth was clamped shut, his eyes hard as they stared at the camera. His posture was rigid, back pole-straight, feet planted hard on the floor. Kia felt a shiver work its way up her spine. Even through the impenetrable veil of more than a century, she felt dark energy radiate from him. “Poor Mary,” she whispered.

A hand touched her shoulder, and she looked into warm, green eyes. “He looks like a hateful son of a munchkin.”

She smiled, and the spell was broken. “Yeah, he does, doesn’t he?”

Sudden thunder had her squealing. Rain poured from the sky as they grabbed the photographs and food and ducked into the house.

Garrett dumped his load on the kitchen table and went to stare out the window. “The sun was out.”

“Does this sudden storm thing happen a lot up here?”

“No.” He was still looking out the window.

“Strange, it’s the second time it’s happened since I’ve lived here.”

He turned then, his forehead pulling into a frown. “Kia...”

“Don’t start with me.” She turned and opened the pizza box. “I’m not going anywhere.”

His hands touched her shoulders, and he turned her toward him. “I worry about you.”

“I can take care of myself.”

Their faces were inches apart, and she was promptly lost in contemplation of his features. A dimple in each cheek when he smiled, a slightly crooked nose, full sexy lips, long lashes, emerald eyes with bits of gold and touches of sky blue. She’d love to paint that face, to see if she could capture the uniqueness of this exquisite man.

When he put his hands on her shoulders and drew her close, it seemed the most natural thing in the world. She continued her study of him as they moved nearer, but when he touched his lips to hers, she felt her lids drop.

His scent. It was something she’d never really considered before. Aware of, of course, but never thought about. It was woody and warm, aftershave and man, musk and fire, moss and smoke. His hands moved over her, both soothing and lighting fires as they went. She breathed deeply as arboreal heat made her dizzy.

It took all she had to focus enough to start edging them in the direction of her bedroom. He caught on quickly, though, and assisted her in the movement toward the goal. Together they sank onto the unmade bed. Her hands grabbed at him. The velvety feel of his hair, the gentle roughness of his shirt, the stiff coarseness of his jeans. The curve of his buttocks through the

material. The almost painfully stimulating feel of his hands on her body as he slid his fingers under her shirt and over her middle. His damp mouth as it brushed her cheek, her neck, her breast.

She jerked his shirt out of his pants so her hands could roam freely over his hard, warm back. By now he had her T-shirt off and unfastened her bra. His lips discovered her nipple, and she gasped and arched her back in response. Digging her hands into his hair, she held him to her. “You feel so good,” she whispered.

“You feel pretty good yourself.” He jerked her jeans down and tossed them overboard with one hand while the other slid down to tease her most vulnerable spot. Long, hard legs pushed hers apart, sending lightning bolts of desire through her body.

The boom of thunder reverberated around them. Had her senses overloaded and exploded?

He had stopped, and she moaned as she pulled at him to continue. She’d die if he didn’t, of that she was sure. Then his mouth was claiming hers, his tongue invading her. She grabbed his butt and squeezed. He responded by shoving a finger deep inside her. On the verge of climax, she arched her back in anticipation.

Something exploded near her right ear. And suddenly rain was pelting them.

Chapter Eleven

Kia felt Garrett's warm body over her, between her and the icy drops of water. He was protecting her, and some primitive part of her was drinking in the sheer allure of it. It amazed her that she was lying here enjoying being protected by a man. His hard body between her and the cold rain.

Rain.

Reality tugged at her, and she pushed against Garrett. He moved, and the chill of the wind and rain shocked her to her senses. The side window was no longer a barrier to the elements.

Rolling to her feet, she assessed the damage. Shards of glass and bits of leaves and bark were strewn over the floor. Biting rain was blowing in where part of a window still hung.

Garrett had stood also, and was struggling to cover the opening with the blanket from the bed. Carefully, she picked her way through the mess on the floor to help him. "It's already wet," he said, indicating the blanket and shooting her an apologetic look.

"I don't care," she told him. "But there's no way we're going to make this hold." She, like he, was trying to tie the blanket to the curtain rod.

"We left some boards in the basement." He looked into her eyes. "Do you have a hammer and nails?"

"Of course."

"I'll go get the wood." He stepped away, and the end of the blanket pulled but held.

"I'll go with you."

At first she thought he hadn't heard over the sound of the rain. "I said—"

"I heard you. But you're all wet; you get dried off—" he indicated the shards on the floor, "—and stay out of that glass." He slipped on his shoes, then went out the bedroom door, tucking in his shirt as he went.

She picked her way through the mess on the floor, grabbed her clothes and sandals and tugged them on before she followed him into the kitchen and through the door leading to the basement. "I'm coming too."

As she headed down the stairs, she heard Garrett quietly making four-letter-word comments regarding stubborn women. The single bare bulb in the utilitarian white fixture that hung halfway down the stairs only spat out enough light for a small area, leaving most of the basement in inky darkness.

"Have you seen that old movie, *Arsenic and Old Lace*?" she asked.

"I don't remember."

"Two old ladies buried the bodies of the men they killed in their basement." He didn't answer, so she continued. "They killed a bunch of old guys. Turned their basement into a regular graveyard." He gave her a look that, even in the gloom, held obvious irritation.

"Think there are any bodies buried down here?"

"Keep on and there will be." He continued picking among the small pile of boards lying near the foot of the stairs.

Movement caught her eye, and for a second she thought she caught a glimpse of white, but like a dark spot after a bright light, as soon as she looked in that direction it was gone. "Did you see that?"

"Kia, that's enough."

Was that fear in his voice? "No, seriously, I saw something in that corner."

He glanced in the direction she was pointing. "There's nothing there."

Sure she'd seen something, she crept toward the back of the basement. It was hard to make things out in the gloom, but she thought there were parallel lines visible on the wall. "Does this look like a door to you?"

"It looks like an old, cracked wall." He stood with a stack of boards in his arms. "Let's get that window blocked before the water damages your things."

Feeling rather contrite, she went toward him. "I can carry some of that."

He handed her one small piece of wood, then turned and went up the stairs without a backward glance.

“Pain in the ass.”

“I’d talk,” he shot back.

He dropped the boards in the bedroom floor. “Okay, where are your hammer and nails?”

“In here.” She went to get them, and he followed her.

In the kitchen, she handed him a tiny hammer and small picture-hanging nails.

He looked at the six-inch tool in his hand, then at her. “You’ve gotta be kidding.”

“What are you taking about?”

He narrowed his eyes. “You know what. This is a doll hammer.”

“It works fine for me.”

He growled. “I’ll go get mine out of the truck.”

She followed him to the door. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head, a soft expression in his eyes. “It’s not your fault that your hands are half the size of mine.”

Oddly touched, she watched as he crossed the porch in two steps and sprinted across the lawn through the downpour. How in the world could telling her she had small hands thrill her so much? The logic circuit in her brain twitched, then threw up its hands in surrender.

She worked at kick-starting her feminist streak as she went to get towels. As she had anticipated, he was soaked when he came back in. What she hadn’t anticipated was that his wet clothes sticking to his hard body would heat her up in a very pleasant way. He dried the worst of the wet with the two large towels, but he had to be uncomfortable. Still, he went right to work in the bedroom.

Trying to block the opening where the window had been was harder than she would have thought. The rain and wind blew at them as she fought to hold the boards while he nailed them against the frame. They were both soaked again by the time they were finished.

“If you give me your clothes, I’ll put them in the dryer.”

A smile pulled at his lips. “Nice try, Wolfe, but I’d better be getting home.”

She forced herself to nod and shrug as if he hadn’t seriously disappointed her. “Okay.”

He took her chin in his hand. “Daisy gets scared when it storms. I’d better go and see about her.”

Mesmerized by his gaze, she stared into his eyes. “Thanks for fixing the window.”

“No problem. I’m good with my hands.”

“Yes, you are.”

He smiled as he lowered his face to hers. The kiss sent her flying into orbit.

Then he pulled away. “You’d better change, you don’t want to get sick.”

She nodded, not entirely sure what he was talking about.

Then he was out the door, and she was standing alone and watching him go. She felt empty, drained. She missed him, and he wasn’t even gone yet.

Woof.

She turned to see Dracula regarding her with his loyal eyes. As she closed the front door and turned toward the kitchen, she lectured herself. Dracula was the only male she needed in her life. Men were nothing but trouble.

But her heart argued against that theory. Dogs were great, but they didn’t take the place of strong arms holding a woman tight, protecting her from the elements. She smiled as she remembered just how good that had felt, then lectured herself on the illogic of females needing protection. Women were capable of taking care of themselves.

But man, it had felt so good.

Shaking her head, she tried to focus on what was important. After the fiasco with Charlie, she had vowed to keep emotional involvement out of her life. Easy, casual relationships, that was the way to go. She never intended to experience that loss of herself again, of having her essence sucked right out of her. Men had expectations for their women, and she wasn’t about to play that game. Sex with Garrett McKnight was great, but that’s all it was. She had to remember that.

Zechariah Strode smiled. He’d managed to stop the whore from plying her tricks right in his house. She was so like his wife, this tramp.

Rage ripped through him, manifesting itself in a clap of thunder that rang in the whore’s ears. Smiling, he reached out a spectral hand to touch her face. He knew she’d only feel the touch as coldness, which wasn’t as satisfying as striking her would be. But it would do.

For now.

Daisy was not at all happy about being left alone in the storm, and she let Garrett know about it by standing in front of him and barking long and hard. Usually her antics made him smile, but today he really wasn't in the mood. Reaching down, he rubbed her tiny head and told her it was all right, and that he was very sorry to have left her alone like that. But she wasn't buying any of it. "You females never listen," he told the dog.

It took him a while to get the dog calmed down, and by then the rain had all but stopped. He gave her dinner, then stripped out of his drenched clothes and stepped into a hot shower. In the privacy of the running water, thoughts came unbidden. He missed Kia. She was a beautiful woman. Strong, unashamed, full of fun. He wanted her with every fiber of his being. But it wasn't only sex he wanted from her. And that was the quandary.

When he finished his shower, he scrubbed himself with a towel as if he was trying to take off the top layer of skin. But it didn't help.

Frustrated, he went into the bedroom and pulled on fresh clothes. Daisy came toward him, calm now and anxious to play. He sighed as he lowered himself to the floor to engage in a game of tug-of-war using one of his socks. Hadn't he learned anything from his ex? Asking for more only resulted in pain. Besides, Kia was a free spirit who wasn't interested in commitment. Her passion for life was one of the things he loved about her, but he knew she only wanted some quick rolls in the hay. She, like his ex, was only interested in the moment.

Groaning, he stood and went into the living room with Daisy at his heels. She'd called what they had a "casual relationship".

Why couldn't he just be happy? Most men would give their eyeteeth for a woman to say that. Women were supposed to want commitment.

Just not the women he managed to get his fool self involved with.

Kia had just finished her own shower when her phone rang. Wrapping the huge bath towel around her, she picked up the cell and pushed the on button without looking at the screen. “Hello.”

“Kia, how are you?”

She dropped to the couch, forcing herself not to groan audibly. “I’m fine, Mom. How are you?”

“Busy as always, you know how it is.” Yeah, she did. For her parents, business—and appearance—were everything. “Your father and I were just wondering how you were getting along out there in the middle of nowhere.”

“I love it.”

“That’s good, dear. We actually were thinking about coming that way sometime next week. We have a bit of free time—not much, you understand, but perhaps we could at least get a look at this place you’re so proud of.”

Visit! Panic twisted her gut as she forced her voice to work. “I really haven’t had time to get things together yet.”

“Oh, we understand completely. We’ll stay in a hotel, of course. We just thought it’d be nice to pop in and say hello.”

“I’d love to have you,” she lied.

“We’ll see you sometime toward the end of next week.”

The phone clicked, and Kia beat her head repeatedly against the back of the couch. Things were just not going her way.

When Kia got to the bookstore the next morning, she was in no better mood. “I can’t believe they actually have time in their busy schedules to come and make my life miserable,” she was telling her friends.

“Are they really that bad?” Wy asked.

“No.” Kia sighed, as honesty prodded her. “They’re basically nice people, but they’re driven lawyers obsessed with making money.”

“Sounds like my dad,” Rusty said.

“So you didn’t inherit your artistic ability from them?” Wy asked.

“Actually Mom used to sculpt back in her college days, but she decided being a lawyer ‘made more sense’ and gave it up.”

“Do they hate that you’re artistic?”

“Not really, but they keep telling me that I could make more money if I went back into advertising.” She shuddered. That job had all but driven her insane.

“How do they feel about Sydney writing romance novels?”

“They were okay with that at first, since romance is where the sales are in fiction. But then they started saying she had her foot in the door now, and pushed her to write more mainstream stuff, since that pays better—and is more acceptably ‘literary’.” She rolled her eyes. “They don’t understand that Syd just plain loves to write paranormal romances.”

“You’re certainly both good at what you do.”

“If your parents are here, we won’t be able to do a ritual next week.”

Rusty looked so sad that Kia felt guilty. “I’m sorry.”

Wy put a hand on Kia’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll just do it some other time.”

Kia considered, then looked at her friends. “I’ve been thinking maybe we should try a séance.”

Rusty’s eyes grew huge. “A *what*?”

“Ooh, I love it.” Wy was literally bouncing with excitement. “Maybe get in touch with your resident spook.”

“That’s what I was thinking. By the way, it’s Mary Strode for sure.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, Garrett brought by some photographs, and there was one of her that looked just like a picture I drew—the one Sydney said was the ghost.”

“Garrett came by?” Wy asked, as one perfectly groomed eyebrow lifted.

“Yeah, and it’s a good thing he was there. That big storm yesterday blew a limb through my bedroom window. Garrett was nice enough to board it up for me.”

“What big storm?”

She blinked. “The huge one. Lightning, thunder, buckets of rain, howling wind, limb through window. That storm.”

Wy shrugged. “Must have just been on the mountain. It was sunny and nice down here.”

“It was bad up there, that’s for sure. Like I said, I’m glad Garrett was around. He’s pretty handy with a hammer and nails.”

“Interesting way to get him in your bedroom.”

“Ha-ha. Anyway, we went down to the basement to get this wood they had left behind when they worked on the house, and I saw something.”

“Mary?”

“Maybe. And what looked like a door, but Garrett said it wasn’t. And he does do that sort of thing for a living.” She shrugged. “Of course I was trying to scare him at the time, so he might not have looked at it really close. Plus the light is horrible down there.”

“So, you want to do a séance to see if we can contact Mary?” Wy’s eyes were shining with excitement.

Excitement was bubbling up in Kia too. “Yeah. Maybe she wants to tell me something. Besides, it’d be fun.”

“And scary,” Rusty said, and she didn’t look all that excited.

“If you don’t want to do this, it’s okay,” Wy said.

Rusty grinned then. “Are you serious? Playing with ghosts or home with the scary parents. No contest.”

“So we’re on?” Kia asked.

There was agreement, and the women moved on to specifics of date and time. And the most important question—what junk food was appropriate for conversations with dead people.

When Kia pulled into her driveway, she was greeted by the sight of a blue pickup—and a sexy man leaning against it. A smile pulled at her lips as she took her time sliding out of her car and strolling over to him. “Well hello, cowboy. What brings you way out here? Not that I’m complaining or anything.”

His sunglasses didn't quite camouflage the sparkle in his eyes. "I came to repair your window, ma'am."

A glance at the bed of the truck revealed a brand new pane of glass. "Well, now that's what I call quick. I didn't even put in the order yet."

"The McKnight men pride themselves on their special services."

She put her hands flat on his chest and moved them slowly upward. "And what kind of fees do you charge for these special services?"

"That all depends on the customer."

She leaned closer, so that her body was touching his. "And is there a special rate for good-looking women?"

"No."

She paused her teasing and frowned up at his dark lens-covered eyes, trying hard to convince herself that it wasn't hurt she felt. "Really?"

"Really."

She edged back. Well, maybe he was truly being a businessman, simply providing a service that he'd present a bill for at completion. Maybe that was better. Maybe they shouldn't let the passion they'd shared get in the way of their business arrangement. That was the way she wanted it, after all. All passion, no emotion. Safer that way. Even if that did make her feel cold and empty inside.

Suddenly he grabbed her and pulled her against him, taking her with his lips and tongue. "You have your own special rate, gorgeous," he murmured against her lips. Then he dove back in again, lips caressing her mouth, tongue exploring it.

When he pulled back, she grabbed at him in protest. Gently but firmly, he grasped her arms and moved her away from him. "I came here to fix your window."

She pouted as he unloaded the materials. "All work and no play make Garrett a dull boy."

"Anybody ever tell you that you're spoiled?"

"Yeah, but they didn't know what they were talking about." He was smiling and shaking his head when she realized that Dracula was barking in frustration inside the house. Annoyed at

herself that she had let hormones get in the way of taking care of her dog, she aimed her apologies over her shoulder and headed toward the front door.

“I’m sorry, boy,” she told the drooling mass of fur. “You know you’re my main man, right?”

He allowed her to scratch his head, then took off out into the front yard to finagle attention from Garrett.

Not at all happy with the direction things were going, Kia marched into the house. “Men,” she said as she went. “Have no appreciation of the female species.”

A few minutes later, Garrett carried tools into the bedroom, then set to work repairing the storm damage. She offered him food and drink, but he declined. So she wandered off to the studio to pretend she was working, even if it was impossible to concentrate with a hunk banging around in her bedroom.

Dracula came inside, gulped down his lunch, and went to find Garrett. The traitor.

About one, she went outside. “Have time for lunch?”

“Just a sec.” He finished with the hammer in his hand, then put it on the ground. “Just let me clean up a bit.”

“I’ll make sandwiches.”

She was putting the mustard back in the fridge when there was the weirdest feeling against her leg, almost like she’d been touched with an icicle. She dropped the bottle of mustard and jumped backwards as she squealed.

“Kia?” The sound of footsteps rushing toward her only increased her trepidation.

“I’m fine,” she told Garrett, as he rushed in. “I just dropped the mustard.” Grabbing a paper towel, she stooped to wipe at the mess on the floor. “If I’d just learn to close the condiments, I wouldn’t have these problems.”

When she stood up, Garrett was right there—glaring at her. “What happened?”

Oh boy. “I told you, I dropped the mustard.”

“Because?”

She turned to toss the used paper towel in the trash. “Because I’m clumsy, that’s why.”

He was still glaring when she turned back around. “Bull.”

“Excuse me?”

He grabbed her shoulders and she felt him shake her just hard enough to get her attention. “Something happened. Why don’t you want to admit it?”

“Because I know how you’re going to react. You’re going to blame some weird feeling I got on that stupid ghost and tell me I need to leave my house.”

“Thanks for saving me the trouble.”

She felt tears sting her eyes and angrily blinked them back. “I’m safe in this house.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Mary wouldn’t hurt me.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Yes.”

“Tell that to the mustard.”

With that, he turned and marched back outside. She stood watching him go and thinking of ways to make him seriously sorry he’d treated her the way he had.

And wondering deep down if he might just be right.

Garrett had to take a couple of deep breaths before he could finish the work on the window. The last thing he wanted was to accidentally break the thing and have to start over.

He bashed his thumb with the hammer and threw the tool to the ground while saying words his mother would probably still wash his mouth out for.

What was it with him? His ex-wife was nuts, and now he’d gotten himself involved with another crazy woman.

He heard a soft whine and turned to see Dracula looking at him with big, loving eyes. Reaching out, he petted the dog’s head. “Sorry, fella. I’m just a little perturbed at your owner right now.”

Woof.

“She has a good dog, though.”

Dracula gave him an affectionate lick, and a serious tail wagging.

He smiled at the beautiful animal, while deep inside a voice reminded him that his ex wasn't crazy—she was a selfish bitch who cared more about her career than she did about her husband or child. It was hard to believe he had once thought he wasn't good enough for her. "More like she wasn't good enough for me," he told the dog. Who agreed with him, or at least he was pretty sure that's what the bark was saying.

He spent a few minutes playing with Dracula, then the dog curled up on the ground near him as he finished work on the window. He was loading his tools in his truck when he realized Kia was standing at the bottom of the porch steps. He forced himself to close the lid of the toolbox and not slam it before he looked at her. "Sorry I upset you."

"You didn't upset me, you pissed me off royally."

"Well, I'm sorry I pissed you off. I'm just worried about you."

"Look, cowboy, I love living here. It feels like home. I believe I'm safe here, and I don't intend to leave. And I don't like continually having to justify that to every Tom, Dick, and Garrett around."

He closed the space between them in two long strides. "I'm not just anybody."

"So you think you're special, huh?"

He had never wanted to slap the gloat off a face so bad in his life. He swallowed hard. "I thought we had something together."

"We had sex. It's not like we have a relationship."

"We made love, that's a relationship in my book."

She rolled her eyes. "Where are you going with this? You plan on giving me your letterman's jacket or something?"

"What if I did?"

She laughed. "What is it with you?"

"I care about you, Kia."

He saw her swallow. "You're serious."

"Yeah, I am."

He had a feeling that scared her more than any number of ghosts. "Garrett, I'm just looking for a good time. That's all."

“I know.” He turned back toward his truck. “I’ll call,” he said, just before he jumped in. He executed a turn in the driveway and took off in a curtain of dust.

A few hours later, three amateur witches gathered around Kia’s kitchen table. Candles scattered over the cabinets provided flickering light. Dracula lay sprawled on the floor near them, chin on paws, watching the humans with an expression of lazy curiosity.

Kia lit the single fat candle in the center of the table, then placed her hands flat on the tabletop. “We call to you, those who inhabit the spirit realm. We invoke you who are caught between this world and the next. We ask you to show yourselves to us.”

Nothing happened, and Kia repeated the invocation. The other two joined her, and they chanted for a few long moments. Kia was beginning to believe the fact that they didn’t have a clue what they were doing might actually be a problem. “Focus,” she whispered.

They chanted again, for what seemed like hours. The candles were melting onto the table and counters, Dracula was asleep, and Kia was just about ready to quit.

“Nobody’s home,” Wy whispered, as she giggled softly.

“Yes,” Rusty’s shaky voice whispered, “there is.”

Kia looked toward where her friend was staring. And gasped.

The translucent figure of a woman was floating about a foot off the floor. “Mary?” Kia whispered.

The apparition didn’t answer; it simply vanished into the basement door. Before she knew what she was doing, Kia was on her way down the stairs. She heard her friends yelling for her to stop, but at that moment all her attention was focused on the patch of white visible in the same corner where she thought she’d seen something before. She felt a touch against her face, and jerked before she realized it was the white string hanging from the ceiling fixture. She pulled it, and the bottom half of the stairs was illuminated—and not a whole lot more. Still the white figure floated near the corner. Waiting. Or so it seemed. Kia heard her friends telling her to stop, but all her attention was focused on the vision as she went down the stairs.

Mary's ghost vanished into the wall, leaving barely visible lines glowing slightly for an instant. "I knew it," she breathed. "There *is* a door."

"Are you okay?" Wy asked from the stairs.

"There's a door down here, against the back wall just like I thought."

"I'm not sure I see it," Wy said, her voice closer than it had been a moment ago.

"It's there." Kia ran her fingers along the lines so recently illuminated. "I'm sure of it." She saw Wy move closer to look.

Dracula, who had followed them into the basement, suddenly began to bark and rushed back up the stairs.

"Guys." Rusty's shaky voice came from the top. "Somebody's here."

"I don't think anyone's home," Kia heard a woman's voice say.

"Her door was unlocked," a man's voice answered. "And there are two cars parked outside."

"Guys." Rusty's voice didn't sound at all happy.

Kia turned and marched back the way she'd come. *Not now.*

She saw the board about a half-second before her foot impacted with it.

"Oh shi—" She hit the ground face first.

Chapter Twelve

Kia pulled herself up off the floor of the basement. She was sure steam was coming from her ears as she stood and brushed dirt from her clothes.

“Who are you?” a male voice asked, apparently from the vicinity of the basement doorway.

“Rusty.” The word trembled as it was spoken.

“She’s a friend of mine, Dad,” Kia said, as she trotted up the stairs.

Her mother’s face appeared in the doorway. “What in the world are you doing down there?”

“Looks like she’s been digging,” her father said.

“Funny.” Kia pushed through the onlookers, flipping on lights on her way to the bathroom. A wet washcloth got the worst of the dirt off her face and arms, and she turned to face the crowd that had gathered in her kitchen.

Wy had turned on more lights, blown out the candles, and was currently leaning against the counter looking more than a little uncomfortable. Rusty was cowering in the corner, and Dracula was greeting the guests in his own special way—by jumping up and trying hard to lick their faces. Her parents were reacting to him with typical annoyance.

“Down, Drac,” Kia said. He gave her an unhappy look for spoiling his fun, but he came and sat beside her. “Mom, Dad, this is Wyoming Cawood-Brown and Rusty Sloan. Wy, Rusty, this is Richard and Emily Wolfe.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” her father said. Wy offered her hand without hesitation, but Rusty looked much more wary about the whole thing and didn’t move until Richard walked over to her and said, “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Well if that’s out of the way, why don’t you tell me what the hell’s going on here?” Her mother stood arms crossed, lips pushed together so hard they almost disappeared.

“We were having a séance,” Kia told her, feeling gleeful, but sure that would end soon.

“A *what*?”

“A séance. The house is haunted, and we were trying to contact the spirit.”

Her mother held a hand to her chest as though she thought she was having a heart attack.

“How horrid.”

Dracula barked, and Emily took a step back.

“So, you wanna tell me why you’re here this week instead of next?”

“We finished early on the Bridges’ case, and thought we’d pop in and surprise you.” Richard looked around. “Obviously we succeeded.”

“Um, I think Rusty and I had better get going. We both have to get up early in the morning.”

Rusty’s response to Wy’s statement was one of wide-eyed nodding. “Yeah, I’ve got a class at eight.”

The women started across the kitchen.

“Let me help you get her in your car,” Richard said.

Rusty spun her chair, shot her chin up, and regarded him as though he were about two inches tall. “I am perfectly capable of getting into a car by myself, thank you very much.”

“I’ll be right back,” Kia said over her shoulder as she walked toward the front door with her friends. “I’m sorry,” she said, as soon as they were on the front porch. “I had no idea they were coming tonight.”

“It’s not your fault,” Wy told her.

Kia turned to Rusty, who was studying her lap. “And my dad...”

“He meant well. I shouldn’t get so mad over things like that.”

“You should feel any damn way you want. I can’t believe he was so condescending toward you.”

Rusty’s eyes widened, but then she gave Kia a smile that warmed her heart.

Kia helped get the wheelchair down the front steps, thinking a ramp wouldn’t be a bad thing to look into. She walked her friends to Wy’s car and waved goodbye, then reluctantly turned to face the music.

A smile pasted firmly on her face, she marched back into the kitchen. “Well, would you like something to eat or drink?”

“I’m sorry we interrupted your party. Those are lovely friends you have. Cawood-Brown sounds either like a well-to-do family or an extremely modern one. And I believe I’ve heard of the Sloans from this area. What is it her family does?”

“They’re ‘lovely’, huh?”

“Why, yes.”

“If you thought they were nobodies, you’d tell me what you really think.”

Emily raised one perfect eyebrow. “I really think having a séance is a rather juvenile thing to do, but if you and your friends wish to behave like children, then that is your own business.”

Kia bit her lip to cover the smile. It always amazed her how her mother could cut somebody down while sounding down-right polite about it. She used that talent with great success as a divorce lawyer. From what Kia had heard, a grown man weeping on the stand wasn’t uncommon when Emily Wolfe was in attack mode.

“Well?” Emily asked.

“Well what?”

Exasperation pulled at Emily’s face. “Tell us about your new friends.”

Now Kia was feeling the exasperation. “I have no idea why Wy has a hyphenated name, or what Rusty’s family does.”

“You don’t know their family backgrounds?” Emily put a hand to her throat, and her expression screamed horror that she had managed to give birth to a socially incompetent daughter.

“No, Mom, I don’t.” She went to the fridge and took out a beer. “Anybody want one?”

“Nasty stuff, especially for a lady,” Emily said.

“I’m not a lady,” Kia told her.

“Obviously. A lady would be aware of with whom she was socializing.”

“I’ll take one,” Richard said. “You know, I was hoping we could go out to a nice dinner somewhere, but there don’t seem to be any restaurants around here.”

“That’s because our daughter chose to move to the land of the untamed and unwashed,” Emily said.

“I’ve got some leftover meatloaf, we can have that.”

“Sounds wonderful.” Sarcasm dripped from the words.

Kia faced her mother. “Well, if you’d let me know you were coming, I’d have prepared.”

Emily picked up a bag of barbeque corn chips, gave it a disparaging look, then put it back down on the counter. “Is there not a restaurant anywhere near here?”

“Sure, there’s Stella’s, you probably saw it on your way up here. You can’t miss it; it’s in an old caboose. Plus there’s a McDonald’s out toward the highway, and a pizza joint. The downtown diner is probably closed by now.”

Emily actually shuddered. “I suppose there aren’t any hotels around here either?”

“You can have my room; I’ll bunk on the couch.”

Her mother’s gaze nailed her. “This is a huge house, and you don’t have any guest rooms?”

“Emily, she only moved in a few weeks ago. You can’t expect her to have everything done.”

Emily sniffed. “That’s what professionals are for.” She marched down the hall and stood in the middle of the living room floor with her arms crossed. “If she’d hired a decorator, this entire house would be finished by now.”

“Excuse me, but I don’t particularly like being talked about while I’m right here. And I intend to do the decorating myself.” Kia was shaking with the effort of not screaming.

“And what a wonderful job you’ve done so far.” Emily used her thumb and index finger to pick up a bright purple and green throw pillow, then made a face and dropped it back onto the couch.

Kia grabbed the pillow and held it to her chest. “Thank you.”

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“I know.”

“Well,” Richard said, “I’m hungry. Is it possible to agree on something for dinner?”

“I could go get a pizza.”

“Oh, please.”

“You eat pizza, Emily.”

“Luigi’s pizza.”

“You’ll survive.” Richard turned toward Kia. “If you’ll tell me where it is, I’ll be happy to go get it.”

“Oh no, I’ll go get it.” *You’re not leaving me alone with her.* “You and Mom have been driving for hours. What kind of toppings do you want?”

The drive down the mountain gave Kia time to consider the meaning of Mary’s showing her the door in the basement. She apparently wanted Kia to open it, which meant there was something important behind that wall. Maybe the answer to why the house was haunted? The thought provoked another. Mary’s husband had claimed she’d gone to stay with her sister, but if that was the case, why was her ghost still in that house? And if she had been murdered, then maybe something was behind that door to prove who did it.

But she’d have to wait for her parents to leave before she could look for the answers. Unless, of course, they’d be willing to help her.

She was laughing so hard when she pulled into the pizza place that she had to calm down and wipe her eyes before she could go in.

Garrett passed the mashed potatoes to his mother, making sure she had a good grip on the heavy bowl before he let go. “How’re you feeling, Mom?”

“I’m fine. I just had a bit of a headache, that’s all. You worry about your father; he’s the one that got hurt.”

Landon touched the reddened lump on his forehead. “I’m fine, Carolyn. I just got in the way of a falling board, that’s all.”

“I called to let you know to be careful.”

“Carolyn, I know you believe those headaches of yours tell you things.”

She narrowed her eyes. “After all these years, I would think that you’d have learned to trust me.”

“Maybe your headaches could warn Garrett once in a while.”

“It doesn’t work that way, and you know it. The headaches only come when you’re in danger.”

Landon chuckled. “Because I’m the one meant for you?”

“Yes,” she whispered, her cheeks going pink as she looked at her plate.

Feeling quite uncomfortable, Garrett decided it was time to change the subject. “Mom, the food is wonderful.”

She turned a big smile on him. “Thank you, Garrett. It’s just plain old country food.”

“Well, it’s great to have a home-cooked meal I didn’t have to cook.”

“Well, I’m glad to have you. I like to do things for my men.” She beamed at the two of them.

“I hate to add extra work on you. You work too hard as it is.”

“Nonsense. You and your father work hard, I just putter around the house.”

“You know, I’d be happy to pitch in to get some help for you.”

“I’ll not have some stranger poking around in our things. Your father helps me with what I can’t do myself.”

“I do what I can,” his father said, “but I can’t do enough, not with the hours I work. Garrett’s right, Carolyn. It wouldn’t hurt to have somebody come in once a week and help with the heavy stuff.”

“Landon McKnight, I can’t believe you’d go along with that silly idea. I have a touch of arthritis, that’s all. I’m just getting older.” She looked at her plate.

