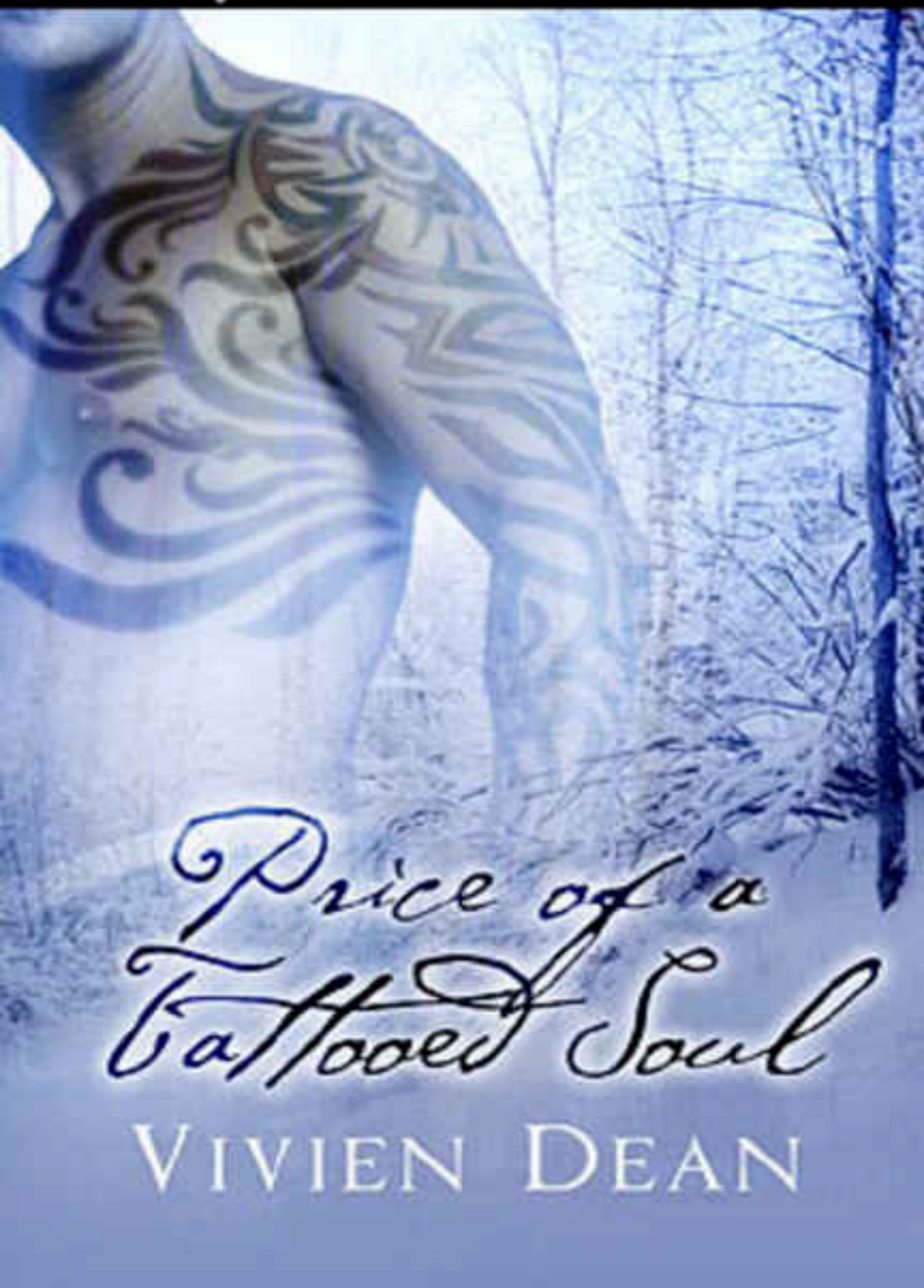




Liquid Silver Books



*Price of a
Tattooed Soul*

VIVIEN DEAN

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by Vivien Dean

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Chapter One

The force of the wind made the glass rattle in their frames, drawing Lydia Nicholls to her feet and to the windows to pull the blinds. Though it was mid-afternoon, the sky was nearly black and the sidewalk deserted, the impending storm driving even the most stalwart into safety. The forecasters were calling this one for the record books. Los Angeles was about to get shaken to its stylish boots by the rainstorm of the century.

With a sigh, Lydia turned her back on the window and retreated to her worn, overstuffed couch, sinking into the corner as she pulled the crocheted afghan up around her legs again. Normally, her birthday was a day of taut anticipation, her morning spent trying to keep busy, her afternoon lost to frequent glances at the clock. She always took the day off, first from classes in college and then from whatever job she was working. This year, however, was likely to be different from every one she'd had since she turned eighteen. With this weather, there was no way someone would come knocking at her door at precisely four-eleven. It would be the first time in over a decade she didn't receive her mysterious gift.

Her book rested lightly on her lap, the words blurred and skipping before her eyes. It was a well-worn favorite, plucked blindly from her packed shelves, but now the nonsense about some girl chasing after some boy eluded her interest. She had wanted something escapist to pass the time, to try and not think about the fact that she was single and alone, turning

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

thirty, and in a job that bored her to tears. But the encroaching storm had her on edge even more so, her curvy body skittish, her attention wandering without warning. More than once, she looked at the clock on the DVD player, and more than once, she looked back at her book, determined not to obsess about something that probably wasn't going to happen anyway.

Take a breath.

Turn the page.

Don't look at the time.

Turn the page back because she didn't remember how the girl was suddenly in a mall instead of in her car.

Breathe. In. Out.

In again.

Lydia glanced up without thought, eyes flickering to the red numbers just a few feet away.

Four-ten.

It's not going to come. There's no way anybody can deliver anything in this kind of weather. Whoever has been doing this can't control Mother Nature, and I need to get ready to be disappointed. It's only a stupid gift. It doesn't even mean—.

A sharp knock at the door startled her into knocking her book to the floor.

Lydia sat up and reached for the paperback, setting it on the coffee table without marking her page. Her hand was trembling. "God, get a grip," she said to herself. The knock didn't mean anything. It was probably just the idiot from upstairs thinking she was making too much noise again because she was breathing too loudly.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

She tried not to notice the time out of the corner of her eye as she headed for the door.

Four-eleven.

The DHL guy standing on the other side of the door was having difficulty remaining upright, even under the mild protection the eaves gave to her threshold. The wind buffeted against him, whipping his jacket around his slight paunch, and he'd obviously given up on wearing a hat of any sorts, the lightweight strands of his hair nearly standing on end from the force of the gales. Under his arm was a box she recognized on sight, a foot square, wrapped in plain brown paper. Half-hidden by his grip was the awkward printing of her name. Familiar. Enthralling.

Her heart beat a little bit faster.

"Package for Lydia Nicholls," the delivery man said, his voice gruff.

"That's me." She held out her hands to take it, surprised that the shaking had ceased for a moment, and set it down just inside the door while she signed off on his little Stylo pad.

"Have a nice day," he said.

It was a conditioned response, but Lydia smiled anyway. "I will now."

She didn't wait to watch him bow his head against the winds and make a run for his truck. Kicking the door shut with her heel, Lydia picked up the box and carried it back to the living room, forgetting all the fear and all the worry that had knotted her only minutes earlier. It had arrived. Somehow, some way, against every rule of logic or reason, it had come. Just as it had every year since her eighteenth

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

birthday. This box, delivered at the exact moment she had been born. The sole motivator for taking the day off in order to meet the delivery instead of having to wait until she got home from work or class. And as always, without any clue to its sender.

Kneeling on the floor, Lydia pushed the package to the edge of the coffee table before reaching around the couch. There sat the large plastic bin she'd removed from her closet that morning. Her heart was hammering as she pulled it out and lifted the lid, but its contents were as familiar to her as the box's wrapping had been. It held the gifts from her last twelve birthdays, and it waited to hide away the gift from this one, though she was fairly certain she knew what it would be. Each year, the gift was the same. Each year, she went to sleep with a smile on her face, a haunting melody in her ear, and the same questions burning inside her heart.

Who are they from? What do they mean? How do they always find me no matter where I am? And why would somebody go to the obvious care to put them together?

Lydia doubted she'd find any of those answers this time. She was grateful the gift had arrived at all. It wouldn't have felt like her birthday otherwise.

The ringing of the telephone shattered the relative silence. Exasperated, she stretched to pick it up from the end table, tucking it into her shoulder. "Hello?"

"Did it come?"

The chirpy voice of her best friend was always too loud through the line, as though Noelle had the receiver pressed

directly to her mouth. But the obvious excitement of her tone was hard to resist, especially with the gift within reach.

"It came." Lydia stroked the brown paper. "It just got here."

"In this weather? God, somebody must really like you to brave this storm. I'm so jealous."

She laughed. "Well, it's not like it was delivered in person. Unless it's been a DHL guy all this time, which, let me tell you, would be kind of disappointing."

"Have you opened it yet?"

"No. I'm savoring the moment," Lydia replied. "How's everything there?"

"Boring. Half the office took off early to beat the rain home. You picked a good day to have your birthday."

"Yes, because I had such a choice about when I'd be born." Hearing Noelle complain about work made her even happier she was home. They worked together in the marketing department for a pharmaceutical company, writing copy for new medicines, both in advertising and packaging. It was tedious, mind-numbing, and a waste of her English degree, but it paid the bills and gave her time to dabble with the fun stuff on the side, the plays and the short stories and all the first chapters that sat unread on her hard drive.

"So am I going to see you this weekend?" Noelle asked. "Wicked Three is playing at the Hive tomorrow night. I thought we'd go and be fangirls for the night."

A fresh gust of wind whistled past the window, drawing Lydia's attention away for a moment. "Don't count on it," she

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

said. "I think I'm going to stay in. Me, Ben, and Jerry. My favorite threesome ever."

"Now I know that's not true. I've seen some of your stories. You like the escape as much as I do."

Noelle was the only person who had, at least since college, but Lydia didn't need to indulge in those fantasies when she had her favorite yet to unwrap. "You have fun looking for Mr. Right Now," she said. "I'm going to stick with the tried and true."

"You mean your birthday present."

She smiled. "Like I said. Tried and true. See you next week."

Disconnecting, Lydia set the phone aside as she pulled the gift closer. No more waiting. No more distractions. If Noelle tried calling back, she was going to ignore it.

She slit the paper at the well-taped seams, allowing it to fall free without ripping. This was part of the annual ritual, as was setting the paper aside to fold and store away later. Though all that was written on it were her name and address, it seemed important to preserve every last part of the gift, whether she understood why or not.

This was the way it had to be.

Her heart lurched inside her chest when she pulled open the flaps and saw the carved wood peeking through the packing material. Swallowing against the tightness of her throat, Lydia reached in and cradled it in her hands before pulling it free of the Styrofoam. A loose piece of the popcorn stuck between the wood and the wind-up key at its back, and

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

she plucked it free without tearing her eyes away from the small gift.

It was a music box, obviously handmade. The light oak was burnished, but the slight crookedness of the hinges betrayed its rustic origins, as did the hole that was always drilled a shade too big for the key that wound it up. In the center of the lid, someone had carved out a tree looming over a small fire, and through its branches, Lydia thought she could even see the shape of a small half-moon. The detail was meticulous, made with painstaking care. She liked to imagine a man's hands, stained and strong, holding the piece of wood with a light grip as he created his beautiful etchings.

Turning over the box, Lydia smiled when she saw the other marker she knew it would bear—a coiled burn that looked very much like a brand. His signature, whoever he was. It was the same on all of them. In fact, with the exception of the new design on the lid, it was identical to the other twelve music boxes she had received over the years, and when she wound it up, it would play the same ethereal melody.

She set it on the table, her fingers caressing the edges of the box before finding the nerve to open it. The faint squeak of the hinge was the only sound in the room as she lifted the lid, though the blood rushing in her ears came a close second.

Her lashes dipped. Her heart thudded.

There it was.

To anybody else, it would probably be perceived as nothing. Just a piece of paper folded into a perfect square. Resting in the bottom of the music box, waiting for her to read its contents. To her, though, it was more—the single link

she had to her mysterious gift-giver. It was as treasured as the boxes themselves.

She plucked it free and realized her fingers were trembling again.

The handwriting was the same, that awkward print all angles and long lines. Lydia had found it difficult to decipher the first year, but constant re-reading had made the second note much easier. This year's was like the others only in the fact that it contained a single line of cryptic text, but she barely noticed it for the addition at the bottom of the soft paper. Her gaze flickered over it three times before she realized what it was.

A signature.

Delaney Michael Wessner.

She read the note again, starting at the beginning, on the off-chance she'd mistaken it the first time, but the name was exactly the same. The only problem was, she didn't know anybody named Delaney, and Wessner wasn't ringing any bells either. There were a few Mikes and Michaels in her life, but none of them had been a presence in her life since she was a teenager. Why would a complete stranger have gone to all this trouble all these years? And why was he suddenly signing his gift?

Her carefulness evaporated as she turned back to the packaging, digging through the Styrofoam in search of something else, some kind of clue, then dumping it out, white wedges scattering over the table and carpeting, in order to look more closely. Her fingernails scratched against the wooden surface, sifting through the contents, until finally,

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Lydia sat back on her heels, frowning as she stared at the mess she'd made.

