

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

ELLORA'S CAVE
Quickies
Jory Strong
Spirit Flight



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Spirit Flight

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SPIRIT FLIGHT

Jory Strong

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The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Jeep: Daimler Chrysler

Chapter One

Marisa Lacoste doubled over as pain sliced through her side.

Run. Keep running. Run. Run. Run.

The words pounded through her in time to a heart that felt like it was going to burst out of her chest. She panted. Sucking in air while the pain in her side kept her still for a minute.

She had no idea if they were behind her. At this point she had no idea if they even realized she was no longer out sketching impressions of the mountains.

Stupid! She'd been so stupid. So unaware. So naïve.

A different kind of pain twisted through her. How could Ethan be involved in this? And for money. He knew the most important thing to her was her art. It was all she'd cared about since she was old enough to hold a crayon.

Tears threatened, from the emotional pain as well as the physical. She tried to quiet her breathing so she'd be able to hear them if they came crashing after her. Tried to force herself to breathe through her nose, realizing as she did so that her throat and lungs were starting to ache from gasping the cold mountain air of the Cascades.

A rumble sounded in the distance. Thunder to go with the darkening sky as the gray clouds were starting to gather.

Tears trickled down her face and Marisa brushed them away impatiently. Tears wouldn't do any good now and she couldn't allow herself the luxury of them.

Maybe later. When she found her way off the mountain. When she flagged down a car or found a call box. When she got back to the last town they'd stopped in. Hohoq—so small it wasn't even on the map.

They'd eaten at a tiny home-style diner there and anyone who'd seen them together would testify they'd been in great spirits. A man and two women. Enjoying themselves the way people do when they're on vacation. Laughing. Teasing. Probably in the area for rock climbing or hiking, or just to camp. She and Ethan resembling each other so closely with their black hair and blue eyes that they were obviously related. Not that Kaitlyn wouldn't have drawn her share of appreciative glances with her blonde, fashion-model looks.

Fresh pain ricocheted in Marisa's chest. They'd played her so well. Not just for the last couple of days, but for months.

The beautiful tabletop books with pictures of the Cascades. Talking her into taking a rock-climbing class. All of it done so this trip wouldn't seem out of character and her *accidental* death wouldn't seem suspicious.

Stupid! She'd been so thrilled to be included!

But now she could see the exact moment when this thing had been set in motion. When she'd realized that slowly, over the years, she'd begun living only on the proceeds from the sales of her paintings. When she'd casually mentioned that she wanted to put the money she'd inherited from their father, the money her brother had been managing, into a scholarship fund so other artists could "make it" as she had.

She wondered if any of the money was left. If Ethan had been embezzling it all along. Or only since Kaitlyn came into the picture.

Marisa pushed thoughts of her brother and Kaitlyn aside. Forced herself to straighten. The air around her was getting colder and the sky darker.

A different fear gripped her. Its fingers icy dread.

Lost, her skin slick with sweat from running, exposed to the elements overnight with nothing more than the clothing she was wearing, she could as easily die from hypothermia as from a staged fall while rock climbing.

It'd be so easy for them to claim she'd gotten lost while she was hiking. Gotten so absorbed in her surroundings, in the beauty and colors she'd try to pull into her art

later, that she hadn't been paying attention to where she was going. They would say she had panicked and run when she finally realized she didn't know where she was or where camp was.

Anyone who'd ever seen her when she became immersed in her work would testify that she could go days without answering the phone or opening the mail, would barely remember to eat. It wouldn't take any great leap of imagination to believe she'd gotten lost.

Marisa shivered. The sweat starting to chill underneath her shirt and jeans.

They'd still want to find her body, just to make sure she hadn't used her art pencils to leave a note behind. A record of what she'd overheard them planning and why she'd run.

The breeze picked up. Bringing with it the scent of impending rain. Distant thunder rumbling in confirmation a storm was on its way. It's threatened arrival turning both the mountain and time into deadly enemies.

She wouldn't last the night if her clothing got wet. She knew it with a certainty that came from being a news addict, not an experienced camper.

Marisa surveyed her surroundings. Took in the vast panorama of rock and pine, brambles and juniper. Breathtaking beauty and terrifying solitude at the same time.

In that moment she would have given every penny she had just to spot smoke curling upward from a cabin tucked away in the landscape. But there was nothing. No indication anyone lived in the area though the presence of the rough dirt road and the *No Trespassing* signs she'd seen a short time ago had given her hope that she'd find someone to help her.

Another rumble sounded, this one sending adrenaline and terror coursing through her. All doubt as to whether or not they'd realized she was missing answered by the sound of the off-road motorcycle.

There was a grove of pine and oak ahead but she wasn't sure she could get to it before being seen. And even if she did, the trees and undergrowth might slow her down and trap her instead of offering her shelter and protection.

She'd returned to camp earlier than expected and overheard them deciding to find her and kill her *now*, when the storm would work to their advantage. But despite the pain and panic and fear she'd experienced since that horrible moment, Marisa had tried to keep her wits. She'd stuck to roads leading downward, though early on she knew she wasn't on the one they'd taken to get to the remote campsite. It had become too narrow, too overgrown, barely more than a footpath in places before opening on a harsher, wider track.

Where it had become a wider track again was where she'd seen the *No Trespassing* signs and a short distance beyond those, the totem poles. So exquisitely carved that she knew she was looking at something created by a master craftsman. The animal figures carved in detail, the thunderbirds on the top of each pole ferocious, magnificent, the epitome of raw power and the primal acknowledgment of forces greater than man. Even in her flight to reach safety she couldn't go past the totem poles without stopping long enough to run her fingers over the designs etched into the wood, her artist's spirit aching to linger, to try and capture on paper the essence of what was in front of her. The image of the great thunderbirds—their wings outspread, their attention focused outward, claiming everything for as far as the eye could see—filling her with profound emotion.

The rumble of the motorcycle grew louder and for the first time since she fled the camp, she left the road and confronted the mountain directly. Scrambled over rock, grabbing with her hands and trying to gain purchase with her feet while pebbles tumbled like small slides down the steep incline.

She was trying to get out of sight from the road. Praying that whoever was on the bike was simply following a possible escape route rather than tracking her specifically.

Her only intention was to find a place where she could cling safely until the bike had passed and then passed again, returning to camp.

But as the bike drew near, its engine roaring, echoing in the canyon, the rock under Marisa's hands and feet gave way and sent her hurtling downward, clawing desperately, each wild grab dislodging more rock and earth so that a tide of it heralded her descent.

For the first few seconds there was only wild panic, a desperate awareness of speed and motion, of being momentarily airborne. But then came pain. Legs, ribs, arms, back as she landed hard on an outcropping, the debris in her wake striking her face and arms and torso before bouncing and continuing the journey downward.

When the last of it had passed and the sound of the slide faded, only the purr of an engine remained. Marisa opened her eyes and watched as the motorcycle stopped far above her and the rider slid the helmet off to get a better view—or maybe it was a gloating show of victory. Either way, for long moments Kaitlyn looked down at where Marisa lay, and then with a wave, she put the helmet back on and drove away.

There was nothing but pain afterward. Emotional. Physical.

Bleeding, killing wounds inflicted to heart and soul.

Breaking, tearing wounds done to bone and flesh.

Marisa faded in and out of consciousness. Aware on some level of the darkening sky, the rapidly approaching storm, the feel of cold rain pelting against her exposed skin when it finally arrived. The wetness of her clothes. Their sodden mass a heavy weight on a frame barely able to sustain life.

The thunder was directly overhead now. Lightning flashed, its brilliance flickering against Marisa's eyelids.