“Fifty-eight isn’t old,” Landon said. “And there’s no shame in admitting you need help.”

She looked from one man to the other as if she were deciding which to turn over her knee first. “No, and that’s the end of that.”

Garrett couldn’t help but admire that stubborn independence, but he knew she suffered a lot with the rheumatoid arthritis she’d been diagnosed with almost five years ago. He and his dad had talked a lot about what they could do to make her life easier, but until she was willing to let them, there wasn’t much. What was it with these pigheaded women? What did it take to convince them you were trying to do what was in their own best interest?

No doubt worn out by travel—and attempting to run their daughter’s life—her parents went to bed soon after dinner. Kia had a harder time settling down, and as always when she needed to relax, she found herself with a pencil in her hand. Doodling at first, her thoughts wandered again

to the earlier events. It was frustrating to be so sure Mary wanted her to see what was down there, but not be able to explore.

Realizing she'd been sketching a person, she fully expected to see Mary's face. Instead she discovered Garrett's features smiling back at her from the paper.

She leaned back in her seat and stared at the sketch. With a finger she traced his full lips and the dimples in his chin. In spite of trying to tell herself that she had a bad case of lust for that man, she had to admit more of her was invested in their relationship than just hormones.

Realizing she'd used the "R" word, she closed her eyes in annoyance. As much as she'd protested, it was true there was a connection between them. And it scared her. If her heart was involved, she was risking heartbreak. And she'd seen what that could do to a woman.

But even while she lectured herself, she realized she craved his insights. He knew more about this house than he was telling her, darn him. But more than that, she would love to just sit and discuss this new information with him. Maybe over some good food and a bottle of something smooth and mellow.

And then if hormones took over, so be it.

Feeling the frustration of coming full circle in her thoughts without being any closer to understanding, she tossed the sketchpad on the floor and lay back on the couch.

She tried to focus on her work, on the séance, on how irritated she was with her parents. But it was Garrett's face that accompanied her into sleep.

Kia was having a dream where she and Garrett were lying on a beach, waves pounding near them, sun drenching their naked bodies, passion driving them toward ecstasy.

The scream tore her right out of it.

Gasping for air, she sat up. Dracula was standing outside the door to her bedroom and barking. The door flew open, barely missing the dog, and Emily Wolfe dashed out. "There's someone in this house."

"Woman, long white dress, sad eyes?" Kia asked, and yawned.

"All I know is that someone touched me."

"It was a dream, Emily," Richard said, from the bedroom door.

“No, it wasn’t.” Emily had found her purse and pulled out a tiny revolver.

“It was the ghost, Mom,” Kia told her, forcing down the irritation she knew was fueled by tiredness.

“Oh, baloney. I felt someone touch me, probably some escaped rapist.”

“Oh, I’m certain a rapist went straight for you,” her father said.

“Richard.”

“Enough! It was my ghost, her name’s Mary, and she won’t hurt you.” Kia thought it wise not to mention what had happened to Nick.

“That’s ridiculous.” Emily said.

“There’s no one in the room, and the windows are locked,” Richard informed the women.

“Nobody came through here,” Kia said, before yawning again.

“Well, I’m thrilled to know the two of you are so concerned for my welfare.”

Kia stumbled across the cold floor to pull a bottle of brandy from the back of a cabinet next to the sink. She handed the bottle and a glass to her mother, then dropped back onto the couch and covered her head with the blanket.

The bickering between her parents didn’t allow for steady sleep, but she did manage to doze in snatches until finally her father convinced her mother to go back to bed.

She never made it back to the beach, but she did have some okay dreams about her parents going on a long vacation—to Abu Dhabi.

Garrett stood on his porch sipping coffee and watching the sun slowly emerge from behind the trees. Daisy finished her morning potty run and came up the steps to curl near his feet.

He knew he should probably get going, but there was nothing pressing at work, and he hadn’t slept well. Visions of a particularly exasperating female had filled his dreams, making restful sleep impossible.

“Wonder if Kia’s up?” he asked Daisy, who opened one eye, then closed it again. He chuckled as he contemplated calling to find out. Thoughts of her sleepy voice made him smile. She’d probably be madder than hell—and that image intrigued him.

Finally curiosity—or was it mischievousness—got the better of him. He smiled as he dialed the number, anticipation filling his thoughts.

“Kia Wolfe’s cell,” a woman’s voice said. He blinked in surprise. That was definitely not who he’d expected.

“May I speak to Kia?”

“She’s not available at the moment. May I take a message?”

“No, thank you. I’ll call back later.”

Clicking the off button, he contemplated the strange turn of events. The woman, whoever she was, had a strong Southern accent, and had been businesslike to the point of coldness. Now his curiosity was traveling in a whole other direction. Who was this person who was in Kia’s house so early in the morning? And why wasn’t Kia “available”?

Inquiring minds seriously wanted to know.

He considered for a moment before dialing again. When he heard the voice on the other end, he smiled. “How’s my best girl this lovely morning?”

“What do you want, Garrett?” Wy’s voice said.

He chuckled. “Can’t you believe that I just called to say good morning?”

“No.”

He leaned against the porch railing. “No faith in me, huh?”

“I grew up with you, McKnight. Now, what is it you want?”

“Okay, you win. What do you know about some older woman answering Kia’s phone?”

“Called her, huh?”

“Obviously.”

He heard a chuckle from the other end. “That would be her mother. Her parents appeared unannounced late yesterday. Happy?”

A slow smile was pulling at his lips. “I owe you chocolate, Wy.”

“I’m holding you to that.”

They hung up, and he went inside to get ready to put his new and improved mischievous plan into action.

Kia ran her fingers through her wet curls and stared at herself in the mirror. Bright pink T-shirt with a rhinestone heart between her breasts, faded jeans with torn knees, no makeup. She grinned; her mother would hate the way she looked. Perfect.

That particular parental unit wasn't to be seen when she exited the bathroom, but the smell of frying bacon was a more than adequate substitute. In the kitchen she found her father immersed in cooking. "That smells wonderful," she told him. The bacon made her mouth water, and she couldn't resist stealing a piece from the plate beside the stove.

"I love to cook," her father said, "but I never have enough time. Besides—" He held his hands out in a what-can-you-do posture. "Nelda runs me out of the kitchen every time I go in there."

Kia smiled. Nelda, her parents' cook, was rather protective of "her" kitchen. "She does realize that you own the house, and therefore technically the kitchen belongs to you?"

He sent a look of challenge her way. "You're welcome to try explaining that to her."

"No thanks. If I feel the need to beat my head against the wall, I'll just talk to mom."

"Your mother loves you."

"I know." She shoved a second piece of bacon into her mouth.

The voice of the woman who loved her came from the living room. "Kia, a workman of some sort is here."

Kia could hear Dracula making his presence known outside. "I don't have any work scheduled..." Realization hit her like a truck, and she rushed toward the front.

Her mother was positioned on the porch, at the top of the steps, arms crossed, watching the visitor with open suspicion. Dracula was making himself a nuisance, and Garrett was scratching Dracula's head while eyeing Emily with curiosity.

Kia walked past her mother and down a couple of steps. "Well, good morning, cowboy. What brings you out so early?"

“Actually, I brought you a present.” He smiled innocently as he held up the jacket he was carrying.

She sashayed over to him, hoping she looked less stupid than she felt in her ridiculous outfit.

He handed her a Mt. Shadows High School letterman’s jacket. “I got it when I played football.”

Touched beyond words, she fought to maintain her cool. No way was she going to cry in front of Garrett and her mother. Especially the latter. “Well, I always did want to date a football player.”

A throat was cleared vigorously behind her, and she bit back a threatening chuckle before she turned. “Mom, this is Garrett McKnight. Garrett, this is my mother, Emily Wolfe.”

“Ms. Wolfe.” He hustled to the porch to take her hand in his, then instead of shaking it, he brought it to his face to touch his lips to her knuckles. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Her expression was cynical, but her voice was polite enough. “Thank you, Mr. McKnight.”

“Call me Garrett, please.”

She smiled, actually smiled. “Garrett.”

“Dad’s making breakfast, would you like to join us?” Kia asked. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her mother’s horrified expression.

“I’ve already eaten, but I could use a cup of coffee.” He took the steps in two long strides, made it to the door before the two women, and stood holding it open for them.

Emily took the situation in stride, hiking her chin as she glided into the house.

Kia followed her mother, still holding the letterman’s jacket close, thinking how much fun the next few minutes should be. Then she caught a glimpse of the twinkle in Garrett’s eye, and was just a bit unnerved. Something told her things might not go the way she intended.

But then, that was par for the course lately.

Chapter Thirteen

In the kitchen, her father turned and greeted the newcomer with a smile and an outstretched hand. “Hello, I’m Richard Wolfe, Kia’s father.”

Garrett shook the man’s hand. “I’m Garrett McKnight, a friend of Kia’s.”

“McKnight? Isn’t that the name of the company Kia used to renovate this house?”

“Yes, it is. My father and I own McKnight Contracting.”

Great, Kia thought, her dad knew more about him in two seconds than she’d known in two weeks. She poured herself a cup of coffee and backed over to the corner to watch the proceedings.

“Contracting must be a fascinating business to run,” Richard said.

“It’s hard work, but it can be pretty interesting. And I love not being stuck in the office all the time.”

“But there’s still a lot of paperwork, I’m sure.”

“Tons.”

“Quarterly reports and tax forms, no doubt.”

“Don’t forget permits and inspection forms.”

“And all the IRS-required paperwork on your employees.”

“Yep. It never ends.”

The men laughed together while Richard poured Garrett a cup of coffee, and they continued their discussion as Richard fried more bacon.

“Do you enjoy working with your father?”

“It has its challenges, but my dad and I get along pretty well.”

The men’s bonding ritual went on, but Kia tuned them out. A glance toward her mother revealed a woman who didn’t seem any happier than she was about the turn of events. This cheered Kia considerably.

She poured herself a second cup of coffee and dished up generous servings of eggs, bacon, and toast.

“You persist in indulging yourself, and you’ll regret it when you reach your thirties and your waistline begins to expand.”

Kia smiled toward her mother, shrugged, and took a big bite. Emily closed her eyes in apparent consternation before she dished herself up petite portions of food.

As she ate, Kia glanced toward the living room, where she had draped Garrett’s jacket carefully over the back of a chair. She couldn’t kid herself, it was a commitment. A promise.

Incredible. She’d come out here to avoid entanglements and promptly managed to slip right into one. She promised herself she’d give it back to him when he left, and hoped he was man enough to accept that and not make a scene.

She was surprised to find the idea of returning the jacket made her feel sad and empty. What was her problem? Was she seriously considering “going steady” with Garrett?

Just how much was she willing to give of herself to this man?

“Kia?”

The sound of her name broke her out of her contemplation. “Huh?”

“Your father is speaking to you,” her mother informed her.

“Sorry, Dad.”

“Garrett was telling me that you still have quite a bit of work to do on the house.”

“Yeah, obviously the basics had to be done before I moved in, but there’s still a lot I want to do, especially upstairs.” *If the ghost approves.* She fought the sudden attack of giggles. Obviously the stress was getting to her.

“Were you so anxious to get away from us that you were willing to move into an unfinished house?” The accusation in her mother’s voice sent anger through her veins.

“I wanted to be involved in the renovation. It’s hard to decide exactly what you want long distance.” This meal was not going the way she’d hoped.

“You could have stayed in a hotel, or rented an apartment nearby.”

“I like it here.” The anger in her voice must have been obvious, because her mother’s eyes widened.

“Emily, not everybody likes to supervise from a distance. Besides, Kia’s an artist. It makes sense she’d want to be directly involved.”

Kia decided her father was her new best friend. She aimed a smile in his direction and hoped he understood just how grateful she was.

“Perhaps your ghost can advise you. It has, after all, been here longer than you.” Emily sipped her coffee.

Kia barely managed to avoid spurring hers across the table. When had her mother developed a sense of humor? *It was* a joke, right?

Richard chuckled. “When we got here last night, Kia and two of her friends were engaged in a séance.”

For a moment it appeared that Garrett was going to choke on his coffee. “A *what?*” he croaked.

“Wy, Rusty and I held a séance last night. You were wrong, by the way; that is a door in the basement. Mary showed me where it was.”

“What the hell did you think you were doing?”

The anger in Garrett’s voice was enough to have her backing up in her chair. “*What?*”

“You will not speak to my daughter in that fashion, especially in her house. May I remind you,” Emily continued, “that she is your employer?”

Ignoring her mother, he leaned toward Kia, and she saw anger mixed liberally with worry in his eyes. “You know the kind of history this house has. Why do you continually ignore the danger you’re in?”

“Mr. McKnight, it is completely inappropriate to speak to one’s superiors in such a fashion. Furthermore...”

Kia tuned out her mother’s ranting and stared into those powerful green eyes. She knew he was concerned about her, but no man was going to tell her what she should and should not be doing. “Mary wouldn’t hurt me.”

“She hurt Nick.”

“It’s kind of strange, don’t you think, that of all the people in and out of here, he’s the only one who’s been hurt.”

“Are you saying he’s lying? Because, may I remind you, your sister was witness to the attack.”

“Attack? What attack?” Emily’s voice was almost shrill. “You didn’t say anything about an attack.”

“Was anyone hurt?” Richard asked.

“Just some scratches, nothing serious,” she told her father, without looking away from Garrett’s hypnotizing gaze.

“Answer me, damn it. What attack are you talking about?”

She turned to answer her mother, when she realized her father was chuckling. Before she could ask, he turned to Garrett. “You didn’t tell me the two of you were an item. Good luck with her, son. She’s a real fireball.”

“Item? What are you talking about?” The voice was definitely shrill now. “Kia? Are you dating this *workman*?”

It gave her great pleasure to turn to her mother and smile. “Yes, Mom. Garrett and I are going steady.”

Emily’s hand went to her chest, and her face drained of color. “Steady?”

“He isn’t a workman, Emily,” Richard said. “He and his father own a company together.”

“A *contracting* company. In the middle of nowhere. Glorified maybe, but he’s still a workman.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, mother.” Kia allowed the sarcasm to drip from her words like honey. Or blood.

“It’s just that your father and I had hopes for you and your sister. Someone like you needs to marry quality.”

“Leave me out of this, Emily,” Richard said.

“Like Charlie?”

“Yes, of course. He’s from an excellent family.” Emily looked at the coffee cup she was holding in her hand. “Perhaps if you hadn’t given away the milk for free, he’d have been more anxious to buy the cow, so to speak.”

Kia felt tears burn her eyes. “Charles Barger is a jerk, and for your information *I* called off the engagement.”

“Then you made a huge mistake.”

“Emily.” Richard’s voice was quiet and forceful, but Emily ignored him.

“Kia, at a certain social level, marriage becomes more important than blind lust and ignorant matchmaking. For those in our social class, marriage is an important tool. If you could only see the benefits—”

“Stop it.” Kia stood and glared down at her mother. “I can’t believe you think social status is more important than your daughter’s happiness, but you’ve made it very clear that you do.”

“Dear, long-term happiness requires marriage to a proper person. If a person gives into childish desires for romance-novel endings, she is destined to marry someone who—in the long-term—is completely unsuitable. How could she possibly be happy then? And the children of such a match would also suffer.”

Kia was trembling with embarrassed anger. She’d known her mother harbored arrogance, but she had no idea it went so deep. Unable to recognize the woman sitting at her table, she wanted badly to run. But that would hardly solve anything, and besides, Garrett was there, and she wasn’t leaving him alone with her parents.

Dracula’s sharp bark brought four pairs of eyes around to look at him. He was staring at them, tail wagging and tongue hanging out. He barked again, then walked over to Garrett and put his chin on his leg. Softly whining, he looked up at the man with obvious love in his eyes.

“Well,” Richard said, “Dracula seems to approve of his owner’s choice in men.”

Emily sniffed. “Well, I suppose it’s all right then, since the *dog* likes him.”

“Dogs don’t harbor human prejudices,” Richard said.

“I understand your concern,” Garrett told them, his voice serious enough to give Kia pause. “I honestly care about your daughter. However, if our relationship is going to cause family problems, then I’ll be on my way. Nice to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Wolfe. Goodbye, Kia.” The sadness she glimpsed in his eyes tore at her heart, and as she watched, Garrett stood and started down the hall.

“Well, at least he knows his place.”

Kia stared at her mother, the bitch. What the hell had just happened? Then she heard the front door open, and knocked her chair over rushing toward the living room.

Garrett felt as if he'd just been stabbed in the heart. No way would he have guessed Kia's parents were the same kind of stuck-up snobs that Susan's were. But then he'd not had a clue who they were. He hadn't bothered to find out. He'd let his desire for her blind him to potential problems.

No way in hell was he going through *that* again. As he stomped toward his truck, he remembered Susan's parents looking at him the same way Kia's mother had. Sort of like he needed to be scraped off a shoe.

"Garrett."

He jerked the truck door open, but didn't get in. Instead he stood, head down, waiting.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"No biggie," he lied.

"My mom is a first-class bitch."

Yes, she is. "No, she just wants the best for her daughter. Sorry I caused you problems."

He felt her grab his arm. "Please look at me."

Steeling his face to not reveal the turmoil in his heart, he turned to face Kia. The tears in her eyes shocked him so much he almost dropped his guard and pulled her into his arms. But he managed to fight the urge. "It's okay, Kia. I understand. Believe me, it's best if you and your parents agree on who you're with."

"Well, I'm so very happy for you. Why don't you and my parents just figure out my whole life? You're all so damn good at knowing what's best for me."

With that, she turned and rushed back toward her house. He stood staring after her for a long moment, then, heart twisting in his chest, slid into his truck and started the motor. As he turned to go back out the driveway, something caught his eye and he looked up at the second-story window of the bedroom where the mysterious furniture had briefly appeared. For a moment he saw a face, a woman's face, staring sadly toward him. Then he blinked, and the face was gone.

Cursing himself for being a fool, he whipped the truck around and tore out of Kia's driveway as if he were running for his life.

Maybe he was.

"There's nothing wrong with being a small business owner. My father owned a bakery, that's how he put me through law school," Richard said.

"Don't you want more than that for your daughter?" Emily asked.

Kia ignored her parents' argument as she walked into the kitchen. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Her mother's eyes widened and filled with indignant accusation. "Kia! How dare you speak to me that way?"

"Answer my question." Kia was feeling pretty indignant herself.

Emily's chin came up, and her eyes burned with fire. "What do you think I was doing? I was trying to protect my daughter from making a mistake she would regret for the rest of her life."

"And what the hell do you know about my life and what would and would not be a mistake?"

"It's obvious to any thinking person that that workman is not a suitable mate for a woman of your background."

"From now on, you keep your insulting and snobbish opinions out of my life." There was a gasp, but Kia tore on. "For your information, I'm a grown woman. Where I live, what I eat, who I date, and how I live my life is up to me. You have no say. If you really want to know why I moved out here, well it's because I got seriously tired of being told what to do. And if you want to know why I broke up with your precious Charles, it's because he's a boring snob who wanted to tell me what to do, too."

With that, she spun and marched out. She didn't exactly slam the front door, but she did shut it soundly. The fresh air and beautiful scenery that greeted her had a calming effect, but tears still threatened, so she sat on the steps and fought for control.

A dog's snout nudged her and she rubbed his nose. "My parents don't have a clue who I really am," she told Dracula.

"I'm not so sure about that."

She managed to keep the groan internal, as footsteps told her she was being approached. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her father perch on the steps near her. "Your mother only wants the best for you."

"I know."

"You really care for this man?"

Her shoulders rose in an automatic shrug. "He's nice, and not bad-looking."

"I think it's more than that."

"He drives me nuts telling me about the history of this place, and how I'm in danger."

"He cares about you."

For some reason anger moved through her. "I'm a big girl, I can take care of myself. I don't like having this big pain in the rear always around telling me what I should and shouldn't do."

To her surprise, her father laughed softly. "So you do have feelings for him."

She opened her mouth to say feelings had nothing to do with anything, that lust was the operative word here. But somehow her voice just refused to work.

"Well, if my opinion means anything, this Garrett seems to be a very nice young man. And he obviously cares deeply for you."

She looked into her father's brown eyes and found herself saying, "I'm scared, Dad."

"I'm not surprised. You saw what your sister went through with that other idiot your mother's so fond of."

Shock hit her out of nowhere. "I thought you liked Stan."

He shrugged. "Unlike your mother, I don't think it's wise to interfere with my daughters' love lives. Sydney cared for him, and that was what was important to me."

Tears filled her throat and overflowed her eyes as she smiled up at her father. "Have I told you lately that I love you?"

He pulled her close, and the familiar warm smell of her dad comforted her more than she would have admitted. “Don’t let what happened with Stan and your sister, or you and Charlie, keep you from giving Garrett a chance.”

“But...”

“No buts about it. The boy cares for you, you care for him. You owe it to both of you to give it a chance.”

She pulled back enough to look up into his face. “What about Mom?”

“You just leave your mother to me. Okay?”

She nodded, as she leaned back into her father’s arms.

The scream tore them apart, and they were back in the house before the echo had died out.

“What’s the matter, Emily?” Richard asked. “You look as if you’d seen a ghost.”

Emily turned to look at them, face pale, eyes wide, both hands over her heart, and looking as if she were about to collapse onto the floor. “I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what happened.”

Kia saw a movement in the corner and glanced in that direction. There was a figure in white, shimmering, ethereal—and smiling. The spirit seemed to look toward Kia for a moment before she vanished.

“Well I’ll be damned,” Richard said. “She really does have a ghost.”

Garrett loathed paperwork. He’d much rather be at a site, supervising, hammering, or even doing plumbing. But the quarterly reports had to be done, and he was the one who had to do them.

He leaned back in his desk chair and stared at the ceiling. If he hadn’t stopped by Kia’s to be insulted, he’d have gotten to work earlier and he might have managed to talk his father into doing the paperwork. But by the time he’d arrived, the older partner had already gone to the site—and had left word for Garrett to do the reports.

Sighing, he turned back to the computer keyboard and prepared for another long session.

“Busy?”

Garrett looked toward the face peeking around his office door and smiled. “Yes, and boy am I glad to see you.”

Nick laughed as he came into the office, shut the door behind him, and lounged in a chair. “Monthly report, I take it?”

“Close, quarterly. Damn worthless waste of time. If I’d have remembered the thing was due, I’d have probably come on to work early, talked Dad into doing the report, and avoided the wonderful experience of being made to feel like a mosquito waiting to be swatted.”

Nick leaned forward and propped his elbow on the edge of the desk, as interest twinkled in his eyes. “And what mosquito-infested swamp was it you were wading in?”

“Kia’s house.”

Nick frowned. “I don’t know her very well, but she doesn’t seem the type—”

“She isn’t. Her mother, on the other hand, has no problems with putting people in the place she believes they belong.”

“Ouch. Let me guess, her daughter’s way too good for the likes of you?”

Garrett looked into his cousin’s eyes. “I can’t go through that again.”

“Well, I can understand that, but...” Nick hesitated.

“But *what?*”

“It’s just that Kia and Susan are as different as day and night.”

Garrett stared at the other man. “Oh, give me a break. They’re both selfish, crazy, and have families who think they’re better than the mere mortals around them.”

“Kia doesn’t seem that way to me.”

Anger tore through him so fast, he spoke without thinking. “And what do you know about women?”

Pain slid across Nick’s face, and Garrett instantly regretted his words. “I’m sorry. That was uncalled for.”

Nick raised his chin and seemed to look deep into Garrett’s soul, an ability that had always been unnerving. “I choose to remain alone. You don’t have the burden I do, and I’ve seen how happy Kia makes you. Don’t give up on the possibilities just because her mother reminds you of your ex-mother-in-law.” He stood and put his hand on Garrett’s shoulder. “You’re a good man,

you deserve happiness. And I think Kia might just be the woman to give it to you, God bless the poor thing.”

With that, Nick turned and walked out the office door, leaving Garrett to wonder about his cousin’s life—and his own.

Kia was both surprised and relieved when her parents announced they would be leaving the next morning. That night her father insisted on making dinner, so Kia told them she needed to work—mostly to stay away from her mother.

When she heard the footsteps, she chose to ignore them and pretend she was busy.

“I’d forgotten how talented you are.”

Kia dropped the act and looked up at her mother. “Thanks.”

Emily actually smiled softly. “You think I’m an ogre, don’t you?”

Kia put down her pencil, as she considered how honest to be in her answer. “No, I just think your idea of how my life should be and mine are very different.”

“I want you to be happy.”

“I know.”

“And I’m worried about you all alone out here.”

“I’ll be fine.”

Emily studied a sketch for a time before she said, “There’s something here, in the house. I felt it last night.”

Kia suppressed a sigh. She was becoming very tired of defending her territory. “Mary the ghost. She’s harmless.”

“No, it wasn’t that—not that being handled by a spirit wasn’t quite unnerving enough. There’s a power in this house, an evil that I can’t quite put words to.” Emily touched Kia’s arm. “I’m not foolish enough to ask you to come home with us. I realize that isn’t going to happen. But I can ask you to please be careful? Listen to that young man of yours. As much as I hate to admit it, I believe he does have your best interests at heart.”

Kia was staring in shock when her father came in to announce dinner was ready. And all during the meal, she watched her mother for signs of impending mental illness. But other than being quieter than usual, Emily seemed herself.

After her parents retired for the night, Kia got out her DVD player and had herself a *Halloween* movie marathon in honor of her mother's trip to the dark side. Even if she didn't quite believe it.

The morning dawned gray and depressing, but the fact that her parents were going away cheered her quite a bit. And by midmorning, the elder Wolfes were ready to leave.

"Long way to drive just to turn around and go home," she told them.

"We're planning to stay over in Chattanooga," her father said. "I haven't been to the aquarium in years, and I'm looking forward to that."

"Ah, thrown over for a bunch of fish. I feel loved."

"Oh, you're definitely loved." He hugged her, then took their bags and went out toward the door with Dracula following at his heels.

Kia turned and looked at her mother. "Well, it's been interesting."

"That it has." Emily kissed her daughter's cheek. "Let us know you're all right." Kia nodded, and the two of them walked to the car.

"Be well, Kia," her father said. He hugged her again and brushed her cheek with a kiss. Then they were gone.

Kia stood for a time, staring as the dust kicked up by the Lexus came slowly swirling back down to earth.

Odd, she actually thought she might miss them. Shoving that thought aside, she turned and went back into her house.

She was barely inside when she felt the presence. A glint of white confirmed what her gut had already implied. "Okay, okay. I'm getting to it already."

A quick trip to her car resulted in a large flashlight and a tire iron. From the kitchen she took a steak knife, an old screwdriver, and her tiny hammer. With the tools dumped into a plastic grocery bag, she started toward the basement. A thought stopped her, though, and she made a detour to make sure both outside doors were securely bolted.

Dracula followed her down the stairs, where she stood in the middle of the dank room and breathed in the unmistakable smell of rich, dark soil. “Didn’t seem as gloomy when Wy and Rusty were here,” she told Dracula. He didn’t comment. Instead, he stretched out to gnaw on a leftover piece of wood. “If you get a splinter, don’t blame me.” He glanced toward her before he continued his gnawing. “Gotta get you a bone,” she told him, as she pulled back her shoulders and marched over to the wall where she was convinced a doorway lay hidden.

It took her a few minutes to decide where to begin. Apparently whatever lay beyond was covered with at least one coat of paint, so the obvious first step was to take the steak knife and poke it between the boards around the perimeter of the door.

It only took a few minutes to find out that the steak knife wasn’t the best tool for this project, but it being all she had, she persevered. The blade kept breaking, but eventually the entire edge of what she believed to be a door was free of paint. It seemed odd that she hadn’t encountered hinges or anything, but that didn’t stop her. She poked what was left of the knife around in an attempt to find a handle or something, and when nothing was apparent, she decided to exchange the subtle approach for a more direct one.

It took a few minutes to force the tire iron into the opening she had cleared with the knife. Then she sat to work trying to pry the sections apart.

Thirty minutes and three broken fingernails later, the dirty and perspiring Kia heard a pop. Fully expecting some sort of secret door to open, she was amazed when a large piece of plywood pulled loose and smacked her on the head on its way to the floor.

Coughing in the wake of the dust cloud raised by the falling board, Kia examined the result of her hard work. What she thought was a door might not have been, but there was no mistaking the huge one now revealed.

Dark and foreboding, set a few inches back from what turned out to be a plywood wall apparently built at a much later date, the door stood taunting her. She turned the knob and pulled, but wasn’t surprised when nothing happened. The flashlight came in handy as she examined the rusted hinges and the old-fashioned doorknob. A keyhole below the knob seemed to be calling to her, but trying to look through it was hopeless. All she could see was darkness.

She considered the situation for a time, even entertaining the idea of calling Garrett. His tools and expertise would make the job easier. Still, she'd managed to get this far without him. She could handle one obnoxious door. *Right?*

Tire iron firmly in hand, she tackled what she hoped was the last barrier to the answers she was anxious to find.

Several minutes and another broken fingernail later, the lock gave way. It still took some doing to pull the door open on its rusty hinges. Some sort of smoky mist billowed through the opening and around her. It was foul-smelling enough to make her gag, and its icy coldness sent chills up her arms as it passed. At the same time, some invisible force seemed to be pushing her away, something that made the hair on her arms stand on end. Determined to get some answers, she ignored all that and pressed on.

The light from the hanging bulb near the stairs was useless this far away, so she picked up her flashlight and pointed it toward the opening.

It was a small room, rectangle-shaped, probably no bigger than six or seven feet from front to back, and even smaller side to side. The walls were red, and covered with odd symbols. Symbols Kia recognized from her first ghostly encounter upstairs. But it was the smell she knew she'd always remember when she thought of this moment. Dark musty, sharp decay, sickening rancid, spicy sweetness—and something else. Something that she couldn't identify, but that made her want to run.

There were shelves along one wall filled with small bottles. Perhaps this was the source of the oddness of the scent. As strong as the spice was, it didn't cover the sickening smell of death and decay, and Kia assumed that at least one small animal had at some point met its fate in the room's dark recesses.

Shoring up her courage, she took a small step inside. She wasn't claustrophobic in the least, but the small area seemed to close in on her just the same. Forcing herself to take another couple of steps inside, she pointed her flashlight at the shelf. What she saw caused a gasp that brought in more of the odd, sickening smell and had her gagging.

In the bottles were what looked like small animals floating in dark fluid. There was one she couldn't see very well, but it looked suspiciously like a tiny baby.

She'd seen more than enough, and had started backing out when her foot touched a hard object. Bracing herself in case it was that dead animal, she looked down.

Whatever was sticking out of the ground was metal. Bending down, she brushed dirt away and saw what looked like a cylindrical object. Excitement took the place of fear, and she dug and pulled until she freed the object.

It was the handle of a double-sided knife with a blade that widened just before the point, much like the athame Wy used. The handle was brass or maybe tarnished silver, with what looked like gemstones embedded in it. She picked it up, and for just a second it seemed to glow. As if that wasn't weird enough, she could have sworn she felt it vibrating.

She dropped it and backed away, but when she did, she saw something else sticking out of the dirt. Swallowing hard, she moved toward it. It also appeared cylindrical, and she wondered for a moment if there were a pair of knives here. Reaching out a trembling hand, she started brushing the dirt away. Whatever it was, it didn't appear to be metal. It was brownish gray, buried deeper. She kept brushing away the dirt, and realized the object was much longer than she'd first thought. It was perfectly cylindrical except for the ends. And it seemed oddly familiar.

Then understanding hit her, and she stood and backed away so fast that she knocked the shelf off the wall behind her. The sound of breaking glass told her she had made a mess, and the smell was awful. But she didn't look that way. The sight in front of her held her complete attention. She tried hard to convince herself she was wrong, but she knew she wasn't.

It was a bone. And it looked human.

Chapter Fourteen

Garrett grabbed his head as sudden pain shot through it. Daisy barked, and he tried to speak, to tell the dog that he was all right. But it was an effort to get the words out. Finally he gave up and leaned his throbbing head back against the overstuffed chair. The book he'd been reading slid to the floor, but he was barely aware it had fallen. All he knew was that apparently he'd inherited his mother's headaches.

He tried to convince himself that it was just a regular old headache. No big deal. Or maybe he was having a migraine. Or a stroke. Not good, but mundane nonetheless.

But deep down inside him he recognized the agony for what it was. He had always doubted his mother when she claimed her headaches were precognitive. But now he knew the truth.

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

And he was pretty sure it involved Kia.