There was nothing else there. The gift was complete as it always had been. A music box with a single-line note inside.

With a brush of her arm, Lydia swept the Styrofoam to the floor before turning back to the storage bin. She pulled out the other boxes, arranging them along the table in the order in which she'd gotten them, and opened each as she moved along. It wasn't that there was something she was missing, she realized. For the first time, she began to think she finally had all the pieces.

The notes came next, unfolded and placed in front of the box each came with, with the most recent, the thirteenth, resting at the end of the line. When she was done, there was a single row of text across the papers. Her skin went cold as she scanned the words.

With the exception of this year's, each was burned into her memory, poetry she'd used as a mantra more than once. It had never occurred to her to think of them as a set, though. Part of the game had always been trying to fathom their meaning, their nonsense only adding to the mystique of the unknown giver. Read like this, though, it was obvious they belonged together, thirteen lines of antiquated prose that spoke of hearts and fire and blood and life everlasting. It ended with the signing of his name.

Delaney Michael Wessner.

At least she'd been right about the gifts coming from a man. Had he written the poem, too? For what purpose? And why was he choosing to reveal himself now?

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Curiosity got the better of Lydia, and she picked up the latest present, turning it around in her hands in order to wind it up. The tinny melody started as soon as she released the key, sad and captivating and awakening memories of numerous dreams created from falling asleep to the same tune. She set the box back down in its place, looking again to the verse.

This time, she read it aloud.

Her lips barely moved, her murmurs entwining with the music as if words to a song. She took her time, savoring each syllable, but as each line was released, her body grew a little bit warmer, her breath a little bit faster, until it took effort to speak the last of the poem. Lydia couldn't even hear the wind outside the windows above the sound of her pulse pounding inside her veins, and her skin felt like it was on fire as she leaned to read the final line.

She stopped. Held her breath. If she'd expected something to happen, she would've been disappointed.

Her gaze fell to the signature. Her world narrowed to those last three words.

"Delaney Michael Wessner."

A clap of thunder shook the room, the world pitching beneath Lydia's seat. She gripped the edge of the coffee table to keep from toppling over, wondering who in the cosmos thought it was funny to have an earthquake in the middle of a thunderstorm, but before the boxes on the table stopped jostling across the surface, a brilliant flash of lightning blinded her to her surroundings.

By the time the world calmed again, the room was empty.

Chapter Two

Cold.

Ice cold.

Pressing into her cheek.

Consciousness crept up on Lydia with thickly padded feet, alerting first one part of her body to sensation and then another before her mind had the opportunity to catch up. There was the chill in her face, with something hard poking into the numbed skin, and there was the heat around her legs, making her ankles prickle as the flesh was brought back to life.

Back to life? When did I get so cold?

The world had gone silent, the storm wreaking its havoc now absent. In its place was a familiar crackle, and Lydia forced her eyelids open to try and discern its source. Immediately, thick smoke made her eyes blur and water. She had to squint in order to make out any detail.

The crackling was a roaring fire a yard or so away from her feet. She was stretched along the ground, but while she saw what looked like dry earth near her legs, patches of white danced along her peripheral vision. Snow. She frowned.

In Los Angeles?

Blinking to clear her sight, Lydia tried to push up from the ground, but the world spun crazily around her. There were trees, thick and dense, surrounding the small area in which she rested, and through their thick branches, she caught glimpses of an evening sky, fading in violets and oranges to

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

midnight. The smell of pine mingled with the peaty smoke of the fire. Nowhere was there any indication of civilization.

Not LA then. Somewhere else.

What happened?

Lydia didn't know. The last thing she remembered was reading aloud the verse that had come with her music boxes. There had been thunder and lightning and the earthquake, and then...

She blanked on what came next.

There was no then. Then she was here. Wherever here was.

Falling against the snow, Lydia groaned as something sharp stuck into her side. Her fingers scrabbled through the snow and hit frozen earth before curling around a broken twig. She plucked it free from where it jabbed through her thin shirt. When it took all her strength to toss it aside, the first itch of fear began to crawl over her skin. Whatever had happened to her had left her weak as a newborn kitten, stranded in the middle of nowhere, with only the clothes on her back. It had to be up north somewhere if there was snow. Was it still California? Rolling onto her back, she lifted her lashes to stare up at the trees again, trying to recall every biology lesson she might have had. There weren't many, and they had been over half her life ago. Her concerted efforts fell far short of anything resembling success.

Could be California. Could be Canada. To a city girl like Lydia, a tree was a tree.

Letting her eyes drift shut again, she took a few minutes to inhale deeply, concentrating on trying to clear her head. The

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

memories were there. It was only a matter of remembering. Focusing. Replaying through the past...

She stopped in mid-thought. She had no idea how much time had elapsed. How long could she have been unconscious? It was dusk, so only a few hours at most, but then how did she get so far up north? Could she have been out of it for over a day? Her blood chilled even further at the thought of losing so much time.

But she was alive. That was a good thing. And outside of being debilitated, she didn't think she was hurt. Cold, yes, but nothing was in pain. A shiver undulated through her body. Okay, she was *very* cold.

A shadow fell across her face, momentarily darkening the flames that danced through her closed eyelids. It took most of her remaining strength, but Lydia opened her eyes again, curious about what had caused the shift in light. Her pulse jumped when she saw the man standing between her and the fire.

He was dressed in baggy trousers and thick boots caked with mud and dirty snow, with a white shirt barely visible beneath his bulky brown coat. The clothes looked sturdy, like something a mountain man would wear, but they hid anything specific about his body shape. She couldn't even tell how tall he was. Her best guess would hazard him around five-seven or eight, though Lydia was all too aware her angle on the ground skewed her perspective. In spite of the chill, his head and hands were bare. His brown hair fell nearly to his shoulders in a shaggy cut that said nobody had put

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

scissors to it in quite some time, and his hands were strong and broad where they hung at his sides.

His face banished all those incongruous details.

Long, lean features. A full mouth with a natural cupid's bow that would've cost thousands from LA's best plastic surgeons. Blue-green eyes so penetrating Lydia couldn't move under their weight.

Eyes currently regarding her with such awe and disbelief that she had to stifle the urge to look behind her for the true object of his attention.

"You're here," he murmured. His breath took form in cloudy wisps before his face. "You came."

The soft rumble of his voice took her by surprise. He spoke with a precision that belied his rough exterior, a slight Southern drawl in his accent. Even more curious was the note of recognition she swore she heard. He acted as if he knew her.

He spoke as if he'd been expecting—but didn't dare hope for—her arrival.

Lydia tried again to push herself into an upright position, but the moment she began to move, the man rushed forward, stooping to press her back to the ground.

"You need to rest." His fingers lingered on her shoulders for several seconds before he pushed them into her skin again. She was already flat on the ground, so she had no idea what purpose it served. From the look in his eyes, she was tempted to say it was to test she wasn't a ghost.

Closer range revealed fresh details. Calluses thickened the pads of his fingers, but there was an indentation on his left

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

middle finger that looked like it came from holding a pen for too many hours. His nails were clipped short, clean of the dirt she would have expected, and the dark curl of a tattoo snaked along the inside of his wrist up into his sleeve.

As he sat back on his heels, he peeled his coat from his body. The liquid action revealed broad shoulders and a trim waist, his baggy shirt doing little to hide the muscular torso beneath. Before Lydia could appreciate him further, though, the man was leaning over and tucking the jacket around her, protecting her from the cold.

"There is more for me to do." His tone was apologetic, his gaze still wonderstruck. For a moment, she thought he would touch her face, but he stood back up without ever making contact with her skin. "Rest," he repeated. "This shall pass soon enough."

The question as to what the hell he was talking about bubbled to her lips. When Lydia tried to say it aloud, however, the words choked in her tight throat. She swallowed to clear it, but even then, nothing came out but a raspy croak.

Another side effect of whatever had been used to knock her out, she rationalized. It would likely take time for her voice to return, just like her strength.

The added protection of the coat made it easier to get acclimated to her new and definitely odd situation. When he turned his back to her, returning to the fire, Lydia buried her nose in the thick collar, hoping to find some added clue about this mysterious man. There was the faint smell of sweat

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

mingled with harsh soap and, beneath it all, that same peaty smoke. He spent a lot of his time around fire, it would seem.

She watched his silhouette against the flames, his shirt translucent amidst the orange light so that his muscles were more clearly outlined. She even saw the sinuous flex when he tossed something powdery into the blaze, but the sudden burst of sparks diverted her attention, made her shrink within her skin as her focus shifted. A single flame jumped into the air, a momentary roar blasting in her ears.

The man remained unfazed. As the sound died out, he began to circle the bonfire, and his lips were moving when he passed into profile. He was speaking but too low for her to make out what he was saying.

"What are you doing?" she asked without thinking. Her third attempt at speech was better. She actually heard words in the garbled scratching of her voice.

He didn't stop moving, though his gaze flickered in her direction. "Are you still cold?"

Lydia frowned. Maybe he *hadn't* understood her. All right, she'd try again. "I'm fine. What're you doing?"

His nimble fingers disappeared into a leather bag that dangled from the waist of his pants, and more of the powder drifted into the fire with a casual flick. A fresh cascade of sparks showered onto the surrounding snow, pinpricks melting with a sizzle. He didn't speak until he had completed a circuit and had his back to her again.

"I'm making reparations. Such gifts are never free."

Though his manner with her had been gentle, the possibilities within his answer had her trying to sit up again.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

She wasn't a *gift*, and anybody who would consider her one couldn't have her best interests in mind. These were the words of stalkers and madmen.

But why would anybody stalk a thirty-year-old copywriter who hadn't had a date in months?

Her struggles drew his attention again, and the man's pace hurried as he completed two more revolutions around the fire. At the end of the third, most of the snow around it had melted away, the flames dancing strong and proud amidst the trees. He closed the distance to her, but this time, when he approached, Lydia shrank back.

He froze. "You're frightened." He seemed completely perplexed by her reaction.

"Well, yeah." The more she spoke, the easier it got. "I don't know where I am, I don't know who you are, and now you're talking like I'm some kind of prize that you won. Excuse me for being a little freaked out."

Her response seemed to amuse him, and his shoulders relaxed beneath his thin shirt. "The last thing I would ever do is harm you," he murmured. "I only ask that you trust me."

"I don't *know* you."

Crouching at her side, the man pressed her back into lying down, his hands firm but tender. "There will be time for that." Though his touch didn't linger, his intense gaze did, poring over her face as if memorizing every curve, every line. "Please. Rest. I know you must still be cold, and I know you're confused, but I cannot do anything for you until the sun sets. Please, Lydia."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

He knew her name, but the soft reverence with which he uttered it didn't scream "Ted Bundy" at her. Her gut wanted to believe him. Her gut wanted to listen. And really, as weak as she was, did she have any other options? Resting would help gather her strength back. If he did turn out to be some kind of psycho serial killer, at least she would be in a better position to fight him off.

Her eyes strayed to his very discernible muscles. There was no doubt in her mind he was strong. Right now, she didn't have a prayer, and frankly, she wasn't convinced she would have even a Hail Mary once she did feel up to par.

"You're going to tell me what's going on?" Lydia asked. "The first chance you get. I want to know exactly where I am, how I got here, who you are, and how the hell you know who I am."

For the first time, he smiled at her, a pleased little boy grin that lessened the sobriety he wore like a cloak. "I would expect nothing less from you. You have ... an inquisitive mind."

He returned to the fire before she had the chance to question how he knew that. Lydia was left watching him continue whatever *reparations* he felt needed to be done.

The heat grew blistering, warming the small clearing until her cheeks hurt. But in spite of the escalating flames and the showers of sparks, the trees remained untouched, tall and dark and steadfast. When a slight wind picked up, stirring loose strands of her hair in her face, the thick fronds remained motionless, and if she hadn't known better, she would have said the pine canopy became even thicker.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Like it was protecting them from the sky.

Or keeping whatever was in the clearing from getting out.

Her companion was no longer interested in the blaze he'd created. After several more circuits around the ring of stones at the fire's base, he knelt beside it, ignoring the growing damp from the melting snow. He turned his palms upwards atop his bent knees and bowed his head. If they'd been in a church, she would have said he was praying.

Lydia's gaze jumped back to the fire.

Such gifts are never free.

Fear returned to crawl over her skin with icy pins and needles. Looking at the situation objectively painted it in a bleak palette, with slasher movie red adding just enough color to make her feel like panicking. Her dilemma arose when she looked at *him*. Maybe she wasn't always the best judge of character when it came to men; being thirty with her dating track record didn't afford the highest confidence in her opinion. But her instincts screamed at her about this one.

He hadn't hurt her.

He'd given her the coat off his back in spite of the cold.

And he looked at her with such obvious concern that she couldn't help but believe it.

Maybe he was just crazy. Bipolar. Or a split personality. She was seeing Jekyll, but as soon as the opportunity arose, Hyde would come crashing through. That made the most sense.

She looked up at the trees again, her fingers toying with the edge of his smoky coat.

It made as much sense as any of this did.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

With a silent sigh, Lydia closed her eyes against the unchanging tableau. She would have to be on alert. The first chance she had, she'd make a break for it, find a phone, and get help. Get help for him, too, if he really was delusional. For whatever reason, she disliked the thought of leaving him alone with his madness.