She forced them open, knowing she was dying and yet *choosing* to see the beauty around her. The magnificence of the storm. Far more powerful and real than anything she'd ever been able to capture in her art—though sometimes she came close, and those were the paintings she treasured.

A crash sounded, followed by lightning. Jagged streaks illuminated the sky and Marisa gasped, her pain forgotten as the thunderbird image from on top of the totem pole hovered above her.

His powerful wings beat the air with such force that clouds swirled around and under him. The bright colors of his feathers reflected off gray rock, painting it red and white with splashes of yellow and blue woven in. His beak open in a soundless scream as lightning sparked from coal black eyes.

Marisa knew she was hallucinating and yet she embraced the hallucination, even managed a small laugh of sheer joy as she felt herself floating upward, toward the thunderbird, the wind catching the sound of her pleasure and carrying it away.

But then the great bird turned its eyes on her and swooped. Its dive sending the clouds scattering and rushing away, driving Marisa's awareness back to her body. To pain and cold. And finally – nothingness.

Chapter Two

There was the sound of a solitary drum beating in the rhythm of a heart. A voice accompanied it in a chantlike song offering prayers in a language Marisa didn't understand.

Instead of pain, there was only heat. Moving through her. Over her. Building in intensity as the song built, peaking, fading. The process repeated over and over again until the voice stopped. The drum stopped.

Into the sudden silence came the eerie sound of water dripping in the distance. The sensation of being watched. The hint of a woodsy scent that coiled in Marisa's womb and gave her the strength to open her eyes and struggle to her elbows.

It took her a minute to see him, and even then she blinked. Licked lips that were dry as she forced herself into a sitting position. The movement made her lightheaded for an instant, warned her that she shouldn't try to scramble to her feet.

He rose from where he was squatting next to a small fire and her fingers clenched involuntarily – not with the need to defend herself, but with the urge to draw him. To capture him on paper.

He was a vision from history. A warrior. His muscles toned from a life where only the fittest survived. His skin bronzed, revealed except for the area covered by the loincloth he wore.

The bulk of his black hair was a curtain flowing over his shoulders and down his back. But on either side of his face beads and feathers decorated tight, narrow braids.

"Drink this," he said, kneeling next to her and offering her a cup she hadn't noticed him carrying. His voice deep, confident. His words English, firm.

She shook her head in confusion as the memories flooded in, of overhearing Ethan and Kaitlyn plotting to kill her, of running, of being injured, of knowing she was dying and seeing the thunderbird swoop down from the sky.

“Drink this,” he repeated, gripping the back of her head and holding her still as he pressed the cup to her lips. She struggled instinctively, wondered if she was drugged.

Her captor set the cup down and quickly subdued her. His arms around her torso all that was necessary in her weakened condition.

A different kind of awareness ripped through her when skin came into contact with skin. When she realized she was completely naked.

“Easy,” he said, as if sensing her rising panic and her intention to renew her fight. “Easy. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Marisa’s attention flitted wildly around her, taking in the rock, the darkness, the campfire and finally her clothes. Torn and bloody, dripping from a peg pounded into the wall. The sight of them calmed her as nothing else would have.

Her gaze returned to the man holding her. Seeing the dark eyes. The thunderbird’s eyes. The colorful feathers braided into his hair. Red and white and black with splashes of blue and yellow. The thunderbird’s colors.

“You rescued me,” Marisa whispered, understanding dawning. She must have been delirious when he found her, her mind lost in the last piece of art to make an impression on her. The totem poles.

Marisa pulled away from him and this time he let her go. Wonder flowed through her, disbelief as she gazed down at her body and saw no open wounds, felt no broken bones even though the state of her clothing attested to the fact that she *had* been injured and bleeding.

She glanced up and her nipples tightened in reaction when she saw his gaze travel over the same territory hers had just explored. His eyes darkened with masculine appreciation at the sight of her exposed nipples and cunt.

His nostrils flared as though he could scent her sudden wetness and Marisa's womb fluttered in response. Her hand went to the apex of her thighs in an attempt to shield her mound and arousal from his view. The other hand dropped to the material underneath her and she realized it was thick fur, a hide tanned and softened.

"No," he said, his fingers going to her wrist, stilling her when she shifted, intending to free the fur and wrap it around herself. "I will bathe you first."

Marisa's breath caught in her throat. Her entire body hummed at the words, at the possessive way he was looking at her. At the command in his voice.

He picked up the cup and once again held it to her lips. "Drink this. It will help you gain strength, Marisa."

She opened her mouth to ask him how he knew her name and he used her response to his advantage, tilted the cup and left her no choice but to drink the contents or choke on it. She swallowed, expecting something cold and bitter. Finding instead something warm and thick and tasting of honey.

Almost immediately the heat of the drink spread out from her belly, going first to her cunt and breasts and making her whimper. She licked her lips and groaned as warmth spread there too.

"You've drugged me," she whispered, her eyes meeting his then going to his mouth, her upper body leaning forward, following the direction of her gaze.

He laughed, a small husky sound, and once again took her into his arms, this time brushing his lips across her temple. "You are feeling the call of our spirits to one another. The drink was to aid you, nothing more."

She allowed herself to simply luxuriate in the feel of hard muscle and hot flesh, to soak in his strength and breathe his scent. A shiver went through her and another whimper escaped when his hands smoothed over her back, slid down to her hips and pulled her more tightly against him. Her breath caught when she became aware of what his loincloth was concealing. "I don't even know your name," she said, wondering how she could be naked and yet so at ease in this stranger's arms.

“Ukiah,” he said, rubbing his cheek against Marisa’s, giving her the name the townspeople and guests at his lodge knew him by. The name he went by in the physical world.

He tangled his fingers in her hair in order to keep her from turning her face away as he settled his mouth on hers, coaxed her lips into parting so his tongue could slip into the wet heat of her mouth, tasting her essence along with the drink the Creator had directed him to give her.

She was lush and sweet, utterly desirable. His. Given to him by the one who had called up the storm and drawn the thunderbird into the air. Leading him to where Marisa lay dying, her soul ready to flutter away.

It was not Ukiah’s place to question the Creator’s choice of a wife for him and he had no desire to do so. She was beautiful. Long-limbed and exquisitely feminine. Her breasts tipped with large dusky nipples, her pubic hair trimmed into a small dark triangle left to arrow downward toward a delicate clit and bare cunt lips.

He hadn’t known what reaction to expect from her. Had thought only of carrying her to the cave and stripping her of the wet clothing, of starting a fire and beginning the sing, offering up prayers and supplications and promises that he would accept her and care for her and teach her so that she would answer the call as a thunderbird.

Until she opened her eyes and became aware of her surroundings he had tried to respect her privacy, to not stare at her naked body where it lay on furs, warmed by a fire that was created by the Creator’s will, just as the drink Ukiah had given Marisa was.

Ukiah groaned as his cock pressed against the loincloth. His heart soared as her tongue twined with his. As her arms wrapped around his neck and she clung to him, the smoothness of her skin and scent of her arousal tempting him to lay her back down on the furs and cover her with his body.

He ached for her as he’d never ached for another woman. Wanted desperately to peel away the loincloth and bathe his penis in her wetness before pressing into her, merging his body to hers.

He'd waited so long. Had dreamed of having a woman at his side. A helpmate and companion. A mate who would fly with him when the thunderbird was called to the sky, who would winter with him when the snows came and celebrate with him when spring kissed the land.

But even as his cock demanded to be sheathed in her wet heat, Ukiah wanted to finish caring for her. As he'd promised to do. He wanted them to know each other better, to have their first joining be more than an urgent, mindless rush toward physical release. He wanted her to welcome him into her body as a soul mate, not simply as the man who had rescued her.