She didn't scream, though the desire to was all but overwhelming. Instead she backed away from the horror of the room and toward its recently sealed door. Her leg touched something, and she jumped, but it was only Dracula huddled in the doorway. "You're the smart one," she whispered, "you didn't go in there."

She glanced back one time, and her gaze fell on the knife. Something about it seemed to pull at her, and she found herself stepping far enough back inside the room to grab it. She didn't feel the vibration this time, but it didn't feel quite like an inanimate object either.

A quick glance back toward the room evoked a shudder and convinced her she'd had more than enough spooky for a while. Turning her back on the room was unnerving, so she sprinted up the stairs as fast as she could—not even stopping to turn off the light. To her relief, Dracula followed her, and she shoved the door closed.

The upstairs was dark, and she panicked for a moment until it occurred to her to flip the light switch. Blessed illumination flooded the kitchen, and Kia closed her eyes in relief. The knife in her hand felt heavy, and she quickly stuck it among some of her art materials in a bag just inside her studio door.

It was only when she saw blood smeared on the knife that she realized she'd scraped her hand. With a scrap piece of paper, she swiped at the handle, but she was in no mood to do a thorough cleaning. A second piece of paper served to staunch any more blood flow, and she headed back toward the kitchen.

For a reason she couldn't explain, a chair forced under the basement doorknob made her feel better, and checking the lock on the back door seemed like a great idea. The lightweight curtains on the windows in the kitchen let in entirely too much of the darkness outside, so she retreated to the living room.

The heavy drapes in there were soon pulled across windows that now seemed huge. She checked the lock on the front door to make sure it was secure and fought the urge to cower in the corner. She needed to call the sheriff, but somehow she just couldn't face that, not yet.

Her gaze fell on the jacket draped carefully over the back of a chair, and thoughts of Garrett all but brought her to her knees. His arms around her, his strength protecting her.

Shaking her head, she forced the thoughts away. She was a strong, independent woman. She didn't need a man to protect her. Still, she couldn't stop herself from picking up the jacket. And it made sense to slip it on. It was obviously chilly, that's why she was trembling. *Wasn't it?*

Her hand reached for the cell phone lying on the little table. She needed to call the authorities. If that was a human bone in her basement, they had to be notified. She'd call the sheriff, that's what she'd do.

Her fingers had other ideas.

When Garrett answered, he sounded funny, like maybe he was sick or something. Guilt twisted inside her. Already upset, it was all she could do to make her voice work. "Hi. Busy?"

"Kia?"

"Yeah."

"What's wrong?"

A glance toward the kitchen had her swallowing hard. "Could you maybe come over here?"

"I'm on my way. Are you hurt?"

She shook her head before she realized he couldn't see her. "No."

Through the phone came what sounded like a groan, then a door closed, and she heard feet running. "Are you in danger?"

She glanced toward the barricaded basement door. It was all too easy to imagine something blowing out of there, something dark and evil.

"Kia? Honey, what's going on?"

It took effort to shake herself back to reality. "I found something I...I don't know..." Then she was biting back tears.

"I'll be there in a minute, just hang on."

"Okay."

He kept asking questions and she somehow managed to answer. But when she heard his pickup pull in the driveway, she gasped like she'd been holding her breath.

Dracula barked, of course, and the sharp sound tore at her already over-stimulated nerves. It was a trembling hand that pushed aside the drapes enough to make sure it really was Garrett who had just pulled in. Part of her wanted to race outside to meet him, but most of her would much rather not go out into the darkness.

She compromised by opening the door when he came up the steps. "Garrett."

Then he was across the porch and taking her in his arms, and his warmth and strength were a balm to her overloaded system. His gentle voice washed over her, soothing her, making her feel safe and protected. She heard the door close and lock, as he held her close.

Then he pulled back and took her face between his hands. "What the hell happened?"

She looked up into his eyes. "In the basement. There *is* a door."

"And you just had to investigate."

She ignored his tone and continued. "There's a room. Small, weird symbols on the walls. Long shelf, gross stuff on it."

"Gross?"

She shivered as she remembered the awful smell and those things on the shelf. “Jars full of things, small animals maybe. The stuff smelled rancid, but spicy too. It was very odd. And there was a bone buried in the dirt.” She felt another shiver move through her. “I think it’s human.”

He pulled her tighter against him, and she leaned closer, enjoying the comfort.

With a little shake, he pushed her away from him and stared into her eyes. “Why didn’t you call me *before* you went poking around down there? You could have been hurt, killed.” The last word was a croak.

She pushed at him, though not hard. “I’m perfectly capable of investigating my own basement.”

He pulled her against him, ignoring her weak protests. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

Her resolve fled as she leaned against him. “It feels like evil down there.”

“I don’t doubt it. There’s something wrong with this house. I’ve known it ever since I was twelve and a couple of my friends and I came up here. We were all brave and stupid, and we thought it’d be cool to break into a real haunted house. So we did. It wasn’t hard, we just crawled in a broken window. We spent the afternoon poking around and saying we hoped we saw the ghost. The other kids seemed to think it was a real hoot, and I pretended to think so too, but I felt something even then. Something dark and evil.”

She pulled back enough to look up at him. “Mom said the same thing, about the evil. Before she left she told me to be careful.”

“So you exercised that caution by poking around in the basement by yourself?”

“I never listen to my mother.”

“Maybe you should.”

The hurt in his eyes stabbed at her, but dealing with that particular problem was way beyond what she could handle at the moment. She gave him a half-hearted push away from her. “I need to call the sheriff. If that is a human bone, he needs to know about it.”

Garrett nodded. “Yeah, as much as I dislike Hal, he does need to know. Why don’t I call him, while you sit and try to relax a bit?” He rubbed his forehead. “By the way, do you have any aspirin or Tylenol?”

“Yeah, I do.” Suddenly she realized her hands were filthy. “I guess I could clean up a little.”

“Go ahead, I’ll notify Hal.”

She nodded, and headed for the bathroom. She got him a bottle of pain reliever, wondering if it was a headache that was bothering him. He kept rubbing his forehead, and his eyes looked funny. Guilt again twisted her gut for calling him over when he obviously didn’t feel well.

Forcing all that aside, she turned to getting herself cleaned up.

The mirror told her that she’d managed to get dirt all over her face. Glancing down, she realized just how badly she’d soiled her clothes. Even Garrett’s jacket was dirty, no doubt from her grubby hands. She carefully pulled it off and went about scrubbing herself. The dirt washed off, but her nails looked like they’d never be the same again. The scrape on her hand began seeping blood so she put antiseptic and a bandage on it. On her way back to the living room, she stopped by the bedroom and carefully laid the jacket across her bed.

Garrett was waiting for her when she came out. “Hal’s on his way. I wouldn’t hold my breath, though.”

“It’s a good thing the crime rate around here is so low.”

He chuckled as he edged her toward the couch. “You sit, and I’ll get you something to drink.”

She leaned against the back of the couch as she watched him go into the kitchen. “Maybe I got overexcited. Maybe it wasn’t even a bone. Maybe it was a stick. Or if it is a bone, maybe it’s not human. Maybe...oh, I don’t know.”

Garrett came back and handed her a Coke. “Maybe not, but we need to be sure.”

She nodded and took a sip.

“Beer is probably more what you need right now, but with Hal the Wonder Sheriff coming and all, I didn’t think that’d be a good idea.”

“No,” she agreed, “I guess not.”

He sat beside her and sipped his own Coke. “I’m not losing it, really,” she told him when she realized he was watching her closely.

“I know. I was actually thinking that if it had been me, I’d probably be racing down the mountain screaming about now.”

She heard herself laugh softly as she looked at him. “I doubt that. And thanks for coming to my rescue.”

He held up the hand without a drink, as if in surrender. “It wasn’t rescue, it was more like moral support.”

Dracula barked, and Kia jumped.

Garrett put a hand on hers. “Well, I’ll be damned. I do believe our fearful sheriff is here already.”

“Bones aren’t as dangerous as intruders,” Kia said.

“And she’s cynical too. I think I’m in love.” He gently kissed her before he stood.

She sat and wondered why the playful words had her breath catching in her throat.

Garrett opened the door, and the sheriff strolled in. “Well, McKnight. Seems you spend a lot of time out this way.”

“I called him, Sheriff,” Kia said. “I got spooked.”

“Well, that’s what happens when you live in a big old house all alone.” He looked around the room. “I’ll bet this old place makes all kinda strange noises at night.”

“Actually, no,” she told him.

“Hal,” Garrett said, “I called you because Kia found a bone in the basement and she believes it might be human.”

“Have you seen this bone?”

“No, I thought I’d leave that to you.”

“What did this supposed bone look like?”

Kia felt a touch of anger, but was too busy forcing back the shivers to pay much attention. “Long, thick. Maybe femur or humerus.”

Hal frowned. “You had some kinda medical training or something?”

“I’m an artist.” He frowned and shrugged, so she continued. “I studied anatomy so I could represent the human body more accurately.”

His condescending smile made her want to punch him. Instead she forced a couple of deep breaths and counted to ten in five languages. Then started all over again.

“Where is this ‘bone’?” Hal asked.

“Basement,” Garrett told him, and motioned toward the kitchen.

Hal pointed toward the chair under the doorknob and chuckled. “You afraid that bone’s gonna walk up the stairs and get you, little lady?”

“She got spooked.” Garrett’s voice sounded dangerous. “Let it go.”

Hal raised an eyebrow and went toward the basement door.

Garrett sent a reassuring smile in Kia’s direction before he followed the sheriff into the abyss.

Kia had no desire to go anywhere near that door, but she edged in the general direction in an effort to keep an eye on Garrett. For some reason, the thought of him going down there made her feel sick inside. “Careful,” she whispered.

She was sure she hadn’t spoken loudly enough for anyone to hear, but Garrett still turned and winked in her direction. Swallowing hard, she gripped the edge of the door as she watched them disappear into the shadows.

Hal flipped on his flashlight, and the strong beam swung up and down, alternately illuminating the dirt floor and the walls. Kia’s heart skipped a beat when the light reached the open doorway near a far corner of the basement, and grew brighter and more focused as the sheriff walked that way. She watched as the light swept over the broken glass and the spilled contents.

And then the light stopped its searching, and she realized he must have found the bone. In spite of herself, she found she was holding her breath.

The sheriff stooped down and took something, probably a pen, out of his pocket and poked at it.

Something shifted, and the end of the shelf still attached to the wall came undone.

The sheriff stood so quickly he stumbled. He regained his balance and glanced around him as if he thought he was about to be attacked. Then he brushed at his uniform, shot his chin up a fraction, and went toward the stairs with more speed than Kia would have thought possible, given the man’s bulk and the debris on the ground.

The sheriff got to the top and pushed past Kia into the kitchen. “That’s one creepy basement you got there, lady.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Well, I’m gonna go out to the cruiser and notify the coroner. I believe old Kinley oughta know about it, even if he winds up telling us it’s a deer or something.” Hal let out a high-pitched, choppy laugh, then turned and rushed out the front door.

“Well, that was amusing.”

“Quite.” Kia turned to Garrett, who had come up the stairs and was standing behind her. “You saw the bone?”

“Yeah, and the rest. There was something interesting going on down there, that’s for sure.”

“Interesting?” She smiled ruefully. “That’s a strange word to describe that disgusting mess.”

It wasn’t until her hand touched Garrett’s arm that she realized it had moved. “I really think it’s human,” she whispered. “I feel it.”

His arm slid around her, warming her. “I know.”

“It was down there, all this time, who knows for how many years. And it might have stayed there forever if Mary hadn’t shown me.”

“I wonder why she did that.” Garrett reached a hand up to his forehead.

“Do you have a headache?”

“A bit, it’s getting better.”

“Did the Tylenol help?”

He blinked and then chuckled. “In all my hurry to get our great and mighty sheriff out here, I forgot to take any.”

“Take some now.” She started to go and get it for him.

He stopped her with a touch. “It really is better. It seems to be going away.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. How are you?”

She studied his face and saw worry pulling at his eyes. “I’m okay. I just got freaked out by that weird room.”

“And Mary showed it to you?”

“Yeah, I guess she wanted somebody to know about that poor person.”

“Or maybe she’s just trying to scare you.”

Kia felt a smile pull at her mouth. “Mary?”

“You’re a hard sell, Kia. Disappearing furniture, strange scratches, the ghost herself, none of that got to you. Maybe she went in for the big guns.”

“Why would Mary want to scare me?”

“You talk about her like she’s your friend. She’s not, you know, she’s a frigging ghost. And ghosts scare people, that’s what they do.”

Then she was laughing. “How do you know what ghosts do?”

“Everybody knows what ghosts do.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, really.”

Dracula’s bark had them both jumping. There was a sharp knock, and Hal’s head appeared in the doorway. “Coroner’s on his way. Be about forty-five minutes.”

Because she was a basically nice person, Kia pushed back her dislike of the man and made an effort to be civil. “You can wait in here.”

“That’s okay, I’ll just sit out in the cruiser.” He disappeared again.

“Chicken,” she told the closed door.

It was more than an hour before the elderly coroner, who introduced himself as Alan Kinley, finally arrived.

Kia had taken the opportunity to find Dracula’s leash, and while the coroner and Garrett descended into the basement, she stood at the door and held onto the dog. She couldn’t see much though, because the sheriff’s bulk was firmly planted halfway down the stairs. The man aimed untrusting glances toward the dog, and Dracula growled softly at the sheriff. She thought the whole thing was silly and fought the urge to giggle.

Until she glanced down into the hole of her basement and thought about the weirdness she’d discovered. Deep down, she felt guilty because she hadn’t been able to force herself to go down there again. She wanted to see herself as braver than the cowering sheriff.

But she wasn't, and so she stood safely in the doorway while the investigation continued. It was taking forever. What in the world was that old man doing?

Finally the coroner trudged back up the stairs, where he stood leaning against the wall and gasping. "Are you okay?" Kia asked.

In answer, he waved a hand toward her, seemingly unable to do anything else. She was beginning to consider dialing 911, when he croaked out, "Fine."

She didn't believe him, but she had to take his word, didn't she? He was a doctor, *right?*

"Well, is it a bone, Kinley?" the sheriff asked, his tone indicating that he fully expected a negative answer.

"Yeah," the coroner answered.

"Human?" Kia asked, as the sheriff was too busy staring.

"Yeah, and it's old." The coroner's color was returning, and he was breathing more easily. "I've got a friend at the university. I'll see if I can get him down here and get his opinion."

"How long will that take?" she asked.

"Hopefully, he'll be here sometime tomorrow." He glanced at his watch. "Or rather, later today."

"Okay." So yet another stranger was coming to invade her house. This had gone from scary to annoying.

The old man smiled kindly. "Try to get some rest."

Then they were gone. She closed the front door and leaned her head against the cool wood.

Garrett's hand touched her back, and the warmth seemed to sink into her muscles. It felt better than she'd like to admit.

"Why don't you lie down for a while?" he asked.

"I don't think I could rest."

"At least try."

She looked down at herself. "I need a shower."

"Go ahead if you want. I'll see if I can find us something to eat."

She gathered her courage before she looked into his eyes. "I know you must have things you need to do."

“I’m not leaving you.”

Relief washed over her. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” He touched his lips to hers, then turned toward the kitchen.

She went to shower, wondering what clothes were appropriate for an investigation in your basement. A ghost was one thing, but this was ridiculous.

For just a second, she thought she caught a glimpse of Mary, but when she turned the image was gone.

Mary Strode watched the proceedings with great interest. After all these years the secret was going to be out. She harbored no illusions; she’d never rest in peace. But if she was destined for hell, she hoped to take her murdering husband right along with her.

When Kia came out of the shower, Garrett was in the kitchen. He had closed the basement door again, and she was grateful for that. Still, the darkness she could see through the windows felt heavy and forbidding. Surprised at her continued uneasiness, she found herself moving toward him like he was warmth for her cold. Maybe he was.

“Feel better?” he asked.

His presence seemed to push back the shadows, and she smiled. “Almost human.”

“Hungry? I threw a few things together.”

The “few things” turned out to be an omelet, toast, and bacon.

Sitting at the kitchen table, eating food that this sweet man had prepared for them, the stress of the last few hours began to peel away like the layers of an onion.

There was still something that needed to be said, though. “Garrett, I’m really sorry about the way my mother treated you.”

He looked at the table for a long moment, then finally looked up to meet her gaze. “She just wants what’s best for her baby.”

She almost choked on her coffee, or was it anger that was filling her throat? “I’m not, in any sense of the word, a baby.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I don’t care what you meant. My mother would have me married to that jackass Charlie, working at a big advertising firm, and living in a monstrosity of a showcase house just like the one I grew up in.” She took a deep breath. “I’d be as dead and dry as that bone in the basement. That’s not the life I want, and if my mom can’t deal, then so be it.”

Garrett put a hand over hers. “I think maybe we should talk about this after the current crisis has been dealt with and we aren’t both exhausted.”

A smile pulled at her lips in spite of everything that had happened. Nodding, she went back to whatever meal it was they were eating.

They finished, and cleaned up the kitchen together.

Drying her hands on a dishtowel, she smiled toward the cook. “That was excellent.”

Still, it didn’t taste as good as Garrett tasted when he kissed her.

“You need to rest,” he told her.

“Later,” she said.

Garrett smiled as he felt Kia pull his shirt from his waistband. Her soft hands slid under the fabric and over his chest, leaving a trail of fire. Gasping, he pulled her close and ran his hands over her back and down to her bottom. She was amazing, this woman. So independent, so sure she could handle anything and everything. But she couldn’t. No one could.

He slid his hands under her T-shirt, and all doubts fled from his mind. All he could think of was how much he wanted to be inside this wild, sweet woman.

“You make me crazy.”

She chuckled. “I try.”

With a growl, he swept her up in his arms and carried her to the bedroom. There in her bed, he pulled her shirt over her head and her shorts off her legs. Then he took a moment to take in

the inspiring picture of her dressed only in a lacy bra and a tiger-stripe thong. The sight brought a smile to his face, and blood to his crotch. Thirty seconds later, he realized he'd never been so hard in all his life.

"You're amazing," he whispered.

Then she grabbed him and was pulling at his clothes. With him helping, it only took a moment to remove the material separating his body from hers. Then she lay back, and he ran his hands over her body. The fire in her eyes told him she was enjoying the moment, and when he leaned over her she came alive with passion. He kissed that warm, sweet mouth for a time, then lowered his kisses to her neck, over the top of her breast, and took a nipple in his mouth right through the lace.

"Don't ever stop," she gasped.

"Wouldn't think of it, darlin'," he told her, then returned to her sweet, pink nipple.

She bucked and he hardened even more. He reached up to push the scrap of her panties down her legs. Then he touched her, sliding his fingers until he felt her most sensitive spot. She bucked and arched her back, and he almost lost it right there.

Reaching behind her with his free hand, he tried to manipulate the snaps on her bra, but found he couldn't without using both hands. He started to move the one from between her legs, but before he could, she reached back and pulled her bra free. It went flying, and he lowered his mouth to the delicate pink tips of her beautiful breasts. She moaned, and he closed his eyes to savor her scent and the way her nipple felt in his mouth.

"Oh, God!" She moaned and grabbed at his shoulders as if she needed something to hang on to.

Then he moved so that he could slide her panties completely off. Pushing her legs apart, he rose over her, and grabbed both her wrists and pulled them over her head. Holding her captive with one hand, he used the other to torment her. She writhed as he moved a finger over her clit.

"I want you inside me," she gasped.

He obliged her by shoving her legs further apart and driving himself into her. She pulled her legs up and around his back, and he let go of her wrists.

She grabbed him and pulled him close. When he slipped his tongue into her mouth, he tasted passion like he'd never known. As he slid in and out of her sweet, sexy body, it took all the focus he could muster to not come until he felt her build toward climax. As soon as he felt her body go into the convulsions of orgasm, he let go and followed her over the edge—hearing her scream his name as he went.

When he could move, he slid off her and lay on his back. She curled next to him with her head on his shoulder, and he gently stroked her hair. She was such an enigma, this woman. So strong, so determined not to need anyone.

And yet she'd called him. He smiled at the memory of her standing there in the doorway wearing his jacket. She was tall, but small-built, making the jacket so big on her that it almost reached her knees.

She'd looked like a scared little girl when he first got there. And it had all but ripped his heart out. And his head had pounded even worse than before.

Frowning, he thought about the headache that had hit with such vengeance while he was still at home. It had all but blinded him for a time. But when Kia called, it had turned to a dull ache—until he saw her and it had hit again momentarily. Since then it had receded until it was gone.

He remembered what his mother had always said about her headaches, the part he'd always secretly laughed at. Was it possible she'd been right? Was that why he'd never experienced the headaches until now?

Closing his eyes, he pulled her close. Now he was really scared.

If his mother was right, that meant this wild woman was his soulmate.

Lying against Garret's shoulder, Kia relaxed for the first time since before her parents arrived. Why did that seem so long ago? A lifetime, almost. She smiled as she drifted toward sleep.

“*Whore.*”

“What the hell?” She sat straight up in bed, wondering who was in the house with them.

“Kia?”

She looked at Garrett's confused expression. "You didn't hear that, did you?"

"Hear what?"

With a feeling of frustration—and a touch of fear—she lay back and tried to recover the feeling of peace she'd so recently experienced.

"You had a nightmare," Garrett said, as he pulled the covers over her shoulders. "Just relax."

She allowed him to comfort her, but she didn't think it had been a nightmare. Deep inside, she knew the voice she'd heard was real.

Chapter Fifteen

Early the next morning, Kia and Garrett discovered the coroner's friend had arrived when Dracula's barking startled them awake. Tearing herself away from the warmth of Garrett and the covers was irritating, but when Kia's bare feet touched the cold wood floor, she squealed and uttered some very unladylike words.

Garrett's laugh didn't help her mood any, and she tossed a pillow in his direction. He only laughed some more. "And all this time I thought you were a sweet little Southern belle."

She told him what he could do with himself as she pulled on jeans, thick socks, athletic shoes, and a lime green sweater in record time, then hurried to answer the repeated knock at the front door. Garrett followed her, still pulling on his shirt and chuckling.

The sheriff had returned, heading up a small parade. The coroner was also back, and it was Dr. Kinley who introduced his friend, Dr. Ethan Drake, an anthropologist from the state university.

Kia had expected a man near the coroner's age, but this Drake dude was no older than Garrett. His black hair was swept back from his face and tied with a leather strap. Obsidian eyes looked through the lenses of wire-framed glasses. Intelligence glinted in those eyes, but so did wariness. He greeted Kia and Garrett coolly, but Dracula brought a smile to his face.

"What a beautiful dog. What's your name, fella?"

"Dracula," Kia supplied.

Dr. Drake aimed a look at Kia. For a second she was tempted to take a step back, as a feeling of danger hit her. But then it stopped and his expression turned friendly. "Interesting." He patted the dog while the coroner smiled and Hal rolled his eyes.

"The bone's in the basement," the sheriff informed them in a voice that said he was in charge.

The elderly coroner shook his head. "Hal, I'm old, but not senile. I even managed to drive up here all by myself."

The sheriff leveled a look of sheer hatred toward Dr. Kinley, then stood beside the basement door as Garrett and the scientists trekked down the stairs. He followed, but only halfway, where, as before, he stood posturing like he had to prove he was important. Drac and Kia stood watch at the top of the stairs, where she tried not to fidget as flashlights flickered and echoing voices conferred quietly.

Two hours later, Dracula was outside, and Kia was tired of the whole thing. She sat at the kitchen table with her sketchbook and a third cup of coffee and was doodling when voices and footsteps alerted her. Standing quickly, she positioned herself in front of Dr. Kinley and his scientist friend. “Well?”

The coroner spoke. “Dr. Drake concurs that the bone is human.”

Kia was tired, stressed, and could feel that her patience was rapidly running out. “It took two of you almost three hours to figure that out?”

The coroner’s cheeks turned pink. “Well, we were looking at the entire area. There are some very interesting things in that room.”

“No kidding.” She took a deep breath and tried to quiet her urge to scream. “Now, does anybody have any idea who’s buried in my basement?”

It was Dr. Drake who spoke this time. “We aren’t sure of much except that the bone is a human femur, and it’s been there for quite a while. There appears to be more of the body buried, but I don’t really want to excavate it without the proper equipment. Especially given the other materials found in the room—which also appear to be quite old.”

“Wanna share why that stuff interests you so much?”

The anthropologist’s lips pulled up a bit at the corners, betraying his excitement. “Obviously, the materials consist of various biological specimens, frogs, lizards, what looks like a fetal cat, and even... Well, I won’t know for sure until I consult with my biological colleague.”

Kia swallowed. “It’s a baby, right?”

He bit his lip and studied her for a moment before he spoke. “It looks like a human fetus, yes.”

“Oh God.” She blew out her breath slowly. “So what the hell was going on down there?”

Dr. Drake's lips tightened into a line. "I'm not sure, but it looks a lot like supplies for worship."

Garrett, who was standing next to her, asked the question before she could. "Worship? What the hell do you need a fetus to worship?"

"That's a good question, and I don't have an answer right now."

"The devil," Kia said.

Dr. Drake opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again to speak. "Probably."

She felt a shudder move through her and was thankful for Garrett's hand on her shoulder.

"So what's the next step?" Garrett asked.

"I'd like to bring a crew here to excavate. I know it's an imposition." He gave her a sheepish look. "Would you allow that?"

"Now wait a doggone minute here." The sheriff pulled himself up to his full height. "There's a body down there. That means legally we can do whatever we need to until we get to the bottom of what happened."

The coroner chuckled. "Hal, from the looks of the bones down there, you'd need a time machine to find the murderer—if there is one."

"What do you mean, if there is one? Why else would there be a body in the basement?" The sheriff's red face was rapidly going purple.

Dr. Drake spoke. "It's possible that the body was there before the house. Depending on the age of the remains, it could be an explorer, early settler, Civil War soldier, or it's even possible that the house was built on top of a Native American burial ground. There may be more bodies down there." He sent a sheepish look toward Kia. "It might mean digging around in your basement—depending on what we find once we get the skeleton out."

"Find the answers. Whatever it takes." Kia sighed and went into the living room to collapse into a chair. She knew her mom would be disappointed at her for being so rude, but she was tired and beyond caring.

Garrett's voice reached her from the kitchen. "You can't tell *anything* yet?"

Dr. Drake's voice replied. "Human, woman or small man. That's all I know until we get some other bones out."

“So there are definitely more?”

“Yes. I can see there are others under the dirt, but I’d rather wait for the right equipment.”

There was a general movement behind her and toward the front door. Unlike the other two, the coroner went over to her and touched her shoulder gently. “I know this must be upsetting.”

She smiled, moved by the caring in his eyes. “I’m okay.”

“Get some rest. It’s going to be a stressful few days.”

“I will.”

He gave her shoulder a squeeze before he headed out the front door.

Garrett closed the door, then came over and sat on his heels in front of her. “This *has* been rough for you, I know. And you’re tired.” He took her hand in his. “And that’s partly my fault.”

She felt a smile form in spite of herself. “No, I don’t think I’d have slept at all if it hadn’t been for you.”

“Glad to have been of service.”

She put a hand on his face. Rough and unshaven, strong and safe. Familiar. She sighed. “I like having you around.”

“Something wrong with that?”

She chewed her lower lip for a moment, considering. “No, I guess not.” He chuckled, and she felt a surge of anger. “What’s so funny?”

He shifted from the floor to sit beside her. “It’s just you had this look on your face, like you wanted so badly to find a reason to throw me out the door.”

Confused and wondering what he was up to, she narrowed her eyes. “And that’s funny?”

“No, it’s just that you looked so cute.”

The anger inside her grew, and she opened her mouth to tell him off. He stopped her by covering her mouth with his.

When he pulled back, she tightened her arms around him. He countered by pulling her against him and sliding his hand under her shirt. She gasped with pleasure.

“If you’d just stop trying so hard to prove you don’t need anybody, you might enjoy being with me a little more.”

His hands were making it hard for her to think. “I don’t need anybody,” she managed.

“I know. You’re a strong, independent woman.”

“Glad you got that,” she said through clenched teeth, as his fingers slid over her nipples.

“Even strong, independent women need other people in their lives.”

She grabbed his wrist and tried to focus. “Not to tell them what to do.”

Her hand on his wrist barely slowed him down. “I don’t tell you what to do.”

“You’ve made it very clear you don’t want me here in my own house.” She gasped as his other hand opened the zipper of her jeans and slipped inside.

“I’m worried about you.”

“I have a right to live any damn place I want to.” She should stop him, so she could think, but she couldn’t quite remember how.

“Yes, you do. Even if you wind up getting your fool self killed.”

“By what?” She moaned, trying hard to focus. “Ghosts?”

“Ghosts, escaped criminals, wild animals, falling down the stairs and lying there because nobody knows you’re hurt, getting so sick that you’re not able to get to the phone—” Through her half-closed eyes, she saw him swallow.

“You’ve put a lot of thought into this.”

“Yes, I have. I’m concerned about you, okay?”

It was the caring in his expression that threw her. She felt the anger drain out of her, and something twisted in her gut. “I’ll be fine,” she managed.

“Stubborn.”

“Yeah,” she told him. “I am.”

Suddenly his face lit up in a wide smile. “I like stubborn in my women.”

“*Your* women?” She tried for an angry voice, but it was hard when the irritating man had one hand in her bra and the other in her panties.

“Woman,” he breathed, then captured her mouth with his.

Her eyes closed, her arms pulled him close, and against her better judgment she gave in to the sensations moving through her.

He lowered her slowly to the couch and slid her jeans down her legs. He shoved her shirt up and used his mouth to do interesting things to her nipples while she felt her jeans and panties being pulled down and off.

He released her nipples, and she fought to get her brain working again. Then she felt him pushing her legs apart and reached out to stop him. She needed to think, to plan, to figure out...

She moaned as his mouth lowered to take her most private place. Overcome by the wave of sudden sensation, all she could do was lie back and grab at the couch. Never in all her life had a man done to her what Garrett was doing now, and she couldn't believe how good it felt. He was giving, only giving, and she didn't know how to handle that.

Then the wave built and she couldn't think. Higher, higher, higher...and the wave crashed.

Convulsions jerked her body as the orgasm hit with an intensity she'd never felt before.

Then it was over, and Garrett was tenderly touching her. His fingers caressed the insides of her thighs, brushed gently over her mound, slid around to cup her butt. Unbelievably after the climax she'd just experienced, she found herself becoming aroused again.

He pushed her bra out of the way, then took a nipple in his mouth. Nipping, licking, sucking, he had her body responding in ways it never had before. This time she refused to go alone and grabbed at Garrett. "You too."

He chuckled. "I thought you were a loner."

"Not today," she gasped.

He unzipped his jeans while she opened his shirt and ran her hands over his furry chest. Again he spread her legs, but this time he moved over her and captured her mouth as he took her body.

Aroused more than she'd ever been in her life, she grabbed at him as if she could make the experience more intense. Then she felt the wave build again. And this time the two of them went together.

He lay over her for a time before he slid off her—and the couch—to sit on the floor. "Don't go away," she whispered.

"That couch isn't big enough for both of us."

"We could go to bed."

He chuckled. “I was thinking more in terms of going to my place and getting some of that chicken salad I keep bragging about. I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry.”

“I have food here. You don’t have to go all the way over there.” Her manners were trying to make an appearance. It had nothing to do with not wanting him to go. Honest.

“But I owe you lunch. Besides, I have a sneaking suspicion you’re about to have a bunch of people in here, and they’ll get hungry.” He stood and began pulling his clothes on.

Dracula barked, and her brain woke up. “I guess you need to check on Daisy too.” She slid off the couch and picked up her clothes from the floor.

He shrugged. “Actually, I called Dad. He’s probably babying her as we speak. Even if he tries to act like he hates that dog, he’s crazy about her.”

Kia smiled as she thought about the little dachshund. “She is sweet.”

“Yeah, she is.” He kissed her gently, then turned and went out the front door.

Dracula’s sharp bark, followed by a whine, let her know the dog wasn’t happy about Garrett leaving. In all honesty, neither was she. Blowing out a frustrated breath, she lectured herself on how men were nothing but trouble.

Garrett got home and found that he’d been right, his father had kidnapped his dog—there was a note telling him as much. Satisfied Daisy was taken care of, he called work to make sure there wasn’t any crisis.

“Everything’s fine here,” his dad said. “Would you like to tell me what’s going on with you?”

He considered how to phrase his answer. “Kia found a bone in her basement, and they think it’s human. She’s pretty freaked.”