She must have dozed. The next thing she knew, something was brushing against her cheek, and her eyes fluttered open to see the man crouching next to her. Well, she saw his outline, at least. The pitch black made it impossible to see much more.

He drew his hand away as soon as their eyes met. "How do you feel?" His voice was a whisper, but without any other sounds in the clearing to mask it, he didn't need to speak any louder.

Lydia catalogued the sensations in her body before answering. Fingers and toes still intact. No pain. Her back ached from being in a single position for too long, but that had a non-nefarious explanation. The only discomfort was the chill that had returned to her bones.

That was when she realized the fire had died out. How long had she been asleep this time?

"I'm okay," she said, matching his low tone. "Just cold."

He nodded. "It's late, and you aren't accustomed to our seasons here. I wish I'd thought to bring you a blanket, but..." He lapsed into silence, as if unsure what to say.

"Are you going to tell me what's happening?" Lydia prompted.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

"Once we're quit of this place," came the reply. "Can you walk?"

Gingerly, she attempted to stand. His heavy coat weighed against her, but the worst conspirators were her weak legs. Her head was awake, but her body seemed to have different ideas. After several minutes, the best she managed was sitting up.

"Let me."

Before her mouth formed a protest, he slipped his arms beneath her, one under her knees, the other below her arms, and stood as if her five-two, one-hundred-and-forty-pound frame was nothing more than a basket of laundry.

Instinctively, Lydia leaned against his muscled chest, her arm going around his neck for support, but if he seemed bothered by the way she held onto him, he gave no outward sign.

"Where are we going?" She had a feeling her questions would be endless for awhile yet.

He didn't answer. Picking his way over the rough terrain, he carried her out of the clearing, allowing the pine forest to swallow them up. Any breaks in the foliage were now gone, and Lydia was left blind to anything but the stranger who held her.

She repeated her question, a little louder. Maybe he hadn't heard her the first time.

"Home." His arms pulled her closer against his chest.
"We're going home."

Chapter Three

She kept expecting to see some inkling of civilization. A power line. A pinprick of moving light in the sky that could only be an airplane. The distant hum of traffic. But as they wound their way through the towering trees, all Lydia saw was more nature, and all she heard were his footsteps crunching over the snow-dappled ground. It was hard not to keep stealing glances at him, but not once did she catch his eyes on her. They were always fixed onto the path ahead, his arms staunch and sure beneath her. It was both reassuring and terrifying, all in the space of the same breath.

Home turned out to be a break in the forest, its edges melting into the darkness so it was impossible to see exactly how large it was. In the center stood a one-story cabin with a covered porch running the length of its front, but no illumination, either inside or out, disclosed further detail. The best she could make out were small rectangles in the walls where the shadows grew smoother. Those were probably windows.

A single step rose to the porch, and the man kicked the toe of each boot against it as he approached the front, presumably to knock the snow from his shoes before entering, Lydia reasoned. She tensed, expecting to be lowered in order for him to unlock the door, but when he paused before the entrance, the man simply shifted her weight against his chest to slip a hand free.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

The door swung open on silent hinges. Warm air drifted out to curl around the pair, and Lydia barely had a moment to peer inside before he was crossing the threshold, and the rest of the world was closed behind him.

The darkness outside had been deceptive. Short, drab curtains covered windows that would have revealed light from the low fire smoldering in a stone fireplace on the opposite wall. The cabin itself was a single room, its furnishings sparse. A small table with a single chair. Another chair near the hearth. A narrow bed in the corner. A large chest rested at the bed's foot, and there were shelves, too many to count, mounted on the rough-hewn walls, all crammed with a hodgepodge of items that were impossible to discern without closer inspection. There wasn't a single electrical item in sight.

He crossed the room to the fireplace and carefully set her down in the chair. Lydia watched as he went to the chest and opened it, extracting a thick, knit afghan, and it wasn't until he'd brought it back and started tucking it around her legs that she found the nerve to speak.

"I'm going to guess you live alone," she said.

Crouched in front of her, his hair hid his face from her view, but she thought she saw his mouth curve into a smile. "That would be a simple deduction to make, yes," he replied softly. His hands hesitated when he reached her feet. "May I?"

It took a moment for her to realize he was referring to her shoes, and another for it to sink in he was asking her permission to take them off. She didn't want that; without her

shoes, it would be harder to run when she got the chance.
"Oh. No, they're fine. Just leave them."

He sat back on his heels and looked at her, a small frown marring his features. This close, she saw the thick lashes framing his eyes, their color even clearer than they appeared at a distance. Dark stubble was starting to shade his jaw, and there was a scar, nearly invisible, running along his hairline. She had thought he was younger than she was when she'd first spotted him, but that had been an illusion. His features were boyish, but the faint lines along his brow and at the corners of his eyes betrayed the passage of time.

"You need to warm your feet," he said, "and they're wet from the snow. At least take your shoes off long enough to dry."

He had a point there. Wiggling her toes, Lydia tested how uncomfortable they really were and decided maybe it wouldn't be too bad. She wasn't going anywhere until she got some of her strength back anyway. And she'd make sure they never left her sight.

"Okay." She bent over to undo the laces. They were stiff from the cold and damp where they'd absorbed the melting snow. Her fingers fumbled to loosen the knots.

His hands covered hers, warm and rough against her skin. Lydia froze, but when she glanced up, she found him merely watching her, waiting for consent to help. Everything about him was still, his fingers, his shoulders, his gaze. Only the shadows, dancing across his face, from the fire behind him gave any indication of movement. She got the distinct feeling that he could stay that way for hours.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

"I don't know your name," she blurted.

His mouth softened. "Del."

He took her hands in his and lifted them to her lap, abandoning them there to return to the knots in her laces. Lydia was left staring at the top of his head again as he worked, wondering why she was so willing to yield to him when she should have been terrified out of her mind. The situation was frightening, but he—Del—was not. How could she be scared of someone who treated her with such grace?

It wasn't until he had slipped off both shoes and set them on the hearth before she made the connection with the name.

"Del," she breathed. Immediately, he looked back at her, waiting for what she had to say. Lydia had to swallow against her dry throat. "That's short for Delaney. Delaney Michael Wessner. You sent me the music boxes."

"I did."

"You made them?"

Instead of answering, Del rose to his feet. She twisted to watch him go to the chest, lifting the heavy lid as if it was tissue paper and reaching inside. The blood roared in her ears as she saw him take out the small wooden box, and by the time he returned and held it out to her, her hands were shaking.

She would know those strong lines anywhere. As she took it from him, her fingertips caressed the soft wood, buffed to a smooth shine, and she noted the design on the lid, the coiled burn she had always assumed was a signature. Turning it over, she saw the slightly too big hole for the wind-up key,

but something inside made her refrain from starting the music.

"It plays," he said. "If you wish."

Part of her did wish. It would confirm this was all connected, give her some order to try and cling to while she tried to figure out what was going on. But another part, the calm and rational side of her that had a tendency to win out as she got older, told her it was all a trick, that she had likely hit her head in the storm and all of this was a mere figment of her imagination.

For once, she thought Miss Smarty Pants inside her head wasn't quite so smart. It was a logical possibility, but hallucinations didn't feel this real, did they? They didn't interact with their environment so completely. It couldn't be possible.

Lydia wondered if he noticed the tremor in her fingers as she turned the key. The first, haunting note brought goosebumps to the surface of her skin, slithering past her defenses to coil down her spine. It was the same. Of course, it was the same. But now, something darker colored the music, something shadowed and eerie, as the reality of the gifts—the fear of what she'd been a part of all along—came slamming home.

Adrenaline surged through her veins. Lydia jerked to her feet, the box tumbling from her lap, and before Del could stop her, she was summoning strength she didn't realize she had and bolting for the door.

The night was cold and cheerless, and it swallowed her without hesitation. With her breath pluming before her face,

she crashed through the trees, heedless of direction. *Run, run, run*, was all she focused on, *away, away, away*, and she let her body take over, pushing past the boundaries it had inflicted on her earlier, listening to her blood continuing to clamor inside her skin. There were no other sounds to make out, no footsteps in pursuit, no crashing through the undergrowth as he chased to take her back. There was only her need to flee, but that was more than enough.

It lasted far longer than she would have imagined if she'd been collected enough to assess her situation more objectively. Further and further and further her pounding feet took her until her knees buckled from exhaustion and she stumbled against a thick pine, its rough bark scraping her palms as she gulped for precious air. She squeezed her eyes shut. No tears. She wouldn't allow it. But the fierce reality of her inevitable death shattered every fantasy she'd ever created about the music boxes. If Del didn't kill her, the cold definitely would.

Lydia leaned against the tree, shivering, for minutes that seemed to tick forever. It was hard to believe that she had run so far and still not found some shred of civilization, but there was no denying the truth of the forest surrounding her. She hadn't even happened across a road or a path. How did Del get supplies without a car? Did he live completely off the land? Were there people who still did that?

Her feet were numb. Now that she wasn't running, she felt how sodden her socks were. The cold stiffened the weave, making them hard around her toes, but it didn't matter anyway, because Lydia could barely feel them. She glanced

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

down, more than a little worried. As irrational as it was, she didn't want anything to happen to her feet.

The soft crunch of steps echoed from the direction from which she'd come. Lifting her head, Lydia scanned the darkness, her exhausted body tensing even though there was no more hope of running. Then she saw it. A thicker space in the black. Shadows moving against the dark as if the world itself wasn't sure it wanted to hide this creature any longer.

She saw his eyes first. In spite of the lack of light, they seemed to gleam as they honed in on where she rested. The moment they saw her, however, they softened with what looked like relief, and the rest of his features came into view at the same time a grateful smile ghosted over his mouth. He had taken the time to put his coat on before coming after her, and the afghan he'd tucked around her legs dangled from his fingers.

Keeping his pace slow and measured, Del approached as if she were some kind of wild animal he was trying to catch, and Lydia had to stifle the hysterical giggle that rose in her throat at the irony of her situation. She was the city girl, dropped into the middle of rural America. She was the furthest thing from wild that could possibly exist.

Yet ... here she was. Still fighting the desire to run.

He stopped a foot away, able to touch her but, for whatever reason, choosing not to. "If you stay out here..." His voice was low and measured. Gentle. It soothed some of her nerves even though logic told her it shouldn't. "You will not survive the night. I'm not the only one who calls this forest home."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

She hadn't seen nor heard any other animals, but she didn't doubt his assertions. It didn't change her mind, though. "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me why I'm here. And no more stalling or excuses to wait until we get back to your house." She swallowed. "Are you going to kill me?"

Del jerked back at her question, a look of horror on his face. She almost felt guilty for asking. Almost.

"I didn't even think you were real until you arrived at the offering," he said. "Why would I want to hurt you? Have I done anything that would make you think I mean you harm?"

"Well ... no, but..."

"Did you ever consider my gifts as anything but that? There was never ill intent, Lydia. I've done everything I could to protect you. From ... everything. But if you choose, I can take you into town in the morning, and you never have to see me again until it's time for you to leave. I won't keep you against your will."

Her head ached. It felt like she'd been dropped into the middle of a movie without knowing what the hell had happened in the first half. Questions too many to number fought to make themselves heard, about what he'd been doing at the fire, about how he could protect her—and from what—if they'd never met before, but all she could manage to say was, "You *chased* after me. If you mean what you say, you'll take me to town tonight."

"And if that were possible, I would. But town is a five-mile trek by foot. It's too dangerous to do at night, and you're not strong enough to walk that distance yet." His lashes ducked, as if in embarrassment. "The offering always saps my

strength, otherwise I would submit that. But five miles is too far for me to give you what you would need."

Considering how he'd carried her from the fire to his cabin, Lydia didn't doubt Del was capable of doing the same with the journey into town. What was more frightening than that realization, though, was feeling her worries crumble. Everything about him seemed so genuine, and he had a point. He hadn't done a single thing since she'd woken up that could be construed as malevolent.

And he had yet to touch her now.

"You'll take me in the morning?" she asked.

He looked up. A sad resolve had settled behind his eyes.

"If you so desire."

Using the tree as a brace, Lydia straightened as best she could, grimacing when her icy socks refused to mold around her feet. "I don't suppose you thought to bring my shoes, too," she said. She took the afghan from his hand and draped it over her shoulders, hugging it close in a vain attempt to warm up. "Or dry socks."

Del took the edges of the blanket and pulled them closer together. "I can carry you if you can't walk."

"I guess I didn't run five miles then."

"No. Though you went much further than I would have imagined."

He still wasn't moving, so Lydia decided to take the initiative. Banishing the last of her fear, at least temporarily, she took a step closer so that their bodies were almost touching. The scent of smoke made her nose twitch, but there was something oddly comforting about it after the foreign chill

of the forest, something that made her realize part of her wasn't really pretending.

"Will you answer me one thing?" she said.

His eyes bored into hers. "Anything."

"Tell me where I am. Exactly."

Several seconds passed. She watched the slow, even tempo of his breathing, the steadiness of his lashes. He never even blinked as he seemed to weigh how to respond.

"Where you are is the simple part of what you request," Del finally murmured. "This is Montana. The town I mentioned is called Troy."

Montana was further away than she had thought, but it fit. The ruggedness of the terrain. The weather. What didn't fit was how Del had worded his reply.