It took all of his strength to lift his mouth from hers. "I need to bathe you first."

"No, I need this more," she whispered against his lips, her arms tightening around him as her tongue forged into his mouth, as she became the aggressor.

Marisa knew she was reacting to the betrayal, to the wild run which had very nearly ended in her death. A part of her mind argued for her to pull away from Ukiah and put some distance between them. But that part of her seemed powerless against the deep anguished cry of her soul, the clamor of her body for warmth and comfort, for the security he represented.

She shivered when he responded, when he moaned and eased her backward so she was once again lying on the luxurious pelt of fur. His body straddled hers, making her whimper and arch in a futile attempt to rub her pelvis against his. She slid her hands down his sides and settled them on his hips with the intention of removing his loincloth. But he grasped her wrists and held them to the ground above her head.

"No," he said, lifting his mouth from hers, the rich waves of black hair a curtain on either side his face. The narrow braids with their beads and bright feathers brushed against her cheeks, overlaying the present with the past in a burst of déjà vu that made her think they'd once been like this before, in another lifetime.

His eyes widened slightly and she wondered if he was experiencing the same thing, but before she could ask him he lowered his head and her breath caught in her throat.

Need pulsed through her cunt at the glimpse of herself reflected in the dark pools of his eyes. Her naked body made golden and sensuous, wanton, in the flicker of a fire that seemed too small to provide so much light.

Ukiah's tongue traced her bottom lip before sucking it into his mouth. His knees tightened against her hips to keep her from arching high enough to rub against him. He altered his grip, shifted so he could hold both of her wrists with one hand while the other moved to her breast, cupping it, worshipping it with his touch. A thin sheen of sweat formed on his upper torso as the ghost drums sounded in his mind, as ancient, long-dead ancestors joined their voices in a prayer for fertility rather than a healing song.

He groaned as he slanted his mouth, penetrated hers with his tongue. His testicles heavy with seed. His cock pulsing in time to the mystical drum beat.

Images of other lives fluttered past with the swiftness of a falcon, whispered voices called him by names his spirit had once answered to. Whispered the names he'd known Marisa by.

The tempo of the ghost music increased, built, urged Ukiah to consummate his union with Marisa. Filled his chest with echoes of a long ago emotion, the fierce pride of ownership. She'd once been his captive, his war prize.

The drums and songs and whispered voices blended, so tightly knit that they stripped him of control. He freed her wrists and kissed downward, no longer able to separate the man known as Ukiah with the ones who had come before him. From the thunderbird who knew this woman as its mate and wanted to reclaim her.

He circled and laved her nipples with his tongue until they were ripe and hard. The sounds of Marisa's moans and the sharp sting where her fingers buried in his hair, tugging as if she would pull him into her very skin, only made him feel *more*. Only made him crave her more.

He bit and suckled as his hands roamed over her breasts possessively. Exploring their fullness. Imagining the sight of them hanging free beneath her like ancient symbols of fertility when he took her on her hands and knees.

With a groan he forced himself away from them, kissed down her belly and buried his face between her thighs, doing nothing at first but inhaling her, filling his lungs with her unique scent. She whimpered and arched into him, a primitive plea for succor and pleasure and protection. A submissive yielding as if she too was locked in a long ago role where she lived or died at his will.

Ukiah tilted his head so he could see her face, wanted to watch her expression as he took the first taste of her, his tongue gliding along her lower lips, dipping into her slick channel in a primal claiming.

Her skin glistened, her eyelashes were delicate black crescents against taut skin. He wanted to command that she look at him but he couldn't bring himself to leave her silky wet cleft.

She gasped when he pierced her with his tongue, tightened her grip on his hair, her luscious breasts flushing a deeper color. He thrust again and the muscles of her sheath clamped down, trying to draw him deeper even as she drowned him in arousal.

The cadence of the ghost drumbeat demanded that he thrust again, and again. His hips jerking in time to the press and retreat of his tongue. His cock pulsing, rigid and confined, making him as much of a captive as she was.

Her cries of pleasure filled the cave and he could imagine them drifting upward and rolling through time like a supernatural thunder. Carrying a message, a scream of victory, a promise for the future.

Ukiah spread her thighs further, bent her knees and tilted her pelvis so that every inch of her was exposed, open, his to lick and suck. To fuck with his tongue.

Her clit was swollen, as rigid as his cock, its hood pulled back just as his foreskin was. Its head nearly purple.

“Please,” Marisa said, her voice hoarse, her back bowed as though she could force him to swallow her whole, her hands trying to guide him to her clit. “Please,” she begged again. Her skin coated with a sheen of sweat. Her heart racing, pounding so fast that it made her think of drums beating on a dark night, of ancient fertility rites and gods so old they were no longer named.

Ukiah licked over her swollen knob and she convulsed with pleasure, the icy-hot shards of it spearing through her, making her buttocks clench and her breath so scarce that she felt lightheaded. He closed his mouth around her clit and the tears came. Mixed with whimpers and cries as he sucked, hard and fast, aggressive now, somehow knowing she needed a violent release in order to cleanse her of the horror of what had happened to her.

He pinned her to the fur. Held her down as if she was his captive. The feathers and beads and silk of his hair making him seem primitive, savage. The shadows on the wall dancing like some ancient people around a timeless campfire.

Over and over again he swirled his tongue across her clit as he sucked. His lips firm, resistant, driving her higher and higher until she came, shuddering and writhing. Ecstasy rolled through her like a fierce storm and Marisa rode the pleasure until the last of it passed into distant rumbles and short bursts of lightning, leaving her feeling cleansed, calm, like the earth after a rain.

Color flooded her cheeks when she finally forced her eyes open. A sudden shyness at having taken so much from him but given nothing in return.

Ukiah’s skin felt stretched tight and his cock ached with the need to sheathe itself in her wet heat. He could feel the dampness against his flushed foreskin where the head had leaked in preparation for coupling with Marisa.

For long moments his chest rose and fell in sharp pants, only gradually did his heart slow as the drum beats and singing faded, leaving him the choice as to when to join with her.

He kissed his way up her body, stroked her heated flesh as he did so, cupped her breasts, lingered to suck before once again claiming her mouth. This time sharing the taste of her pleasure with her.

She wound her arms around his neck and even that simple gesture filled him with a contentment he'd never known before. A sense that all would be well. That there was no need to hurry or rush.

He rose to his knees and lifted her into his arms before standing. Carried her to the cavern next to the one they were in and settled her into a small indentation in the floor that was filled with heated water.

Ukiah smiled when she squeaked, her eyes widening with surprise and confusion. "There are still volcanoes in this range," he reminded her, though in truth the water running down the wall and into the shallow pool was heated at his command, as was the cavern itself. Everything within created and maintained for her safety and comfort.

They were not abilities he had in his mortal form, only in this one. When he was both thunderbird and man, a creation of magic and belief.

Ukiah squatted by the natural bath, grimaced as his cock and balls pressed against the loincloth. He dipped his hands into the water before reaching for a crudely made bar of soap. Tumbled it over and over until lather coated his fingers.

Chapter Three

"I can do it," Marisa said, her voice husky, low, nearly breathless.

"But *I* will do it," he said, his tone telling her it was his right and nothing she said would dissuade him.

Heat stole into her cheeks and remained there as he smoothed his palms over her neck, her shoulders, the slopes of her breasts, her arms.

He stroked every inch of her. Claimed every inch of her.