“And she called you?”

“Yeah, she called me.”

“Just how close are you to this girl?”

Garrett bit back a sigh. “I live nearby, she knows me, she called me.”

“That’s all?”

Anger moved through him, and he covered it with a chuckle. “I’m a big boy, Dad. I think I can handle my own relationships with women.”

“Kia Wolfe isn’t just any woman, son.”

“She’s a nice person, and she doesn’t know many people here.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, and you know it.”

“So I can’t be friends with her because of her place of residence?”

There was a moment of quiet before his father said, “I’m not so sure it’s friendship you’re interested in.”

“Dad...”

“Garrett, you’d better think about what you’re doing. You know that house’s history as well as I do. Getting mixed up in that isn’t something I want for my son.”

“You were the one who said we shouldn’t warn her.”

“Didn’t stop you, did it? Besides, that was business. It’s a different thing entirely for you to get personally involved with a woman who—one way or the other—isn’t going to be around long.”

White-hot anger blasted through Garrett so hard he began to tremble. “So it doesn’t matter what happens to her, as long as I’m not involved.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Didn’t you?”

“Son, I can’t protect everybody who does crazy things. You’re family.”

Pain twisted his heart. “So you feel you have to protect me.”

“Yeah, I do. That house is evil, and you know it. By getting tangled up with this woman, you’re putting yourself at risk.”

“Evil? A house can’t be evil.” But hadn’t he said the same thing?

“Yeah, well something in the house is evil, then. What difference does it make which it is?”

Garrett shook his head in frustration. “So this evil has just been sitting there all these years, waiting for somebody to grab?”

“Years don’t matter to evil, evil just is.”

They said their goodbyes and he finished gathering food and supplies. Why was his father being such a jackass? He didn't even know Kia, he had no idea what kind of woman she was. And yet he was willing to throw her to whatever was in that house without a second thought—as long as his son wasn't involved.

Leaning against the counter, he tried to clear his thoughts. His dad was worried about him, that's all. He wasn't a bad man, just one who was highly protective of his family.

Garrett wasn't worried about himself. He didn't believe he was really at risk from whatever was in that house. But Kia was.

And that terrified him.

Chapter Sixteen

It was a good thing Garrett brought lots of food back, because right behind him was a parade of hungry strangers. By mid-afternoon, Kia's solitary new life was nothing but a memory. Cars were parked not only in her driveway, but also in her yard. People trudged in and out, hauling shovels, cameras, wooden boxes with screens, buckets, and things she couldn't identify. Dracula, who was beside himself with excitement, quickly learned which of the various visitors would play with him if he could catch their attention, and which he could scare with a random bark.

Trying to not think about what was going on in her basement, Kia threw herself into some long-overdue unpacking. She kept wandering back to the kitchen though, to stand at the open door and gaze down into the dank cavern below the floor.

Garrett was down there, talking with the coroner and the group of university students Dr. Drake had brought with him to assist in the excavation. They all seemed comfortable, as chatter and occasional laughter seeped up the stairs. But that gloomy hole under her house still made her nervous. She was curious about what they were doing, what they were finding, but she couldn't bring herself to join them. A couple of times she went part-way down the stairs, but never all the way. She just couldn't force her feet to go very far. Not even to check on Garrett.

She was standing at the halfway point and trying to coax her feet to go down further when she heard her phone play its little song. Glad for the interruption, she dashed up to answer it.

"You okay out there?" Wy asked. "I heard there was a big to-do going on out your way."

"You heard already?" Phone to ear, Kia moved into the bedroom and shut the door.

"Small towns have killer grapevines."

"Apparently."

"I own a store; I get all the good gossip." There was a bit of a giggle. "So when you say you have a skeleton in your closet, you really do have a skeleton in your closet."

Kia chuckled. "Hey, I told you I liked different. And to be accurate, the skeleton's in the basement."

“Where Mary was telling you to look?”

“Yep, right where she showed me, there was a false wall, a door, and a secret room complete with bones and creepy junk.”

“Creepy junk? What kind of creepy junk?”

She shuddered as she remembered. “Jars of stuff. Like animal parts. Probably eye of newt or something. And one that looked like a tiny baby. ‘Fetus’, that anthropologist said.”

“Cool. What anthropologist?”

Kia shuddered at the excitement in Wy’s voice. “It isn’t so cool when it’s in your own basement. And the anthropologist is a friend of the coroner from the university. Ethan Drake’s his name.”

“Let me guess, he’s old and ugly and forgets where he put his glasses all the time.”

“Actually, young and good-looking.”

“And you didn’t call me?”

She frowned, remembering the dark-haired man with the eyes that seemed to look right through you. “There’s something weird about him.”

“Weird? How?”

“I’m not sure I can explain it, he just spooked me somehow. Dracula likes him, though. So he can’t be all bad.”

“Hmmm. I may have to come visit you after I close.”

She opened the bedroom door enough to peek out and make sure there wasn’t anyone in the foyer, then closed it again. “I wish you would, Wy. There’s something I want to show you.”

“What?”

“I’ll show you when you get here.”

“Ooh, mysterious. I like it.”

Kia laughed. “Not so mysterious as all that. I just want your opinion, that’s all.”

“Well, I’m always happy to express my opinion. Even if I have no idea what I’m talking about. See you about seven? I’ll bring pizza.”

Her mouth watered in anticipation. “Wy, you’re the greatest.”

“I know.” Wy giggled, said goodbye, and hung up.

Kia pushed the button on the phone and went back to the kitchen. A glance down the stairs revealed no new developments, so she trudged to her fridge. The sparse pickings didn't appeal to her, so she pulled the freezer section door open. Nothing there but ice and frozen peas. She stuck her head back into the fridge section to try again to find something worth munching. Those evil students had sucked down all Garrett's chicken salad, and it was the best stuff she'd ever eaten. Darn it. She spotted a package of salami way in the back and leaned in to grab it.

The scream startled her into bumping her head on the still-open freezer section door.

Giving both parts of the door a hard shove, she trucked it toward the basement stairs. At the bottom, one of the students stood to one side. "What is that?" the young woman was screaming. "Something touched me. I felt it! Now there's this stuff on my arm."

"Take it easy, Lisa," Dr. Drake said, handing her a cloth.

The woman's hand shook as she wiped at her arm. "I felt it, honest. And I heard a voice. It said, 'Whore', I heard it."

"I understand you're upset. It's dark down here, and closed in—"

"I am *not* a hysterical female." The woman pulled back her shoulders as her gaze leveled accusing darts at Dr. Drake. "I know what I saw and what I felt."

"Lisa..." He obviously had no idea what to say.

"I can't stay here. I'm sorry. If this ends my career, so be it." She handed him back the cloth, then marched up the stairs and out.

As Kia watched the woman go, her gaze brushed past Garrett. He wasn't watching the woman, though. He was watching Kia.

She looked back at him and saw deep worry in his forest green eyes. Soft, warm, caring. She felt herself sinking in. Safe, welcome. A port in this crazy storm. Her feet began to move toward him.

"Dr. Drake, could you look at this? Are these teeth marks?"

The voice caught Garrett's attention, and he turned to look. Shaken from her spell, Kia followed suit.

Dr. Drake nodded. "That's what it looks like."

"Rats?"

“No, the marks are too big. These were made by a much larger animal. I’d say a bear or a wolf.”

“Interesting.”

Kia felt a shiver move through her as she stared at the bone in the student’s hand. How many more creepy secrets did her beloved house hold?

She slowly became aware of a pressure on her shoulder, one that was hard enough to cause pain. Almost afraid to find out what was happening, she glanced around to see the cause.

Garrett was standing beside her, gripping her shoulder, his face pale and his eyes filled with fear. “Oh my God,” he whispered.

“Garrett?” She reached up and put her hand on his. “Are you all right?”

“I never really thought...not really.” He seemed to realize she was there and looked at her. “Kia.”

She stared. She’d never heard her name spoken so intensely. It was almost as if her soul was a book, and he was studying it.

The barking from the top of the stairs startled her, but Garrett literally jumped. She turned to see Dracula looking at her with that pathetic expression he adopted when he wanted something from her. A glance at her watch told her that what he likely wanted was to go outside.

Her gaze returned to Garrett. “I need to go take care of the mutt.”

He blinked a couple of times, almost like coming out of a trance. “Dog, yeah.”

He was still pale and Kia wasn’t convinced he was okay, but she had no idea what was wrong or what to do for him. So all she could do was to gently squeeze his arm before she hurried up the steps.

Dracula, as usual, launched out the door like a rocket, but got distracted by a butterfly before he got to his business. And as soon as he finished he went right back to running and playing in the yard. She smiled as she stood at the doorway and watched him run and play. She felt sorry for people who didn’t have pets. They were missing out on so much.

The sound of someone coming up behind her brought her out of her contemplation. Garrett was there, less pale but still intent. “We need to talk,” he said. She nodded and together they walked into the backyard.

Back here it wasn't obvious that her house had become a second Grand Central Station, which was a relief. This was why she loved the house in the middle of nowhere, this fresh clean air, this soft breeze, the scent of wildflowers and pine, the open spaces, the privacy, the inspiration. That's why she'd left Savannah, for this. And bones or no bones, she didn't regret the decision.

"You're in danger," Garrett said.

She regarded him, taking in his pallor and the fear in his eyes. "From what? A pile of old bones?"

He touched her arm, and she felt a tremor move through him. "From the curse."

She bit back the laugh. "Curse? So now there's a curse?"

His hand dropped off her arm. "Remember the story about the woman whose husband and son were killed by an animal?"

"Yeah, she went nuts."

"But she never stopped saying that the animal that killed her family was really a man."

"So? You said yourself that she'd been through a lot and was probably delusional."

"She might have been right."

Incredulity swept through her. "You've got to be kidding."

He turned away, as if he was considering what to say. When he faced her again, there was determination in his eyes. "The story is that there's a curse. Nobody really knows the details, but I've heard all my life that it originated right here in this house."

"Okay, I'll bite, what curse?"

"A curse that turns a man into a beast."

"Oh, a sexist curse."

"Kia..."

"Well, it is. Unless you're using the word 'man' as a short form for 'mankind', which of course is sexist in its own right."

Garrett rubbed his forehead as if he had the mother of all headaches. "I don't know why, but it's always a male who changes."

"Into a wolf?"

“More or less, yes.”

“And you believe that crap?”

“Werewolf legends go back further than writing. Cultures all over the world have werewolf legends. Native Americans believe in shapeshifters.”

“And that proves what?”

“After everything you’ve seen since you moved here, why is this so hard for you to accept?”

She leaned against the side of her house and stared at the man in front of her. “Look, I don’t know what you think about me, but I’m not a kook. I’ll buy that a human soul can stick around for a time, especially if they died violently or something. But I don’t believe in werewolves, vampires, or little green men.”

He moved in front of her so fast she sucked in her breath, and his hands dug in her shoulders as he pushed her against the outside wall. “Don’t you understand, Kia? There’s evil in this house. It should’ve been burned to the ground years ago. To allow a woman to live here alone is criminal.”

He was acting more than a little strange, and she wasn’t sure how to deal with that. She did know she didn’t like his words. “Nobody ‘allows’ me to do any damn thing.”

“I want you out of here. I want you safe.”

Anger burned hot in her veins as she kicked at his lower leg and shoved against his chest. He loosened his hold, and she used the development to move away. She stood a few feet from him, staring at the man she had thought she knew. “I think you need to go to work where you belong.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Good.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Her fists gripped as she fought the urge to hit him. “How many times do I have to say that I’m a big girl? I can take care of myself.”

“Don’t you think all those other people thought that?”

There were tears in his eyes. She couldn’t hit him when there were tears in his eyes. “I don’t care about other people. I just know that I love it here.”

“At least leave until they figure out what’s going on in that basement.”

She was getting seriously tired of defending her choices. “No.”

“I’m not going to let you stay here. It’s too dangerous.”

Okay, maybe she *could* hit him. Instead, she clenched her fists at her side. “What you want doesn’t matter. This is my life, remember?”

“Don’t you understand?” He gently touched her cheek. “I love you.”

The words sizzled through her like lightning from a clear sky. For a moment she couldn’t breathe, and had an overwhelming need to run far and long. She heard herself laugh. “Please don’t confuse a couple of rolls in the hay with real emotion. And even if you do think you feel something for me, you don’t have the right to dictate my life.”

“Kia, please.” There was agony reflected in his face.

Shoving back the need to grab him and hold on for all she was worth, she forced herself to look him straight in the eye. “I appreciate you coming over here. But I think you need to go now.”

He nodded sadly as he turned toward the side of the house. Dracula ran to him, and Garrett took time to rub the dog’s head. Then he stood and looked back toward her. “Call me if you need me.”

She walked over to the edge of the house, where she could watch as he got into his truck, pulled around the various vehicles parked behind him, and drove away.

For a time she simply stood, her heart a weight pulling at her, while Dracula barked in frustration at the loss of his playmate. Then reality settled around her, and she turned and stomped back into the house. Where did he get off thinking he had the right to “allow” her to live or not live here? How could he think he had the right to tell her what she could and couldn’t do? What was it with men that made them think they had to be in control all the time?

And what was with this crazy urge to sit in the middle of the floor and cry her eyes out?

Back in the kitchen, she stood for a time at the top of the stairs and watched as strangers dug holes in her basement. When that got to be more than she could handle, she went into her studio, picked up a sketchbook, then took that and a Coke out to the front porch. Ignoring the table, she perched on the front steps and set the drink beside her.

Twenty minutes later, Fuzzy's outline was barely sketched, and Kia was staring out at her front yard. It wasn't Fuzzy she was seeing in her head as she contemplated the trees a few feet from her house; it was a very human face that was filling her thoughts.

Something wet touched her hand, and she looked down. Drops of water had sprinkled over her paper, but there wasn't a cloud in the sky. When she closed her eyes, tears ran down her face.

Her hand scrubbed across her cheeks so hard it hurt. *What are you doing? Why are you letting him get to you like this?*

Dracula gave her a slobbery kiss, and she hugged him close. "I swore I'd never do it, Drac. I swore I'd never let a man do this to me. I watched as Sydney all but curled up and died after Stan dumped her, and I made a vow that I was never going to let a man get close enough to do that to me."

The dog laid his chin on her leg, which made her smile. "You're the only male I need in my life. Human males are more trouble than they're worth."

He raised his head to reply with a quiet bark, and she planted a kiss on his soft, furry head. Dogs were much better than human men. Dogs were loyal, they never cheated on you, said you looked fat, or tried to tell you what clothes to wear or what friends you could have.

Or where to live.

Deciding she needed something to shake her out of her mental rut, she stood and started down the steps. Apparently deciding his mistress wanted to play, Dracula danced around her. She looked at him and considered. Why not?

She grabbed a stick, and before long they were immersed in a spirited game of fetch. Kia ran almost as much as Dracula did, delighting in the dog's obvious enjoyment.

They were still playing two hours later, when Wy's red Volkswagen pulled into the yard. Dracula rushed over to the newcomer, and by the time Kia got there Wy was being shown in no uncertain terms that she was welcome.

Wy glanced at Kia as she got near the car, then turned back to the adoring dog. "Was that mean old woman chasing you around the yard with a stick? You poor baby."

Kia laughed. "Oh good grief, don't encourage him."

“But he’s such a sweetheart, aren’t you, Dracula?” He answered with bark. “Someday I’m going to buy a house and have a dog of my own. And Max will just have to get over it.”

“So what are you waiting for?”

Wy didn’t meet her eyes. “The right person.”

“What, you think you aren’t good enough to have a house by yourself?”

“No. I guess I just would like to wait.”

“Because men are so damned important?” She shouldn’t have said that. When was she going to learn when to keep her big mouth shut?

Wy straightened and looked toward Kia. “I’d like to have a husband and kids. And getting a house right now just seems pointless. For me, anyway.”

Kia pushed her chin up a notch. “For me it was the right choice. But then, I don’t feel that I need a man to have a life.”

“Neither do I, Kia. But the kind of life I want does include a husband.” She touched Kia’s arm. “I think you made the right choice for you. I’m just a different person, and I have to do what’s right for me.”

Kia swallowed. “Sorry, I guess I’m just defensive. I’ve gotten so much flack about my choice to buy this house.”

“I understand.” Wy aimed a narrow-eyed look at the structure before them. “You do realize the flack isn’t just about choosing to buy a house.”

“I know. Haunted house, middle of nowhere, woman alone. I got the lecture from Garrett earlier.”

“Speaking of Garrett, he stopped by my store.”

“To complain about the way I treated him?”

She stopped and looked into Kia’s eyes. “No, to tell me that he was worried about you.”

“Men are such pains in the ass.” She sighed as she pushed open the door so they could enter the house. Indicating with a sweep of her arm, she said, “And here you have Grand Central Station II.”

Once the pizza was secure on the kitchen table, Wy insisted on seeing the center of activity. So they went to the door leading downward to the basement.

The area resembled an ant hive, with most of the activity centered on the secret room, but also pockets of hole-digging scattered around the basement.

“Why are they digging all those holes?”

“Making sure there’s nothing else buried down there.”

Wy’s eyes widened. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

Her friend watched quietly for a time, then asked, “Which one’s the weird anthropologist person?”

“He left earlier, said he had something he had to take care of.”

“Well, crap. I really wanted to meet this dude.” Wy started down the stairs, and Kia reluctantly followed, at least to the lower third of the stairs. She should have known her friend would want to investigate close up and personal.

Wy circled the basement, checking out the proceedings and getting the attention of more than one male.

After completing the inspection, she returned to the stairs where Kia stood waiting. “Awesome.”

“If you say so.” Kia motioned with her head. “Let’s eat before the pizza disappears.”

Once back upstairs, she breathed a sigh of relief. Her basement it might be, but she wasn’t comfortable down there. Not anymore.

They sat at the table with the two Cokes Wy had brought and opened the box. Kia took a slice of pizza and breathed in its warm, cheesy scent before she took a bite. The spicy pepperoni, the gooey cheese, thick crust. She closed her eyes, sure she was in heaven.

“Like pizza a little?”

She didn’t even open her eyes, she just nodded. Across the table, she heard her friend’s laughter.

They took their time, enjoying the food while Kia filled her in on finding the bone. “It spooked me pretty good, I’ve gotta say.”

“I’d have had to change my pants,” Wy said.

“I almost did.”

Wy smiled, but then her expression became more serious. “Garrett said you called him. He said you were pretty upset.”

Anger bubbled up, and she fought to hold it down. “Yeah, I called him. I was spooked and not thinking straight.”

“He said you scared him, that nothing seems to get to you, and yet you were pale and shaking when he got here.”

“Well, I’m glad he gave you a play by play.”

Wy sighed. “I’m not trying to make you mad. I’m just trying to tell you that he’s seriously concerned. And that worries me.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s worried, so apparently there’s a reason to be worried, and that makes *me* worry.” There was frustration in her voice. “Does that make sense?”

Yes. “No.”

“He wouldn’t be so upset if he didn’t have good reason. He’s not like that.”

Maybe he was just concerned about her, maybe...no. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“So you think he’s overreacting?”

“Yeah, I am. He’s made it very clear that he wants me out of this house. He’s just using what’s happening now to scare me into moving.”

Wy leaned toward her, chewing her lip for a moment before she spoke. “He’s not the only one who wants you out of here. Your sister was adamant about it. And to be honest, I’m not thrilled with you living out here all alone.”

The words surprised her, and she stared at her friend. “But I love this house.”

“I know you do. I just worry, that’s all.”

Sudden tears burned her eyes, and she looked down at her pizza. Both touched and frustrated, she fought to keep her cool. “You know, I get tired of having to defend my choices all the time.”

“So you thought you’d move into a haunted house in the middle of nowhere and everybody would just be thrilled about it?”

“You thought it was pretty cool.”

“That was before the ghosts, and the bones, and the weirdness.” Wy caught her arm. “And before I got to know you.”

“Really?” She still couldn’t look at Wy.

“Well, yeah. It’s one thing to think about a stranger moving up here, it’s a whole other ballgame when it’s a friend.”

She bit back the deluge of emotions—both caring and anger—and stood. “I want to show you what I found.” She went into her studio and pulled the knife out of the bag where she’d stuck it. Again there was a slight tingling when she touched the handle, but she tried not to betray her building excitement. Instead, she laid it on the drawings scattered across the top of the small table.

Wy’s eyes were wide. “It’s gorgeous. Where did you get this?”

“I found it in the basement, next to the bone. In fact, I tripped over the knife and that’s why I found the bone.”

“It looks like an athame.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Wy touched the knife, but quickly jerked her hand away. “Must be static electricity in here.” She reached a cautious hand toward the knife again, her eyes widened, she seemed to hesitate, but then she picked up the knife. She only held it a minute, then reverently replaced it on the work table. “Did you feel something...well...strange when you touched that thing?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“And you didn’t warn me?”

“I wanted to know if you’d feel it too.”

There was a sound near the doorway, and Kia pulled a sketchbook over the knife before she looked up. One of the student workers stuck his head around the corner. “Sorry to bother you, ma’am, but you might want to put that pizza somewhere before somebody eats it.”

Kia and Wy looked at each other and smiled. Wy turned to the man, leaning her hip against the table. “You boys have been working hard all day, why don’t you take the rest of the pizza?”

The smile was quick and bright. “Well, thank you.”

Then he was gone, and Wy turned back to face Kia. “So you don’t want anybody to see that thing?”

“Not really. I’m sure these scientist-types would love to get their paws on this knife, and it’s all mine.” She glanced toward the doorway, and lowered her voice. “Besides, I didn’t tell the sheriff, and that’s probably some kind of offense or something.”

Wy whistled softly. “You do take the chances, don’t you? So why didn’t you tell him?”

She considered for a moment. “You know, I’m not sure about that. Somehow I just felt it was better if I kept it to myself.”

She slid the knife back into its place in the bag and covered it with some papers. Then she and Wy returned to the kitchen, where they found nothing left of the pizza but crumbs. “Hungry varmints,” Wy said, and Kia laughed.

They took fresh Cokes and went into the living room. Curling on each end of the couch, they sat quietly for a time, each involved in her own thoughts.

“It really does look like an athame,” Wy said.

There was no sense trying to pretend Kia didn’t know what her friend was talking about. “You know, ever since I found it I’ve been thinking about what Diana Cole said.”

“About athames being made with built-in power?”

“Yeah.” Kia leaned closer to her friend. “You don’t think...?”

“I don’t know. But Ms. Cole ordered some books the other day. If you just happened to be there—with your knife—when she picks them up...”

“Just let me know when.”

Wy nodded. “I’ll call you.”

“I’ll be there.”

“We could be wrong.”

She shrugged. “So we’re wrong. But what if we’re right?”

“True.”

The conversation turned to mundane things, then Wy stood and announced she needed to go home. Kia walked her to her car.

Wy opened the little VW's door, but simply stood for a moment, studying the ground. Finally she looked into Kia's eyes. "You know, I've never seen Garrett like he was this afternoon."

Tense, and raw from all the stress, it was all she could do not to snap at her friend. "Wy, please."

Wy continued as if Kia hadn't spoken. "He was scared. And really upset. He wanted me to make sure you were all right."

"Whoop-de-do."

Wy put her hands on Kia's shoulders and gave a shake. "Don't you get it? If he didn't care about you, he wouldn't feel that way."

"What way? That he has to control my life?"

Wy dropped her hands and stared hard at Kia. "I don't know what your problem is, but Garrett's a good man. His ex hurt him really bad, and I didn't think he'd ever fall again. But he has, and you're a lucky woman. You're just too all-fired stubborn to see what you've got." She slid into her car, then looked back toward Kia. "And just in case you're too blind to figure it out, you're in love with him too."

She slammed the door and sped out of the yard, leaving Kia feeling like she'd just been hit with a truck.

Zechariah Strode howled in frustration, though to anyone listening it would only sound like the wind. "It's mine! That whore has no right to my property."

He could see the athame, stuffed into a bag and hidden by bits of used paper. No respect for an object of power. The idiot obviously had no idea what she'd stumbled onto.

He tried again to force his hand into corporeal form. But it was hopeless. The laws he had found himself caught in for over a century had too strong a hold on him.

"It isn't hers!" he roared. "She has no right."

Maybe he couldn't take it back—yet anyway—but he would damn well make her suffer for what she'd done.

Chapter Seventeen

Tap, tap, tap.

Kia opened one eye, to see darkness curled around her like a shroud. “Dream.” She pulled the blanket closer.

Tap, tap, tap.

She opened both eyes this time and saw Dracula looking back. A glance at the clock showed three a.m. Groaning, she snuggled deeper into the soft, warm bed.

Tap, tap, tap.

Suddenly there was a chill, even under her warm covers. Sitting straight up, she studied the ceiling as if she could peer through the boards and discern whether those were footsteps she was hearing.

Tap, tap, tap.

She slid out of bed and pulled her jeans on. Shivering, and not only from the cold, she motioned for Dracula to stay quiet and tiptoed to the bedroom door.

Tap, tap, tap.

The door wasn't quite closed, but glancing through the inch between edge of door and doorjamb gave no indication of anything amiss in the darkness of the living room.

She pushed the door further and edged through the opening. Still nothing but the shadowy outlines of furniture.

Tap, tap, tap.

Moving as quietly as possible, she crept into the room. Glad for the light of the moon, she managed to get to the table where she was sure she'd put her cell phone, only to find it wasn't there.

Her mouth went uncomfortably dry as her trembling hands felt around again on the small table. But the phone wasn't there, and her fear-filled brain couldn't think where it might be. Was it possible that whoever was in the house had stolen the phone so that she couldn't call for help?

Tap, tap, tap.

Whoever was upstairs was walking, back and forth. *Think!* There was nothing of value up there. Nothing period. Her brain registered that, but processing the information was beyond her. Her phone. She had to find her cell phone.

Tap, tap, tap.

The kitchen. She had hung up with Wy and taken the phone with her when she went to find a snack.

Tap, tap, tap.

She glanced up at the ceiling, swallowed hard and then stepped into the open area between the living room and the kitchen. It wasn't far, she just had to be quiet.

And pass by the basement door.

Tap, tap, tap.

The cell was on the kitchen cabinet. She grabbed it and began edging carefully back the way she came. Closer and closer she came to the basement door. How could it be that evil seemed to seep around the edges? Sure she was simply reacting to the tension of the situation; she forced herself to ignore the dread growing inside her and move toward her goal.

Tap, tap, tap.

The hard swallow sounded so loud to her that she was sure the intruder upstairs must have heard it. She hesitated a moment to listen, but the footsteps continued without pause. Breathing a tiny sigh of relief, she moved on.

Thump.

She jumped back so hard, she bumped into the cabinet a good five feet from the basement door. The cell hit the floor, but she did manage to keep the scream to a soft shriek. Was there someone in the basement also?

Tap, tap, tap.

Garrett.

Her eyes closed tightly, and she berated herself for even thinking in that direction. She didn't need him. She was not running back to him for help. She was a strong independent woman who did *not* need a man to protect her.

Tap, tap, tap.

She reached down and picked up the cell phone. She'd simply call for help. Like anybody else. Garrett lived alone. On top of the mountain. And nobody tried to talk him out of his house.

Tap, tap, tap.

Of course, his house hadn't come with a prior tenant who'd stuck around even after she died.

Gripping the phone, she backed as far away from the basement door as she could and still get to the foyer. Slowly, carefully, quietly she tiptoed across the floor.

There was a movement in the shadows, and for a moment she was sure she would have a heart attack. Then she realized it was Dracula, and let her breath out in relief.

Tap, tap, tap.

She tiptoed to her dog, and the two of them went back into her bedroom. With the door securely closed—and the nightstand pushed in front of it—she felt a little better. Still, she buried her face into Dracula's soft fur for a moment before she found the strength to dial 911.

She told the woman at the other end her address and that an intruder was in her house. The woman promised help would be there soon, so Kia hung up and sat in the floor by the bed to wait. Her heart was racing in her chest; she could hear it in her ears. Thump, thump, thump.

Tap, tap, tap.

Tears formed in her eyes. *Garrett*. She wanted him there so badly that she actually picked up the cell phone again. "No," she whispered. "He'll only use this to try to convince me to move."

Tap, tap, tap.

Garrett thought she'd been wrong to move here. So did Sydney. And Wy. And her parents.

Tap, tap, tap.

Were they all wrong?

Tap, tap, tap.

She loved her house. She hadn't been scared until she found the bones. Imagine, being panic-stricken over a few old bones. What was wrong with her?

Tap, tap, tap.

With trembling hands, she wiped away the tears as she thought about that. It wasn't the bones that had spooked her, it wasn't even the nasty crap in those jars. No, that wasn't why she'd been so scared.

It was the all but palpable evil that seemed to center in that small room.

Tap, tap, tap.

Garrett had warned her there was evil in the house.

Tap, tap, tap.

Her mother had said she felt evil. Her logical, solid, always composed mother.

Tap, tap, tap.

Kia buried her face in her hands and cried as quietly as she could. Dracula whined softly as he nuzzled her hair. "Was I wrong?" she asked him. He whined again as he gave her a big, sloppy kiss. "I love you," she whispered. Garrett's face flashed into her mind as she said it, provoking a fear worse than the sounds above her. Whoever was there might kill her. Falling in love with a man led to giving up who you are. Or heartbreak. She wasn't sure which was worse.

Above her, the intruder continued his pacing back and forth across the floor. The bedroom above her, where she'd seen the furniture.

Tap, tap, tap.

Where she and Sydney had seen a light on when they returned from the pizza run. Where Dracula had refused to enter that first day. The center of ghostly activity until she'd found that basement room.

Tap, tap, tap.

It was an intruder. A human one. As soon as the sheriff got here he'd find the person and arrest him. Or her. And it would all be over. The fact that intruders don't pace was irrelevant.

Tap, tap, tap.

Above her, Zechariah Strode laughed in glee as he watched his human prey cower.

Chapter Eighteen

“There’s nobody up there.”

Kia stared at the sheriff. “I heard somebody walking around.”

The man shrugged. “Maybe he got out the back, but there ain’t nobody up there now.”

The deputy who had arrived right behind the sheriff spoke up. “I ran to the back as soon as I got here. There wasn’t anybody there.”

The sheriff gave the deputy a hard look. “Then he must’ve took off before you drug your lazy ass back there.”

“But I heard him walking around as you pulled in,” Kia said.

“He heard our cars and took off.”

Tears of frustration pooled in her eyes, but she refused to allow the sheriff to see her cry. “I don’t think there was time.”

The sheriff puffed out his chest. “Well, I don’t know what to tell you, but there ain’t nobody in that house.”

“I’ll go look again,” the deputy said.

Kia fought the urge to hug the man.

While the deputy went back inside, the sheriff stood with his arms crossed and glared toward the open front door. Kia stood a bit away from him, holding Dracula’s collar and hoping like hell that a burglar was holed up on her second floor. How crazy had her life become?

If time was any indication, the deputy did a thorough job of searching. She knew he had been in there for just over forty-seven minutes—though it seemed like hours—because she nervously checked her watch about a million times. Her already overwrought nerves throbbed with worry as she waited for the deputy. The sheriff went to sit in his cruiser soon after the deputy went inside, but he now stood shifting from one foot to the other and making her even more nervous.

She was beginning to think the deputy had met with an accident—or foul play—when he finally emerged from the house. The apologetic look on his face told her the news before he voiced the words. “I didn’t find anything.”

“Well, let’s get out of here.” The sheriff turned and waddled off to his squad car. “Coming, Roger?”

The deputy nodded. “Right behind you.”

The sheriff pulled out of the drive, and the deputy turned to Kia. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

She nodded as she fought back the threatening tears.

“Is there anybody you could call to come and stay with you? Or maybe someplace you could stay.”

Garrett. “No, I’ll be fine, thanks.”

“Call if you need us.”

She nodded again as the man climbed in his car and drove away.

“Well, Dracula,” she said. “It’s just you and me, kid.”

First taking a deep breath to shore up her courage, she tipped up her chin and marched up the front steps and into her house.

The lights were still on downstairs because of the search. And it was quiet. She checked the locks on both doors, turned out most of the lights, then let out a sigh of relief as she started toward her bedroom.

Tap, tap, tap.

She froze. Her heart began beating so fast she was sure it would wear itself out and simply stop. “No.” It was a whimper, and Dracula answered with one of his own.

She collapsed onto the couch and dropped her head into her hands. Sobs shook her, even as she fought for control. “Why?” she asked the empty room. “Why are you doing this to me?”

She didn’t expect an answer, so she wasn’t disappointed when none came.