"What's not so simple then?"

He sighed. "Promise me you won't run again."

Her brows shot up. "Not that I think I could, but you do realize how dire you make this sound, right?"

"I do. I had hoped to delay telling you this aspect of your arrival until you trusted me a little more. When I first started having the dreams, I didn't believe it either. Everything in them was too fantastic to be true, I thought. And yet ... here you are."

As cold as her feet were, the rest of Lydia's body was flushed with warmth, both from the frank awe he refused to mask from his voice and the rising dread about what he might add. "If you didn't know who I am, how could you send me the music boxes all these years?"

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

The corner of his mouth lifted. "That will be as difficult for you to believe as the other, I fear."

"Maybe it's time for you to stop trying to predict how I'm going to react and start telling me what I need to know."

His half-smile bloomed, his amusement apparent. "I'll show you." Del crouched at her feet, resting his hand across her frozen socks. All she saw was the top of his head, but in the quiet of the forest, she heard his soft murmurs, his exact words indiscernible.

A small breeze blew a strand of her hair in front of her face.

Lydia never looked away.

His fingers felt heavy, the heat in them greater than she would have expected from someone who'd spent the last twenty minutes outside without gloves. They were even warming her toes, if that was possible. She wanted to ask how this was supposed to tell her anything, but his concentration made her reluctant to disturb him.

A branch overhead snapped.

She jerked in surprise, her sharp intake of breath audible.

Del pulled back, straightening to meet her gaze. In the dim light, his eyes sparkled, and his cheeks were flushed.

He didn't speak. He seemed to be waiting for something. For her, maybe.

"What was—?"

That was when she felt it. Or rather, that was when she didn't feel it.

Lydia's eyes went wide as she stumbled back against the tree. Though the muscles in her legs screamed in protest, she

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

lifted and bent her right knee, propping her foot up on her other leg in order to be able to see and touch it more closely.

Her sock was dry.

It was even warm and soft, as if it had just come out of the dryer.

"Your life is far different from mine," Del said quietly. "Our worlds, very different. The closest you have ever come to mine is in your stories, but you abandoned those long ago."

Slowly, she put her foot down. She was almost afraid to look at him, but only almost. "How do you know that?"

"Because I know you. I've had that privilege these past twelve years. By the same way that's brought you here." He reached forward and took her hand with the one he'd used on her feet. His palm was almost scalding hot. "I know you'll find it impossible, but this is 1894, Lydia. All of these—your gifts, your traveling, your arrival—these are all because of magic."

Chapter Four

She didn't want to believe him. It was crazy, the stuff of movies and overactive imaginations. At best, it was society's creation to explain the unknown.

Like waking up in the Montana in the middle of winter.

Like having socks that shouldn't be dry.

Like twelve years of identical gifts, even when circumstances such as awful storms conspired against their arrival.

Lydia glanced down where he still touched her.

Like a man's hand, strong and powerful and hot, encompassing hers.

She was either insane or this was all true. It was far more pleasant to believe the latter.

Her silence stretched, eliciting a soft sigh from Del. "We need to get you back to the fire," he said, his voice gentle. He gestured toward her legs. "May I?"

Absently, Lydia nodded. Being lifted into his arms this time was almost a relief, her fatigue too thorough, and she rested her head against the powerful wall of his chest without thought. It didn't occur to her until he'd turned back into the darkness, following the path he'd drawn to her, that she seemed to yield to his strength more often than not. She only hoped that her instincts about his true nature wouldn't betray her.

As he walked, the slight rocking lulled her into closing her eyes, her breath evening out as she thought about everything

he had said. Time travel. It was inconceivable. And yet, she hadn't seen anything that would disprove his statements. He could take her to the middle of nowhere and try to pretend with log cabins and candlelight, she thought. But nobody controlled flight patterns of airplanes, and not once had she seen any sign of life in the sky except the stars. No blinking of satellites, no faint trail of flight. The world supported Del's declaration. Too bad common sense was giving her such a hard time.

She was still trying to decide what to believe when they reached the small house. Half-asleep, Lydia was barely aware of him pushing the door open, but instead of taking her to the chair this time, Del carried her to the narrow bed, laying her out on top of the blanket as if setting a child to rest.

"What ... what are you doing?" she asked, struggling to sit up.

He paused where he'd gone to the chest. "I thought you would like to get some sleep. I don't have clothing, but..." Opening the lid, he pulled out a folded shirt identical to the one he wore and brought it back to her. "No fears. I shall step outside so you can change."

Her fingers worried the soft cotton. "I'm not sleeping with you," she protested.

The firelight cast an orange glow over his face, but it wasn't enough to hide his flushed cheeks. "That was never my intention. You're my guest, Lydia. The bed is yours. I'll sleep on the floor in front of the fire."

"Oh. All right."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

She remained motionless as he stepped away, averting his gaze once he'd reached the door. His hand hovered over the knob, and in spite of the bulky coat that hid his body from view, she saw the rise and fall of his shoulders as he sighed.

"Regardless of how long you remain," the low cadence of his voice was almost lost over the crackle of the fire, and Lydia had to strain to hear the rest of his words, "simply knowing you exist, having these few hours to speak with you even though you think me mad, was worth every minute of the past twelve years."

Del walked out the door, leaving her stunned into silence. It took several moments for her to blink, and several more for her to remember to breathe. She couldn't recall the last time a man had said such thing to her. If anybody ever had.

Her fingers were clumsy when she finally stripped out of her clothes. Leaving on her bra and underwear, Lydia folded the rest, setting them near the side of the bed before slipping his white cotton shirt over her head. It hung loose on her curvy form, falling nearly all the way to her knees, and the sleeves hung past her knuckles, forcing her to roll them up. She was sitting on the edge of the mattress, feet on the floor as she finished with the left sleeve, when the door opened and Del returned.

His eyes went immediately to her bare calves. Del froze, half in, half out, and she saw his knuckles whiten around the door knob, nostrils flaring, before she realized what he was reacting to. Lydia glanced down at her legs, a tiny line between her brows. His response to the smooth skin was too

instantaneous not be genuine. Another nail into the truth about his time travel theory.

He coughed, clearing his throat. "You're not ... cold?"

A faint tickle of amusement curved her mouth, allaying more of her disquiet over her situation. "You mean, outside of you standing there letting all the cold air in?" she teased.

His head snapped back to the open entrance, and he closed the door even more swiftly. "My apologies," he rushed to say. "I shouldn't..."

"I was kidding. I'm fine." To make it easier for him, Lydia scooted back on the mattress, pushing back the blankets and sliding beneath them in order to obstruct his view. "Better?"

Del's breath came out in a loud exhalation, his shoulders sagging. As he stepped further into the room and into the golden light of the fireplace, she caught the line of his arousal in his pants. "I'm not ... I suppose it's one thing to see it in my dreams," he murmured, removing his coat and dropping it on the table. "I am not normally quite so callow."

He was obviously embarrassed, turning his back to her to stand in front of the shelves on the opposite wall, rearranging items with little sense of pattern. This was new to her; usually, she was the one who felt out of step. There had been boyfriends and dates over the years, but more often than not, Lydia felt like a mime in a choir. She could try, but the words would often not come out.

His entire demeanor made her feel a little silly about being nervous about his intentions. If she accepted it all at face value, she was the one with the power here, his magical prowess notwithstanding. Del Wessner had no idea how to

deal with a modern woman, and she could utilize her natural intelligence and education to keep up in a strange new world. She had the advantage of history on her side; all Del had were a few dreams.

"You keep talking about these dreams," she said, wondering if she could coax him into conversation. Either she could get him to trip up and she'd discover this entire thing was a sham, or he'd confirm it all by sticking true to his story. Plus, wasn't there some theory about humanizing yourself to criminals? If Del did have malicious intent, thinking of her as a person might temper his desire to hurt her. Though, more and more, she doubted he would. Or even could. "What do you mean?"

Del sighed. "I made my first offering twelve years ago," he said, his voice hushed. "On this date. Always on this date. Afterward, I fell asleep and dreamed of a raven-haired young woman with eyes so dark, I drowned every time I saw them. She was crying, grieved about an evening she'd spent in the company of a group of people, all close to her age. They had gone to see the ocean, and there had been a celebration of some sort, with cake and brightly colored presents. And I heard her mother try to get her to talk about what had happened, but the young woman refused and barred herself in her room. Then I saw the music box I had made sitting at the side of her bed, and I watched her tears slow, and all I could think was ... how is this possible? Especially when she opened it, and wound it up, and I heard the music."

He ran his fingertips along the edge of a shelf as he spoke, as if something so tactile rooted him in the real world and not

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

in that of the dream he detailed. When he half-turned to gaze back at her, Lydia wondered if her shock was visible or whether he was oblivious to his story's effect. Because it wasn't a story or a dream. It was her life. Her eighteenth birthday. She had voiced the concession aloud before she realized it.

"I know," Del said. "Well, I discovered that the following night when the next dream came." His shadowed gaze met hers. It was far too dim within the cabin to discern what he was thinking. "Did you honestly believe he had given you the gift?"

"What else was I supposed to think?"

The memories had faded over time, but with Del talking about them in such detail, they came rushing back to Lydia, some of the residual ache from that particular birthday dampening her surprise at hearing it. As would set the precedent for her next twelve birthdays, the music box had arrived at precisely four-eleven in the afternoon, delighting her with the surprise. She had rushed out for the beach party her friends had planned for her, but when she'd tried to thank her boyfriend Charlie for it, he'd denied giving it to her, growing angry as he accused her of leading on some other guy in order to get the present. Lydia had left the party in tears, Charlie's caustic words following her, and found solace only in the wee hours of the morning, with the music haunting her sleep.

"And the next year?" Del prompted. "What did you think when you received the second music box?"

"That ... I didn't know what to think." There hadn't been a boyfriend that year to credit.

"But you enjoyed them. I saw that."

"I did, but..." She frowned, forgetting the need to remain covered as she shifted more to face him. "Are you telling me you've been dreaming about me, about my life, ever since I was eighteen?"

"Not continuously, as you believe," he replied. "They last for the month after the offering. And never anything so intimate. Various details of your day. Perhaps a spare hour when you would be sitting in lecture. Or watching you with your friends and family." His mouth curved. "I remember when you attended your cousin's wedding. You were right about those hideous purple dresses, in spite of how many people told you they were lovely."

"But why did you think I was real?" Lydia asked. "Why didn't you think they were just dreams?"

He pushed his hair off his face in a tired gesture, his soft breath the only reply for a few seconds. "I did not put it all together right away," he conceded. "There were so many things in your world that confused me. Like the electricity. And the cars. And all the noise. I think it was the sheer consistency of the dreams that finally persuaded me. And then when they returned the second year, directly after the offering again..." Del shrugged. "There was no other conclusion for me to reach but to believe I was being allowed this window into your life for a purpose."

"And what's that purpose?"

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

His gaze broke from hers as he returned to the fire, stoking the glowing embers so fresh flames bloomed within the hearth. "In exchange for my continued fealty, I made a single request, though I never thought it would be granted. Mine is not the position from which one can demand without cause, which is why I suppose I never expected you to actually arrive. But that did not stop me. Every year, on this date, I prepare the pyre, and I pay the price, and I pray for companionship. For one month where I might not be alone."

Lydia's brows shot up. "And they had to go all the way into the future to find someone to keep you company? Whoever brought me here couldn't just take a ride into town and find some nice local girl who wouldn't freak out about time travel?"

In spite of the surprise in her tone, Del chuckled. "I do not presume to understand how the greater powers work," he said. "Perhaps my unique circumstances prevented them from acting more rationally. Or perhaps, only a woman who has seen that which you have could accept the notion of magic. Either way, it doesn't matter. You're here now." His head bowed as he sat down on the floor and stared into the fire. "I am more than pleased with the choice that has been made."

He might be happy about it all, but the more Lydia heard, the angrier she got. The way he made it sound, Del wasn't even the one who had brought her here. She was the target of some century-spanning, all-powerful, magical dating service, and worse, it was a blind date. So, okay, they'd set her up with someone smart, articulate, and gorgeous, but

still, there was a principle here. She had every right to be indignant about being manipulated.

"I know my explanations are insufficient," Del was saying. "When I would imagine what it would be like for you to be here, I was always far more eloquent. I never frightened you, and I never embarrassed myself by staring at you like a fool. But you are so much more than in my dreams, Lydia. As vivid as they were, they never did you justice."

Her cheeks flamed. The compliment was not so much unexpected as it was frank; Del seemed incapable of hiding his appreciation for her. Self-consciously, Lydia pulled at a loose strand of hair hanging over her shoulder. It was dark and thick, resistant to curl, forcing her to either pull it up or let it fall straight down her back. She had good skin, but her cheeks were a tad too full, her mouth a touch too wide, and she wasn't even going to think about her weight. She had been a size ten for most of her adult life; no amount of sucking it in was ever going to make her ass any smaller.

"I guess your dreams must come with that soft filter that makes everybody look good, huh?" she joked.

Leaning back on his hands, Del finally turned to look at her. "You have always been far too hard on yourself," he murmured. "I still fail to understand why."