His touch was possessive, caring, so erotic that by the time he'd rinsed the last of the lather from her skin, Marisa was shaking with need. Her labia flushed and swollen. Her nipples and clit tight hard knots.

Nervousness fluttered through her and she licked her lips. He inhaled sharply and her gaze went to his face. Confidence returned in a heated rush at the sight of his taut features, the coal black eyes focused completely on her, the erection that strained against his loincloth, framed by thighs strung tight with tension and self-control.

She touched him then. Slid her hand along the muscle of his thigh, watched through lowered eyelashes as his nostrils flared and his jaw clenched. Felt the silent command to move higher, to free him from the loincloth in the way he held himself completely still.

Anxiety pitted in her stomach when her fingers arrived at the suede-like material stretched tightly over his cock. Its construction unfamiliar.

Ukiah's fingers covered hers, gently guiding them, explaining without words how to remove the loincloth. Her breath caught when the garment fell away, revealing his length and thickness, his penis—uncircumcised, his testicles heavy sacs underneath it, making her think of a stallion.

She stared in fascination, licked her lips again, only barely aware of his groan when she did so. Tentatively she reached out to touch him. To stroke his foreskin, to explore what she'd only seen in studio models and in finished art, untouchable examples of man as he'd been created by nature or god or maybe both.

Ukiah's masculine beauty appealed to her on so many levels. But as she stroked his shaft, it wasn't the artist who prevailed, but the woman.

Desire shivered through her at how soft he was. Her cunt throbbed, clenching and unclenching when arousal escaped the blood-filled tip of his cock. She grasped him in her hand and he hunched forward, burying his fingers in her hair as she'd done earlier. Pulling her to him.

She rose from the shallow basin of steamy water and kissed his chest. His nipples. Laughed softly when they became hard, tiny peaks on a sculpted chest.

"Marisa," he whispered, and her name sounded like a prayer on his lips.

Happiness filled her. Joy. Something more than lust.

Her kisses trailed downward. One hand going to cup his testicles, to weigh them like sacs of gold, to explore them while the fingers of her other hand wrapped around his cock, stroking up and down until his hips were moving to the rhythm she imposed on him. His breath coming in short pants.

His fingers tightened on her hair and Marisa didn't resist when he guided her mouth to his erection. She nuzzled it, her tongue darting out. Tasting. Feeling. Learning him as he'd learned her.

Waves of jagged pleasure rippled through Ukiah. Spikes of painful ecstasy like fractured bolts of lightning with each touch of her tongue to his heated flesh. He was helpless in her hands. Unable to do anything more than pant, and shake, and hold her to him as she tortured him with her tongue, with her fingers and lips.

Beads of sweat rolled down his neck and chest. Every muscle in his body strained to remain still, afraid that any movement would shatter the last of his control and he

would hold her to him and spew his seed in the wet depths of her mouth instead of her cunt.

He cried out when her soft mouth left his shaft, her tongue like the kiss of the sun against his sac, burning him with heat, then immersing him in a river of fiery sensation when she sucked first one testicle and then the other.

Ukiah bucked against her, his body strung so tightly that between one heartbeat and the next he knew he'd reached his limit. "No," he said, the word so guttural it was barely recognizable. "No more."

He used the grip on Marisa's hair to pull her away from him, his buttocks clenching when his testicle slid from between her firm lips. The drumbeats which had faded began again, only this time they were the thunder of his own heart.

He picked her up, heedless of the water adhering to her skin and splashing onto his. Uncaring of anything except returning to the other chamber with her and spreading her out on the furs.

"Look at me," he said, coming down on top of her, his fingers intertwined with hers, holding her hands to the floor as his thighs roughly opened hers.

He groaned when his cock encountered the slick wet heat of her swollen vulva. Very nearly plunged in and impaled himself to the hilt in one fast, hard stroke. But he managed to hold himself at her entrance. To meet her gaze and then slowly, an inch at a time give himself to her—just as slowly, an inch at a time, he claimed her for his own.

"Ukiah," Marisa said, her fingers tightening on his as he pushed deeper, his name filling her soul as completely as his cock filled her channel.

She shuddered when he reached the end of her, wrapped her legs around him as if afraid he'd try and leave her. She rejoiced in the heavy feel of his testicles against her buttocks. Wanted to close her eyes but his coal-black gaze commanded that she keep them open, that she see the possessive way he gazed at her. Acknowledge the ownership he claimed as his hips began moving, first in short, forceful jabs, and then in long, full-length strokes that left her mewling and whimpering, crying for him.

He covered her lips with his and began thrusting in earnest. Made her scream in climax as he filled her with his seed. His release a violent hammering that had him going lax against her before rolling to the side and gathering her in his arms.

The sound of their breathing was harsh and ragged. Loud in the small cave. It drowned out the drip of water and the crackling of the fire. Masked even the far away droning, the continuous undertone that made Marisa think of chanting but was probably the sound of wind through rocks, or more ominous, deep shifts in the mountain range.

She cuddled against him, content as she'd never been before. Then made a murmur of protest when he released her and stood. But a moment later he'd once again scooped her into his arms and carried her to the sunken indentation filled with heated water.

"This is wonderful," she said when he sat, positioning her so that she was straddling him, her head on his shoulder, the water covering her legs and lapping at her lower back. The pool only barely large enough to hold the two of them.

Ukiah brushed his hand along her spine. His heart filled with not only the beauty of the woman in his arms, but at what they'd already shared. Even without the Creator guiding him to her, gifting him with her, he would have been drawn to Marisa.

"How did you end up on these lands?" he asked. "When I was in Hohoq earlier today, no one mentioned there were visitors staying in town."

Marisa's eyebrows drew together in surprised confusion. *Hohoq?* That was the name of the town where they'd stopped for lunch days ago. And after they'd left, it had taken them hours to get to the campsite.

She reached for one of Ukiah's narrow braids, finding comfort in the feel of the smooth beads and soft feathers. "Am I close to there?" It occurred to her that she didn't really know where she was, other than in a cave. "Am I close to where you found me?"

He chuckled, a rumble that vibrated against her and made her smile. "Yes to both questions." His fingers skimmed over her backbone again and made her shiver and press more tightly against him. "So you were lost?"

Her hand clenched on his braid. Then she forced herself to release it in favor of touching his skin, of curling her fingers around his biceps. "I was lost. Mainly I was trying to get somewhere safe."

Overhearing the conversation to kill her. Running. Her terrified escape. It seemed like a nightmare now. Unreal. Unbelievable. Something that had happened to someone else. While this...being here with him... It felt like they'd always been together. Not in the same way as people who've known each other years, but in the way of people whose souls are linked.

Marisa remembered her earlier thoughts, of knowing him in another life. Of belonging to him then. She shivered then laughed silently at herself. Attributing her flight of fantasy to artistic temperament.

Ukiah leaned back and in the process forced her to shift position so he could look into her face, his hand tangled in her hair held her still for a lingering kiss before he pushed her for answers.

The tension in her body a moment earlier – along with the motorcycle tracks on the road above where he'd found her – told him the safety she'd been seeking was more than shelter from the storm or the approaching night. "Someone was chasing you?" he whispered against her lips and she immediately jerked in his arms.

She met his eyes and everything inside him responded to the fear he saw in them. His cock stirred where it lay snug between her wet thighs, filled, grew ready to offer physical reassurance that she was safe, cared for.

Marisa's fingernails dug into Ukiah's biceps. Tears formed at the corner of her eyes, and a quiet sob escaped when he leaned forward, kissing them away. Nuzzling her, rubbing his cheeks to hers and finally taking her mouth again. His tongue twined with hers, reassured, eased the ache in her heart until the pain of betrayal gave way to heat and warmth, the beginnings of love.