Dracula, who must have sensed his owner’s distress, climbed up onto the couch to curl next to her and give her drooly kisses. She cuddled him close and tried not to give in to the urge to run screaming from the house.

Tap, tap, tap.

As the sun-streaks of morning peered around of the edges of the tightly closed drapes, Kia finally fell into a shallow sleep. Two hours later, she was awakened by the sound of cars, voices, footsteps, Dracula's barks, and knocks on her door.

She let the circus into her house, managed to pour a bowl of breakfast for the dog, then stretched out on the couch and slipped back into sleep.

Garrett's truck tore up patches of grass as it slid into Kia's yard. Shoving the thing into park before it was completely stopped, he jumped out and ran toward the house. The front door was unlocked—not surprising, considering the number of vehicles parked all over the yard.

“Revolting pile of sticks pretending to be a house,” he said, as his long legs made short work of the distance between him and his goal.

“Kia?” he shouted, as he blew through the doorway and into the foyer.

“What?” Kia rose from where she was lying on the couch.

He rushed into the living room “Are you all right?”

She blinked and squinted toward him. “Yeah, just sleepy,” her voice was thick.

“I heard about last night.”

She looked confused. “Last night?”

He sat beside her and took her hand in his. “Somebody was in the house?”

“No. Not anybody alive anyway.” She covered a yawn with her hand.

His heart hit the side of his chest so hard he thought it might escape. “What the hell happened?”

“That stupid, pacing ghost. If she wasn't already dead I'd kill her.”

He put his hand on her chin and tipped her face up. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I just need coffee, that's all.”

“You need rest, that's what you need. You go lie down, and I'll—”

She moved away from his touch, as anger darkened her eyes. “What part of ‘don't tell me what to do’ didn't you understand?”

The headache that had awakened him from sleep last night still pounded. “What *is* your problem? Since when is caring about somebody telling them what to do?”

“Why don’t you go lie down?” Her voice was mocking as she repeated his words. “You need your beauty rest, you poor delicate creature.”

Pain and frustration converged, and a volcano of rage belched lava throughout his body. “What the hell does that mean?”

Her face was contorted with anger. “You figure it out, you know everything, right?”

“I don’t know why it is that you resent anybody caring what happens to you.”

She shook her head, as if clearing it. “It’s not the caring, it’s the telling to grow up. Be adult. Get a real job. Live in an expensive apartment. Move out of your house.” Incredibly, she yawned.

He stared at the woman he loved, the woman for whom he’d broken the vow to never give his heart to a woman again. “I’m not your parents.”

“Yeah well, Charlie was like that too. All men are.”

He stepped back and looked into the eyes of this woman he loved, but didn’t understand in the least. He closed his eyes for a moment and rubbed at his aching head, trying to get his temper under control, but knowing that it was hopeless.

The anger rose and pushed until he spun and took a step toward her. “Damn it, I’m not your momma, your daddy, your sister, or your dog, and I sure as hell ain’t your ex-boyfriend.”

“I know that.”

“Do you? Is that why you just lumped me in there with them?” He leaned over, put his hands on her shoulders, pinning her against the back of the couch. “You get thoroughly pissed off when people don’t treat you with respect. Well, you’re going to have to do the same.”

“What does not wanting to be pushed around have to do with respect?” She aimed a meaningful glance toward his hands pinning her shoulders.

Forcing himself to back up, he held his hands up in surrender. “You’re so defensive about your independence you don’t know the difference between caring and pushing.”

“Whatever.”

“Damn it, I love you so much it hurts. I can’t stand by while you get your fool self killed.”
He touched her cheek. “If you need me, give me a call.”

He turned and walked out the door.

And left his heart with her.

Kia sat and stared unseeing into space while she wondered if the pressure in her chest meant she going to die. It wasn’t true what he’d said. It couldn’t be. She knew when somebody was trying to run her life for her. She was sure she did. And she wasn’t defensive.

Was she?

Irritated, she stood and went toward the kitchen. Maybe a pot of coffee would knock the cobwebs loose and allow her to think.

The coffee didn’t help much, and she spent most of the day in a groggy fog. Her body screamed at her to go stretch out, but she didn’t feel comfortable holing up in her bedroom while total strangers wandered in and out of her house.

Was that what Garrett was trying to tell her, that he’d keep an eye on things while she rested?

“Could I *be* more confused?” she asked Dracula as she went to feed him his lunch. Since she was in the kitchen, she looked for food. Nothing seemed to suit her, however, and she found herself wishing the parade of strangers with shovels would go the way of the dinosaur and vanish off the face of the earth. Then she’d take a long nap, go into town for a greasy dinner, and thus be girded for the tapping that would most likely commence with the lowering of the sun.

Finally she settled for a tuna sandwich on the porch. She took her sketchpad with her, and even managed to get a little work done. The food and the feeling of accomplishment went a long way toward making her feel human again. It was with a smile that she went back into the house to do a bit of straightening up. Not that it would do much good. You couldn’t have people trudging in and out as much as she did and still have a clean house. Still, maybe she could make some progress.

As the afternoon wore on, she remembered the football game and turned on the radio. It wasn't very interesting without pictures, though. Especially not without the wild companionship of Wy and Rusty. Before long she turned the thing off, though some of the students listened to the game, so she picked up on the fact that UT lost. "Great day," she said, gaining her a sideways look from a passing student. She smiled innocently as the man hurried toward the basement. "It isn't me you should be afraid of," she muttered toward his retreating back.

She tried to read the Stephen King book, but that really wasn't a good idea. Without cable or satellite dish, television reception was horrible. And she just wasn't in the mood to watch one of her DVD's.

The sun was beginning to set when the work crew began to pack it in for the day. She told herself she was glad to see them leave, but deep inside, the combination of being left alone and the onrushing night triggered a loathing in her that she was hard pressed to ignore.

Also hard to ignore was the persistent desire to call Garrett. She'd feel safe with him there, she was sure of that. But then she'd have to apologize and admit she had been a bitch earlier. She'd have to admit she couldn't handle being alone in her very own home. *Hell no.*

Pulling back her shoulders, she went to the kitchen to thaw out one of the two steaks she'd stashed in her freezer. Steaks she'd planned to enjoy with Garrett one lazy evening.

The heck with thoughts of tall, sexy and pushy. If she was going to face her fears, she sure as hell wasn't going to do it on an empty stomach.

A potato nuked in the microwave and a Coke completed her meal, and she ate in the living room, feeding Dracula bits of the steak.

To distract herself, she turned to her DVD collection. About half of it consisted of horror movies, and she was in no mood for that. Instead she looked to the other half of the collection: Martial arts, kick ass, beat-the-bad-guy-to-a-pulp movies. Oh yeah, that fit her mood perfectly.

She put in a classic Chuck Norris action movie and stretched out on the couch. Dracula curled near her, and she smiled. Maybe living alone wasn't so darned bad after all.

Tap, tap, tap.

It wasn't so loud, because the living room wasn't directly under the source as her bedroom had been. But it was still enough to blast chills up her spine. When the Norris movie was over,

she went over and put in a Jean-Claude Van Damme flick. “You’re not running me out of my own house,” she told the invisible intruder, as she cranked up the volume.

Tap, tap, tap.

Tears burned her eyes, but she refused to give into the feeling. “This is *my* house, Mary. You’re the one who needs to leave.”

Something brushed her cheek. Soft, gentle, like a flower petal. It should have been frightening, but instead it was reassuring. Dracula let out a soft sound from the floor, sort of like the one he made when Kia scratched his ears.

Puzzled, Kia looked around for an answer she knew she’d never get. “Weird,” she said, and Drac barked softly, as if agreeing.

Then it was quiet, and Kia sat back to enjoy the movie. Maybe it was over. Maybe it had finally stopped. Maybe tonight she could actually sleep. Maybe—

Tap, tap, tap.

Groaning, she used the remote control to up the volume another notch. It was going to be a long night.

Two miles away, Garrett woke with yet another headache. Groaning with frustration, he rolled out of bed to take two aspirin he knew wouldn’t help. If this didn’t stop, he was going to be forced to go to a doctor. As if they could help him any more than they had his mother.

He went back to bed and hoped he could sleep.

Three days later, Kia was so tired her head felt full of fur. Coffee barely made a dent in the exhaustion, and she was wondering if a person could actually die from lack of sleep.

The parade wandered in and out of her house, and down in the basement, more holes were being dug. Stuff was being carted out, and she wondered absently what happened to it after it went out her front door. It was entirely possible they were carting off valuable objects she had no

idea were there. Items long forgotten that would someday show up on that Antique Road Show thing where a former graduate student would all but faint with the realization that he—or maybe she—was rich.

Sighing, she realized she didn't much care. If they were crazy enough to dig down there day after day and then steal from a ghost, they were welcome to whatever they could find.

Late in the afternoon, she and Dracula were in the kitchen. She sat at the table, sipping a Coke and doodling when she should have been working. The doodle became a drawing of a lab-coated egghead with thick glasses. She grinned, visualizing a scene in her head.

"Interesting dirt," she muttered, as she imagined one lab-coated scientist commenting.

"Very much so," another answered.

"I cannot imagine anyone allowing their dirt to be so full of diamentranostomyrant."

"Yes, the owner of the house is obviously ignorant of the need to treat their dirt."

"Obviously."

She was giggling when she realized a real-life scientist was standing in the kitchen doorway and looking quite uncomfortable. *He no doubt thinks I'm a lunatic.*

"Dr. Drake, hi." She flipped the sketchbook closed.

He took a small step in her general direction. "Something funny?"

"Not really." She waved her hand, hoping he hadn't actually heard what she was saying, and wishing the gesture could act as an eraser for his memory. "Sorry, I haven't been sleeping well lately."

"Well, maybe I can help you a bit with that."

The words didn't make sense to her. "Excuse me?"

"We're finished. In your basement. They're cleaning up as we speak."

"Good." It was, wasn't it?

"We checked all over your basement, but nothing else was buried. Just the one skeleton."

Her tired brain tried to put together a cohesive sentence. "What about that? Do you know anything?"

He shook his head. "I'll need to do some more tests. I'd rather not speculate at this point."

He knew something, but he wasn't telling. "What about the teeth marks?"

“Large mammal, obviously carnivore. Other than that, I wouldn’t want to speculate.”

She was tired, and not in the mood for this. “You’re just full of useful information, aren’t you?”

He smiled. Small, careful, secretive—nevertheless, it was a smile. “Sorry. I’ll let you know something as soon as possible.” He turned and walked back toward the basement door.

She sighed. “Men.”

Arf.

She smiled toward Dracula. “You don’t count.”

Woof.

She laughed and scratched his ears.

There was a noise in the direction of the basement door, and Kia saw one of the student workers carrying equipment out. She propped her elbow on the table, rested her chin in her hand, and observed. Dracula settled at her feet, and the two of them watched as their basement became theirs again.

The equipment was removed, the holes were filled in, and the skeleton and yucky specimens were carted away to places unknown. Her house belonged to her—and the ghost—again.

And it was quiet.

Spooky was the word, actually. She’d been so upset to have her world disrupted, and now it was quiet.

Too quiet.

She’d become used to the workers trudging in and out, talking and banging during the day. And the tapping at night. But not quiet.

Never happy, are you? She grabbed another Coke and went out to enjoy her porch. The air was fresh, the view was gorgeous.

She was tired.

Sitting back, she allowed herself to relax for the first time since...

Groaning, she realized the last time she’d been relaxed she was curled snugly in Garrett McKnight’s strong, warm, sexy arms.

She was *not* going to sit and wish the jerk was here. She refused to obsess over how nice it would be to lie naked next to him. No way was she going to think about his lips on hers, his hands sliding over her body, his voice whispering in her ear.

Bolting out of the chair, she marched out into her yard to admire the wildflowers growing near the corner of the porch. It was lovely here, it really was. She *had* made the right decision to buy the house, in spite of the spirited prior inhabitant's continued residence. Much better, this was, than living in Savannah and having your entire family breathing down your neck. They didn't like her living here alone, but they weren't around to give her a hard time about it.

But Garrett was.

Groaning, she leaned against a porch post and tried to figure out how to exorcise a demon from her brain—a demon of obsession. She was not going to allow another person to dictate her life. She'd had quite enough of that from Charlie. He'd shown her in no uncertain terms what it was like when a man thought he knew what was best for a woman. Even after almost a year away from him, she still caught herself thinking she shouldn't say something, or wear something, or do something because Charlie wouldn't like it. She'd made a vow never to allow a man to treat her like that again. And she wouldn't.

But was Garrett *really* trying to dictate her life?

Pushing the doubts away, she called Dracula to her and went toward her door. The tendrils of setting sun illuminated the yard in gold and crimson stripes. It was a beautiful reminder of why she'd moved up here, and it stirred determination in her.

After she and the dog had dined, she curled on the couch and started her *Rush Hour* DVD. She figured she'd watch both the first and second movies. Martial arts action and comedy—her idea of the perfect movie for forgetting the rotten in your life. And she could do this because there was no man to tell her proper women didn't watch “redneck” movies.

Halfway through the first flick, she remembered she had some popcorn and went into the kitchen to stick the bag in the microwave. It was quiet, and she was beginning to think things were looking up.

Back on the couch, she munched while Jackie Chan kicked butt and made jokes. Dracula was curled on the floor, looking for all the world as if he too were enjoying the flick.

She ate, and laughed, and eventually began to get sleepy. Her eyes drifted closed, and she smiled. Maybe she'd get some rest tonight. Sleep pulled at her, and she allowed herself to drift deeper and deeper into the soft darkness.

Tap, tap, tap.

She slid off the couch, stumbled over to the DVD player, and started the movie again. "Obnoxious, irritating, full of crap ghost." She curled up and pulled the cover to her chin.

Zechariah Strode stomped back and forth across the floor. He hoped he was driving that woman insane. The whore. Bringing men into his house. Fornicating right under his nose.

Just like his wife. Cheating on him with that farmer right here in their bedroom. He snarled under his breath. He'd taught them a lesson.

In spite of the knowledge that it was depleting his energy to take a physical form strong enough to do it, he stomped harder. He liked that he was keeping that woman from her beauty sleep. Maybe she'd get tired of it and go away. It had never taken this much to get intruders to leave his house. Apparently she was too stupid to be frightened.

A figure in the doorway grabbed his attention. Mary stood watching him, keeping him from doing what he wanted to do. Who could have imagined the revenge he'd taken on his wife allowed her to control him in death. He couldn't leave this room, not for long, anyway, while she was free to roam the house. He still wasn't sure how she'd managed that, but it blasted rage through him every time he thought about it.

His adulterous wife smiled, and he rushed the door. Of course he was stopped there, but the action made him feel a little better.

"You won't hurt her," Mary said.

"I wouldn't have to, if she'd just leave."

"She belongs here, and you know it."

"Of course you'd think so, she's a whore just like you."

Mary's gaze touched the floor. "I was wrong to take another man into our bed. For that I am sorry."

“As well you should be.”

She looked up, and there was fire in her eyes. “But you made a pact with the devil himself. You spilled my blood right here in this room. Worse, you cursed innocent men. What you did was unforgivable.”

“It was my right. You were mine.”

“You won’t hurt another innocent person. I’ll see to that.”

“She isn’t innocent, she’s a fornicator. And she stole my athame.”

But Mary was gone.

He went back to pacing.

Chapter Nineteen

From the depths of a sleep so deep it knocked on death's door, something pulled Kia up. The crazy dreams with a mix of familiar and unfamiliar images vanished into the aether, the paralyzing hold began to let go, and she opened her eyes.

Around the edges of the tightly closed drapes, bright slashes of sunlight burned her eyes. But it wasn't the light that had awakened her, it was an annoying, tinny melody. "Go away," she told the noise.

And it did. But only for a few short minutes. Before she could return to the world of the unawake, the sound pulled at her again.

"Whoever you are, you're going to die slowly."

Pulling herself from the couch, she staggered across the floor to answer the cell phone. "What?"

Wy's laugh came from the device. "Don't tell me you were asleep."

"Okay, I won't tell you."

That laugh came again, and Kia considered ways to torture her friend. "So you think it's funny, huh?"

"Yeah, I think it's funny. I know you keep odd hours, but I figured with the basement excavation going on, you'd have to be up and about."

"They finished yesterday afternoon." *And I wanted to sleep late.* A glance at her watch, though, told her that it was almost noon.

"Really? Great. What did they decide?"

Carrying the phone, she stumbled into the kitchen. "Nothing, really. Just that there was only one skeleton."

"That's all they told you?"

After a bit of thought, she managed to put a filter and coffee into the coffeemaker. “Yeah, that doctor dude said he had to run more tests. Kinda like that other kind of doctor.” There was something else...oh yeah, water.

“Well, it’s good that they finished, ’cause Ms. Cole’s books came in this morning.”

Kia stopped in mid step. “Really?”

“Yep, I called her a while ago and she said she’d be by about three. You still up for getting her opinion?”

The tendrils of sleep began to fall away. “Oh yeah, I definitely would like to see what she has to say about what I found. I’ll be there as soon as I can get my act together.”

“Great. I’ll see you then.”

Garrett sat at his desk and stared out the window. He knew he should be doing paperwork, but he couldn’t seem to focus. In fact, it wasn’t just paperwork that he couldn’t concentrate on, it was pretty much everything.

Lack of concentration was how he’d ended up back at the office instead of the job site where he belonged. After he’d banged his thumb twice, tripped and knocked over a stack of boards, then almost gotten himself knocked out by walking right into some newly installed pipe, his father had suggested he go back to the office. He hadn’t argued.

So here he was, sitting at his desk and pretending to do paperwork, when his mind was on top of the mountain worrying about a crazy, headstrong woman who was probably in the process of trying to teach a grizzly bear to drive. It’d be just the kind of thing she’d do.

When he caught himself smiling at the thought, he gave up and went to get something to eat. Maybe food would help.

But he doubted it.

Kia pushed open the door of Wyoming Books.

Wy looked up and smiled. “Good afternoon, Sleeping Beauty.”

“Oh, bite me.”

Wy laughed, but she also tipped her head and narrowed her eyes, as if evaluating her friend.

“You really haven’t been sleeping well, have you?”

“What gave it away, the bags under my eyes, or fact that I can barely stand up?”

Wy handed her a cup of coffee. “Well, now I feel bad about waking you.”

She took the coffee and indulged in a long, luxurious sip. “I’m glad you did. I’m really anxious to find out what Ms. Cole has to say about my find.” She laid the bag she carried on the countertop.

“So what’s up with the not sleeping?”

Kia sighed. “Mary’s taken to stomping back and forth. Upstairs, over my bed. I thought it was an intruder and called the sheriff the first night, after that I’ve just tried to ignore it.”

Wy’s frowned. “Stomping?”

“Yeah. For such a tiny woman in life, she sure has a loud walk as a ghost.”

“You’re sure it’s Mary?”

“Well it isn’t anybody alive, they searched the place pretty thoroughly. That leaves our friend Mary T. Ghost. Unless she’s been having a spook party.”

“Wow! Sounds unnerving.”

“Oh, it was. Trust me.”

Wy moved closer and put a hand on Kia’s arm. “You’re welcome to come and bunk on my couch.”

“I don’t think your apartment manager would like Dracula being there, but thanks anyway. Besides, I have no intention of being run out of my own house by a ghost.”

“Okay, but we’ll figure out a place for slobber dog if we have to. I have a couple of friends I could ask.”

A mix of irritation and wistfulness sprang up in her. “Garrett?”

Wy shrugged. “Well I was thinking more in terms of Mona, but yeah, Garrett has a big yard.”

Kia saw the twinkle in her friend's eyes, and decided to derail that topic train. "Is Rusty in class?"

"Yeah, she had a calculus test today. Poor thing."

"Calculus? What the hell is she majoring in, rocket science?"

"Biology. She wants to either work in genetic research, or in a zoo or something."

"Wouldn't that be hard...I mean, with her being in a wheelchair and all? No offense."

"She's got a chip on her shoulder, I know. And to answer your question, yeah, it would be hard. But Rusty's tough."

"And her family's going along with that?"

"They don't know. They think she's an English major."

"You're kidding."

Wy laughed. "Nope, she'll do whatever she has to. She's working on figuring out a way to finance her own school, so she can move out and tell her dad to take a flying leap."

"I hope she manages it."

"Me too."

The bell over the door tinkled, stopping the conversation and signaling the arrival of their target: Diana Cole.

"So my books have arrived," Ms. Cole said.

Wy put three hardbacks on the counter. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

The older woman gave them a considering look. "No, but I have a feeling there's something you want from me."

Kia was surprised, but that didn't hold her for long. Dragging the bag closer, she slid the knife out. "I wanted to get your opinion—"

"Oh my God!" Ms. Cole looked like she'd just had her first orgasm. "Where did you find that?"

"In my basement."

"*What?*" She stared wide-eyed at Kia.

"There's a secret room in my basement, and I found that...and a few other things."

"A skeleton," Wy supplied.

“And some yucky things in jars. Eyes of newt or something.”

She heard Ms. Cole’s breath catch. “You said you found all that in a secret room?”

“Yeah, the one Mary showed me.”

“Mary?”

“The ghost.” She bit back the grin at Ms. Cole’s expression. “Mary Strode, one of the original owners of my house.”

“Yes, of course, I know who Mary Strode is. *She* showed you the room?”

“The door that led to the room, yes.”

Noticing Ms. Cole hadn’t touched the knife, Kia slid it closer to her. The woman actually backed up a bit. Intrigued, Kia asked, “You aren’t afraid of it, are you?”

“No.” Ms. Cole looked at her. “I’m just respectful with such a thing of power. It isn’t something a person plays with.”

“Power?”

“Yes, of course.”

Something grew in Kia, something warm and happy, and at the same time somehow terrifying. “It’s an athame, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” She studied them for a moment. “You weren’t sure, were you? That’s why you wanted me to see it?” Both Kia and Wy nodded, and Ms. Cole smiled an odd smile. “Yes ladies, it’s a *real* athame. And as far as I know, it’s one of only two still in existence that were made with power interlaced into the very material of the thing. In fact, from the looks of it, I’d say it was forged by the same person as the one in Ireland.”

“Wow!” Kia made to touch the athame, only to have her hand grabbed.

“You need to learn to respect power.”

Kia shoved back her anger. She had asked this woman’s opinion, not given her free rein over her life. “It’s only a knife, and it’s mine.”

One eyebrow slid up. “Oh, and do you own thunder and lightning?”

“That isn’t the same.”

“Isn’t it? Have you never felt the power that crackles in the air when there’s a thunderstorm? It’s that same power that Majick bends and shapes.” She indicated the knife. “That isn’t the same

thing as that piece your friend bought from the charlatans on the Net. This is a piece crafted thousands of years ago by humans who knew more than we can ever hope to learn. If you have any ability at all, you can be taught to imbue power into objects. But this..." She waved a hand over the athame. "This is an object beyond your understanding. Not to respect it is as dangerous as a child playing with a safety pin and an electrical outlet."

"Teach me."

The older woman stared at the younger. "When you're serious, call me. Your friend has my number." With that, she turned to Wy and handed her a credit card.

"I *am* serious," Kia said.

"No, you aren't."

Diana Cole took books in hand and marched out of the store, leaving two bewildered faces staring after her.

Chapter Twenty

Over the next couple of days, a plan began to form in Kia's mind. At first it seemed unwise, even crazy. But as she lay awake for the seventh straight night, staring at the ceiling, it began to sound very logical. And at least it was better than lying there wishing she could grab Mary Strobe and beat her like Stephen Segal was doing to the villain in the movie currently playing on her television. Ah, how great that idea was. She pictured herself grabbing the ghost's elusive form and shaking it, punching it in its nose, and asking it why the hell she felt it necessary to harass the current owner of her house. "I did what you wanted," she told the tapping currently coming from upstairs.

From the floor beside the couch, Dracula barked an agreement.

She reached a hand over the side to scratch his soft head. "At least I think I did what she wanted. How am I supposed to know? The dang ghost could make sense once in a while."

Above her, the tapping of footsteps sounded over the noise of the fight scene playing on her TV.

"Tomorrow," she vowed. "Tomorrow I'll talk to Wy and Rusty."

Then she rolled to her side, determined to focus on the movie.

A call had verified both women would be in the shop when Kia arrived at just after three in the afternoon. A customer was browsing the cookbook section, so she took the offered cup of coffee and relaxed in a corner to wait.

Rusty slid her wheelchair up beside the chair. "Are you okay? You look tired."

A sigh born of frustration slid from her lips. "Exhausted is more like it. I've barely slept in over a week."

“You poor thing. Wy said something about the ghost walking around. Is that what’s keeping you awake?”

“Oh yeah. That’s one heavy-footed dead lady.”

“Weird. I had no idea ghosts did stuff like that.”

“Me either, but then what I know about ghosts comes mostly from Hollywood.” Kia smiled. “And I dearly love horror movies.”

Rusty made a face. “I’m not big on the being scared thing.”

Kia studied her young friend and wondered if she might be making a mistake dragging her into this ghost mess. Before she reached a conclusion, the customer left and Wy joined them. “Okay, what are you up to?” she asked.

“What makes you think I’m up to something?” Kia asked right back.

“When are you not?”

“Okay, okay, I’m going nuts with the pacing ghost. So I’ve decided I’m not going to take it anymore.”

“You’re moving out?”

She aimed a look at Wy that should have curled her hair. “No. Mary is not running me out of my own house.”

“Then what are you going to do?” Rusty asked. “You can’t fight a ghost.”

“Who says?”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” Wy asked.

“Oh, yeah.”

“But how in the world can you possibly expect to fight a spirit?”

“We bind her.”

“Bind her?” Wy stared. “That’s crazy.”

Kia shrugged. “Maybe, but give me one good reason not to try.”

“You bind humans, not ghosts,” Rusty said.

“And binding doesn’t always work on humans, much less ghosts,” Wy added. “That’s two.”

“Okay, okay. But what’s the worst that could happen if we try and it doesn’t work?”

It was quiet for a time, as the two women stared at Kia. Finally Wy said, “Okay, I’ll bite. What is the worst that could happen?”

“It won’t work. Then I’d be no worse off than I am right now.”

“I know that seems logical, but we’re dealing with a lot of unknowns here.”

Kia grabbed Wy’s arm. “If *you* were living with a pacing ghost, I’d help you bind her.”

“If I were living with a ghost, I’d have not been living there a long time ago.” Then her expression softened. “I don’t know, Kia. I’ve never done a binding, and I’ll bet you haven’t either. Something could go really wrong. Haven’t you ever heard of Murphy’s Law, also known as Wyoming’s Law, by the way?”

“Chicken.”

“I’ll do it.”

Kia turned to see Rusty looking at her, an expression of determination on her face. “Are you sure?”

The younger woman nodded. “Like you said, the worst that can happen is that it doesn’t work.”

Did she really know what she was doing? Did she want Rusty involved? “But—”

“The books all say bindings either work or they don’t,” Rusty said.

“Even with ghosts?” Wy asked.

“I’m willing to take a chance if Kia is.”

Wy sighed. “Oh, all right, let’s do it. How about tomorrow night? That’ll give us twenty-four hours to plan. And it’s the autumnal equinox.”

They agreed, and began to make plans for the ritual. Relieved, Kia started to feel the nightmare might finally be coming to an end.

Garrett put down the nail gun and walked over to the side of the building. The banging of that thing was giving him a headache. At least he hoped it was just the nail gun and not a warning.

Mabon, the autumnal equinox, one of the traditional nights of power for witches. This particular celebration of the harvest found three of those witches gathered in Kia's living room. The furniture was pushed to the side, and the implements of the work of raising Power were scattered in the open area. The circle was cast, the elements called. And then the three launched into the purpose of their gathering.

Kia took a doll she'd made out of an old sock Dracula had chewed, tied the photograph of Mary to it, and began to wind a ribbon around it. "I bind you, Mary Strode. From this time onward you will be powerless." She repeated the words, and was joined in them by her sister witches. Again and again the words rose as she imagined power rising from the earth and flowing through them and growing.

She felt it, the power. She imagined she saw it thickening the air. It rushed around her like a strong wind. It danced and wove its way between them. The power grew and grew until it was so strong it felt heavy, both within and around her.

And then she knew somehow it was time to let it go.

She should have been amazed to realize the others were letting go at exactly the same time, but she wasn't. It was just the way things had to be. The way the universe was.

The Power released, taking the spell with it out into the universe.

"Nooooooooo!"

The voice seemed to resonate both in the room and in Kia's skull. The force of the call almost knocked her to her knees. A chill that blasted straight into her bones came right behind it, and that was followed by an odd feeling of glee that seemed to slide right through her and out again.

"What the hell was that?"

Kia looked to see that Wy was rubbing her arms, as if she had just been transported into a freezer. She was relieved to know she wasn't the only one who'd experienced the phenomenon. Until she looked at Rusty.

The younger woman was sitting in her wheelchair, staring into space, eyes open but unseeing, lips pale, face gray. "Rusty?"

She slowly turned and looked at Kia, but it wasn't Rusty's voice that came from her mouth. "Beware him," the voice said, and chills skittered through Kia so hard she almost thought she was going into convulsions. Then Rusty's head dropped down and the rest of her body followed. For a moment Kia was afraid she was going to fold up and roll out of her chair into a ball on the floor.

Kia and Wy both rushed to her, and Kia was relieved to find she was beginning to come around.

"What happened?" Rusty murmured.

"You must have passed out," Kia told her. "Let's get you onto the couch."

The hand that grabbed Kia's arm was so strong it scared her. "Ground the power and close the circle," Rusty said.

Due to the relief at hearing her friend's usual voice, albeit weak, Kia decided to ignore the strangeness of her physical strength compared to the pallor of her face. They grounded and closed the circle before they assisted Rusty onto the couch.

"Are you all right?"

"I just feel a little weak," Rusty replied. "What the hell happened to me?"

Weak? With a grip like that?

"You were possessed, I think," Wy said.

Kia wasn't so sure it was a good idea to tell her that, and was fully expecting hysteria. But Rusty surprised her. "Yeah," she said, "I think I was."

"What was it like?" Wy asked.

"Very strange. I knew what was happening, but I had no control, kind of like I was watching it from outside or something." Rusty wrinkled her brow. "And I had a strong feeling something was wrong."

Kia shrugged. "The ghost didn't want to be stopped. Understandable."

"It wasn't like that. More like a warning."

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It was a weird experience, but I never felt like I was in danger from her. It was almost a good feeling."

Kia felt an uneasiness grow inside her as she and the other women cleaned up the ritual area and brought out the snacks. Something felt wrong, but she had no idea what it could be.

It was quiet as they nibbled and chatted. There were no more odd occurrences, Rusty seemed fine, and Dracula was going from one woman to the other begging for handouts. It took a while, but finally Kia felt herself begin to relax. Maybe the ghost would be quiet tonight. Maybe she could forget the supernatural and get back to her career. She was seriously behind schedule as it was.

Rusty and Wy left about ten, since Rusty had an early class. And honestly, Kia was glad. She was exhausted from the lack of sleep, and an early bedtime seemed like heaven.

She locked the door after Dracula's last sojourn into the yard for his toilet run, then crawled into her bed for the first time in over a week. Stretching out her toes, she luxuriated in the feeling of lying on her own soft mattress. She picked up the Stephen King novel she'd been reading, but her eyes quickly started to get heavy. She smiled as she put the book back on the nightstand and turned off the light. As she rested her head on the pillow, she was sure they'd done the right thing. It had been so simple, why hadn't she thought of it sooner? It only took a few short minutes for her to drift into sleep.

Tap, tap, tap.

She jerked straight up in bed. The only thing she heard was the chirping of crickets, and Dracula slept quietly near her.

"I'm losing it," she said, as she snuggled back down and pulled the covers over her ears.

Tap, tap, tap.

Again the sound stopped as soon as she sat up. This time, though, the tapping hadn't been over her head. It was on the staircase. "We bound you!" she yelled, and cringed at the fear she heard in her own voice.

Forcing herself to stretch out again, she lay on her back, eyes wide, and listened for any sound at all. Maybe this time there really was a human. But calling the sheriff wasn't an option. She had no problem imagining his smirk. Probably he'd even laugh in her face.

Tap, tap, tap.

Dracula's soft whine blasted fear through her. He heard it too.

Whatever was out there, it was in the foyer.

She shot to her feet and edged quietly toward the door. If she could peek out without being seen, maybe she could find out if the cause was human or ghost. Then, if she actually saw an intruder standing there, the sheriff would have to believe her.

If she survived the encounter.