Lydia swallowed down the lump in her throat. In spite of her rising trepidation and growing number of questions, Del's insight unnerved her to the point of speechlessness. The more he said, the more she believed him, and that, more than anything else, was cause for careful deliberation. Because if it was true, if she really was in the past, then there were

greater forces at work than she had ever conceived of outside of college fancies. Was she stuck here for good? What about all those time travel horror stories she'd ever read or saw in the movies? Were those kinds of paradoxes true? Was she risking more than a little frostbite by being here?

Her head throbbed. Lying down, she let her eyes drift shut as the questions continued to buffet the inside of her skull. "Maybe this is all just a dream," she mused aloud. "Maybe I'm going to fall asleep and wake up in my living room, and you will have just been a very good-looking, entertaining figment of my imagination."

His soft chuckle filled the room. "Your imagination is far more fertile than anything I could ever conjure. I have seen your stories. I've always believed you erred in not pursuing them more diligently."

"That's the second time you mentioned my writing. I haven't been serious about that since college."

"I know. Though I wasn't privy to why you forsook it."

It was a gentle probe, his curiosity more than evident, but Lydia didn't want to talk about it. When it came to that period of her life, she chose the *less is more* school of memories. It was easier. Though in comparison to this particular change of events, maybe that was relative.

"Looks like we both have secrets." A yawn surprised her, almost cutting off the end of her sentence, and her jaw popped from how wide her mouth opened. Embarrassed, her eyes flew open to see Del gazing at her, but if she expected any sort of mockery or amusement in his eyes, she was disappointed.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

"The night grows late," he murmured. "And if you wish to travel into Troy tomorrow, you need your rest. Sleep. There will be ample opportunity for discussion in the morning."

She didn't want to sleep, not really. She wanted answers that made sense and her own bed and running water. But Lydia's body had different ideas, her muscles heavy now that she was nestled beneath the blankets. There was a soft muskiness to the fabric that was almost soporific, seeping into her head and through her thoughts to shroud them in darkness. Her lashes drifted shut again, her protestations unspoken on her tongue. The last thing she saw was the incisive glow of Del's eyes as he watched her from his place in front of the fire.

Delaney Michael Wessner.

She fell asleep wondering why it was she wanted to believe in him so badly.

* * * *

It was the sudden whistling that woke Zuri up, noise where there shouldn't have been any, pressure upon her ear drums that made her black eyes fly open and her lithe hands clap over her ears, trying to block it out. Night still pervaded her sanctuary. Trees knotted together overhead to create a canopy that blocked out the stars, but where they normally remained motionless, now a feeble breeze caused their leaves to dance and flutter. Zuri's reaction was instinctual. One hand swept across the vista before her face, a trail of sparks in its path, as if wiping a slate clean.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

But the trees continued to rustle. Any command she might have uttered went unheeded.

She bolted from her feather bed, the gossamer skirt of her nightdress wafting around her long legs as she tilted her head back to stare up at the disturbance. Black hair, thick and curly, hung down her back, and her porcelain skin seemed to glow even with the absence of light. Most striking of all were the sparks that still coiled around her fingers like thousands of ever-shifting snakes, evidence of the power she didn't bother to contain.

Zuri lifted both hands this time. An inhuman cry split the air, and the trees themselves seemed to shrink. The sibilance lingered for seconds upon seconds, but when it died away, everything was as before. There was still whistling. There was still wind. And now there was a furious Zuri, shimmering with frustrated magic.

"It won't do you any good," a calm voice said behind her.

Zuri whirled to face the woman who stood on the edge of the clearing. "What is it?" she hissed. "Why can't I stop it, Eraya?"

Eraya stepped further into the sanctuary, a mirror image of her sister. The only difference was the color of her eyes. Zuri's were the absence of light; Eraya's were so pale, the irises seemed nonexistent.

"Someone has done a summoning through time," she said. "The ripples have reached even here."

"A summoning? That's not possible."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

"It is. The divinations confirm it. I can't detect the source of the power, but I can tell you where it ended." A sneer curled her sensual lip. "With the marked one."

Zuri seethed. The magic pooling around her hands flared in a shower to the ground. "What is he trying to do? He can't think it will make a difference, can he?"

"I don't know," Eraya admitted. "But he'll be sadly disappointed if he does. There is little time left, so I imagine he's growing desperate."

The wind picked up the ends of Zuri's hair and blew them about her cheeks. Disgusted, she shook her head and the loose tendrils immediately plaited themselves to hang in a thick cord along her spine. "He's a fool to have created so much noise. I thought he had better sense than to anger us."

"We shall have eternity to punish him for his thoughtlessness." Taking her sister's hands in hers, Eraya lifted them over her head, a brief chant falling from her lips. Though the wind didn't slow, another canopy appeared above them, blocking out the worst of the rustling. "In the interim..." Her eyes glowed. "We watch."

Chapter Five

Waking was a slow process, the cold that numbed her nose and the tips of her ears the strongest prompts to pull Lydia from sleep. Blankets bunched tightly around her body and past her neck, and as she opened her eyes, she had to poke her head out from her warm cocoon in order to see where she was.

It was still the cabin, she was still bundled in Del's bed, and there, amidst the golden glow coming from the fireplace, slept the man in question.

She regarded him without moving, grateful for the chance to do so without impediment. He had stripped out of his shirt at some point in the night and stretched out on the floor on his back, a gray wool blanket loose around his legs. His lashes were dark shadows against his cheeks, but it wasn't his boyish features that made her lungs tighten. The absence of his shirt revealed a muscular torso, arms powerfully sculpted and an abdomen most guys would have killed for. But there was more than that. There was the tattoo that stretched in coils and whorls up his left arm, around his bicep and onto his shoulder, ending in a burst that angled down over his heart. Parts of it were clearly recognizable as the brand he'd put on the music boxes or several of the etchings, but others, scrolls and spirals merging with a fluid elegance, were unfamiliar. The entire effect was mesmerizing.

Pushing back the blanket, Lydia sat up in order to get a better look, but the dim light did little to illuminate the detail.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

She swung her legs over the edge of the bed, her gasp audible when her feet touched the cold floor. Del had to be freezing, and yet, only his lower half was covered. That couldn't be good for him.

Before she could think otherwise, she stood and walked over to the fireplace. Crouching at his side, she picked up the edge of the blanket in order to draw it up over his bare chest. She pulled it slowly, unwilling to wake him, her eyes glued to his face with every inch.

Lydia froze when he sighed in his sleep and shifted toward the dying embers. Long seconds passed while she waited until it was safe to continue, but the moment she began to pull again, his lashes flickered open.

He regarded her in silence, eyes so alert that she wondered if he'd actually been asleep. Without looking away, Del lifted a hand to cover hers, and she nearly jumped at the warmth emanating from his skin.

"I thought you were cold," she blurted.

The soft set of his mouth curved into a half-smile. "The cold doesn't affect me very much. But thank you." Gently, he lowered the fabric back to his chest though his hand remained over hers. "Were you uncomfortable? Is that why you've wakened?"

Lydia shook her head. "I don't know what woke me up. I was warm enough, though. Even for being a California girl in the middle of Montana."

His gaze strayed down her body, lingering for a moment on the curve of her hip before traveling lower to her bare feet. Crouched as she was, he couldn't see the calves that

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

had aroused him earlier, but Lydia didn't miss the flare of his nostrils or the slight tightening of his hand over hers. It made her pulse race and banished any vestige of chill from her flesh.

"You should return to your bed," Del murmured. "You will need your strength to make the journey into town in the morning."

She thought that he wanted her out of his reach for other reasons, but nodded anyway. Slowly, she extracted her hand from his and stood up, watching as his eyes followed the unbending of her legs. When they reached the hem of her nightshirt, they skimmed sideways rather than continue upward. That was when she realized he could probably see beneath the cotton if he chose, and took a hasty step back.

"How do you know what time is it?" Lydia asked. She did a slow pirouette, but the edges of the room were too dark to see more than indistinct shapes. "You don't have a clock."

She caught his sad smile out of the corner of her eye. "Time and I are old acquaintances."

"From living alone. I can understand that." She chewed her lower lip, debating the wisdom in questioning him further. It was his earlier honesty—if she chose to believe in the notion of time travel—that convinced her he wouldn't mind. "How long have you been here?"

Del rolled onto his side, propping his head up on his right hand. The blanket fell away from his upper body again, exposing the dancing marks of his tattoos. "Twelve years. I arrived just a week before the first offering." His gaze

flickered to the shadowed walls surrounding them. "I hadn't even built this house yet when I made the first music box."

"That's a long time to live by yourself."

"Perhaps my request for companionship doesn't seem all that unusual now then," he replied. She thought he was teasing her a little, but that sad smile still lingered. "If you don't wish to sleep, we can talk instead. You may ask me whatever questions you like. I don't mind."

"Aren't you tired?" she countered.

"I'll have plenty of time to sleep after you leave again."

It was tempting. Del was obviously eager for conversation, and her curiosity was beginning to get the better of her. There would be no harm in indulging that, and if anything, it would help her better understand what was going on exactly.

Lydia walked back to the bed, but instead of getting back in, she pulled off the top blanket and wrapped it around her body as she returned to the fireplace. Del watched every step, never moving, eyes impenetrable, so that by the time she sat down next to his outstretched body, she was flushed from the weight of his gaze.

"I did not expect you to agree," he murmured.

She smiled. "I know."

He shifted to allow more of the heat from the fire to reach her. "What would you like to know?"

Such a simple question. So many possibilities.

"What's your favorite color?"

His mouth twitched. "Green."

"Your favorite food?"

"Raspberries."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

"What do you do when you can't sleep?"

Some of his amusement faded. "I read."

That one took her by surprise. Glancing around, Lydia wondered how many books she'd seen on the shelves.

"These are not the questions I thought you'd ask," Del said quietly.

She shifted her attention back. "Would you rather I jumped right into the tough ones? Because if you want me to dig for how magic can exist or bizarre winter rituals that drag people through time, I can do that, too."

His smile returned, and the gleam of delight that appeared in his eyes made her stomach tumble. "No, I suppose these are preferable. What would you like to know next? My favorite smell, perhaps? Pine needles."

"Gee, as much time as you spend around fire, I would've guessed smoke," Lydia joked.

There was a moment of silence, and then Del did something so fresh and unexpected that she stiffened without meaning to. He laughed. A full-bodied, rich laugh that made his eyes crinkle at the corners and his shoulders rock up and down. By the time it began to fade, she was warm from more than the flames dancing at his back.

"Not all my experiences with fire are nearly so favorable," he said. "There was this one time..."

* * * *

They talked. For hours, it felt like. And, once Lydia let go of the uncertainty about her situation and treated Del like she'd met him at work or a party, it stunned her how at ease

she felt with him. How engaging his stories were when he wasn't worried first and foremost about her well-being, how loose her inhibitions became in telling anecdotes from her own life.

They kept it light at first, exchanging humorous stories about their everyday lives. It was a little weird that he was so familiar with people she knew, but Lydia got over that almost as quickly as she got over thinking about the time travel part. Talking to Del was like talking to someone whose life occasionally overlapped with her own. They discovered enough disparities to entertain each other, and enough in common to appreciate each other's jokes or insights when they arose. It was warm and comforting, and if she had been anyplace else other than 1800's Montana, she would have been thrilled about the possibilities that meeting this particular man might offer.

As it was, she was already more than attracted to him.

And it didn't help that all she had to stare at were those amazing eyes and that sculpted torso.

He never touched her. Occasionally, when she would be in the middle of a story, Lydia would catch his gaze straying elsewhere, lashes lowering as he glanced at her bare feet sticking out from the blanket or watching her hand move in the air as she gestured while she spoke, but always, as soon as her attention was back on him, Del's focus was strictly on her. His skin never made contact with hers, and yet, Lydia felt him. Felt the weight of his appreciation every time she smiled. Felt the caress of certain words like a lover's stroke along the back of her neck. It was gentle, tender almost. It

banished the last of her doubts about him. By the time dawn began to peek around the edges of the curtains, she had dropped the blanket from her shoulders. It was no longer necessary to hide.

A log fell in the dying fire, startling both of them. Twisting, Del reached for the poker to stoke the embers, and she took the moment to savor the play of muscles in his back unbidden.

"If you wish to bathe before we leave, I can draw the water from the well and heat it for you," he said. "By the time you finish, the sun will be high enough to make our travel clear."

Her gaze snapped back to him. She had completely forgotten about her request to leave.

When she didn't respond right away, Del sat back up, the blanket falling around his thighs. A wary shadow darkened his eyes. "I don't mean to keep you longer than you wish to stay. If that's what you were thinking."

"No," Lydia automatically replied. "That didn't even occur to me."

He frowned. "Then what?"

She shrugged, her cheeks flaming in embarrassment. "I kind of forgot about going into town. I mean, what would I do there? Wait for whatever bigwigs zapped me here to zap me home again? Can't *you* send me back?"

"Unfortunately, no. Such power is beyond my ken. I do not understand how they brought you to me in the first place." His frown deepened. "Why do you delay? This is what you want, is it not? Because you do not feel safe here?"

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Hearing him say it out loud, after having spent the last few hours talking to him like an old friend, made her feel silly. "Maybe I overreacted a little last night. I mean..." She tried not to notice the way he sat up straighter or the brighter light in his eyes. "You have to admit, it was enough to scare anybody. Waking up in the middle of nowhere, with a guy I've never seen before? Perfect recipe for disaster."