When they separated, she made him smile by guessing at the source of his question, by asking, "You saw the bike tracks?"

“Yes. Who was chasing you? And why?”

Marisa exhaled on a long shaky sigh. “My brother and his girlfriend. Kaitlyn’s the one who finally caught up with me, but not before I’d already taken a fall down the mountain. Though I guess that turned out to be a good thing. It fit with their plans perfectly so they were willing to leave me there and let nature take its course rather than help it along.” She leaned in, shaking despite the heated water they were sitting in. Hugged him tightly. “If you hadn’t found me...”

Ukiah slid his arms around Marisa and held her to him, glad her face was buried against his neck so she couldn’t see the rage in his expression, the utter determination to destroy those who wished to harm her. Who had left her to die. “Why were they trying to kill you?”

“Over money.” She shuddered, a soul-deep protest of betrayal and Ukiah thought she wasn’t going to say anything more, but then she seemed to force a calm into her body. “I’ll know more when I get back home. But for the last couple of years my brother Ethan has been managing the money our father left me. At first I got a monthly allowance, but as my art started to actually pay for my apartment and anything else I needed... It was stupid not to pay attention, but Dad left Ethan the business. He trusted him with that. So I trusted Ethan too. I wanted to believe we were a family.”

“You were close?”

“Our father left his mother and married mine – while she was pregnant with me. So no, we weren’t close when we were growing up. But after our father died...” She shrugged. “But maybe that was all pretend, even if I’d like to think Ethan changed because of Kaitlyn. That she somehow convinced him to do this for her.”

Marisa took a deep breath. “They were planning on a rock-climbing accident. Only once we got here... There were so many images I wanted to capture on paper. And then when I saw where they wanted to climb... It made me feel scared. Maybe part of me guessed what they intended to do.”

She closed her eyes and Ukiah speared his hands in her hair and tugged, the sharp little pain making her lift her face so that once again he could cover her lips with his.

This time his tongue coaxed hers, tempted it to enter his mouth so he could hold it, suck on it, a gentle offer of sympathy as well as an acknowledgement of the rawness of her emotions. An offer of closeness and safe haven which she accepted with the softening of her body, with the opening of her thighs and the press of her swollen cunt lips against his engorged penis. When she whimpered he abandoned her hair in favor of grasping her hips and lifting her, settling her on his cock as he held her tongue captive in his mouth.

Marisa was helpless against Ukiah's sensual assault. There was no protest in her mind. No thought other than to invite him further into her body, their movements synchronized to his sucking, so subtle that the water barely rippled and yet each tiny thrust sent shards of white-hot pleasure through her clit. Each slide of his penis over desperately hungry internal muscles starved her for more. Their connection was so intense, so profound, that he became everything that mattered to her. And with a cry, orgasm ripped from the deepest part of her. A place that had never responded to another man like it responded to Ukiah. A place sealed closed until he came into her life.

Ukiah held her to him. The clenching and unclenching of her sheath on his penis exquisite agony as he savored the gift she was giving him, tried to make it last. Succeeded until she went limp in his arms, rung out from her pleasure, her channel snug and hot and wet, issuing an invitation he could no longer ignore. A siren's call that roared through him, making him pant and thrust and fill her womb with his seed.

He carried her back to the other room, laughing when she said, "Despite your having to carry me here when you found me, I can walk now," her voice light, happy.

"I enjoy carrying you," he said, placing her on the furs so she was seated with her back to the fire, then taking a moment to get a comb before kneeling behind her.

Marisa gave a low moan of pleasure when Ukiah began working with her hair, gently untangling it, the teeth of the comb lightly scraping over her back. "How close are we to where I fell?"

"If your handhold hadn't given way you might have seen the cave once you traveled several yards further. But you wouldn't have been able to get to it from where you started climbing."

"You were here?"

"No. But I arrived shortly after you must have fallen."

A tremor went through her as she remembered. "It was storming."

"It's still storming outside."

She cocked her head but heard nothing. "Was I unconscious when you got to me?"

He hesitated, a barely imperceptible pause. "Yes."

Marisa almost lost her nerve then chided herself as he leaned forward and one of his braids brushed against her arm. "Before I blacked out I imagined a thunderbird swooping down on me. He had eyes like yours." She reached over and stroked a bright feather with its bands of red, white and black, its subtle splashes of blue and yellow. "He had feathers that looked like this one."

Ukiah stopped combing her hair and leaned forward to rub his cheek against her hair and nuzzle her ear, to suck the lobe into his mouth. "You are on Thunderbird land."

Marisa smiled, letting herself be distracted by thoughts of the totem poles she'd passed. Accepting that it didn't matter whether she'd seen Ukiah and imposed a thunderbird form on him, or whether she'd been hallucinating.

"Do you know anything about the totem poles?"

Ukiah sucked her earlobe again and made her breath catch. His free hand went around to cup and fondle her breast, sending a rush of arousal to coat her inner thighs. "The poles near the *No Trespassing* signs?" he teased.

She found she could laugh. "Yes, those."

"I made them."

She gasped and tried to turn, but his hand at her breast made it impossible. "They're beautiful. Are you a sculptor?" She laughed again. "Silly question. I mean, is that what you do for a living? Though of course, art is so much more. I'd still create even if no one bought a single one of my paintings."

He nibbled the side of her neck before pressing a kiss to her skin and shifting to resume combing her hair. "I carve in the winter, as a hobby, though my family members manage to sneak some of my work from the lodge and offer it for sale in town."

Marisa's turned her head, yipping when the comb snagged and pulled her hair. "How in the world do they sneak away with totem poles?"

He laughed. "Most of my carvings are animals. Miniatures that can be easily concealed in a purse or jacket pocket."

"I'd like to see them," she said, tensing involuntarily, suddenly feeling awkward about the situation. About reality outside the cave. Outside this emergency dictated interlude.

"Marisa." His voice was a caress as he set the comb down and pulled her back to his front. Kissed along her shoulder, the hand which had been holding the comb going to her belly, burning through to her womb in a gesture of possessiveness and assurance. "I found you and I intend to keep you."

His hand dipped lower, cupping her mound, his fingers sliding into her slit. His palm pressing against her clit, moving in slow circles so that she whimpered and moaned. Soaked him with her arousal as she responded to his touch.

He made a guttural sound and leaned into her, used his weight against her back to force her forward onto her hands and knees. And then onto her elbows and knees with her buttocks raised, her thighs spread to reveal swollen, wet, woman's flesh.

She shivered at how vulnerable the position made her feel. The very awareness of her vulnerability making her labia grow more flushed. Making her clit strain, erect and full, the hood pulled back, desperate for his attention.

“You are beautiful, Marisa,” Ukiah whispered, kissing the base of her spine, his fingers gliding over her slick folds, circling her clit and making her cry out.

She pressed into his hand, rubbed herself on his tormenting fingers, her breath coming in short pants accompanied by low moans. “Please,” she begged, “please.” And even though she couldn’t see him, she could feel the impact of her words on him in the way his touch became more dominant, more aggressive. In the way the tension seemed to fill the cave, a primal energy that made her feel as though a huge presence loomed behind her.

Marisa jerked when he entered her. His cock slamming home in one rough thrust of ownership. His hands going to her hips to hold her in position as he began thrusting. The force of him plunging in and out of her driving the breath from her lungs in screams that signaled a mix of pleasure and pain, an exquisite, all-consuming acceptance of what he was to her.