Slowly, carefully, on her tiptoes she crept through the shadows. Sure her pounding heartbeat or her ragged breath would alert whoever—or whatever—was on the other side of the door, she tried to quiet herself. It was a losing battle, though. She just had to hope for the best.

Almost there. Her hand reached out for the doorknob. Her fingers touched the metal.

And she jumped back.

The doorknob was ice-cold, so cold it stung. The ends of her fingers still tingled.

The door flew open and a hurricane blew into her bedroom, knocking her backward onto the floor.

The howl was overwhelming, but she heard a whimper and glanced toward Dracula. He was attempting to force his bulk under the bed.

Crawling, she moved closer and threw her body over the dog. “It’s okay, Drac. I’ll protect you.”

Okay, maybe she couldn’t protect him. But she’d die trying. Turning into the blast, she shouted, “Leave my dog alone!”

The jeans she’d taken off earlier and tossed over the footboard came flying toward her. The heavy denim smacked her in the face, bringing tears to her eyes. The King novel, followed by a sketchbook that had been underneath it, flew through the air, hitting her shoulder as they went.

She recovered from that just in time to see the pencil that went with the sketchbook coming toward her like a bullet. She threw herself down, but felt it brush her cheek as it drove itself into the wall behind her.

Clothes, knick-knacks, pillows, shoes, anything the unearthly wind could loosen flew through the air toward her. She felt Dracula shiver beneath her and heard him whine. She continued to cover him with her body and rubbed his head to try to calm him. “You aren’t going

to hurt him,” she yelled into the wind. But it was like an ant yelling at a mountain. Still, if will was anything, she would give it her best.

The attack continued for hours, but Kia held her position protecting the dog. Finally the wind began to die down, leaving in its wake the icy breath of death itself.

She pulled a blanket that had recently been used as a weapon over to her. Wrapping her and the trembling dog helped a little, but the chill was so overwhelming she doubted anything would help much.

Her face was cold, and she reached up a hand to warm it. Wetness greeted her, and it was only then that she realized she was crying. Had been crying for a while.

With a corner of the blanket, she wiped her face. Then she pulled it tighter and waited for the next attack.

Zechariah Strode smiled. Finally, he was free to give that trespassing whore what she deserved without interference.

“Thank you,” he told the cowering slut, even though she couldn’t hear him. “You did me a great service.”

Now he just had to build his strength and then she’d be putty in his hands.

His laughter echoed into the night.

Soon he’d be strong enough to get rid of that interfering whore and reclaim what was rightfully his.

Chapter Twenty-one

Wetness touched Kia's cheek.

Groaning, she reached up and brushed the intruder away, only to feel the wetness again.

In an avalanche of fear, flashes of wind, icy coldness, and flying objects rushed through her head. Panicked, she put up her hands as she sat up, expecting to be smacked in the head by some inanimate object.

Instead of an attack, she found Dracula drooling over her. She looked around at the disaster the rising sun's intense rays highlighted. The brightness stabbed through her eyes and into her head. Everything in her room was piled around her, including the curtains that should have been blocking the light.

Groaning, she moved off the dog and began digging them out from under the heap. It took some time to accomplish her goal, but finally she pulled herself from the pile. Stiff, sore and groggy, she stumbled to the bathroom.

Once finished there, she went into the kitchen. "Coffee," she muttered. But she stopped to let Dracula out first. Then she filled the coffeemaker and while it was working its magic she poured food and fresh water for her best friend.

"I love you," she told the shaggy delight as he came in. He gave her a canine smile and serious tail-wagging before he turned to the important business of eating. She smiled and poured herself a cup of coffee.

The noise seemed familiar, but it took her a moment to identify it as her cell phone. Still stumbling, she hurried into the living room and rummaged on the little table that seemed to be the catchall for the house. Not in her purse, not under the papers. She finally found the errant cell phone under a sketch of Dracula. It had stopped ringing by then, so she had to check the display. Groaning, she dialed the familiar number. "You rang?"

"What happened?" Sydney's voice asked.

Damn her sister's ability to always know when something was wrong. "Everything's peachy."

"Liar."

"I love you too, sis." She poured a second cup of coffee and took it along as she stumbled through the front door and out onto the porch.

"Cut the sarcasm and tell me what's up."

"I'm just tired, that's all. Didn't sleep well last night." The understatement of the millennium, but not an actual *lie*.

"Interesting, since I tried to call you several times and never got an answer. Wanna tell me what's going on?"

Sydney would freak, she knew she would. But she also wasn't likely to give up until she got to the truth. Not with that big, wide stubborn streak of hers. "Nothing's going on. I must not have heard the cell over the Jackie Chan movie I watched when I couldn't sleep." She sipped the nectar of caffeine and waited for the next salvo.

"Right, and I'm dating Johnny Depp," Sydney said.

"Congratulations."

"Ha-ha. Now tell me what's up."

"Okay, okay, just some ghost stuff, that's all."

"That's all, huh? Wanna tell me what kind of stuff?"

"Not really, no."

"Kia Aura Meredith Wolfe."

The whole name, crap. "Okay, okay, my friendly neighborhood ghostie went poltergeist last night and threw things at me."

There was the sound of breath being sucked in. "Get out of that house."

"I am. I'm on the porch as we speak."

"Stop it with the smart-ass remarks and get your butt somewhere else. Preferably home."

Anger rose in her, shutting out the fear. "This *is* my home, damn it. How often do I have to say that? I. Love. It. Here. Understand?"

"You're going to get yourself killed trying to hang on to a house?"

“Ghosts don’t kill people.” She bit her lip as she thought about how close that pencil had come to her face.

“You don’t know that.”

“You don’t know they do, either.”

“What is it you’re trying to prove anyway? What possessed you to move to the middle of nowhere?”

Good question. “I like it here.”

“You like showing Mom and Dad that you’ve cut the cord. And maybe Charlie too.”

Anger exploded inside her. “Charlie has nothing to do with this.”

“No? It’s interesting to me that you break up with your overbearing ass of a boyfriend and just a few months later run off to Godforsaken, Tennessee while spouting self-sufficient speak. You’re trying to prove something.”

“I’m not trying to prove anything.”

“Sure about that?”

“Yes.” *No.*

“Maybe that you aren’t the kind of woman who lets a man dictate to her?”

“I’m not.”

The silence on the other end sounded smug. Then Sydney’s voice said, “Prove your autonomy some other way. Get out of that house and come home.”

“Sorry, sis. I’m staying here.”

“Oh God, Kia. Don’t do this, please.”

Kia was hard-pressed to ignore the pleading in her beloved sister’s voice, but some deep feeling of sureness refused to let her give in. Tears filled her eyes as she told her sister no again, and they said their goodbyes. She laid the phone on the table and looked out across the lawn where Dracula was busy chasing a butterfly. Beyond that were the trees that were the border of the woods that covered most of the mountain. “Beautiful,” she whispered. *Home.*

Maybe Sydney had been right in a way, maybe she had come here to prove something. But it was different now. She honestly loved this house, this mountain. She *was* home, and she fully intended to stay there.

Pulling her still-stiff body from the chair, she went back inside to make some breakfast. As she cooked the eggs, she kept thinking she'd forgotten something.

Something was wrong.

As Garrett pulled his pickup into the parking lot of McKnight Contractors, he couldn't shake the feeling he'd had since last night, when a headache had hit him like a sledgehammer.

He was tormented by the thought that Kia might have been in danger and he hadn't gone to her, but she'd made it very clear she didn't want his help. Even knowing that, he'd picked up the phone to call her more than once, but remembering the anger in her eyes the last time he'd seen her held him back. If she needed him, she'd let him know.

Like she'd ever admit to needing anyone. Oh no, not Kia Wolfe. She was complete all by herself. She didn't need any man, and especially not a small-time contractor. He'd better get that through his head before he got his fool heart stomped on again.

He was muttering four-letter words as he pulled open the door to the office.

His father was on the other side, and not looking at all happy.

"Well," the older McKnight said. "I'm glad you're already pissed off, saves me the trouble."

His black mood darkened. "What's wrong?"

"The roofing material for the Johnson job didn't get shipped."

Garrett's jaw clenched. He wasn't up to dealing with this today. "That's going to put us behind for sure."

"It could lose us the contract."

"Who else would they hire?" He walked past his father into his own office and dropped heavily into his chair.

The older McKnight followed him. "Being the only act in town is only gonna get us so far, Garrett. There're plenty of contractors in Chattanooga."

"They'd have to pay an arm and a leg for anyone to come all this way."

"But if they can get the job done on time..."

"We'll get it done."

“Well, I’m glad to see you’re still involved in this company.”

The tone in the other man’s voice had him staring. “What does that mean?”

“You have to admit, you’ve been distracted lately.” His father put his hand on his shoulder.

“You need to get your mind off that Wolfe woman and back on business.”

Before Garrett could reply, his father was out the door.

As he dropped into his desk chair, he thought about midnight black curls and spooky gray eyes. He was in over his head, and he knew it. The question was if he could keep himself from drowning.

Kia didn’t want to leave Dracula at home alone, so she took him with her to town. It was too hot for him to be locked in the car for long, though, so her trips into the stores for supplies had to be very short. Still, she managed to get what she needed, then began the trip back up the mountain. As she drove, she considered what she was about to do. The smartest thing was undoubtedly to turn the Jeep around and head south. It wouldn’t take long to gather her things, and the evening would be cool and perfect to drive in. The thought of spending the night with an angry spirit didn’t appeal.

But neither did turning tail and running back home.

Admitting she had been wrong would be bad enough, but she’d also sunk all her resources into this venture. Just try to get a mortgage on a run-down house in the middle of nowhere, one that had sat uninhabited for almost thirty years. Factor in being a self-employed artist with no regular income, and watch the mortgage people laugh. Going back to Savannah would mean starting over again from scratch. It would mean staying with Sydney until she got back on her feet.

It would mean facing her parents telling her just how wrong she’d been. Her mom would no doubt become obsessed with finding her the “right young man”. Translation: well-off, pushy jerk. Plus there’d be all the pressure to go back into advertising. And with no money, the pressure to create bogging down her creative juices, and the need to get her life back on track fast, she might just give in.

There was no way she was going to go that route.

She was wondering if she wasn't being as stupid and stubborn as everyone seemed to believe when she pulled into her driveway. But as she stared up at the gorgeous old house, she suddenly felt an overpowering sense of belonging. All her life, as she'd moved from house to house, school to school, friend to friend, she'd never honestly felt she belonged. But here, on Lone Mountain high above the tiny village of Mountain Shadows, Tennessee, she felt she'd come home.

Tears fell from her eyes as she looked up at the beautiful structure that was hers alone. She'd never told anyone, barely even admitting the truth to herself, but she'd seen that house in her dreams for years before she'd actually seen the picture on the Net. Sure she was imagining things, she hadn't said a word about what she was doing when she made the first trip to Mountain Shadows. But one look, and she'd known she was making the right decision. She'd started the paperwork as soon as she returned to Savannah. Eventually taking all her savings, her safety net, and sinking it into the place that she believed was her destiny.

"I want to stay here," she told Dracula.

He barked softly in response, and she smiled. "Let's go in, boy." She gathered the shopping bags then marched up the steps, her loyal dog right beside her.

She felt silly hanging garlic throughout the house, sprinkling sea salt, and placing bowls of various herbs and stones reputed to have protective powers. She also couldn't force herself into the basement or up to the second floor, but the area of the basement door and the stairway seemed to be where everything bad had happened—at least in the main part of the house—so she concentrated her efforts there. As she went she repeated, "This is my house, and I will not be forced out by the likes of you." It wasn't the lyrical chanting usually used by practitioners, but it said what she felt in her own words.

When she finished, she felt better. Even though she was more than a little skeptical, there did seem to be a feeling of calm in the house, a sense of warmth and safety. Smiling, she prepared lunch for her dog and herself. She let him out to do his thing and then snuggled on the couch. She might hope for a quiet night, but she wasn't about to count on it.

She managed to nap, but had missed too much sleep over the last few days for that to help much. She was still exhausted as the sun began to dip behind the trees.

Sharp beams of sunlight coming in the kitchen windows stung her eyes and gave her a headache. So she had her dinner in the living room where she could close the heavy drapes.

As the darkness began to settle around her like hungry dogs, she locked the doors and cowered on the end of the couch. The Jackie Chan movie she had running did nothing to cheer her dark mood. Thinking that a Coke and a few of the chocolate chip cookies left over from the binding ritual the night before might cheer her up, she headed for the kitchen, leaving Jackie beating the crap out of a villainous dude who was threatening a beautiful woman.

It only took a moment to grab the drink and the snack, and she hurried back to the living room. As she got to the door, though, she realized something wasn't right. It only took her a moment to figure out what it was. The sound from the TV was wrong. Instead of lightweight banter and heavyweight fighting, there was a sound of groaning, and the background music was dark, eerie. It sounded like that scene where...

She sprinted into the living room just in time to see David Naughton complete his transformation into *An American Werewolf in London*.

Grabbing for the remote control, she knocked over the coffee table, spilled her Coke, and scattered cookies all over the floor. Ignoring the food, she took the remote in her shaking hands and clicked the DVD player off. The silence was better, but still the movie played in her head.

With a wildly shaking hand, she dropped the remote on the couch and bent to pick up the cookies before Dracula could scarf them all down. "You know you shouldn't eat chocolate." The voice was so squeaky, she wouldn't have recognized it as her own.

There was a howl, and she jumped so hard she fell in the floor. On the TV screen was the climatic scene of *An American Werewolf in London*, the one in the alley where the nurse was facing down the wolf that was her boyfriend.

Choking back the scream, she clicked off the DVD player again, then scrambled to her feet and pushed the off button. Just to be safe, she reached behind the TV and jerked every cord she could find out of the wall.

This was crazy. Her obstinacy was over the top, and she finally had to admit it. She'd call Wy, and go sleep on her couch. She had no idea what she'd do with Dracula, but she'd figure something out.

Garrett.

He had a house and a yard, and a dog already. That's why she thought of him. It had nothing to do with wanting his arms around her, really it didn't.

The cell phone wasn't on the table where she kept it. She was sure, because she'd just dropped everything on said table piece by piece into the nearby chair. Most of it slid from there to the floor, but she ignored that. Her living room was a mess, but still there was no cell.

She eyed the phone jack. She had a basic service so that she could access the Internet, but she didn't have a regular phone. Looking down, she saw an old "to do" list with "buy phone" near the top. She always used her cell, so it hadn't seemed important. She hadn't had one in Savannah either.

"Focus," she told herself.

Dracula, apparently thinking she was talking to him, barked in response. She almost jumped out of her shoes.

Realizing he was still munching cookies, she swooped over and gathered the few crumbs he hadn't sucked down and dropped them into an empty hanging basket. "Buy plant" was on her list right under "buy phone".

The TV came on, and the masked face of Michael Myers greeted her, along with some awesome screaming by the woman he was chasing with a long knife.

Using every smidgeon of courage and strength she had, she turned away and forced herself to focus. When had she last used her cell? The answer came slowly, but it came. This morning Sydney had called her. She'd known something was wrong. She'd talked to her in the living room, walked with the phone out on the—

The sharp, stabbing music of *Halloween* played in the background as she stared at her front door. She'd left her cell phone on the table. On the porch. Outside.

There was another scream from the TV behind her as she forced her reluctant feet to shuffle toward the door. Her hand reached out for the doorknob, but it was trembling so hard she wasn't

sure she could control it well enough to open the door. Behind her, the music and screams had stopped, but the quiet unnerved her so much she would have preferred the screams. And still her hand wouldn't move.

"Get outside," she whispered. "Get the phone and get back in." *But it's dark outside*, her inner child whimpered.

"My phone's outside," she argued. "I'll get it and call Wy."

Call Mommy, her inner child insisted.

"Oh yeah, that'd be good. Mommy right. Kia wrong. Turn tail and run home to hide between the maternal legs. Real grownup here."

The grownup part of her inched her hand toward the doorknob. The shiny piece of metal seemed to be a million miles away, but she persevered. But did she really want to go outside? It was dark outside. And it was quiet in here now. Maybe it'd be okay. Maybe—

Tap, tap, tap.

The footsteps were on the stairs.

Her hand grabbed the doorknob and she twisted and jerked. Panicky when the door didn't budge, it took her a moment to realize she'd locked it. Quickly she flipped the lock and flew through the doorway. A furry dark streak brushed beside her on its way out, and she almost screamed before she realized it was Dracula. "I don't blame you," she told the dog, as she grabbed the phone off the table.

She had grabbed the cell and was turning to go back inside when she heard a deep, dangerous growl.

Looking around, she saw Dracula in the tail-down, ready to attack position. It was him she'd heard. When she looked to see what had stirred him up, the cell clattered to the porch, and she felt what little starch was left in her legs begin to drain right out.

The thing that had upset her dog was huge. It seemed to be a wolf, but something was wrong about it. Then as she watched, it rose to stand on two legs, and a human face seemed to cover its animal features for one terrifying second. Then it was a wolf again, but standing on two legs.

It looked at her, and the eyes glowed in the darkness.

“Dracula.” It came out as a croak. “Come here, boy.” That was a little louder, but pathetic. Taking a deep breath, she tried again. “Drac, come here.”

He didn’t budge. He just sat and stared at the thing a couple of car lengths away from him. “Dracula, baby, please.”

He didn’t move, so she did. Edging down the steps, she moved toward her best friend. “Please,” she whispered. Dracula didn’t seem to hear her, but the creature did. It again looked toward her, but this time the eyes were human. Cold, serial-killer human. She froze for a moment, then began to edge toward the dog again. The horror-show watched her, and tears stung her eyes. But she continued toward her goal.

Finally, she stood next to her furry companion and slowly reached out to grab his collar. She pulled, and a hundred pounds of canine held steady. She pulled again. “Dracula, please. Let’s go.”

He didn’t move, only growled deep in his throat.

She pulled harder, but he weighed almost as much as she did.

Tears began to run out of her eyes as she watched the thing start to inch toward them. “Please,” she pleaded. “Let’s get away.” He didn’t move, and she leaned back to put her body weight into pulling the dog. “I can’t let him get you.”

Still holding his collar with one hand, she reached across his body with her other and tried to pull him that way. He didn’t budge. The creature moved closer, and she realized her stubbornness was about to end not only her life, but the life of an innocent being. Hell was too good for her. “I’m sorry,” she whispered to the dog. “Oh God, I’m so sorry.”

To her horror, Dracula pulled as if he was going to attack the beast. “No!” She held him with every bit of strength she had left, her feet digging into the soft earth. “No, please don’t.”

It took her a moment to realize he had finally changed direction and was backing away from the thing. Keeping a death grip on his collar, she and the dog hurried toward the house.

Once in front of the door, she allowed herself to entertain the notion they just might survive this night. Until she tried to turn the doorknob.

It wouldn’t budge. At all. The door wasn’t simply locked. It was as if something had hold of it from the other side. Afraid to let go of Dracula’s collar, she tried one hand and then the other.

Finally she let go to use both hands, relieved when he didn't move. But that effort didn't make the knob turn even a little.

A glance back sent chills up her spine. The hideous thing stared back at her, and she'd swear it was grinning.

She gave the knob one last try, putting everything she had into the attempt. All that accomplished was that she bumped her head on the doorframe. Hearing the low growl from beside her, she grabbed Dracula's collar again, glanced over her shoulder to see the creature was slowly moving closer, and realized she had to take action.

Turning with a jerk, she managed to get Drac started toward the steps. Either he realized the danger, or had decided his mistress needed him, because he didn't give her any trouble as she rushed down the steps—grabbing the cell on her way.

Once in the yard, she turned toward the side of the house. She considered going for the car, but she knew it was locked up tight. She could break a window and get into the house, but that thing might follow. Besides, the house didn't seem exactly safe. *She needed help.*

The thought shot through the long unused pathways of her being. Help. Need. Help.

She had the cell, she could use it. But Wy lived at the bottom of the mountain; by the time she arrived it would most likely be too late. Rusty didn't drive. She didn't have the number of her next door neighbor, and everybody else she knew lived in Georgia.

Garrett.

Telling herself it was logical to call him, she ignored the voice that told her he was the one person she wanted most in the world, and dialed his number.

As she waited for him to answer, she glanced over her shoulder. The creature was following, though slowly. Stalking her, she realized. Waiting for his prey to tire and weaken. Biting back the terror, she heard Garrett's voice.

“Help me!”

“Kia?” Something in her registered that he sounded strange, like he was in pain or something, but her panic overrode all of that.

“Please, it's after us.” She sucked back the sob. “Garrett, hurry.”

“I'll be right there.”

The phone fell out of her wildly shaking hand, and she didn't care. Sounds behind her announced the creature was closing the gap between them. Gripping the dog's collar, she hurried to put some distance between them and that thing. At the backdoor, she tried the knob, only to find what she'd expected—the door was tightly locked. Refusing to look back, she hurried around the house.

Ring around the rosy,

Pocket full of posy.

A hysterical laugh rose in her throat. What had she heard, that the nursery rhyme actually referred to the Black Plague? Perfect. The laugh threatened to fly from her mouth, but she managed to hold it back.

They'd circled the house and reached the area where a garden used to be. Acting on instinct, she ran toward the shadows of the trees. But then she stopped. Hiding from a man in the darkness might make perfect sense, but the monster chasing her wasn't a man. It was a creature of the dark, and staying in the light might be her only hope.

So she headed for the broken bench. Light from the three-quarters moon lit it well enough, and somehow it seemed the place she should be. Still, part of her whispered that she needed to hide. She glanced toward the trees, and a shudder moved through her. The growing, living things might be safe and good, but in the light of the moon, the shadows they cast felt evil.

Dracula growled, and she slowly turned to see the wolf-man creature slinking toward her. Sure enough, he seemed to be keeping to the darker areas and avoiding the full moonlight. Swallowing hard, she started backing away. Dracula gave her no argument, as he backed with her. In the distance, she heard the sound of a vehicle. But would it be in time? And then the thought she hadn't wanted to think pushed its way into her brain—could Garrett even help her? Or had she simply pulled him into the web of destruction she'd spun for herself?

As she backed up, she tried to think. It wasn't like she could just calmly walk over to Garrett's truck, get in, and they'd drive away. That ugly monstrosity stalking her wouldn't let that happen. Of that she was sure. But there had to be something. Some distraction, some way.

She felt Dracula pull against her grip, and tears filled her eyes. "No," she whispered. "I'll die before I let you take on that thing."

The creature apparently heard, because it seemed to smile. Such terror moved through her that she felt the world start to darken. She shook her head; she had to stay alert. Maybe she could distract the thing long enough for Garrett to get Dracula out of there.

There was a noise behind her, and she screamed.

Still gripping Dracula's collar, she looked over her shoulder to see what hideous thing was sneaking up on her. What she saw all but brought her to her knees.

Nick Osborne stepped through the thick hedges separating the properties.

"Nick," she whispered, so very glad to see him there weren't words. Until the reality of the situation hit her like a sucker punch. "Run!" she screamed, as fresh tears ran from her eyes.

"It can't be," he whispered.

"Go!" Would she now be responsible for the death of an innocent human? A man nice enough to help his neighbor?

All at once, Nick stepped between her and the creature. She wanted to close her eyes. She couldn't watch what happened, and yet, if there was some way of saving Nick she had to see it. This was her fault.

She knew what she had to do. Still gripping Dracula's collar to prevent him from attacking, she inched up her chin and started walking toward Nick. She was about to step around him, when she realized the beast was cowering. Slightly, slowly, but he was moving back.

She looked at Nick, and he was doing nothing but stare at the thing. But somehow he was backing it off. She was still wondering how this was happening when she heard her name being called.

Looking toward the familiar voice, she saw Garrett rushing toward her. "Get back," she croaked.

"Go," Nick said.

"I can't let you—"

"Get the bloody hell out of here. I have no idea how long I can hold him."

How he was holding the thing at all was the real question, but she didn't have time to contemplate it because Garrett was beside her. "Nick?" he asked.

"Just get her the hell out of here."

“Okay.” He grabbed her arm and pulled, much as she had done with Dracula not that long ago.

“No,” she said, never taking her eyes from the man holding the creature at bay. “I can’t let him do this.”

“He might be the only one who can.” Suddenly he scooped her off her feet and started running with her in his arms.

“Dracula,” she gasped.

“He’s following.”

She twisted until she saw that the dog really was behind them. Then her gaze moved to where Nick was slowly backing toward his property. “He’s got to be okay.”

“He will be.” She heard fear in Garrett’s voice.

Then they were around the house and she couldn’t see anymore. Garrett opened the driver’s side door and shoved her into the truck. Then he reached down and shoved Dracula after her. She grabbed the dog and hugged, as she twisted to see if Nick was all right.

Garrett slid behind the wheel, started the truck, and began backing slowly down her driveway while also watching the side of the house. He was looking for Nick. She heard him let out a long breath at the same time she saw Nick turn and dive through the hedge.

Suddenly Garrett spun the truck and tore down the driveway. Horrified, Kia watched as the creature dropped to the ground and sprinted toward them on all fours. Dracula growled as the thing tore after them at incredible speed. Realization hit her that if the thing had wanted to, it could have had her at any time. It had been playing with her the way a cat plays with a mouse.

With one hand she gripped Dracula’s collar, and with the other she hung on to the back of the seat. The beast got closer, Dracula growled louder, and the truck seemed to be slowing down. Kia was beginning to think she was still going to be responsible for the death of an innocent human. Except that instead of Nick, it would be the man she loved.

Loved?

Holy crap! Where had *that* come from?

She glanced toward Garrett, who was gripping the wheel. His jaw was tight, and he kept glancing from the driveway to the rearview mirror.

Then they skidded out into the road. As Kia watched in horrified fascination, the monster stopped at the edge of her property, stared after them for a moment, then vanished into thin air.

“Thank God!” Garrett said.

She turned to look at him, at the man who had forced her from her vow. And she had a sudden urge to throw herself into his arms and bawl her eyes out. Instead she gave into the fear and frustration. “What the hell did you think you were doing?”

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Excuse me?”

The look Kia aimed at Garrett was filled with fire. “What were you thinking, rushing in like that? And that carrying me out thing, that was over the top.”

Her angry flame quickly ignited his own. “Now you just wait one damn minute, you ungrateful little pain in the ass.”

“*What?*”

“I saved your life, and you repay me by yelling at me. You’re crazier than I thought.”

“You’re the one acting like King Kong.” She pounded her chest with her fists for emphasis.

He gripped the steering wheel and fought the urge to do the same to her neck. He should probably pull the truck over. Between the trembling remains of the adrenaline, the finally receding headache, and the rapidly growing anger; it wasn’t really a good time for him to be driving. But he wasn’t convinced it was safe yet. Who knew how far ghosts could have influence. “I’m sorry, weren’t you the one who called me, hysterical, begging for help?”

He could physically feel the heat of her anger across the cab of the truck. “I wasn’t hysterical, and I’ve never begged in my life.”

He glanced in her direction, and for a second he was sure he saw the sheen of tears in her eyes. Sudden understanding brought a lump to his throat. She was trying hard not to show how scared she really was. His instinct was to be sweet to her, to be protective. But that would be exactly the wrong road to take with this crazy, wonderful woman.

“You grab me and carry me out of there, without thinking about Dracula, or Nick—and he’s your very own cousin. They could have both been killed.”

Yep, she was definitely fighting tears. “So, you were planning to protect your dog and my cousin? What are you, Xena or what?”

“That thing was after *me*, not them.”

That sure put a different light on Crazy Lady. *Oh God.* “So you were willing to sacrifice yourself to protect them?”

“Nick was nice enough to try to help me. I wouldn’t have wanted an innocent victim on my conscience.” She stroked Dracula’s head. “And I don’t know what I’d do if anything had happened to Drac.”

Her voice broke, and the only reason he didn’t stop the truck now was that he knew if he did he’d pull her into his arms, and she’d probably give him a black eye for his trouble. He’d never met anyone like Kia. And it was driving him insane.

“Everybody’s safe now,” he told her.

“Yeah.”

He glanced her way. “Is there a problem with that?”

“No. Nothing, except that hideous ghost thing just ran me out of my own home.” Her voice broke again.

Ouch. He knew how much that house meant to her. “I don’t get it. I kind of thought you and your ghost had bonded or something.”

He pulled the truck into the driveway of his house, where Daisy was on the porch and barking as usual. She’d come out the kitchen door, which was wide open—he’d been in a bit of a hurry when he left.

“Everything was fine until we tried to bind her.”

“Huh?” He stared at her.

“A binding is a spell. Usually used to stop a person from hurting anyone else. We tried it on the ghost.”

“We?” She nodded without meeting his gaze, and he felt anger heat his veins. “You and Wy. Should have known she’s a real witch.”

“She’s not...not really.” She was watching her own hand while she stroked Dracula’s head. “We’ve just been...well...dabbling.”

“That makes me feel *so* much better.” He slid out of the truck and slammed the door behind him. It was only years of his mother drilling manners into him that kept him from stomping off and leaving Kia to get out and come in on her own.

That, and the fact that she looked as if she might pass out at any moment.

Groaning, he went over and tried to put his arm around her. She batted at him weakly. “Go away.”

“Fine,” he said, but stayed near enough to make sure she made it to the house okay.

On the porch, Dracula and Daisy were sniffing each other warily. For a moment, he was worried because big dogs sometimes hurt small ones. But before the humans got to them they were playing. If he hadn’t been so tired and shaken, he’d have laughed at the antics of the huge dog and the tiny one playing like puppies.

As soon as she walked into the house, Kia went to his refrigerator and pulled out a Pepsi. When she popped the top and started sucking it down, he couldn’t resist commenting. “I thought you were a devoted Coke fan.”

“So sue me.” She plunked down in one of the kitchen chairs.

“Make yourself at home.”

She narrowed her eyes at him over the top of the can, and continued to swill the drink.

He touched her shoulder as he walked by, and to his surprise she didn’t object. In fact, the glance she sent his way reminded him of a wounded child. It took all the strength he had to walk past her and not bundle her up in his arms. The desire to protect her was so strong it hurt. As he dialed his phone, he considered the implications of his feelings toward her.

“Hello.”

“You okay, Nick?”

“I’m fine, what the hell was that thing?”

Garrett felt relief weaken his knees. “A manifestation of the ghost would be my guess.”

“That’s some ghost.”

“You can say that again.”

“Odd, the shape it chose to take.”

Garrett glanced toward the kitchen, where Kia was sitting in the chair and staring at the drink in her hand. *Trying not to cry*. “I don’t think it was a coincidence.”

“Me either.” There was the sound of air blowing through pursed lips. “Which, of course, raises more questions than it answers. Like how was I able to back that thing down?”

“The story goes that the curse originated in the Strode house.”

“Yeah, well what happened tonight seems to give credence to that theory.”

Garrett swallowed hard as his cousin’s pain tore at his heart. “We’ll find the answers, Nick.”

“The men in my family have been trying to find answers for generations. I’m not sure there are any. Besides, it doesn’t matter. Answers or not, it ends with me.” There was resignation in his voice.

“How’s your dad?”

“Same as always. Same as he’s been for the last ten years.”

Garrett wanted to say something to make things better, but he knew from long experience there was nothing he could do. So he changed the subject. “Thanks for riding to the rescue. I knew you could get there faster than I could, and Kia sounded desperate.”

“I can understand why. When I saw that thing, I about needed to change my underwear.”

“I know the feeling. That was one scary son of a bitch.” He felt a shiver move through him at the memory of that monster stalking Kia.

“Yeah, I guess it was.” There was pain in Nick’s voice.

Garrett closed his eyes, wishing he could somehow make things right for a man who was as close as a brother. “I’m just glad you and Kia are both okay.”

“What’s she gonna do now?”

“I have no idea, but at least she’s finally out of that vile house.” *And probably going back home.* His heart twisted at the thought.

They said their goodbyes, and he clicked off the phone. He started to turn to go back and see how Kia was, when he saw her standing in the doorway between the living room and the kitchen. Her arms were crossed, her lips were so tight they had almost disappeared, and she was glaring at him. *Oh, boy.*

He forced his lips into a smile. “Feeling better?”

“No.”

“Are you hungry? I’ve got some turkey and Swiss. I’ll make sandwiches.”

“What are you not telling me?”

Agony twisted as he looked into her eyes. She deserved the truth, but he only knew pieces—and he'd been sworn to silence about even that much. He tried for an innocent expression. "What makes you think I know something?"

"Oh, don't give me that shit." She took two steps toward him and looked up. At six-two, Garrett stood a good six inches above her, but her glare negated any height advantage. "I've known for a long time you're holding something back. And tonight you were sure enough Nick could hold that thing to grab me and leave him there."