"But you believe me now?" His voice was soft, as if speaking louder would make her change her mind again. "I may be a stranger to you, but I would never be a threat."

Lydia matched his tone. "I know. Now." When he smiled, she held up a hand in warning. "That doesn't mean I don't still have a ton of questions I expect you to answer. Or that I won't change my mind about going at some point."

"No, I understand completely."

But the eagerness in his tone left her unconvinced. And when he rose to his feet, talking about fetching wood for the fire as he gathered his coat and shoes, Lydia waited in silence, wondering what it was she was getting herself into. He was at the door, buttoning his coat, when she blurted, "Why does it make such a difference to you? Won't it make it worse after I really do leave?"

Some of the shine in his eyes faded. "That is for me to worry about, not you," Del said. "I shall face the consequences of your departure as I've faced everything else in my life. Do not think about it."

"Easy to say, not so easy to do." Standing, she closed the distance to him, barely aware of the way his attention dropped for a moment to her bare legs. "The last thing I want

is for you to end up lonelier after I'm gone than you were before I got here."

He regarded her with an intense solemnity she felt all the way to her toes. "Do you think I would welcome something that would worsen my circumstances?" He didn't wait for an answer. "But if you have changed your mind, I understand. A month is a long time to spend in the company of a stranger."

Lydia blinked. "A month?"

The tone of her voice must have alarmed him, because Del stiffened and took a half-step back. "I don't think it will be a month of your time," he said. "This is not meant to disrupt your life."

"And dragging me a century back in time to the middle of nowhere *doesn't* disrupt my life?"

Her mind raced. A month. Thirty days. Or maybe it was only twenty-nine now. Did yesterday count? Didn't matter. A month was a month. But why so long? What purpose could it gain? And how did Del know when he hadn't really believed she'd arrive in the first place?

"I will still take you into Troy if you desire," he said, carefully watching her reactions. "You have only to say the word."

The possibility had flitted across her mind, but Lydia quickly dismissed it. She didn't think she could last a month out of her own time with nobody around for assistance. If she stayed, at least she would have Del to help her muddle through.

"No, I'm staying." A draft from beneath the door curled around her ankles, and she shivered, hugging her arms closer

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

to her body. "But I think that list of questions I had just doubled."

Del opened his mouth to say something, but after a moment, closed it again. Instead, he nodded and turned to the door, opening it and stepping onto the porch. She caught a glimpse of the crisp white world surrounding the cabin, sparkling and clean with a dusting of fresh snow, for the brief moment before the door slipped shut. It was real. She was here.

For a month.

Lydia went to the window and peeked past the curtain, scanning the outside until she saw Del standing near a small shed that had gone unnoticed the night before. With a log in one strong grip and an axe in the other, he placed the wood on a low stump, holding it steady for a second before stepping back and taking aim. It split clean, and she watched as he repeated the action with another and another. His breathing never grew heavy. His attention never wavered. He never looked up to see her admiring the curve of his mouth or the power of his hands.

A month.

With a man who had dreamed about her for over a decade.

Time was either going to fly or go impossibly slow. Right then, Lydia wasn't sure which option she preferred.

Chapter Six

The morning was a blur of activity. Once Del had the fire roaring again, he set about showing her around, pointing out the trapdoor in the floor that led to his small cellar, taking her outside to the outhouse and shed. The trees didn't seem quite as thick by the light of day, but Lydia didn't need to look very far to know that he was as isolated as he claimed. Then it was back inside for breakfast, a simple meal of dried fruit and dry biscuits that they washed down with steaming, strong coffee.

"I know it's not what you're accustomed to," Del apologized.

"No, it's good," she assured. And it was. The coffee energized her, fortifying her for whatever she would have to face ahead. A month might be longer than she might have expected, but it was still a vacation from her life. An adventure. How many people could claim to have this kind of opportunity? Maybe she could even use it to inspire some writing when she returned. This was as good as research got.

After they cleaned up, she followed him around as he did his morning chores. There weren't many, and more than once, Del told her she could stay inside and read while he worked, but Lydia insisted.

"You know all about my life," she said. She pulled his coat more tightly around her. He had insisted she take it, while he went about in his shirt sleeves. "I want to know about yours."

A slow smile preceded his brief nod. "Fair enough."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

She didn't bother him with conversation after that. For as talkative as he had gotten during their midnight chat, Lydia was learning that when Del focused, he forgot the world around him and turned all his attention to the task at hand with an intent that she found fascinating. His fingers were quick and sure, no movement wasted, and his gaze seemed both fixed on whatever he was working on and aware of each whisper of motion surrounding him. When snow unexpectedly slid from a weighed-down branch, he was already moving before the first wet drop hit his head. Even if it was just a byproduct of his environment, she had never known anyone to commit themselves so fully to what needed to be done.

It left her wondering if this was how he approached the rest of his life. She had a funny feeling the answer to that was yes.

The sun was high overhead in a sky of crystalline blue when Del finally mentioned lunch. "I'll go out afterward to see what I can catch for supper," he added. "Do you like rabbit?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I've never had it."

"Rabbit it is, then." Knocking the snow from his boots, he held the door open for Lydia to go back into the warm cabin first. "Perhaps tomorrow we can go into town anyway and pick up some supplies. I do without a lot of the time, but there's no reason you have to."

Slipping his coat from her shoulders, Lydia plucked at the hem of her shirt. "What about clothes?" she asked. "I don't want to be a bother, but if I'm here for a month, I'm going to need more than this. Not to mention, I'll stick out like a sore thumb wearing something modern."

He stopped, brows drawn together in contemplation. "I never considered the practical aspects of your arrival," he mused out loud. "And the sight of a woman in trousers would definitely be a disruption. Do you trust me to return with something more appropriate?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Does appropriate mean corsets and long skirts and underwear I won't understand how to put on?"

"I hadn't thought about it. Would you prefer I find something else?"

"Only if you think you can get away with it." Hanging up his coat, Lydia walked over to the fire to warm her hands. "It might be easier to explain if they think you have a male friend staying with you as well. People in this time aren't nearly as open-minded about living arrangements as people in mine."

"No," Del murmured. His gaze ducked as he headed for the cellar. "That, they are not."

Conversation over lunch was light, each lost in thought. When he passed over her plate, his fingertips grazed the side of her hand, sending a shiver down Lydia's spine. Her eyes flew to his, but already, Del was turning away to his own food, too preoccupied to notice the effect he had on her. Perhaps that was better. What kind of woman would he think she was if she admitted to finding him attractive? She would know the truth, but in his mind, it was likely to mean something totally different.

He left after leaving her with a stack of books to choose from. Any other time and she would have embraced the

opportunity for a lazy afternoon of reading, but today, she wanted to explore without hindrance. From the moment Del's steps faded away, she was up and at the shelves, examining them in closer detail. Some things couldn't be learned by conversation alone.

It wasn't simple clutter, as she'd first thought. Under more careful scrutiny, it looked like items were arranged according to use. An array of small boxes turned out to contain dried spices, more exotic than she thought was normal for the time period. Next to those was a row of corked bottles, but after getting a whiff of the first foul aroma, Lydia refrained from opening any more.

There were carving tools, a small iron brand she recognized from the music boxes, a collection of keys that matched those on her gifts. She found his shaving equipment in a worn leather bag and his toiletries in a box next to it. And then there, in a small plain chest, she stumbled upon something that told her to stop nosing around.

The chest held jewelry, only a few pieces, but so obviously tucked away and secured that she knew they had to mean something. On top was an oval locket, gold and unengraved. The chain was so fine that it felt like silk between her fingers, and an old-fashioned photograph of a woman was tucked inside the formed metal. She was undoubtedly related to Del. Though she didn't smile, she had the same bow-shaped mouth, the same long features. His mother, maybe. Or a sister. She wondered if she should ask about his family.

The locket covered a pair of gold wedding bands, just as free of adornment. The disparity in sizes said they were a

man and a woman's, but when she slipped the smaller of the two onto her finger, it got stuck at her first knuckle. Somebody with tiny hands had worn it, but there were no indications of ownership anywhere to be seen. No inscriptions, no initials. But the sinking feeling in her stomach told Lydia that they were heirlooms. Combined with the locket, she'd bet they had been his parents.

A board out front suddenly creaked.

Startled, Lydia jerked, dropping the rings back into the chest and slamming the lid shut as her attention snapped to the door. There was another creak, followed by a soft knock, but the fear that Del would walk in and catch her faded as she put the chest back where she'd found it. His hands must be full, she realized. She'd gotten lucky this time.

Taking a deep breath, she went to the door and opened it. "That must be a really big rabbit..." she joked, but her voice trailed off when she saw that it wasn't Del, after all.

He was Native American, younger than her, with wide features, black eyes, and long hair tied back into a braid that hung over the heavy furs he wore to protect himself from the cold. A bulging satchel was thrown over his shoulder, and when he took a step back, just as startled to see her as she was him, she noticed the covered pot dangling from his left hand.

Her first instinct was to slam the door in his face. She wasn't proud of it, but she'd lived alone in LA for most of her adult life. There were certain precautions a single woman took in order to ensure her safety, including not letting in men you didn't know.

But this wasn't her home. And he had knocked. That meant something.

"Um..." Her hand tightened on the knob, though she didn't close the door. "Del's not home."

Mention of Del had the young man stiffening. His dark eyes darted past Lydia to sweep over the cabin's interior, a line slowly forming between his brows. He began to speak, but as soon as the first syllable came out, she knew it was pointless.

"I don't speak your language," she tried. She tried holding up her hands to make him stop when her declaration didn't. "I don't understand. Are you looking for Del?"

Something in his face hardened, and he took a step forward. Lydia automatically countered with a step back.

A shout came from the forest, causing both of them to jolt in surprise. Lydia peered out to see Del emerge from the trees, his gun strapped to his back, a dead rabbit in his hand, and immediately relaxed. Del would resolve this. It didn't occur to her until he was nearly at the door that she trusted him so implicitly.

He greeted the stranger in the same unknown language, and Lydia shrank back out of the way, wishing she knew what was going on. They went back and forth like that for nearly a minute before the young man gestured with his free hand toward her.

Del looked at her, his eyes softening, a slow smile creeping over his mouth. He murmured something unintelligible, but the reaction in the stranger was instantaneous. His head swiveled around to stare at Lydia, and his brows shot upward.

A single word came out of his mouth, to which Del only nodded.

"I'm going to guess you two are friends," she said, finally finding her voice.

"This is Fox." Her look of confusion drew a swift explanation. "That's what I call him. It's what his name means in his native tongue."

A grin split Fox's features. "Lydia," he said, though it came out strangely accented.

It was her turn to be shocked. "How does he know who I am? Two seconds ago, he looked ready to kick me out for stealing your house."

"Fox belongs to the Kootenai tribe living on the other side of the mountain." Del nodded in the direction behind the cabin. "He's been coming here since he was a boy, bringing me supplies, helping out when I need it. He always comes the day after the offering with food and extra items, because I'm usually not well for a day or two afterward." He took a step closer, his eyes drinking her in. "With everything that has happened, it slipped my mind that he would arrive this afternoon. My apologies if he frightened you."

She looked from Del to an expectant Fox and back again. "So he knows about everything? The dreams and all of it?"

Del nodded. "His tribe has been very good to me. I've never had any reason not to be honest with them." He edged forward until his jacket brushed against her arm. "You can trust Fox," he asserted softly. "He'll do anything for you that I would."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

That was saying a lot. Some of the anxiety that had twisted in her gut began to unwind. Taking a deep breath, Lydia stepped forward and stuck out her hand. "A friend of Del's is a friend of mine. It's good to meet you, Fox."

His smile diminished slightly as he glanced down at her offering. Behind her, Del murmured something in Kootenai, and slowly, Fox lifted his hand to shake hers. It lasted for only a second before he was letting her go, backing off as he swung the satchel from his shoulder and handed it over to Del. They exchanged a few words, none of it comprehensible, and Lydia just stood there awkwardly, waiting for someone to fill her in on what was going on.

"He's not staying," Del said when Fox had turned over the covered pot.

"What? Why not?"

The tone of her voice made the young Kootenai hesitate where he'd begun to retreat. He and Del spoke some more, but through all of it, the continuous shake of his head made it clear he wasn't being swayed.

Del finally sighed. "He doesn't want to be in the way."

"Of what?"

Another burst from Fox. As Lydia watched, he resumed his path and almost bolted for the trees, only glancing back the moment before he disappeared in the foliage. She would have sworn he was smiling.

When she turned back to the cabin, Del was lifting the lid off the pot, leaning over to sniff at its contents. "The rabbit shall save for tomorrow," he announced. "This stew smells

too good not to eat tonight. Fox's mother is the best cook I've ever known."

Lydia followed him inside. "What am I missing here? He shows up, expecting to find you sick or exhausted or something like that, but because I'm here, he just takes off like a bat out of hell? What does he think he's interrupting?"

Del hung the pot over the fire. "I've spoken of you to him since he was a child," he explained. "He knows what's called you here. He knows ... how much it means to me." He took off his coat, still not turning to look back at her. "Would you rather I go out and bring him back? If I insist, he won't dispute it. I'm certain he would love to have the tale to share with his tribe."