Tears formed in her eyes and the shadows dancing on the wall in front of her blurred and blended, took the shape of a thunderbird with its wings outspread, flapping in time to each thrust of Ukiah’s cock, its chest swelling as if with pleasure. The image was so real that she tried to turn her head, only to be stopped by his harsh “no”, by his fingers tangling in her hair and preventing her from moving as he pumped even harder into her. The rhythm of his claiming becoming a nearly unbearable ecstasy until orgasm rolled over her, extreme and powerful, filling her as completely as his hot release filled her channel, rushing toward her like the giant shadow of the thunderbird and taking her with it into the primordial darkness.

For long moments Ukiah panted and shivered above Marisa’s limp form, his cock still buried in her heated depths, his body weak even as the thunderbird’s triumphant exaltation roared through him.

She was pregnant now. With his child. With the thunderbird's.

If they'd met under different circumstances Ukiah would have waited. Would have married her first and moved her into the lodge which served as both his house and his source of income. Would have let her accustom herself to her new life slowly – though he had no fear she would accept and embrace the changes, that she would thrill at what it would mean for her art.

But the choice hadn't been his to make. He walked in the spirit world now. This body a magical manifestation restricted to the cave, a duplicate to house the thunderbird's essence while Ukiah's true physical form lay miles away on a pallet in a sweat building behind his home.

He pulled from Marisa's folds. A masculine smile of satisfaction forming on his lips when she mumbled in protest and immediately moved to press her skin to his. He gathered her hair, wove it into a thick braid before lying down next to her, covering them with a fur and giving in to sleep, her back to his chest, his arms holding her to him. Possessive and protective at the same time.

Chapter Four

Marisa woke smiling, achy in a good way—except for her bladder’s insistence that it was time to find some relief. And then as if the acknowledgement of one basic need was enough to rouse others, her stomach growled.

Not very romantic, she thought, laughing softly as she disentangled herself from both Ukiah’s arms and the fur. She lingered for a moment afterward to look at him, to assure herself he was real and not a fantasy she’d conjured up in a hallucination.

Reluctantly she forced herself to her feet and over to where her clothes hung on a wooden peg. She wondered briefly where Ukiah’s were. Not that she wouldn’t forever savor the first sight of him wearing nothing but a loincloth, but it *was* cold outside and she didn’t think he’d been out hiking in only a strip of suede.

She grimaced as she pulled on clothes stiff with dried mud and blood. Their dryness making her glance at the fire.

It amazed her that something so small could put out so much light and heat and last so long. But then again, what did she actually *know* about campfires? Until this trip she’d had zero experience with actual camping—as in the kind that doesn’t involve an RV or a cozy cabin at the end of a day of hiking to places where she could draw or paint.

She slipped her feet into her shoes and tied the dirt-encrusted laces. Then tried to get her bearings, seeing at first only the opening which led to the sunken pool.

It was the lack of smoke that made her look more carefully at the darkened recess behind the campfire. And almost immediately the flames flickered and she could feel a damp, cool breeze.

With one last glance at Ukiah, Marisa moved to where she thought the exit was and slipped into the shadows. The sudden presence of light—even if it was greatly muted in what served as a shallow anteroom to the cave—made Marisa close her eyes in reaction.

When she opened them she experienced a moment of confusion and disorientation. Her mind scrambling to know what time of day it was, to grasp how long she'd been in the cave with Ukiah.

Marisa stepped to the mouth of the cave and took in the deep gray clouds. She shivered as cold, wet air hit her face—the force and sting of it making her want to retreat. But embarrassment over the prospect of relieving herself in the cave, with Ukiah nearby, made her reach for an exposed root and place her foot on a small cluster of rock.

She climbed, keeping her mind from reliving her earlier fall by grumbling about how Ukiah had it easy. *She* had to go halfway up the mountain in order to find a handy place to squat while he only had to find a ledge and whip his cock out.

Marisa stilled in the act of reaching for another handhold, heat suffusing her body. A different kind of urge burned in her lower regions at thoughts of Ukiah with his fingers wrapped around his penis.

She couldn't safely begin climbing again until she banished the images and the needs that came with them. But this time as she slowly moved toward flatter ground, she wondered how Ukiah had gotten her to the cave at all.

The going was steep and perilous. Nearly impossible even without the added weight of an unconscious person. And yet he'd managed it during a furious storm.

When she finally got to the top the muscles in her arms were burning. For long moments she struggled to regain both her strength and her composure. As she sat at the edge and looked down the face of the mountain she was completely overwhelmed by the miracle that she'd been given. Not just her life. But Ukiah's presence in it.

Finally she stood and turned, seeing the small animal path that wove through low scrub growth and merged with the trail she'd been running on before making the decision to try and hide when she heard the rumble of a motorcycle's engine. Marisa's

heart raced, the memories overlaying reality until she took several deep breaths and forced them away.

She walked a short distance, found shelter from the brisk wind so she could relieve the pressure on her bladder. And then like a fatal attraction, Marisa followed the path, returned to the spot where Kaitlyn had stopped the bike.

A shudder racked Marisa's body in a visceral reaction as she looked at the place where she'd come to rest when she tumbled down the side of the mountain. Where she'd been so sure she would die.

She wrapped her arms around herself, sorry now that she hadn't woken Ukiah and suggested they both leave the cave. Realizing as she looked down that her confidence had deserted her and she wouldn't be able to climb back to him.

The wind picked up, the sky darkening and roiling as though attuned to her fear and distress. The gray clouds churned, became charcoal black as thunder sounded in an ominous warning.

She retreated to the wider path and saw the number of motorcycle tracks there. Her heart skipped and beat erratically at the sight, only resuming its normal rhythm when she reminded herself that Ethan had probably veered off to check another trail and then caught up with Kaitlyn. That's why there were so many tracks.

Marisa rubbed her arms. Fought off the chill working its way under her clothing.

It was only a matter of time before Ukiah woke and noticed she was missing. He'd come looking for her. Of that she was certain. But in the meantime she knew she needed to find some semblance of shelter and the grove of trees in the distance was her best hope.

A rumble of thunder greeted her decision and she glanced at the sky. Shivered at how angry it now looked. Its dark violence filled her mind and made her hurry so that at first she wasn't paying attention to how the motorcycle tracks continued in the direction of the trees rather than upward toward the place she and Ethan and Kaitlyn had camped.

Marisa slowed. Her mind raced. Tried to make sense of why there would be tracks. Then remembered Ukiah's mention of Hohoq, the way he referred to it implying it was within hiking distance.

Uneasiness rippled through Marisa, timed to another roll of thunder. What if the tracks weren't old? What if Ethan and Kaitlyn had returned to make sure she was dead before claiming to have just found her body?

She had no idea how long she'd been in the cave with Ukiah. Or when the worst of the storm had ended though it looked like a new one was getting ready to arrive. She stopped abruptly, suddenly more afraid of continuing on than of braving the elements until Ukiah woke up.

A crack of thunder made her flinch. Lightning flickered across the sky just as two people emerged from the strand of trees she'd been heading for.

"Marisa!" Ethan called, his words whipping past her, carried by the wind.

She turned and ran, glanced over her shoulder and was relieved when she saw they weren't chasing her. But a few minutes later the sound of a motorcycle engine told her they'd returned for their bikes.

Within seconds her side was hurting and her lungs were burning. Fear nearly choked her. Not just at the prospect of them catching her, but of them killing Ukiah too.

She stumbled and went to her knees, but before she could scramble to her feet the wind grew in intensity, making it impossible for her to stand. The dark clouds in front of her became a boiling, angry mass, spitting rain as lightning strikes sizzled through the air, so close to her that she felt their energy across her skin.