"I didn't know."

"But when you saw it back off from him, you had a pretty good idea why that was happening, right?"

"Not really." Just that the phenomenon was somehow connected to the curse.

"I don't believe you."

He didn't know how to answer, so he just stood quietly while she stared at him. "That was Nick you just called, wasn't it?"

That he could answer. "Yeah, I wanted to make sure he was all right."

Concern filled her gray eyes. "Is he?"

"Yes, he's fine."

Relief crossed her face, but then the stubborn anger returned. "But you can't explain how he did what he did, or how you knew he could?"

"I *didn't* know he could. But he seemed to be holding his own, so I grabbed you and got out of there while we had the chance."

"Leaving your cousin, and if I read you two right, your best friend?"

Sweat formed on his forehead. He would almost rather face that creature again. "Yes."

"So how could you do that?"

He closed his eyes and considered how to get out of this without betraying a confidence. "Nick has a way of holding his own."

"Against a werewolf?"

"It wasn't a werewolf, it was the ghost."

"How the hell do you know that?"

Oh boy, how did he get out of this one? “That’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“Would you care to explain that?”

“I wish I could, I honestly do.”

“You’re hiding things from me.”

Pain twisted his heart. It wasn’t his secret to tell. “I can’t say any more. I’m sorry.”

“Fine.” She turned back toward the kitchen, and he grabbed her arm. She spun and glared at him with pure hatred in her eyes. “You expect me to ignore the fact that you’ve lied, kept crucial information from me, and done nothing but tell me I should leave the home I love without telling me the real reason why. I can’t, Garrett. I’m sorry.”

Agony built into a hot, heavy stone in his middle. “Kia?”

“I’ll stay with Wy until I can figure out how to stop that pain in the ass ghost.”

He stopped and stared, as shock and fear battled inside him. “So you’re going to go back and live in that house? With that thing?”

She turned away. “I don’t understand why, but I’m sure all this happened because we tried to bind her. If we can just figure out a way—”

“So you think you and Wyoming can wave some magic wand and the evil in that house will just vanish in a puff of smoke?” He moved around her to grab her shoulders. “This isn’t a game, Kia.”

“I know that, Garrett.” The voice was ice cold. “But that’s *my* house.”

“For God’s sake, it’s just a house.”

“It’s more than that to me.” Her expression softened a bit. “It’s the only place I’ve ever really felt at home.”

For the first time since he’d met her, he saw true vulnerability in her eyes. “What about the house you grew up in?”

“Which one? We were always moving to bigger and more expensive houses.” She shrugged. “And they were more museums than homes.”

He licked his lips while he considered. “That must have been hard.”

She rolled her eyes and pulled out of his grasp to turn her back. “Don’t pull that shrink stuff on me. I love my house, it’s that simple.”

“I’m sorry, but you can’t go back there.”

The ice was in her eyes again when she looked over her shoulder. “I wouldn’t bet on that if I were you.”

Garrett’s last nerve snapped. “You *are* crazy.”

She glared for a moment, then grabbed his phone from the end table where he’d left it. She dialed some numbers, and they stared at each other while she held it to her ear and waited.

“Wy, I’m sorry to bother you this late, but would you mind if I spent the night on your couch? I’ll explain later. Oh, and I need you to pick me up at Garrett’s.” There was a pause. “Thanks, I’ll be looking for you.”

She clicked off the phone, never taking her eyes off him. “Would it be a problem if Dracula stays here tonight? I’ll figure something else out tomorrow.”

“He can stay as long as you need him to.” He reached toward her, only to have her move back to avoid him. “Kia—”

“Don’t start with me, McKnight.” She turned on her heels and marched off toward the living room.

Groaning, he lowered himself into a chair and wondered how he’d gotten himself involved with yet another woman—a demented one.

Or maybe it was him who was nuts.

Zechariah Strode stood in the middle of his living room and laughed. He’d finally managed to run the whore out of his house. It had taken every drop of strength he had, but he’d done it.

In a heartbeat he was in the room with all those horrible drawings. The whore was no doubt insane as well as morally bankrupt.

The woman’s picture drew him, and he stared into the face of his wife. He let out a howl of rage at the thought of the woman who had betrayed him. He could still feel her watching him. But she was helpless—like he had been not so long ago. He had no idea why the whore and her stupid buddies had trapped Mary, but it amused him greatly that they had. “Thank you,” he told the absent women.

A glance at the bag sitting next to the table reminded him what he'd come in here to do. It took several minutes of serious focus to do it, but he managed to force his left hand into corporeal form and reach into the bag. He moved the papers aside and grasped the prize.

Pain tore through him as he was thrown across the room.

"There was a *what*?"

"A werewolf." Kia seriously wished that Wy would let it go until they got to the privacy of her apartment.

"It wasn't a real werewolf," Garrett said. "It was a manifestation of the ghost."

Kia felt like slapping him, and she wasn't sure why. "You don't know that."

"It isn't a full moon."

"Oh, so all those B movies were right? It really does take a full moon to bring out the wolf?"

"Yes, it does."

The smugness in his face sent hot waves of anger through her. "So not only are you the expert on ghosts and my house, you're also the expert on werewolves?"

He shrugged. "I've done a lot of research on them."

"Interest of yours?"

He didn't blink. "Actually, yes."

She opened her mouth to say something else, but the look in his eyes stopped her. He was serious. *What the hell kind of contractor researches werewolves in his spare time?*

"Werewolf, huh? How very weird," Wy said, turning up her nose. "That's a weird thing for a ghost to do. Especially for a *female* ghost."

"Who says ghosts are logical?" Garrett asked. "Besides, she's a woman. Women do whatever it takes to get their way."

Wy rolled her eyes. "Of course you'd think that, Garrett. Honey, not every woman is like your ex, you know."

There was a look that traveled between the two, a look between friends, between a pair that had known each other very well for a long time. Then understanding dawned clear and bright.

He'd been stung by a woman who was selfish and uncaring. He'd been hurt badly by that woman and still harbored a good dose of mistrust for women. Even with all that baggage, he still claimed to love Kia. Okay, she was pretty sure he really did love her. She leaned back and considered what this new insight might mean.

"You all right, Kia?"

It was Garrett who had spoken. He was looking toward her with a gentleness that shook her to her toes. "I'm just tired."

"I guess so, after the day you've had." Wy stood. "Come on girlfriend, let's go home and get some rest."

Kia stood, and hesitated for a moment before she turned to face Garrett. "Thanks for letting Drac stay here."

"No problem."

There were tiny lines around his eyes and his mouth. Why had she never noticed them before? This man had known a lot of heartache. On impulse, she threw her arms around his neck. When she stepped back, she saw confusion in his eyes. She gave him what she hoped was a comforting smile, then turned and went out the door with Wy.

She should be shot for the way she had treated him, and she knew it.

Kia awoke to see a pair of very round, shiny green eyes staring at her. Fear caught her breath, until she realized the eyes belonged to a large cat with white and caramel coloring. "Max," she breathed. "You scared the crap out of me."

The cat gave her a totally unrepentant look.

In spite of herself, she smiled at the ball of fur balanced on the back of the couch. "You do realize I've never really liked cats. I'm a dog lover."

Purr.

"Yeah, well, it's because you're special."

Purr, meow.

"You're welcome."

“Are you having a conversation with my cat?”

Kia looked to see Wy coming out of the bedroom. She was dressed in a long T-shirt and shorts, her hair was wild—and she looked exhausted. Guilt stabbed at Kia as she pulled herself to a sitting position. “I’m sorry for dragging you into all this.”

Wy shrugged. “Don’t mind at all. Quite interesting. Need coffee.” She stumbled off to the kitchen and flipped the switch on the coffeemaker.

Kia slid off the couch and started toward the bathroom. All of a sudden a wave of emotion hit her so hard it almost knocked her off her feet. Only a quick grab at the doorframe prevented her from hitting the floor.

“Kia, you okay?”

She shook her head, trying to push away the picture of her sister lying hurt, maybe dying. “I have to get to the house.”

“Now?”

She turned pleading eyes on her friend. “*Right now.*”

Wy nodded. “Let me pull on some jeans.” She rushed off, and Kia fought the sensation of dread that threatened to overwhelm her.

Chapter Twenty-three

Zechariah Strode watched as the female circled the house calling the whore's name. She looked like that strumpet who had taken his house and his athame. Dressed in the same kind of tight, flesh-baring clothing, she exhibited her wares for all to see. He smiled to himself as he opened the back door and watched as she stepped right into his trap.

"Kia?" the lewd woman called out, as she stepped into the kitchen.

Pulling strength from all around him, he focused harder than he ever had, and slowly his body began to take physical shape.

Her eyes widened and her face paled as she stared at his handsome form standing in front of her.

"Who are you?" she said, and he was pleased at the trembling in her voice.

Ignoring her question as irrelevant, he pointed a long finger toward her. "Whore."

She screamed, covering her ears as she bent over in agony. He chuckled. This was quite amusing. Allowing his physical form to fade, he concentrated on holding her.

"Leave me alone, you jerk," she said, as she fought his binding energy.

He used the energy she was expending to increase his own. Slowly he began to heat her body, sending searing heat and pain through her nerves. She fought against the restraints, just as his whoring wife had done, and this gave him more power. Smiling, he watched as she fell to the floor.

"You've lived your life," she shouted at him. "How dare you come into this world, into my sister's house and mess with the lives of those meant to live now, today?"

Finally she weakened and lay on the floor. Even as she seemed ready to die, she looked at him and raised her middle finger in some kind of defiance, not that it would do her any good.

"Let her go."

The whore who'd taken his house was standing at the door, along with her friend who fancied herself a witch. He smiled. Not only would he take the sister of the strumpet, he'd take the woman herself, and get a charlatan as dessert.

Gathering strength, he focused on destroying the sister first. He'd get her out of the way, then he'd take on the real meat of this meal. It had been a long time since he'd been able to wreak such havoc, and he was enjoying the feeling immensely. The knowledge that his adulterous wife was begging him to stop only sweetened the experience.

When he heard them chanting, he realized they were attempting a rescue. Foolish women, there was no way their efforts would have any effect on a powerful wizard like him. Laughing, he tightened the bindings around the woman writhing on the floor.

"No," she croaked, apparently to stop the other women in their attempt to subdue him. "Get out," she said, just before he tightened his grip on her. She didn't say anything else.

Laughter bubbled through him. This was such fun.

It was only slowly that he discovered he wasn't holding the woman as tightly as before. Reaching out spectral tendrils, he tried to pull strength toward himself, but it wasn't working.

He stopped for a moment and listened to the women's chanting. That couldn't be the problem, it wasn't even a proper chant. They were simply saying words, and chanting to the powers of light and goodness. They couldn't defeat his dark powers, they couldn't! After all, wasn't that why he had turned toward the dark power? Because it was stronger than any other, because the power of the darkness had the capability of granting him what he desired?

They were becoming stronger, those horrid women. He could feel himself weakening. Slowly, painfully, he felt his strength fade. He was being pushed back, away from his goal. "No," he tried to cry, but it was too late. He couldn't make a sound.

"Ghost," Sydney whispered.

"It's okay," Kia told her, as she and Wy pulled her out of the kitchen into the sunlight. "You're safe now."

"He tried to kill me."

Kia stooped down to brush hair out of her sister's face. Syd was pale and shivering. "He?"

"It wasn't Mary," Sydney told her. "It was a male ghost."

"Are you sure?" Wy asked, as she sat on her heels near them.

"Oh, yeah." Sydney cast a glance back toward the kitchen door, and a shudder moved through her body. "He was tall, and his clothes were old fashioned. His eyes were the color of midnight. I could see through him, but I heard him call me a 'whore'."

Well, that explained a few things. Kia looked toward her house, then back to her sister. "Wy, take Sydney with you. I have something I need to do."

"I'm all right," Sydney protested.

"I'll not even dignify that with a comment," Wy said, as she helped Kia pull Sydney to her feet.

"That *was* a comment," Sydney pointed out.

Wy rolled her eyes. "Sarcasm must be in the genes." She helped walk Sydney to her car, and put her in the passenger seat. Then turned to Kia. "I'm not leaving you here to get yourself killed."

"Me either," Sydney said, attempting to stand up and failing miserably.

"Oh, don't worry. I wouldn't stay here for a million dollars," Kia said. "But I just realized my keys are in the house. Syd, can I borrow your car?"

Normally Sydney would never have let anyone drive her baby—*especially* not her sister. But apparently her view on life had changed a bit in the last few minutes, because she pulled keys out of the pocket of her designer jeans and handed them to Kia without a comment. She also handed Kia a cell phone. "I found this behind the house."

"I dropped it last night."

"Last night?"

"I was running from a werewolf, but it might have been the ghost. I'm not sure."

"*Werewolf?*" Sydney's eyes were huge.

"I'll explain later. Right now let's get the hell out of Dodge."

"I'll second that." Wy slid behind the wheel of her car.

"More like get the Dodge out of Hell," Sydney said.

Wy pulled her car out onto the road, and Kia slid behind the wheel of her sister's car. Everybody was safe. For now at least.

But this was far from over.

Garrett shook his head to clear it. The medicine he'd taken for his insistent headache hadn't helped at all, but it had made him fuzzy-headed. He wouldn't make that mistake again. Once again, he started to dial Kia's number, but he managed to stop himself. Let her come to him.

He rubbed his fingers over his aching forehead. He'd give her a little more time, then he'd call. If she didn't like it, too bad. Something wasn't right.

Kia turned onto an almost hidden driveway. "Thank you," she said into her cell phone. "I really appreciate this." She hung up and put the cell on the seat beside her.

She hadn't slept much last night, but she'd done a lot of thinking. And most of that had involved beating herself up for being too stupid to live. She had screwed up royally, and now she had to figure out how to put things right. Lots of different ideas had crossed her mind, but none had seemed like they might actually work.

Sometime in the early hours of the morning she'd used Wy's phone directory—and her address book—to look up and write down a few numbers. At the time she wasn't sure she'd ever use them, but at least it was doing something positive. Now she was very glad she had.

Before long she was turning into a long, winding driveway. The house wasn't large, but it was beautiful. Rounded areas on both sides of the mountain-stone-covered front gave the house the appearance of a squat castle. Before Kia even parked her car, the front door opened and a regal woman stepped out. Her dress was very different from the casual—and almost baggy—clothes she wore when she came into Wyoming Books. Now she was dressed in a long, flowing black skirt, and her hair was loose and dancing around her face in the gentle breeze. It hadn't been so obvious before, but the woman was beautiful.

Kia got out of the car and walked toward her, feeling her heart beat double time as she did. She wasn't entirely sure this was a good idea. "Hello, Ms. Cole. Thank you for seeing me."

"Diana, please. Now tell me what it is that, in your ignorance, you've managed to do."

Mary Strode fought against the invisible restraints that held her. She wasn't sure how those women had managed to do this, but she was terrified of what was going to happen to them. That one had almost died today—and she hadn't been able to do anything but watch.

As she struggled against her bindings, her husband tried over and over again to get hold of that knife he wanted so badly. She wasn't sure why the thing was so important, but she did know that the woman's blood had marked it somehow and was keeping him from it.

And that was a good thing, because she knew that if he was able to use that knife he'd be unstoppable.

Kia's hand trembled as she sipped tea. Diana Cole sat across the table, eyeing her with an expression of assessment that scared her almost as much as the creature had the night before.

"You actually attempted to bind a ghost?"

Kia set the cup down before it escaped her trembling fingers. "Apparently we *did* bind her, but it wasn't Mary who was the problem, it was a big, scary male ghost."

"What in the world were you thinking?"

She took a deep breath before she turned to the questioner. "I was thinking that I couldn't live with that ghost making noise every night."

"It never occurred to you to simply leave the house?" Ms. Cole asked softly.

Kia felt anger move through her, followed quickly by remorse, and she stared at her hands. "Ms. Cole, I belong in that house. I've loved it for years."

The older woman looked at her over the rim of her teacup. "Years?"

Kia nodded. Now was the time for honesty, no matter the cost. “I’ve had dreams about that house since I was a little girl. And no, I’d never seen it before.”

“Perhaps you did. Some family trip you don’t consciously remember?”

“I doubt that. My parents believed in vacations in the Bahamas or trips to Europe, not jaunts up a mountain in the middle of nowhere.” She leaned toward the other woman. “Besides, even if I did see it, to continue to dream about it for so many years must mean something.”

Ms. Cole seemed to think about this for a time. “So you had dreams. When did you first see the house for real?”

“I saw the picture on a real estate company’s website. I made arrangements to come up here and look at it. And when I first walked in the door, I felt like I’d come home.”

Ms. Cole never batted an eyelash. “And you weren’t going to let a little thing like a ghost keep you away from your new love.”

“But it wasn’t like that. At first it was just a few things—disappearing furniture, lights being on when they shouldn’t be, seeing a wisp of white out of the corner of my eye. Even when my sister saw Mary, she wasn’t scared until Mary disappeared, and Sydney’s a big chicken. Nothing dangerous.” She frowned, wondering now at the significance of Nick’s attack. “Except the scratches on Nick’s arm and face. That was weird.”

“Nicodemus Osborne?”

“All I know is Nick, but yeah, Osborne is his last name. He lives next door to me.”

Ms. Cole nodded. “He and his father are rather reclusive. Rumor has it that they and your house are linked in some way.”

“That’s strange.”

“Yes, but the bigger issue is why you didn’t consider the ghost a danger when it attacked your friend.”

Kia shrugged. This questioning was making her more nervous than she would like to admit. “Can’t you just tell me what to do, or if there’s nothing I *can* do?”

“In time. Now, please answer my question.”

Kia sighed in surrender. “Okay, okay. Nick’s not a friend. I only met him one night when I went to his house to ask to use his phone.”

“Why did you do that?”

“We thought there was someone in the house, but it was just the ghost. Or one of the ghosts, anyway.”

“Was this when he was ‘attacked’?”

“Yes. We were searching the house, and he and Sydney—my sister—were looking in the living room. Somehow he got a mysterious scratch on his arm. A little later he got scratched on the face, and my sister was sitting right beside him when it happened.” She eyed the older woman, who seemed to be charging up for a question. “And before you ask, no, I didn’t think it was a big deal. I never felt scared, and I kept thinking it was some kind of trick—or maybe the ghost didn’t like Nick. From what you say, that might be possible. I’d never met him before, for all I knew he could have been a bad guy.” *But he wasn’t, was he? He’d been willing to risk his life for her.* She swallowed hard.

“So, when did you get scared?”

Her stomach twisted. Were these questions ever going to end? “Two nights ago, when the ghost threw stuff at me. A pencil lodged in the wall right behind me.” She shivered, remembering.

“This was *after* the binding?”

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t leave then, either.”

“No.” Pain welled up inside. “I did protection stuff, and I thought I would be all right. And, I guess I was just too pigheaded. And it could have cost lives. Nick, Dracula, Sydney, Garrett.” *A sweet neighbor, the best dog in the world, and the two people she loved most.*

Ms. Cole considered for a moment. “So your life isn’t as important as others’?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” *Was it?* “I made the choice to move there, not them.”

“If your sister lived there, and not you, would you wish her to continue to stay in that house in spite of the risks?”

Frustration began to crawl up Kia’s spine. “What does this have to do with whether or not you can help me?”

“Answer my question, and I’ll answer yours.”

“Okay, okay, I wouldn’t want her to stay somewhere she was in danger.”

“So your life is less important?”

She started to protest, but Ms. Cole raised a hand to stop her. “This does relate, honest.”

Something in her expression convinced Kia, and she searched her heart to answer. “No, my life isn’t less important. I really didn’t feel in danger from Mary, and I guess I wasn’t. It was the male who was dangerous. And, like I said, after he threw stuff at me, I did all the protection stuff I could find in books. And I felt safe, I really did.” She felt tears in her eyes and wiped at them. “But then I heard him walking around again and he got control of the DVD player. I knew I had to get help, but the phone was on the porch. Then that werewolf thing chased me, and I couldn’t get back in the house.”

“Wait a minute, you were *outside* when you were attacked?”

“Yes.”

“Away from your protection charms?”

“But the footsteps, the movie...” Realization hit her like a truck. “He scared me outside, where I had no protection.”

A gentle smile pulled at the corners of Diana Cole’s mouth. “Very good.”

Kia looked at the older woman as she blinked at tears. “I was so stupid.”

“Yes, you were.”

Ouch. “What do I need to do?”

“And finally, wisdom. I believe we can work together.”

“Work together?”

“Fight together, actually.”

Shivers skittered down her spine. “What kind of fight?”

Ms. Cole chuckled. “And she’s learned to be cautious. Very good.” Then her expression grew serious. “A classic fight between good and evil. One that can only be won by strength and determination.”

“I’m determined.”

“Yes, I think you are, and strong.” She pulled a small notebook and pen out of a drawer in the end table. “We’ll need some supplies, and your coven, of course.”

“Are you sure...well, that it wouldn’t be better for me just to leave?”

“That isn’t an option now. You’ve released the ghost—which I suspect was a wizard of some kind in life—and we can’t allow him to continue to grow stronger. The consequences could be devastating.”

Shock moved through Kia. “What if we burned the house down?”

“Is the room you found below ground?”

“Yes.”

“Then no, that won’t help.”

Fear washed over her. “Oh, God.”

“Yes, prayer is appropriate.”

Kia blinked rapidly, trying to hold back the panic, the tears. Trying to deal with what she’d heard.

“Get yourself together, child. We have work to do.”

“Thank you, Ms. Cole.”

“Diana, please. Now call your friends. We need to set up before dark. There are three of you, correct?”

Kia swallowed. “Yes, but I was hoping we could leave Rusty out of this. I mean...well, after all...”

Diana leaned toward her. “For your information, Rusty is the strongest of the three of you. I believe it’s in her genetic structure.”

“But if this goes bad...”

“Please tell me that you aren’t one of those people who believe a person who uses a wheelchair is helpless and weak. Most are anything but.” She motioned toward a telephone on the other side of the room. “Call your friends.”

Kia nodded and went to do as she was told. She’d opened Pandora’s Box. Now she had to deal with the consequences of her actions—and hope nobody got hurt.

Chapter Twenty-four

Preparing for a battle with the supernatural wasn't so much like arming troops as it was like cramming for a test.

“What is the most important law of Majick?”

Okay, that was easy enough. “Harm none.”

“Very good.”

Kia eyed her teacher. “What happens if you use Majick to harm somebody?”

Diana turned from where she was gathering an odd assortment of herbs, stones, and candles. “Are you planning revenge on an old boyfriend?”

Oddly, that thought terrified her. “No. Actually, I was thinking that you said earlier that the ghost might have been a wizard in life. And if he used his ability to hurt somebody...” She was out of her league, and didn't really want to put her foot further into her mouth.

Diana leaned against her kitchen counter and narrowed her eyes in apparent contemplation. The scrutiny made Kia nervous, and she fought the desire to cut and run. “I'm sorry if I said something wrong.”

“You're a very astute woman. Much more insightful than I would have thought.”

Kia blinked. “Thank you. I think.”

The other woman chuckled. “Your theory about the ghost having hurt someone during its life is a good one. As you may be aware, there are some who practice a darker form of Majick. These practitioners, whom we call wizards, use power in hurtful ways. Many a witch has been tempted into using her ability to cast spells that cause harm. But they quickly learn the error of their ways.”

She understood that. “The Law of Three?”

Diana nodded. “Yes, in Majick, as in life, what you do comes back to you multiplied by three. It isn't always evident. For instance, if you see a ruthless businessman you may only see

his riches, not the alcoholism, the wife who hates him, or the painful disease taking root inside him.”

She took a long breath before she continued. “But some people don’t believe that. They think they can use foul and horrible devices to get what they desire. But in the end, everyone pays for their actions. Majick is only another way of using natural resources. Use them improperly, and you pay the price.”

Kia considered. “And you think that might be what happened to this ghost?”

“Probably.”

“But why is he so powerful now? He’s dead.”

“Instead of passing over to the next level, he’s staying here and continuing to tap into dark power.”

Kia stood and stared at the other woman for a moment. “He’s insane.”

She nodded. “One of the consequences of dabbling in darkness. And apparently, death hasn’t changed his mental status one iota.”

Diana turned back to her preparation, and Kia followed her example. As she worked, she thought about what they were going up against. And that sent chills down her spine.

A few hours later, they were still gathering materials and Kia was being drilled on her understanding of Majick, Power, spells and history when her cell phone rang. Excusing herself, she went into the living room. “Hello.”

“This is Ethan Drake, returning your phone call.”

Gathering her courage around her, she asked the question she dreaded. “Do you have any more information about the skeleton?”

“I’m having a colleague examine the bones, but there are still a lot of questions that need to be answered.”

Frustration had her gritting her teeth. “I understand that, but it’s really important that you tell me what you have. Even if it’s just your opinion.”

“I don’t like to speculate.”

Tears gathered in her eyes as she forced herself to not beg. All she needed was for this man to think she was nuts and refuse to give her anything. “I understand that, and I won’t hold you to anything. But that’s my house, and I have some hard decisions to make.”

She heard a long, slow sigh come through the phone. “All right,” he finally said. “The body appears to have been killed and buried approximately one hundred to one-hundred-fifty years ago. The bones belong to a female, approximately five feet in height, and we found a piece of scalp with some dark hair still attached. She was Caucasian, probably in her twenties. The tooth marks appear to have been made prior to death, and were likely the cause of death. Given the time frame, the house may have been built on top of her grave.”

“Then how did she wind up in that particular room?”

“I don’t have a clue.”

“Could she have been moved there later?”

“Highly unlikely.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. And please, take all that with a grain of salt.”

For some reason, that was funny and it was all she could do to not laugh as she thanked him again, then closed the phone and dropped into the nearest chair.

“Is there something wrong?” Diana asked.

“I believe the skeleton in my basement is the remains of Mary Strode.”

Diana nodded. “Makes sense. In all probability the male spirit is her husband, and he killed her.”

“No, Dr. Drake said she was killed by a wild animal.”

Diana considered for a moment, then said, “Didn’t you say the male ghost took the form of a wolf to attack you?”

Kia sucked in air as she realized what the woman was saying. “But he’s a ghost. He wasn’t a ghost then.”

“There are many documented sightings of man-wolf creatures. It’s possible that your house and the sightings are related.”

This was making less sense all the time. “But he’s a *ghost*.”

“There is more to this story than we know.” Diana put a hand on Kia’s shoulder for a moment. “Put it out of your mind for now. We have to focus. There’ll be time to explore the mysteries of Lone Mountain when this is over.”

“Do you know why this is called Lone Mountain, when the town itself is Mountain Shadows?”

“Actually I do. ‘Lone Mountain’ is a translation of the Cherokee name for this area. The white men who built the town wanted to get away from the native superstitions, and came up with their own name. In spite of that, many of the locals still call this place Lone Mountain.”

“It’s kind of weird, since our mountain is part of a mountain range. It isn’t lone at all.”

“That’s because word ‘lone’ would be better translated as ‘unique’.”

“There’s something different about this area.”

Diana nodded. “Different, yes. And powerful.”

Kia went back to work with a whole other feeling about her new home.

Garrett stood in the kitchen of his parents’ small house. The familiar white cabinets and yellow wallpaper usually calmed him, but not today. All he could think about was the dull pain in his head—and what it meant. “What are they, Mom?”

“They’re headaches, honey. That’s all.” His mother poured salt substitute into the soup she was cooking.

“Mom, please. This is important.”

“Calm down, Garrett. You’ll wind up with high blood pressure like your father.”

“They’re warnings, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they’re warnings. They’re warning you that you need to slow down and not work so hard.”

Exasperation pulled at him. “Mom.”

“I really don’t want to dredge up all that old stuff.”

Garrett stood and put his hands on his mother's shoulders, turning her to look at him. "This isn't old, this is right here, right now. Please, tell me what's going on. Kia's in danger, isn't she?"

There was serious reluctance in her voice when she said, "Let's sit down."

They went over to the kitchen table and she lowered herself slowly into one of the chairs. He sat near her and waited while she slowly ran a finger over the edge of a placemat.

Finally she spoke. "I know you've heard the stories. About the Strode family, the ones that lived in that house on the mountain."

"Kia's house."

Green eyes much like the ones he saw in the mirror every morning looked at him. "That house isn't ever going to belong to anybody. It's evil, that's what it is. The best thing you can do is stay away from it—and that woman too."

She started to get up, but he grabbed her arm, being careful to hold her gently so as not to hurt her. "Mom, please. Tell me what the pains mean."

"They mean you need to see a doctor." She pulled against his grip and he released her. She didn't walk away, though. Instead she stood there, staring at that placemat again. "Please, Garrett, let this go."

"Mom, what are you so afraid of?"

He was shocked when he saw tears filling her eyes. "I never wanted you to be part of it."

He stood and put his hands on her shoulders, feeling the delicacy of small, fragile bones. "Part of what?"

"The devil himself marked the Strode family."

Frustration warred with confusion. His mother had never been overly religious, so why was she saying this now? "What are you talking about?"

"Some of us get the pains, some feel things, some know things."

"What are the pains? Please, Mom, tell me."

"Like you said, they're warnings. I'm only a cousin. I've had the pains a few times, and you never did before. I thought maybe—"

"Mom."

She stared at him, while guilt tore at his insides.

“I’m sorry, Mom, but it’s really important that I know what’s happening to me.”

She reached a delicate hand up to touch his face. “I’ve only ever had the warnings when something was about to happen to your father. They got really bad before he had that wreck, and when he had the heart attack I felt like I was being torn apart.” She stopped for a moment, and he felt shivers move through her.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the family, about the things that happen?”

“Because I didn’t want you involved.” He saw her swallow. “And because I promised my father I’d never speak of it.”

“But if lives are in danger, a promise shouldn’t hold you.” The truth hit him like a boulder—he’d made the same mistake.

She reached out her hand. “It’s the woman who bought the house isn’t it? The person you’re supposed to be with.”

“Yes.”

Tears filled her eyes. “Oh, Garrett. I’m so afraid for you.”

“I’ll be all right.”

“She’s part of it. It doesn’t make sense, but Norma Jean called me and told me she feels it.” She touched a trembling hand to his cheek. “You’re my only child, and the thought of you mixed up in that ugly Strobe business tears my heart. That house should have been burned to the ground years ago.”

“I agree, Mom. But it wasn’t, and we have to deal with that.”

“Please be careful.”

“I promise.”

He kissed her soft cheek, then headed for the door. But before he got there, the sharpest pain he’d ever felt blasted through his head. Unable to fight it, he crumpled to his knees.

“Kia,” he moaned.

Kia stood outside the house she loved. Beside her were Diana, Wy, Rusty, and Sydney. Each of them held a bag with objects related to the elements, as well as various charms attested to be protective in nature.

“It doesn’t look the same,” Rusty said.

Kia wondered if her friend wasn’t just reacting to the anxiety they were all feeling. But when she looked again, she saw it. There were curtains on the upstairs windows. Old-fashioned, white, lacy curtains. Her stomach twisted in knots as she looked at the lower windows. There were no curtains visible in her bedroom window—the violet ones she’d put up had been ripped out of the wall by the violent wind. But her midnight blue drapes still hung over the huge front glass in the living room. Somehow that didn’t make her feel better. “He’s trying to take over my house.”

“We must stop him,” Diana said, as she marched toward the front door.

“Sure, no problem,” was Wy’s sarcastic remark.

There was a sound from beside her, and Kia realized she’d just heard Rusty’s gulp.

“Oh boy,” she breathed.

The quartet of witches, and Sydney, began the trek toward the house, and while Kia and Wy helped get Rusty and her chair up the steps, Diana stood on the porch waving a small broom and chanting.

By the time all of them were gathered on the porch, the door was open.

The stench of evil hit Kia as soon as she crossed the threshold. Pain, rot, fear, dank earth. She could feel, smell, and taste all of them as she stepped into the foyer. “Mary,” she whispered. “I’m sorry I doubted you.”

“We should never have bound her, that’s for sure,” Wy said.

“That’s what she was trying to tell me,” Rusty said. “I just didn’t understand.”

“We’ll fix that first,” Diana said. “Kia, you get the material you used in the binding and the athame, and the rest of us will begin setting up in the living room.”