She contemplated the option. There was something Del wasn't telling her, but she was scared of pushing too hard to find out what it was. There were already so many unknown variables, and trying to wrap her brain around all of them at the same time gave her a headache. She didn't need even more confusion muddying the waters, especially when the object of that confusion had already fled the scene, unlikely to return.

"No. Let him go." Lydia smiled, a weak attempt to try and lighten the mood. "I'm sure you don't want to have to play translator all night. It's bad enough you have to try and figure out what I'm referencing half the time."

There was a shy sadness lurking in his eyes when he looked to her. "I've had the good fortune of years of practice deciphering your speech. It's no longer a hardship. Trust me."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

There it was again, the awed appreciation that he kept veiled more and more the longer she was there. When it looked like he was going to retreat again, Lydia braved crossing the distance between them and took his arm in her hand, forcing Del to turn back. His muscles were hard and taut beneath her touch, and her breath skipped a second as she felt that increasingly familiar pulse of desire course through her.

She stared at the contact between them for an eternity before lifting her chin. His smiles of earlier were gone, replaced by a fervency in those brilliant blue-green eyes that made her chest tighten further. He swallowed, and his nostrils flared, and then his hand was on hers, folding over her fingers, callused and warm and solid.

"You're still afraid," he murmured. "I understand. This is all new, unlike anything you've experienced before. I will try to be more patient with your questions."

It wasn't the reaction she expected, and it wasn't the one she wanted. "Why do I feel like you're the one who's scared here?" she whispered.

"And what would I fear?" His mouth barely moved. His eyes didn't waver.

"I think you're scared of me."

Del shook his head. "Never."

"Then what?"

He took so long to answer that she was sure he wouldn't at all.

"I fear what you'll think when you discover the cut of man I truly am," he confessed.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Her head whirled. It sounded like a contradiction, that he asserted she could trust him in one breath and then in the next, practically admit to being a threat. But her instincts told her it was more than that, that this was all part of the riddle of her being there in the first place.

"Maybe you should let me be the one to decide that," Lydia said. "I'm still here, aren't I?"

Some of the tension in his face eased. Lifting his hand from where it covered hers, he brushed a knuckle along her jaw, following the soft motion with his eyes before replying.

"Yes, you are."

Chapter Seven

Their unspoken agreement to defer the questions Del had raised with his cryptic statements turned dinner into a repeat of their early morning conversation, light and friendly with little vestige of his previous sobriety. Lydia insisted on doing her part, stirring the thick stew Fox had brought, while Del put away the various supplies. All the while, they chatted about this and that, small details that might be thrown away in a grander scheme but provided her with new strokes to paint the picture of his life. She took each one and tucked it away for analysis later. For the time being, she was content to simply appreciate his company.

They ate in front of the fire, sitting opposite each other on the floor, listening to the wind whistle outside the windows. While Lydia never let the conversation lag, it was impossible not to get absorbed in the way the heat brought color to his face, how the reflection of the flames in his eyes was almost inconsequential compared to the keenness that gleamed there naturally. The more engaged he became, the looser his body grew. Gestures began to accompany his words, and the stiffness of his posture relaxed.

"How often does Fox come around?" she asked when Del rose with their dirty dishes in hand.

"Every few months." He carried the plates to the table where a basin of water stood ready. "I may see him at other times when I tend to tasks his tribe requires. He is often difficult to escape."

She smiled. "That's called hero worship. Obviously, he admires you."

Though his hands remained steady as he cleaned the dishes, the muscles in Del's back visibly stiffened beneath his shirt. "He is young," he demurred. "He only sees what he wishes."

"That doesn't mean he's wrong." The compliment came without hesitation, and Lydia flushed in embarrassment at her blatant regard. Averting her eyes to the fire, she asked, "What kind of things do you do for them? That's probably what he's reacting to."

The sound of splashing water filled the next few seconds. "The Kootenai had several problems with the residents of Troy when I first arrived," Del replied. "I gave my assistance to get rid of them. Still do when the occasion merits. I act as a ... mediator for them. Intercede on their behalf so that they can conduct their lives in peace."

It wasn't the answer she would have predicted, but in light of what she knew about American history and the expansion west, she wasn't going to quash any desire to help. She waited until he had put away the dishes and returned to the hearth before pressing for more details. "Are you a translator then? Or do you use your magic to make things better for them?"

His thumb rubbed the palm of his other hand in slow circles, as if he was working out a kink in muscles. "If I say both," he ventured carefully, "would you think less of me?"

"No."

His lashes lifted from where he'd been staring at the floor. Her stomach lurched at the raw emotion that flickered in their depths.

"The Kootenai have never been a warring tribe. They believe their only purpose here is to keep their Spirit-Creator's covenant, to guard and keep the land for him. Most white men do not understand that."

She held up her hands. "You don't have to sell me on it," she said. "I'm the product of a liberal family with lots of existential guilt, remember? I know things get bad, and hey, if that's what it takes to make it a little easier for them, then who am I to stop you?"

"Some would deem it an inappropriate use of my power."

"I'm not one of them."

Her reply seemed to satisfy him, and the corner of his mouth lifted. "I do not like seeing bad things happen to good people," Del said. "What I do for them may not matter in your time, but if I can ease their pain now, then that's all that I care about."

Lydia shifted to get more comfortable in front of the fire, stretching out on her side with her head propped up on her hand. "For someone so concerned about other people, it seems a little weird that you'd cut yourself off from the world so much. Doesn't it drive you crazy, not having the contact?"

Del shook his head, mirroring her pose. It pulled his shirt from the waistband of his pants and exposed a strip of taut skin along his side. "My isolation is better for all concerned. And I have the contact now, do I not?" Reaching across the distance between them, he brushed a strand of hair over her

shoulder and away from her face. "You should rest. It's been a long day, and you didn't sleep as well as you might've last night."

Such a simple gesture shouldn't have sent a tiny frisson down her spine, but it did. When he began to withdraw his hand, a subtle shift of Lydia's head caught the tips of his fingers across her cheek, and they both froze at the moment of contact. "I don't want to go to bed yet," she admitted. "I like this. You and me. Talking." A sudden thought made her pause. "Unless you're tired. And you know you can have the bed tonight, right? I'm fine on the..."

The rest of the sentence caught in her throat when Del skimmed his thumb across her mouth. Slowly, it caressed her lower lip, and his gaze ducked to watch the path it traced. "You must stop suggesting I treat you as less than the guest you are," he murmured.

His fingers still touched her face. Speech was next to impossible, but somehow she managed anyway. "It's your bed."

"Which gives me the right to say who sleeps in it. Stop being so stubborn."

She couldn't help but smile. "What are you going to do?" Her lips brushed over his callused thumb as she teased him. "Kick me out? I came over a hundred years to see you."

"No." Del still wasn't looking at her, still fixated on the swell of her lip, so she couldn't read his intent in his eyes. "But I might choose to no longer sleep on the floor if you continue."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Her heart hammered in her ears. His implication was clear, but he hadn't been this forward with her since her arrival. What had changed? They had come a long way, yes, spent hours getting to know each other. And she had seen the proof of his desire more than once before modesty forced him to retreat. But just because the suggestion left her breathless didn't mean she was anything special. He had been alone a long time. Any woman would do.

"I'd better behave myself then," Lydia said lightly, hoping it would shatter the spell winding around them. "That's an awfully small bed. There's barely enough room for me in it."

His hand stopped. "If you're uncomfortable..." This time, he met her eyes, his bright irises nearly banished by pupils blown by desire. "You can always join me here."

The huskiness of his voice made everything in her constrict. Swallowing against the lump in her throat, Lydia reached up and curled her fingers around his wrist, slowly pulling his thumb away from her mouth.

"I guess you've given up on ambiguity for tonight, huh?" she said.

Del didn't resist, letting his hand come to rest on the floor between them though his attention never wavered. "It would seem you're more agreeable to my presence."

"And was that the plan all along? Make friends so you could get me into bed?"

He shook his head. "I told you last night that was not my intention. I would never force you to do anything you didn't wish. But..."

"But what?"

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

The tip of his tongue came out to moisten his dry lips. "I no longer believe my attentions would be unwanted."

She shivered. "Because we shared a few laughs?"

"Because of this."

Lydia couldn't move as he leaned forward. It was more of a caress than a kiss, his lips barely parted as they pressed to hers. Her blood roared, and she held her breath, trying to think about all the reasons why this was wrong, why kissing Del was asking for disaster.

She failed. She only knew that Del affected her in ways no man had in a very long time. She wanted this. She wanted him.

He traced the seam of her mouth while lifting his hand to slip through her thick hair and cup the back of her head. Slowly, Lydia opened to the tender inquiry, letting him in to explore in slow, almost delicate strokes, but he never forced it to deepen, never quickened his pace. By the time he pulled away, her head was swimming from the need for more.

Del kept his hand around her nape, strong fingers massaging her scalp. "I have waited a very long time to kiss you, Lydia Nicholls," he murmured. In spite of the smoothness of his tone, his breathing was ragged, his touch scalding. "I would see these men in your life, and I would hate each and every one of them. Because they had what I could not."

Her brows shot up. "You don't mean me."

"I do. Hasn't everything I've done, everything I've said proven it to you?"

"But I'm not anybody special."

Del smiled, and the lingering sweep of his gaze over her face was more intimate than any caress. "You foolish, foolish woman. I wish by the time you leave here, you no longer believe that. I want that to be the one thing I'm able to give you."

Something thick and warm began to spread through her veins, a response to more than her desire for him or his for her. "You're working against thirty years of conditioning," Lydia said. "And no using magic on me to make it easier for you. I'm going to make that a rule."

"No, no magic." His fingers threaded through her hair before pulling out completely, and the second they were gone, she missed them. "Why is it you haven't asked more questions about my power?" he quizzed. "I expected you would have many."

The shift in topic was disconcerting, but Lydia grasped the freedom it gave her to pull herself back together. "Truth? If I don't think about it, I don't get a headache. It's easier to focus on what I know is real and take it from there. There's enough of that to keep my brain more than busy."

His mouth pursed as he contemplated her for a long moment. "Come," he said abruptly, sitting up. He took her hand in his before she was able to protest and pulled Lydia to her feet as he stood. "I'll show you."

"I saw it last night..."

But her resistance faded as Del led her to the shelves and to the chest she'd been rummaging through when Fox had knocked at the door. She held her breath as his hand stretched toward his belongings, only exhaling when he went

past the box and picked up the brand that matched the music boxes and his tattoo.

"Did you notice this on your gifts?" he asked.

Lydia nodded. "I always thought of it as your signature. Since I didn't know who you were."

"Take it." Del waited for her to grasp the iron rod then dropped his hands to the buttons on his shirt. He quickly undid them and pulled the shirt off, tossing it onto a nearby shelf. "It is a signature of a sort," he explained as he turned his left side toward her. The tattoo she had admired in his sleep was bared now for her perusal, the dark whorls outlining his sculpted muscles as they wound and climbed up his arm. "This is the mark of those to whom I owe my power. I bear it as a reminder of what I am, what I do."

Her gaze jumped from the brand to the inked decoration, blocking out the appeal of his chest for the more practical examination of the tattoo. Del obviously thought this was important, and if it kept her from making a huge mistake by sleeping with him, then she was all for it. At this proximity, she saw that there were flecks of color amidst the black, a dash of red here, a sliver of indigo there.

"How long have you had it?" Her fingers itched to trace the tattoo's path, but that way lay badness.

"I got it after I moved here. The first time I helped the Kootenai, they asked how they could repay me. I asked for their help with this."

"Why?"

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

"Because I didn't want to forget where I came from, and I knew..." His eyes grew pensive. "I worried being alone would drive me mad. This was to keep me centered. Give me focus."

Lydia smiled, handing the brand back to him. "I think that part was a success."

Instead of taking the brand, Del wrapped his fingers around hers on the iron rod. "Breathe," he murmured, his gaze locking with hers.

It seemed a silly request. After all, she already did that automatically. But the joke died on her lips as his meaning sank in, and Lydia inhaled, long and slow, feeling her lungs fill and expand in synchrony with his.

The iron grew hot against her palm, not unbearably so but enough for her to notice the difference. Over the back of her fingers, Del's grew equally warm, the heat seeping through skin and bone until her hand felt detached from the rest of her body, isolated and distinct. He didn't look away. He didn't speak. But the hair stood up on the back of her neck as if someone had blown across her nape.

It began at the fine tip, where the design of the brand swirled in delicate black strokes. The color leached from the metal, fading and fading until it was snow white, and when the entire bar had shifted in hue, the sheerest of ash sloughed from its surface. It rained down over their hands, coating her skin for only a moment before disintegrating into nothing, and Lydia's eyes widened as she watched it, transfixed. Layer after layer melted away. Del never moved.

When the erosion reached the point on the iron bar where their fingers met metal, a spray of sparks suddenly burst from

the dust, making her jump in surprise. Almost immediately, the heat disappeared, and Del's shoulders visibly relaxed.

"What happened?" Lydia blurted.

He smiled as he dropped his hand from hers. "The intent was focused on the brand," he explained. "As soon as the power reached living tissue, its path was interrupted, and it aborted the spell."