A scream sounded behind her. High and feminine. Abruptly ended. And then a man's tortured shout. Followed by another bolt of lightning. Splitting into two as Marisa watched.

She gasped when the thunderbird emerged from the cloud, her rational mind and knowing heart in juxtaposition, awe and disbelief warring with her soul's certainty that the mythical creature in front of her was Ukiah.

He swooped toward her and she felt only a rush of pleasure, an answering cry in her chest, a desire to join him in flight. For a split second she thought he would pick her up with talons as black as his eyes, but at the last minute he swung upward.

She turned so she could watch him, her breath catching in her throat at the sight of the two motorcycles lying bent and twisted and smoldering on the path, two bodies next to them.

Hesitantly she began walking toward them. Her emotions volatile, ever changing. Dread and relief mixed with utter sadness.

She got to Kaitlyn first. Shuddered when she saw dead eyes staring vacantly at the sky, the charred place where a lightning bolt had struck.

Marisa moved to Ethan and knelt, tears in her eyes despite everything. She jumped when he moaned, forced herself to feel for a pulse in case the moan was only air escaping. And felt a moment's happiness that he was alive.

She wouldn't forgive him or allow him into her life again. She wouldn't let him get away with what he'd done. But he was her brother and she was glad he wasn't dead.

She stood and looked around, expecting to see Ukiah. But instead there was only the sense that he was watching from deep in the clouds, hovering close but unseen to ensure her safety.

The wind pushed against her, almost as if it was urging her to leave, to move on, toward the grove of trees and down the mountain. The motorcycles were useless and there was nothing she could do for Ethan other than to seek help. So once again she started running. Pacing herself this time. The wind against her back aiding her.

It felt like she ran for hours, though she had no idea how long it took to get to Hohoq. It seemed like a lifetime ago when she and Ethan and Kaitlyn had stopped there for lunch. Sat at the table, lingering, enjoying themselves the way people do when they're on vacation. Laughing and teasing so that others smiled with them.

Marisa closed the door on those memories. Forced herself instead to walk into town and into the first place she came to. *Hohoq General Store*. The thunderbird over the town

name now resonating in her with the knowledge that it was one of the thunderbird's names.

She entered the store and noticed the carvings first. Small, delicately carved birds and animals. Then she noticed the man behind the counter, a silver-haired version of Ukiah though this man's hair was short.

His eyes widened with surprise when they met hers. "Which one of the boys do you belong to?"

"Let me handle this, Father," another man said, stepping from behind a row of shelves and making Marisa's heart rush to her throat even as she hurled herself into his arms and hugged him tight, his gentle pats to her back telling her instantly that he wasn't Ukiah. "My brother misplace you?" he asked, allowing her to pull away from him.

She noticed the sheriff's star on his chest then. The wrinkles at the corners of his eyes that told her he was older than Ukiah.

Words tumbled from her. Parts of her story probably incoherent. But he got the gist of it. As did his father, who moved around from behind the counter and flipped the "open" sign in the store's window to "closed".

When Marisa fell silent, Ukiah's brother said, "I'll take a crew up the trail. My father will take you to Ukiah."

Marisa nodded and let herself be led to a battered black Jeep with streaks of mud sprayed along its side. Her thoughts were in chaos. Wanting answers and yet the silence of the man driving reinforced the feeling that it was up to Ukiah to explain.

She laughed out loud when they passed a beautiful handcrafted sign. *Thunderbird Lodge.*

Ukiah's father spoke for the first time since leaving the store. "Sometimes it is easiest to hide out in the open."

Before she could respond the lodge came into view. A magnificent wood structure that would be a welcome sight to any vacationer. A charming design that spoke of comfort and camaraderie. Of nights spent talking and swapping tales.

The front door opened and Ukiah stepped out onto the porch, dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt. He crossed his arms over his chest. His stiff body posture and emotionless face chasing away Marisa's joy at seeing him.

"Go now," his father said, reaching over and clasping Marisa's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Whatever differences exist between the two of you, they will work themselves out. You're the wife of his soul."

"Thank you," Marisa said, tightening her grip on his hand before letting go and climbing out of the car. Feeling insecure now. Uncertain. Ukiah's reaction to her presence confusing her. Hurting her.

Chapter Five

He remained on the porch. Stoic and unmoving. Making her close the distance between them.

“Why did you leave me?” he asked, the question so unexpected, the pain she saw flicker briefly across his face so shocking that for an instant she remained mute.

But then she hurtled herself at him just as she’d done to his brother. Trusting that his reflexes would do the rest. And they did. His arms went around her just as hers did to him. “I didn’t leave you!” she said. Heat rushing to her cheeks as she added, “Nature called. Then I was too scared to climb back down to the cave!”

A kaleidoscope of emotions played over his face. From chagrin to happiness to grim resolve.

“I didn’t think Ethan and Kaitlyn would be anywhere close,” she rushed to assure him, guessing at the path his thoughts had taken. “The truth is, I didn’t even think about them at all until it was almost too late.”

She hugged Ukiah more tightly. “You saved me—again. Just like you did before. You *were* the thunderbird. I wasn’t hallucinating.”

Ukiah relaxed his grip so he could cup Marisa’s face. When he’d woken to find her gone he’d feared the worst. That she’d run after seeing the thunderbird’s shadow when he’d taken her on her hands and knees. That she’d finally guessed the truth—not only guessed it, but had been terrified by it, preferring to risk death again rather than to stay with him.

He had never known such pain. And then when his spirit had shed the temporary form and he’d taken to the air, seen her once again under attack— Only the knowledge that it might make matters worse if he killed her brother had enabled him to rein in the

thunderbird's fierce desire not only to protect its mate and unborn offspring, but to destroy any who threatened them.

"Marisa," he said against her lips. The word holding all the tenderness he felt for her.

He licked along the seam of her mouth and she opened for him, readily accepted the thrust of his tongue. Greeted him with joy and passion and need.

Ukiah swooped her up in his arms and she laughed, disengaging from the kiss long enough to remind him. "I can walk."

"But I enjoy carrying you."

She thought he'd do something romantic like carry her over the threshold but instead he left the porch. Stopping every several steps to kiss her. Long, sensuous assaults that left her aching and needy. Wet. Swollen. Weakened so she wasn't sure she could actually do as she'd boasted and walk if he set her down.

He took her a short distance into the woods, to a tiny building surrounded by totem poles. "Is this a ceremonial sweat lodge?"

"No. Those who stay here during the months the lodge is open enjoy it as a sauna."

He placed her on her feet. His hands going immediately to her clothing, unzipping the torn, bloody jacket and removing it, then dropping it to the ground. He was unbuttoning her shirt when the full impact of his words hit her.

Marisa grabbed his hands, stilling them, her nipples going tight as the heat from where they rested on her breasts reached her skin. She glanced around then and saw several cabins discreetly positioned among the trees. "I can't strip here!"

Ukiah laughed, enjoying her reaction. The way she grew flustered at the thought of someone other than him seeing her without clothing.

Complete satisfaction followed his amusement. Utter masculine contentment as he remembered how she'd been with him in the cave. How freely she'd given him access to her body, let him touch and kiss every inch of it. Let him keep her naked.

His cock pressed urgently against the front of his jeans. The throb of his heartbeat pounding through his shaft.

He leaned in and kissed her, nibbled on her lips because he couldn't stop himself. "There's no one here but us. The lodge is closed for the winter now."

She loosened her grip on his hands and he finished removing her clothing, ushered her into the lodge before she grew chilled. Marisa laughed and tugged at one of his braids, sending a jolt of pure happiness straight to his heart. "I notice *you* didn't strip where someone might see you," she teased.