She nodded and started toward the kitchen. But as she got closer, she remembered the being standing at the basement door—and her sister lying in the middle of the kitchen floor. Her feet slowed to a stop. The basement had always been the center of ghost’s power. He might control

the second floor now, but it was that basement room that was his nexus. Now, as it had been during his life.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed past an almost physical force. Rushing into her studio, she retrieved the ribbon-wrapped doll from a drawer and the athame from its place in the bag under her drawing table. As she drew it out, she saw it glow softly. It felt warm in her hand, and the tingling power moved from the knife and up her arm.

Ignoring the odd sensation, she turned and started back through the kitchen.

He stood beside the basement door, blocking the doorway to the living room.

She gasped.

He was tall and dressed in nineteenth-century finery. He must have been handsome at some time, though the hatred in his features obscured that. Around his edges it was still possible to see the living room.

“Whore.”

She swallowed. “This is my house, and you need to go.”

There was laughter, and she wasn’t sure whether it was in her head or in the air. A little voice that she recognized as her own whispered for her to run out the back door.

Kicking her chin up a notch, she stared into the obsidian eyes of the creature in front of her. “Excuse me, my friends are waiting.” She took a step toward him, only to feel herself being shoved backwards.

It was pure instinct that caused her to lift the athame. “Move.”

To her total shock, the pressure against her lessened. Taking one small step at a time, she went toward him, and he began to shimmer. By the time she’d reached him, he was only an outline that she walked right through—though she felt a rush of icy cold as she did.

“Weird.” She hurried into the living room before something else happened.

Everything was set up for the ritual. “His power is in the basement,” she announced. “Should we do this there?”

“*Your* power is here,” Diana said. “Let’s meet him on our terms.”

“Sounds good to me.” She took her place in the circle.

Pictures of her sister lying pale and writhing in pain haunted Kia. “I don’t think Sydney being here is such a good idea.”

“I want to help,” Sydney said.

“I think her being here is an excellent idea.”

Kia whirled to stare at Diana. “She isn’t involved in this.”

“She’s your sister, of course she’s involved. And twins have a link, a power that can help us. Not to mention, the power of love is the strongest in existence. Her presence will make a difference.”

Sydney aimed a smug look at Kia.

Staring at the almost mirror image of herself, Kia felt tears burn her eyes. Her decision to make a new start had gone so wrong. Not only was her life in danger, but so were the lives of her sister and her best friends. If Diana was right, if love was the strongest force in the world, they had a good chance. There was certainly love in this circle.

“Now we must focus,” Diana said. And as the rays of the setting sun reached for them through tiny openings between the drapes and the window frame, Diana moved around the perimeter of the gathered women with her own athame. Then she came back to the center and raised her arms high over her head. “We call upon you, She who has a thousand names, and ask that you join our circle. We must battle a great evil tonight, and we need your help. But first we must right a wrong. It was a wrong done with the best of intentions, but a wrong it nevertheless was. Please restore the spirit known as Mary to her prior strength.”

The chill in the room became icy cold. “*Go!*” a voice sounded in her head.

The loud knocking sound startled Kia so much that she let out a little shriek. Embarrassed, she covered her mouth with a hand and wondered what Miss Manners would have to say about guests to a magical battleground.

“Focus.” Diana ordered.

Kia looked at her hands. “We ask that the spirit known as Mary be restored to her prior strength.”

The others began to chant with her.

“*You?*”

She couldn't help it, she looked. Zechariah Strode was pointing a long, spectral finger toward her front door. She ignored him and continued the chanting, as she began to unwind the ribbon from the sock doll in her hand.

The sound of the door being thrown open sent squeals around the circle.

Nick Osborne all but fell into the house. He stared toward the flickering ghost. "I guess Garrett was right, something is going on."

The ghoul let out an ear-splitting howl, and Nick doubled over.

"Focus, damn it!" Diana yelled.

Kia went back to unwrapping the ribbons on the doll, as she and the others chanted, "We ask she who is known as Mary be returned to her strength, and we ask her help in the battle to come." Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw Nick's body shifting and changing.

There was the rushing of wind, and Kia caught the sight of a shimmering whiteness to her left, and looked to see a woman's form begin to take shape. "Mary," she whispered. The ghost's eyes seemed to meet hers for a moment, and then she was gone.

"Spirit of Zechariah Strode, you have no power over us. You are helpless against our Majick," Diana was saying, and Kia fought to focus on the ritual.

The sound of moaning had her looking toward Nick. He was leaning against the wall, apparently fighting some kind of attack by the ghostly fiend. "No," he moaned. "Not now."

To Kia's amazement, hair started to sprout from Nick's body. His skin began to shift and change, his facial features altered, and he seemed to be growing a snout.

"Nick?" Sydney started to move, but Diana caught her arm.

"The best way to help him is to finish the ritual."

"What's happening?"

"The ghost is attacking him," Kia said. Her heart went out to Nick and her sister, but she knew Diana was right, they had to finish what they'd started.

She glared at the spectral horror floating near her neighbor and raised her athame. "You have no power over us."

Zechariah turned to glare at the witches. An evil smile twisted his lips as he threw himself at the circle.

Though unable to get through, still he caused a gust to move across the protected area. Through the din of the wave, Kia heard a laugh that shook her to her toes. Then she saw him turn back to Nick, and she focused on stopping him.

“Kia.”

Sheer panic tore through her as she saw Garrett rushing through the open door and into the living room. “Run!” she yelled.

But he rushed toward her. He’d only taken a couple of steps when a dark shadow appeared in his path. Garrett flew back against the wall as if he’d been thrown.

“No!” Kia screamed. She’d started to go to him, when she felt someone grab her arm.

“Respect the circle,” Diana said.

Kia looked back toward Garrett, and saw Mary had moved between him and the ghostly wizard. Sparks flew as the unearthly opponents squared off. Near them, Nick was on all fours and moaning as if he was in agony.

Garrett’s green eyes were focused on her. He’d come running to her rescue, and the sweetness of that brought tears to her eyes. How could she have missed the heart—and the strength—in that man? She loved him.

But had that knowledge come too late?

Chapter Twenty-five

Kia shrugged off Wy's grasp and raised her athame. She had to save Garrett, or at least try.

"If you open the circle, we'll be vulnerable," Diana said.

"I'll close it," she said.

"You'll be killed," Sydney moaned.

"I have to go to him." Using the athame, she opened a doorway, stepped through, and closed the opening.

"You shouldn't have come," she told him as she reached for him.

"I had to. I couldn't let the woman I love face this alone."

She stared up into his eyes for a moment, but a tingle from her fingertips quickly captured her attention. Pulling her gaze from Garrett's, she looked toward the knife in her hand. It was glowing slightly and felt warm in her hands. "We have to get back into the circle," she told him, as she started pulling him in that direction.

She glanced toward where Mary and her husband were facing each other, an odd, sparkly mist rising between them. He was stronger than Mary, and Kia knew she didn't stand a chance against him. Maybe they didn't stand a chance either, but she was beginning to believe maybe, just maybe, they did. After all, Diana had said love was the strongest force.

She had raised her athame to reopen the circle, when a shrill scream tore through the air, and she looked to see Mary's form wavering as her attacker vanished, then reformed in the inches between them and the circle. He was smiling as he raised one hand. "You will pay, whore."

The athame tingled, and out of the corner of her eye she saw it glow.

"Put your hand on the knife," she said, and held it toward Garrett.

He looked at her and frowned, but did as she said and touched his fingertips to the handle near her hand.

The athame flared to life. Sparks flew as vibrations from the thing made her teeth chatter. Garrett jerked away, but Kia grabbed his arm. "Hold it with me."

There was fear in his face. “It’s alive.”

“No, but it does have power.”

Understanding seemed to dawn in his eyes, and he put his hand over hers.

They held it up, as if they were about to cut a huge wedding cake. “I love you,” she said.

She caught Garrett’s glance and soft smile, just before Mary appeared beside them, and the air clouded as she somehow pushed against their opponent. He moved back slowly, but he moved—and away from the circle.

“I love you too,” Garrett said.

Suddenly Mary was flung toward the far wall and Zechariah Strode, in all his spectral darkness, descended on them. She heard a howl, and saw a wolf where Nick had been moments ago.

She felt the big hand that was helping her hold the knife tighten on hers, and the arm around her waist pull her closer.

“Die, whore!” Zechariah screamed.

And in that moment, the terror lost its power. Love was stronger, she knew it. “You aren’t taking my house, you bastard.”

The ghost bore down on them, and the athame glowed brighter. To one side she heard the chanting of her fellow witches, and to the other was Mary’s white shimmer. Ignoring all that, she focused all her strength on the tool in her hand,

It began under her feet. A building, a growing well of energy. A bit frightened at the strength she sensed gathering, she swallowed her fear and concentrated on holding back the shadowy maliciousness hovering before her.

All at once, she felt a wave of power sweep up through her.

“Wow,” she heard Garrett whisper, and knew he was experiencing it also.

The chanting voices seemed to grow, the light flickered, and a sudden force blasted through her and out the tip of the athame.

She’d have been knocked off her feet if it hadn’t been for Garrett’s strength holding her steady. As she watched, bright light from the athame enclosed the ghost. Her hand wavered as

she fought against the urge to drop the knife. But again Garrett's strength held her. Her body trembled. But the ghost was growing thinner, weaker.

She gathered up the last drop of reserve inside her and added it to the gush shooting at the creature. She heard a growl, then a low moan and then it was gone. The ghost, the light, the power.

All of it was gone.

Her hand dropped. She felt herself fall against Garrett, and he staggered. Then they were sitting on the floor, and she was cuddled against the man she loved. "Are you all right?" she heard him ask.

She nodded. "You?"

"I think so. What the hell was that?"

"My bullheadedness come to life," she told him.

She looked toward the corner, and Nick was sitting propped against the wall. He was pale, but he was totally human again. Mary's whiteness flickered near them.

Then Wy and Rusty were beside her, bringing tears and exclamations of happiness. "Thank you," she told them.

Diana was standing nearby, an approving expression on her face. "Thank you," Kia said.

Diana smiled. "My pleasure."

She turned back to Garrett. "You idiot! You could have been killed."

He only shrugged. "You needed me. Admit it."

His green eyes twinkled, and she had the sudden urge to deck him. But a quiet voice whispered that he was right. And for once in her life, she listened to that voice. "Yeah," she said. "I did."

"Say it."

She looked into his teasing eyes, and felt the horror of the last few hours lift and float away. "I needed you, Garrett McKnight."

She looked around her then, at the people she cared about, that she wanted in her life. "I needed all of you."

"It's about time you learned that," Diana said, amusement in her voice.

Knowing her new friend was right, she turned back to Garrett and kissed him thoroughly.

“What the hell did I walk into?” Nick asked.

“Just a huge battle between good and evil,” Wy answered. “No biggie.”

“What the hell was he doing to you?” Sydney asked.

“He was trying to make you into the beast.”

There was a shared gasp, as they realized it was Mary who had spoken.

“This was why I hurt you before,” the shimmering ghost said to Nick. “You had to leave before Zechariah’s hatred destroyed you. You’re the descendent of the man I loved, the man my husband cursed so that he, in animal form, would be the one to end my life.”

Nick gasped and stared at the spirit in apparent shock.

“There were two ghosts,” Garrett said, shaking his head as if to shake loose cobwebs.

“My husband was the other,” Mary told him. “Zechariah made a pact with the Devil himself. He cursed my beloved George, a blight that continues to this very day. It was that curse that ended my life and left George a broken man.” Tears shone in the ghost’s eyes. “I’m so sorry that my actions have wrought so much pain for so many generations.”

“They weren’t your actions, they were your husband’s,” Diana said.

“But it never would have happened if I’d been true to my marriage. Still, I cherish the time I had with my George. He was a gentle, sweet man. Much like his descendant.” She smiled toward Nick.

“Can the curse be broken?” Nick asked in a quiet voice.

Kia glanced over at Nick and saw a solitary tear slide from one eye. It was all beginning to make sense.

“I believe there may be a way,” Mary told him. She glanced toward Diana. “She who risks her life to help can guide you. Her wisdom is great.” She put out a spectral hand that passed through Nick’s shoulder. “Be well, child of my George.”

Kia stood and took a step toward her. “Wait...”

Mary smiled, but her body was becoming more transparent with each passing moment. “You are the daughter of the line of my closest friend. Stephanie swore to help me, but was unable to do so during our lives. Her vow reaches to you. You have set me free. Now please, learn from

my mistake. Marry for love, not because of what is expected of you.” She glanced toward Garrett. “He is your destiny. Do not be afraid.”

“Even if I’m a descendant of the Strodes?” Garrett asked.

Mary reached out a hand that didn’t quite touch him. “Don’t feel that the name Strode is a bad one. You are the son of the line of Zechariah’s brother. Isaac was a good man, a minister who did many things to help the needy. The gifts your family carries are from God.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now I must go. You and Kia will heal the rift. And Nick, there is always hope, remember that.”

With those words, Mary Strode vanished, leaving seven people staring at the space where she had been just a heartbeat ago.

“Well wrap me up and call me a hot dog,” Wy said.

Kia blinked and turned to see her friend shaking her head in what looked like sheer amazement.

“It would maybe have been helpful if we’d known some of that *before* the mother of all battles,” Rusty said.

Sydney was still beside Nick. “What curse was she talking about?”

“You don’t want to know,” he said.

“Yes, I do,” she whispered. “Please let me help you.”

“Stay away from me, Sydney. I don’t want you to get hurt.” He stumbled to his feet and rushed out the door.

Kia’s heart went out to her sister, standing in the doorway, looking hurt and lost. “We have to talk,” she whispered to Garrett.

He nodded. “I know. Soon, I promise.”

“Right now, we need to cleanse this place,” Diana announced. “There’re still spirits hanging around.”

As a group, they followed her directions and began the cleansing ritual. They all knew it was serious work, but there were soon smiles and jokes. And before long, Diana pronounced the house clean. Soon after, junk food appeared.

Kia was surprised that Diana stayed, eating her share of cookies and ice cream. And laughing right along with the rest of them.

They partied until almost midnight, when Rusty suddenly gasped. “Oh my God, I didn’t realize it was so late. My dad’s going to kill me.”

“Come on,” Wy said. “I’ll get you home.”

Kia and Garrett followed Wy and Rusty out and he helped get Rusty down the porch stairs. “You really need a ramp out here,” Rusty said, giving Kia a narrow-eyed gaze. “Make it easier for a person in a wheelchair to visit.”

“I’ll have to look into that,” Kia told her.

“I think I might be able to get you a special rate.” Garrett grinned.

“Think I could bunk on your couch for one night?” Sydney asked Wy.

“If you tell me embarrassing stories about your sister.”

“No problem,” Sydney told her.

Wy swung her VW around and tore out of the driveway, Sydney’s little red car following close behind.

A hand touched Kia’s shoulder, and she turned to find Diana beside her. “You and Garrett are meant to be together. Remember that.”

She bit her lower lip and struggled to hold back the tears. “Are you sure?”

“It’s obvious to anyone who knows what to look for. Your auras resonate. The two of you are that rare thing, true soulmates.”

Kia swallowed back the all but overwhelming hope. “Thank you so much for all your help.”

“Wouldn’t have missed it for the world.”

“It isn’t over, is it?”

Diana shook her head sadly. “Zechariah is gone, but evil remains. There is still work to be done.”

With that she turned and started toward her car. Just before she slid inside, she stopped and looked back toward Kia. “Call me in a few days and we’ll discuss the possibility of you becoming my student.” With that, she got in her car and took off into the darkness.

“You did it,” Garrett said. “You fought a ghost and won.”

“We did it.” She looked up into those eyes she loved so much.

His lips pulled into a smile. “Well, that’s something you don’t hear every day—Kia Wolfe admitting she needs other people. And twice in one night? I may have to call the record keepers.”

Kia chuckled in spite of it all. “Let’s just say the last couple of days have been a learning experience.”

Together they went into the house and sat on the couch. “I’ve learned a few things myself,” Garrett told her. “Like that I should have told you everything. Your life was on the line, and that’s more important than breaking a promise.”

She took his hand in hers, as regret pulled at her. “I should have trusted you.”

“Kia…”

“No, please listen. I understand now. It wasn’t your secret to tell. You made a vow to Nick and you kept it. I have to admire that loyalty.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, then pulled her hand close to his heart. “The thing is, it wasn’t to Nick I made the vow. That would have been easy. I’d have simply asked him. He would never have let you put your life in danger to protect his secret.” He looked down for a moment, and she saw him swallow hard. “It was his father I made the promise to. Ten years ago I was part of a coverup, and I’m not proud of what I did, but I did it to protect my family.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Yes, I do.” He looked deep into her eyes as one hand gently brushed her cheek. “When the moon is full, both Nick and Uncle George become wolves.”

“The curse?”

“Yeah, except there’s more. Somehow, in spite of all kinds of safeguards, the wolf always kills the women the men love.”

“Oh my God.”

He nodded. “Just like the original George killed Mary, except we didn’t know that until tonight.”

Sudden realization had her gasping. “Nick’s mother?”

Tears filled Garrett’s green eyes. “One night Uncle George, in wolf form, somehow escaped his restraints. When he woke up, the body of his half-eaten wife was beside him.”

Nausea ripped through her, along with pain. “That poor man.”

“We buried the body way out on the other side of the mountain. Hopefully she’ll never be found. Two days later, they reported her missing. Uncle George has never been the same. He rarely gets out of bed, and spends most of his time staring into space. Nick had to drop out of high school to look after him.”

“And you can’t get him help.”

“No, obviously that isn’t an option. They’ve tried medication, but so far nothing’s done any good. So Nick takes care of him, and I do what I can.”

A bittersweet smile touched her face. “Like fix the plumbing?”

“Yeah, and I seriously hate plumbing.”

“How in the world do they survive, financially, I mean?”

“You have to understand, this curse has been around for over a long time. The men in the family, knowing that they would have to protect themselves and their families, have made investments and developed businesses they can run from home. In the old days it was done by using trusted servants, nowadays it’s all taken care of via Internet and telephone.”

“So they’re...”

“Rich, yeah.”

“Wow!”

“It’s pretty amazing. Especially Nick. He’s a high school dropout, but he’s taken courses and taught himself so much he’s probably the equivalent of an MBA. And his knowledge of computers is unbelievable.”

“But he’s a prisoner in that house with his father.”

“In a way, I guess. They don’t much trust anybody from the outside.”

“That’s why Nick ran from Sydney, because he’s afraid of falling for a woman.”

“That part’s complicated, and I’d really feel better if you asked him about it yourself.”

“Would he talk to me?”

“Sure. I think he’d love having somebody else he can trust and talk to.”

She reached up a hand to the stubble on Garrett’s face. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course I do.”

“Good.” She touched her lips to his, and he pulled her closer.

“The dogs are at my house,” he murmured around their locked lips.

“We’ll go get them later,” she told him. “Right now I have other plans.” Pushing him back onto the couch, she draped herself over him. “I wanna celebrate.”

“Works for me,” he said, as he pulled her close.

About the Author

Cheryel Hutton was born in a tiny hospital located above the drugstore where the famous Scopes Trial had been hatched and plotted many years before. Cheryel's childhood was traumatic, filled with painful and terrifying hospital visits and scarce emotional support. To escape the trials and tribulations of her life, she built herself an elaborate fantasy world. Unlike the real world, in this one any danger or pain could be fought and defeated with the help of imaginary, but supportive friends and family. Eventually Cheryel decided that other people might like to read her wild imaginings, so she began to get serious and write for publication.

Cheryel is the mother of two grown daughters who have made her a very young grandmother. She holds a green belt in Tae Kwon Do, and is involved in disability awareness. She lives in Chattanooga, TN with her husband and their two dachshunds, Cujo and Sugar.

To learn more about Cheryel Hutton, please visit www.cheryelhutton.com. Send an email to Cheryel at Cheryel@dragon_quill.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Cheryel: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/cheryel_hutton.

One woman's struggle to learn the truth turns into one man's battle to save her life.

Winter's Daughter

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Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble...

Twenty years after the untimely death of her mother and cruel separation from her sisters, Synnamon Angelov returns to her abandoned childhood home in Salem, Ohio. She is determined to find her sisters and search for the answers behind the half-buried memories and nightmares that still plague her. Not surprisingly, the superstitious people of Salem aren't all happy that Syn is back in town.

Secrets revealed...

Police Chief Matthew Whitefeather doesn't deal in hocus pocus; he works with cold, hard facts in both his personal and professional life. When Syn starts asking questions around town, Matt pays little attention to the whispers of witchcraft and murder—until someone tries to force Syn to leave Salem. Dead or alive.

Matt and Syn reluctantly join forces and find themselves caught in a web of deceit. Just what happened the night Victoria Angelov was found dead on a lonely country road?

And why were her children forced to pay for her sins?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Winter's Daughter:

She didn't miss the narrowing of Haines' eyes. By this evening it would be all over Salem that the witch's daughter had returned.

Her gaze met Whitefeather's. "The house is mine, and I'm cleaning it out before the renovations begin."

"I'll need some identification."

"It's in my car outside."

"After you then." He stepped back and allowed her to lead the way.

Calling for Maddie, Syn left the house and jogged down the porch steps. She caught sight of two marked vehicles beside the house and a third coming up the drive. Mentally she cursed. She should've paid closer attention to what was going on. Instead, she'd been caught in the painful memories of her childhood, so she'd turned up the music to drown out the voices in her head.

Reaching the Jeep, she opened the glove box to retrieve her wallet. "Were you expecting a den of thieves to be out here or what? How did little ole' me rate three officers to roust me out of my own house?"

"I'm sure you can understand an abandoned property is the perfect place for kids who are up to no good." He took her license.

"The property was hardly abandoned. We have a caretaker keeping an eye on the place and—"

His radio squawked, cutting her off.

"Four-ten."

He keyed the microphone attached to his shoulder. "Four-ten, go ahead."

"Nineteen ninety-nine Jeep Wrangler, brown, registered to one Synnamon Angelov, age thirty-four, five-ten, black and blue, one-sixty, at a Sedona, Arizona address. Break."

"Go ahead."

"This Angelov has a lengthy arrest record. We're currently checking to see if she has any outstanding warrants. Break."

Syn's gaze met his, and even though she was withering on the inside, she offered him a brazen smile and a shrug. "Some of us were born to be bad, Chief."

He keyed the mike again. "Go ahead."

"She has both a juvenile and adult record. Petty theft, vagrancy, drug abuse, trespassing, and fifteen years ago she was convicted of involuntary manslaughter."

Syn's skin crawled and she wanted nothing more than to slink away, but she wouldn't give any man the satisfaction of seeing her shame. While she wasn't proud of her criminal past, she'd accepted the dark and twisty side of herself a long time ago. If she hadn't walked that road, committed those crimes and lived on the streets, she wouldn't be the woman who stood before him now.

No longer was she the lost, broken woman who'd lived the life of criminal. Her desire for death or the mindlessness of drugs was gone, banished by years of hard work and intense therapy. But no matter how many times she'd wished the past could remain just that—in the past—it never did. Always, when she least expected it, the old Syn would make her presence known.

Whitefeather's gaze never left hers as he spoke into the radio mike. "Copy that."

She'd seen the look in his eyes many times before. He'd already passed judgment and found her lacking. Most people who learned of her dark past did the exact same thing. So what did it matter if one more small-town cop thought she was some sort of drug-addicted, murdering skank?

"Is there anything you'd like to add, Ms. Angelov?" Whitefeather's tone was noncommittal.

"Hardly. I'd really hate to ruin any future surprises for you. I just love the anticipation."

"An explanation might go a long way toward my trusting you more." He handed her license back to her.

"Oh, my life is over, the chief of police doesn't trust me." She rolled her eyes. "Your dispatcher will come back and tell you I have no warrants. I've been clean for fifteen years and I'm not going to make excuses for a difficult time in my youth. I don't owe an explanation to you or anyone else." She stuffed her wallet back into the glove box and slammed it shut. "I did the crimes, I did my time and I'm a law-abiding citizen now. That's all you need to know."

"Fine." His handsome lips tightened and she would almost swear he was disappointed by her response. "In the morning I will verify the ownership of the house, and if everything checks out, you're good to go."

"You do that." Crossing her arms over her chest, she propped her hip against the Jeep. "The house will be listed as held by a trust company in Boston. If you call them, they will assure you I'm the legal owner of this place."

"We'll see about that."

“Suspicious, aren’t you? Did you ever stop to think maybe a person is innocent until proven otherwise? Isn’t that a tenet of our judicial system?”

His dark brow arched. “People who are innocent don’t usually talk back to the law, nor do they have lengthy criminal records.”

“Ah, the unforgiving type I see. I’ll bet you never made any mistakes growing up, did you?” Syn’s smile was icy and thin. “Thank you so much for coming all the way out here to harass me. What’s the matter, not enough crime going on in Salem to keep you busy?”

“Unfortunately, there is always something to be taken care of in Salem.” He crossed his big arms over his chest. “This was considered much more important.”

“That just warms my little heart, Chief.”

“I’ll bet.”

Haines walked out of the house with a troubled look on his face. In retrospect, this one probably didn’t remember anything of the dark times, as he’d been pretty young, possibly the same age as the twins. Still, she had little doubt he’d heard the rumors and speculation that must’ve run rampant in the town after they’d left. The destructive side of her personality would not let her leave it at that.

“Officer Haines, please make sure you give your daddy and mama my regards.” She walked toward the steps.

“Do you two know each other?” Whitefeather asked.

“This one here was but a child when my sisters and I left Salem.” Syn’s laugh was careless. “But I surely did know his older brother, Donnie. He spent most of my fourteenth summer trying to get into my panties or shove his tongue down my throat. I think he was almost eighteen. If he’d succeeded, wouldn’t that have been statutory rape?”

“No, Chief.” Haines’ face looked as if it were carved from stone. “My family didn’t associate with common trash.”

“Just the uncommon kind.” Syn reached the top of the steps and she turned to face the men. “Yeah, well, if anyone in Salem knew what trash was, it was your mama, boy. Edina Mayhew Haines could spot a bad seed, couldn’t she? How do you think she and your daddy got together?”

His face turned bright red, and for a moment she thought his head might explode. If looks could kill, she'd be dead where she stood.

Without another word, Haines spun on his heel and stalked to his cruiser. Slamming the door hard, he took off in a spray of gravel.

"Hmm, maybe you need to think about anger management for your officers," she said to the chief.

"I apologize for Officer Haines. He's been under a great deal of stress lately." His tone was stiff.

Syn shrugged. "I can tell he must've been the whiner of the Haines brothers. He probably had a lot to live up to, with an upstanding brother like Donnie. And how is Trent? Is he still as crazy as hell?"

"I'll check out your story, Ms. Angelov," Whitefeather continued. "Then I'll be by tomorrow around noonish, so I'd recommend you don't leave the county."

"How very Hill Street Blues of you, Chief. If you have so much spare time on your hands, why don't you look into my mother's murder instead of harassing those you're supposed to be protecting?" She struck a look of surprise and snapped her fingers. "Oh wait, now I remember. The Salem Police only look out for their own, isn't that right?"

To get to the truth, you have to strip away all the layers.

Naked Vengeance

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FBI agent Eve Morgan will stop at nothing to find her father's killer and avenge his death, even posing as a stripper and getting suspended from her job. Her plans are blown all to hell when bullets fly, and she's rescued by a man who may or may not be on the right side of the law.

Ex-Marine Nick Shaffer knows Eve is trouble the second he lays eyes on her leather-clad body, but he's been hired to protect her. Nothing will get in his way. Not her sultry looks, his overactive hormones—or the nightmarish guilt from his last mission, in which an innocent man died.

As they get closer to the truth, the danger escalates, and so does the sexual tension. But the secrets they keep from each other could be just as deadly as the killer they hunt.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Naked Vengeance:

Now that she stood so close to him, she could make out his face. And what a face he had. Even with the piss-poor light, she could see the man had strong lines with a square jaw and thin lips—no doubt due to anger. Dark eyes surrounded by darker lashes, with a small scar running through his right brow. From this angle, a shadow cast over a portion of his face, making him all the more mysterious.

Even with her neck-breaking high heels on, he still had a good five inches on her, so he loomed over her with ease. If he thought he could intimidate her, he had another thing coming. With the mood she had been in lately, he'd be better off getting the hell out of her way.

“I've been hired to protect you.”

Eve ignored the prickle on the back of her neck. “By who?”

The intriguing stranger showed no emotion. “The person wants to remain anonymous.”

Could this all be a ploy? Did this man really know her true identity and her plans? She sincerely doubted it, seeing as how she'd been so careful not to tell anybody at all her whereabouts and she'd used only her real first name, making up her last.

On the other hand, what if he worked for the man she'd been waiting for? What if this dangerous stranger could lead her to the killer?

Eve eyed him as the questions and possibilities whirled in her head. "Why should I believe you when I don't even know you?"

"It's up to you whether you want to believe me or not," he said with a cockiness to his slow Southern drawl. "I've been paid to do a job and I intend to do it."

Eve's chin came up in defiance. "Well, you can do what you want, but I have to get back inside before I get fired."

Eve turned, teetering on one heel, but before she could move away from the irksome yet captivating stranger, a shot sounded through the alley. The deafening pop had her looking back over her shoulder at her "protector".

The stranger grabbed her arm and hauled her behind an overloaded dumpster. "Stay down. I'm about to save your ass again, honey."

He pulled a Glock from the leather shoulder holster and fired around the metal garbage bin. Seeing as how she was unarmed, Eve kept her head down, her arms up by her face. She would not die in the back of some dingy alley beside a rank dumpster with a man who looked like a god, acted like Rambo and could very well just be the devil in disguise. She had a job to do and she intended to see it through to the end—just as soon as she got out of this little predicament. Allowing this stranger, who might or might not be on her side, to take control of this situation was all she could do, considering she was half-dressed and without her own gun.

"That should do it." He shoved his gun back into his holster.

"Did you kill him?"

He extended his hand, reaching for her. "Nah, just nicked him. Amateur wouldn't have hit us if we stood right in front of him. You're safe now."

Eve ignored his outstretched hand and rolled her eyes at his stand-behind-me-little-lady attitude. Damn, she hated being protected, especially by a stranger.

She came to her feet now that the fight seemed to be over. The deep V in her robe had fallen open and before she could cinch it back together, she caught him taking a good, long look at her breasts, still only covered by the sheer black bra.

“I already told you once, I don’t do private parties. I don’t do peep shows either.”

He shrugged. “I don’t do strippers, so we’re on the same page. But that doesn’t mean I’m not a man. If you go around exposed like that, I can’t help but look.”

“Gosh, what was I thinking coming out here in only a robe? I forgot to grab my jeans and T-shirt before you so rudely pulled me from my dressing area.”

He laughed and ran a hand down his face. “Are you really that stupid? I saved you. What don’t you understand about that?”

Fury bubbled up through her and before she knew it, her fist connected with the side of his smooth face. He jerked back as his hand came up to rub the red spot she’d made.

He straightened himself and grinned. “You pack an impressive punch, but I was looking for something a little along the lines of gratitude.”

Eve wouldn’t rub her hand. She refused to give him the satisfaction of knowing how much it hurt when she connected with his stone-like jaw.

“Gratitude?”

“Do you have to repeat everything I say?”

Eve clenched her fists to keep from hitting him again. “You’ve said so many idiotic things, I’m just making sure I get it all right.”

“I don’t lie, sweetheart. Everything I say is the truth.”

Eve didn’t like the shudder that rippled through her when the word sweetheart slipped through his kissable lips.

Whoa! Did she just think his lips were kissable? More like smackable. Why would her mind betray her like that? She didn’t have time for sexual encounters or shenanigans in a back alley with this man. Her mission didn’t involve getting sidetracked even for a second. If he worked for the enemy, he was trying his damndest to keep her out in this ratty alley.

“You’ve got a pretty eye,” he said, eyes roaming over her face.

“Eye?”

“Yeah.” He motioned to her right eye. “The one without all that crap piled on it.”

“I was in the middle of taking it off to redo it when you barged in.” Eve let out a sigh and glanced down the alley. “Look, I’m going back inside.”

“You’re going to go back in there after all that happened? Not too smart, are you?”

Eve didn’t appreciate the way he assumed to know her or her intelligence level. “All my stuff is inside. I need to see what’s going on.” Eve shrugged. “Maybe with all the commotion, I’ll have the rest of the night off.”

“I’ll wait around to make sure you get home okay.”

She resisted the urge to growl. “Actually, it’s not okay, but I can hardly stop you.”

Eve stalked toward the club door on her skinny heels, not giving a damn that with each step her silky robe shifted in the back. She didn’t care what this so called bodyguard thought of her, so it didn’t matter that his last impression would be her *derrière*.

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