He kissed her again, found that having her naked while he was fully clothed satisfied something deeply primal in him. "That's because my clothing isn't covered in dried blood and mud."

Marisa's hand went to the buttons at the front of his shirt, slipping them. Stroking his bared chest, her fingers teasing over his nipple and making his cock jerk and leak in reaction. "Should I help you get undressed like you helped me," she asked, her voice husky and aroused, curling around his erection and making him groan.

He let her play for long moments as his mouth reclaimed hers, his tongue thrusting and twining with hers as she toyed with his nipple and sent shards of ice-hot pleasure straight to his penis. He let her drive him to the point where it was painful to remain clothed before hastily getting undressed.

"A quick rinse and we'll go into the main room," he said and Marisa forced her attention away from him long enough to take in her surroundings, to realize they were in a small tastefully done room which served as a place to shower. "This is the men's entrance," he said, leading her to where the floor was tiled, lifting the hand-held shower wand from its wall mount before turning the water on and adjusting the temperature. "The women's entrance is on the other side." He rinsed himself first, then turned the spray on her.

Marisa tried to take the shower wand from him, her face heating with memories of him bathing her in the cave. "I can take care of myself," she said, wishing her voice

didn't sound quite so breathless, but Ukiah's hand had swept down her body and now hovered directly over her cunt, sending a stream of water pounding against her clit and with it delicious waves of need up her spine.

"But I like to take care of you." He closed the distance between the showerhead and her swollen flesh, intensifying the effect of the water. When she would have moved away, he crowded her against the wall, holding her there with the force of his will and the pleasure he was giving her. "Spread your legs wider," he commanded and she had no thought to resist.

Ukiah's hand dropped to his cock, encircling it. He hadn't meant to linger in this room but whenever she was naked he lost his concentration.

Her gaze followed his hand to his penis and his balls pulled tight in reaction. In warning.

He was already so full, so tight, that he very nearly came when her tongue peeked out of her mouth and he remembered the feel of those lips on his cock. When her hand joined his, covering it, brushing over the exposed head of him with her thumb, a quick pass and then a lingering rub against the slit, Ukiah's buttocks clenched and he began pumping into their joined hands.

She'd bested him and they both knew it. Just as they both knew that if they didn't stop now he'd spew his seed on naked flesh before he could drive her to orgasm with the shower wand.

With a groan he put the wand away and turned off the water. Nearly lost control completely when Marisa started to go to her knees.

"No," he gasped, forcing his hand away from his cock, and with it, hers. Pulling her against his chest and holding her there.

She gave him a mischievous look through lowered eyelashes. "Turnabout is fair play, Ukiah. What's good for you, is good for me too."

"Marisa," he groaned, wavering for a moment. Hot need and the desire to feel her mouth on his cock very nearly overwhelming him. But he tightened his grip when she

would have slid down his body. "Later," he promised. "You can do anything you want to me later, when we get back to the lodge."

"Promise," she teased, turning her head and licking over a rigid male nipple.

"Promise," he said, his voice the breathless one this time as he led her into the main chamber, afraid to delay any longer.

Marisa's breath caught in her throat when they stopped next to the fur-covered pallet and she saw the restraints, two strips of leather attached to the floor at the upper corners of the mat. "I don't think this is standard equipment for a sauna," she managed to say, even as something darkly erotic uncoiled in her womb and spread outward.

Ukiah cupped her face in his and forced her to meet his eyes. The dark, dark eyes of the thunderbird. "You are mine," he said, and she felt the words all the way to her soul. Felt them echoing from the past and had a fleeting image of standing naked, her wrists bound in front of her as these same words were once spoken in a language she didn't know. Their meaning translated by the way her captor's gaze roamed possessively over her body.

"I'm yours," she whispered, feeling arousal trickle down the inside of her thighs.

She allowed him to guide her to the bedding, to tether her wrists and make her helpless. A symbolic gesture because bound or freed, she trusted him completely and would never willingly leave him.

Ukiah knelt above her, his balls huge, heavy weights underneath a thick, flushed erection. Her beauty, inside and out, nearly undid him. And even though Marisa was the one in restraints, he knew he was equally helpless when it came to her.

He lowered himself, groaned as his sac settled on her warm belly. His mouth covered hers, captured, claimed, lingered before moving to her ear, her neck, and finally to her breast.

She began whimpering and writhing when he took her nipple between his teeth. Bit down on it, flicked it with his tongue. Sucked it. Her movements beneath him, her

rubbing against his cock and testicles sending bursts of near painful ecstasy through him.

Liquid heat escaped, coating the head of his penis, marking her in the places where their bodies touched. It was primitive, raw. And Ukiah had to fight the urge to take himself in hand, to bring himself to orgasm and cover her cunt and abdomen with his seed.

“Please,” she cried out, arching into him, driving all thought from his mind so that for long moments he suckled hungrily. Aware of only her breast. The wild beat of her heart. Her slick skin and fevered pleas.

It was the heady scent of her arousal that finally drew him away from her nipple. Had him kissing and biting and laving his way downward, parting her thighs and holding her open so he could look at her, taste her, drive her to orgasm by swirling his tongue over her clit, plunging it into her slit.

Over and over again he took her. Made her cry out in release. Her pleas turning to screams. Her body bowing, arms fighting the restraints until finally she went lax. And even then Ukiah couldn't get enough of her.

He nuzzled her swollen folds, sucked on them. Dragged his tongue along her creamy opening until she was whimpering again, her hips undulating. His name a ragged whisper on her lips.

Only the demands of the thunderbird gave him the strength to lift his face from her cunt and move to position himself above her, his hands going to hers, fingers entwining though he didn't free her wrists. He impaled her with a single hard thrust, forced open a channel that still seemed barely able to contain him.

Thunder rumbled as she wrapped her legs around him. Welcomed him completely. Held him deep in her body as if she would never let him go. “Fly with me,” he said, his coal-black eyes mesmerizing as their bodies began moving in a timeless rhythm. An ancient dance.

There was no fire in this room as there had been in the cave, but at the corner of Marisa's vision shadows formed and flickered on the walls. Blending and merging in time to Ukiah's thrusts, to the drums and chants edging into her consciousness, filling her, building in intensity when Ukiah became more forceful, more frenzied as another orgasm built. This one a tidal wave compared the others. Arriving in a great sparkling wash of red and black and white with hints of blue and yellow. Crashing over and through her, taking her with it as the chants and drums reached a crescendo.

There was a wrenching sensation, followed by gray cold nothingness, and then by awareness. Of immense energy and power gathering and rolling through a body that was huge, feathered. The wings outstretched, riding the thermals.

She faltered and immediately felt talons on her back, a gentle grasp meant to reassure and guide her. Ukiah. She flapped the magnificent wings to communicate that she was okay and felt him lift away from her.

She flapped again, more forcefully this time. Reveling in the increased speed, the feel of the air against her as she mentally explored every inch of the thunderbird. Found the spark of life in her womb and nearly dropped from the sky. But once again Ukiah's talons on her back steadied her focus.

With a fleeting thought she was aware of her human form in the building below. Her wrists freed, her back curled against Ukiah's chest, their breathing synchronized and deep as their spirits flew free.

Emotion surged through her. Raw and fierce. Rumbling out in front of her as thunder. A shout of triumph. Of joy. Of love. Of two souls united again.

About the Author

Jory has been writing since childhood and has never outgrown being a daydreamer. When she's not hunched over her computer, lost in the muse and conjuring up new heroes and heroines, she can usually be found reading, riding her horses, or hiking with her dogs.

Jory welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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