She opened her hand to look at the now-white iron rod. The end that dissolved away was polished smooth, and where her fingers had been wrapped around it was slightly darker, as if she had protected it from the full effect of the magic. It was nothing now except an odd piece of metal. A pretty piece, but effectively useless.

"Why did you do this? Aren't you going to need this later on for something?"

Del shook his head. "I only ever used it for the music boxes, and I won't be making those any more."

"Wait. No more music boxes?" She hadn't considered that as a possibility. They were such a part of her annual ritual that the thought of a birthday without them had had her panicking, still filled her with a sense of dread. "But I love them. You can't just stop. Do you have any idea how much getting those meant to me?"

Though a shadow darkened his eyes, there was a ghost of a pleased smile on his mouth as he grabbed his shirt and retreated to the fireplace again. "They've served their purpose, Lydia," he said. "And you still have the thirteen. I wish it could be otherwise, but any more is impossible."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

At least, through his annual offerings, she thought, but she kept it to herself. There was no point in voicing her disappointment at the loss. His tone was incontestable.

"You still haven't told me what the point of that little display was," she said instead. "I got the idea about your power last night with your sock trick."

His shirt pulled taut over his broad shoulders as he stoked the fire. "The fact that you call it a trick is why you needed another demonstration. I don't want you to delude yourself about who or what I am, or what I'm capable of. You have to know the truth." When he turned his head toward her, there was no mistaking the hunger that continued to burn in his eyes, but now it was paired with something darker, something resolute. "I refuse to take advantage of your ignorance on this. The next time I kiss you, it will be with the understanding that you want *me*, not some ideal you've created inside your head in order to better cope with your temporary circumstances. I don't want you any other way."

He straightened and headed for the door, grabbing his coat along the way. "I need to tend to the nightly chores. Take this reprieve to prepare for bed. I'll be out long enough to give you ample time."

When the door softly clicked shut behind him, Lydia shivered, hugging her arms close to her body. Maybe there was something admirable about his determination not to abuse her growing desire for him, but at that moment, the only thought careening through her head was why he thought it was necessary.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

There was something she was missing here. Only trouble was, she had no idea what it could be.

Chapter Eight

She tried waiting up for him, curled up in bed with her gaze locked on the door, but exhaustion beat her at her own game. Maybe he had stayed out longer deliberately to give her time to fall asleep, or maybe she'd been too tired to keep talking. Either way, the end result was the same. Lydia fell asleep without uttering another word to Del and didn't wake until sunlight streamed in through the small windows.

The cabin was deserted, the fire going strong with fresh logs that made the room warm and cozy. The entire place smelled green, like a living thing fresh amidst the wilds, and it drew a sleepy smile to her face. If this was how he'd lived the past twelve years, she had no problems understanding why he would choose to stay in such a remote location.

The chairs from the table had been moved to surround the hearth, and over their backs lay various garments, as though hung out to dry. Pushing back the blankets, Lydia rose from the bed, her breath catching in her chest a moment when her feet touched the cooler floor, and walked over to look at them more closely. Her eyes widened as she approached. They were female clothes, and not the ones she'd worn for the past day and a half. A suede dress she was unable to resist gliding her fingers over. A cotton skirt straight out of *Little House on the Prairie*. A white blouse to pair with it, like Del's but cut for a woman's figure. A long, leather duster to wear against the winter. There were even two pairs of shoes, a set of moccasins and fur-lined boots.

"I found them outside the door this morning." Lydia jerked at the sound of Del's voice, whirling to see him standing in the open doorway. He was in his shirtsleeves with a large bucket of water in one hand and appeared comfortable in spite of the chilly wind blowing in from behind him. "I think Fox brought them in the middle of the night," he continued, crossing toward a large basin in the corner. "They were stiff from the cold, so I laid them out to warm them up."

She watched him pour out the water and head back to the open door. "What are you doing?"

"Fetching water for a bath." He stopped on the threshold, looking at her with curiosity. "I assumed you'd wish to take one this morning."

"Well, yeah, but..." Lydia glanced at the tub again and shivered. "That's going to be a little cold, don't you think?"

Del smiled. "Don't worry about it." He nodded toward the shelves. "There were some fresh soaps in the pack Fox left, and some toiletries. Take whatever you need. It won't be long until I finish."

He was gone then, the door easing shut behind him. There was no mention of their aborted conversation from the night before, no hint of a replay of the kiss. She wondered whether they had mattered enough to Del to merit further attention, but almost as quickly, Lydia dismissed the question. He had been sincere. He was just being his usual courteous self.

It took three more trips for him to get enough water in the tub for bathing, during which time she found the items he'd mentioned. One in particular caught her eye—a polished hairbrush with a bone handle and the softest of bristles. On

its back was a painted design that looked familiar, but Lydia was more interested in giving her hair a thorough detangling than fathoming out where she'd seen it before. Del's comb had been adequate the day before, but nothing was better than a good brush.

She watched out of the corner of her eye as Del bent over the water, swirling his fingers across the smooth surface. His lips moved silently, and within seconds, the faintest hint of steam began to rise from the tub.

"I'll be outside cutting firewood," he said, straightening. He removed a folded white cloth from a nearby shelf and laid it next to the bath. "So you may have some privacy."

"Thank you," Lydia murmured. The urge to tell him to stay made her bite the inside of her cheek. That was a bad idea. For both of them. What would be the point other than to torture themselves? It wasn't like the tub was big enough for both of them.

She looked at it balefully. It was barely big enough for her. But still, a bath was a bath. Lydia wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

The water was as warm as he'd promised, and she washed quickly, hating the thought of Del out in the cold longer than he had to be, regardless of how oblivious he was to the chill. Doing her hair required getting out and bending over the side of the tub, shivering from the change in temperature, but soon enough, it too was clean. She dried and dressed in record time, brushing out her wet hair as she went to the door to let Del know she was done.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

A blast of icy air swept up her skirt, raising goosebumps along her thighs, but when Lydia poked her head out to call to Del, she discovered the yard was empty. A pile of split logs rested near the shed, and the axe leaned against one wall, but Del was nowhere to be seen.

Calling out his name, she ventured out a few more steps, her bare toes prickling from the cold, but the only response was silence. The forest was as still as it had been the night she'd arrived, as if the world was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen.

Panic began to rise in her throat, but Lydia steadied herself and retreated inside. He probably saw something, she reasoned as she went to the fireplace to warm up. He would hardly leave her alone for long without saying something. He had been too concerned about her well-being to this point to be so thoughtless.

As she brushed her hair to dry it in an effort to distract herself, it dawned on Lydia that there was no more disputing the facts of her presence in a different time period. She had been here for too long for it to be a hallucination or a hoax, and Del's repeated use of his power only cemented the fact that magic was very real, whether she liked it or not. That meant she was here for another four weeks. With Del.

Her hand slowed as she remembered the kiss. Just the memory made her lower lip tingle.

He thought she didn't see the real him, and maybe before last night, that might've been true. It was easier to consider him an average guy—a very good-looking average guy—than to think about him being supernatural or some oddity like

that. His magic raised questions she was afraid to find answers to, and Lydia knew it was probably that which had prompted his second display of power. Del claimed to know her from his dreams. It made sense he wouldn't want to settle for anything less in return.

That, more than anything, made up her mind.

Setting aside the brush, Lydia grabbed the boots and slipped them on, not surprised when they fit with ease. The coat was longer than she was accustomed to, but its weight promised to protect her from the winter weather, and she stepped outside, disappointed that Del was still nowhere to be seen. She scanned the area, searching for any clue where he might have gone, and called out in hopes that he would simply acknowledge and make it easier for her.

Like the first time, nothing answered.

The snow crunched beneath her boots as Lydia went to the woodpile, her gaze sweeping over the ground for his tracks. She found them easily, first leading back and forth to the shed doors, then a second set going around the rear of the small building. Those disappeared into the trees. Whether they were marks he left coming or leaving, though, she had no idea. But in the absence of any other hints where he might have gone, she followed them anyway.

Dense undergrowth caught at the hem of her coat as she walked parallel to the trail. Lydia stopped more than once to pull herself free from burrs and bramble, swearing under her breath when she pricked her thumb on a particularly nasty bush. Blood welled up in the cut, and she sucked at it as she continued deeper into the forest. She wouldn't have to worry

about finding her way back. Stealth was most definitely not her middle name.

When she lost sight of the cabin behind her, Lydia called for Del again. The trees sucked up the sound of her voice, as if they didn't wish to be disturbed, and she repeated the cry, this time louder.

She stopped moving, straining to hear something. Anything. An icicle on a low-hanging branch dripped against her neck, but she stifled her shiver in her efforts to focus on her surroundings.

All she heard was the pounding of her own heart.

Panic returned as she resumed the path, winding through the forest with only his footsteps as a guide. He didn't have his coat. He wouldn't have gone far or planned on being gone for long without it, regardless of how impervious he was to the cold. And his gun was still in the cabin. She had seen it propped up in the corner before leaving. Her thoughts scattered, trying to glean clues from everything he'd ever said as if that would lead her in the right direction, but they came back with the same results her shouts had.

Nothing.

When she saw the first splash of color against the broken snow, she thought she was imagining it. She even continued walking, blocking out the blossom-shaped brand in the white surface. It was when she saw the second spatter that her steps faltered, and Lydia took a deep breath before crouching down to examine it more closely.

It had melted away the icy crust of the unbroken snow, sinking below the fine dusting. This spot was larger than the

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

one previous, its color more vibrant, a stark scarlet stain in a world of white. There was no mistaking it for anything but what it was. Blood. Warm and fresh.

Her gut twisted as she straightened. He was hurt. That had to be the only explanation. She craned her neck in every direction, but the trees' continued secrecy taunted her impotence.

"Del!" she screamed. Her voice was sharp with the edge of her alarm, her skin crawling with the bite of fear. Lydia broke into a run, heedless of disturbing the trail any longer, but she only had to travel a few more yards before she came screeching to a halt again.

He was lying face-down at the base of a gnarled tree, almost curled around it like he'd been holding onto its trunk for support but was unable to sustain his grip. A wet streak of reddish brown slithered down the smooth bark, and there was more blood staining his left sleeve, but Lydia couldn't see where the source of it was. The snow was melted where he'd fallen, like the snow was giving him a wide berth, and nearby brush was singed. One branch still smoldered.

Lydia rushed forward, dropping to his side as her hands scrambled in search for signs of life. She found it in his exposed right wrist, a rapid fluttering that said at least his heart was still beating. His breathing was so shallow that she couldn't even see his chest move. What truly terrified her, though, was the chill of his skin. It seemed a perfectly natural response to the low temperatures, except ... Del didn't get cold.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Rolling him onto his back, Lydia's chest tightened when she saw blood soaking the front of his left shoulder. The shirt wasn't ripped, but when she pulled aside the open neckline, she saw an ugly gash scoring the hard muscle of his upper chest.

"What happened to you?" she murmured, pressing the wet material against the wound in order to staunch the flow of blood.

Del groaned, his face twisting in pain. "Stop," he muttered. He lifted his right hand and tried to push Lydia away, but it was a feeble attempt. His strength was gone.

"You're bleeding. I have to get you back to the house. Can you walk?"

His tongue darted out to lick his oddly dry lips, and his lashes fluttered open, taking long seconds before they were fully fixed on her. All color was gone from them, the pupils blown and the whites bloodshot. It shocked her how much it hurt to see him like this.

"You have to go." The louder he spoke, the more his voice rasped. "It's not safe. They'll know. And I can't ... just go."

She had no idea who they might be, but there was one thing she knew, loud and clear. "And where exactly am I supposed to go?" Lydia argued. If he wasn't going to help her, she decided, she'd just drag his ass back to the cabin herself. Looping his right arm around her neck, she braced herself against the tree as she hauled him to his feet. "Not my century, remember? The only place I can find on my own is the outhouse, and if you think I'm living there until it's time

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

for your magical godfathers to zap me home, you're sorely mistaken."

She grunted as she bore the bulk of his weight, his body leaning heavily against hers. Once he was standing, though, Del stopped fighting her, his left hand shaking as he reached out and gripped the tree to try and steady himself.

"There will be repercussions," he said. When he bowed his head, his hair tumbled to hide his face from her, but she still saw the glistening sweat along his brow and cheeks, his exertions taking their toll. "There will be blood. More. And not just mine."

His vehemence was daunting, but Lydia shoved it aside to focus on the immediate task of getting him home. "Fine. I get the hint. Now shut up and walk because you're a lot heavier than you look."

Whether it was the tone of her voice or sheer exhaustion that silenced Del's ramblings, Lydia didn't know. She only cared that he pushed off from the tree and took short, jerky steps toward the direction of the house. His left hand hung uselessly at his side, and every few feet, she'd see a bead of blood drip from his fingertips to land on the snow, but at least he was moving. Every little bit helped.

* * * *

For the first time in three days, the world was still. No wind. No whistling. No clouds sweeping through the pale sky. Zuri threw back her head and bared her long neck as she gloried in the quiet of it all.

"Well done," Eraya said at her side. "Perhaps this will show the marked one that his plans are pointless, whatever they are."

A line appeared between Zuri's brows. "I wonder what he thinks he's accomplishing," she mused, sinking to the ground to stare up at the unmoving canopy of trees. "First the ripples, then destroying the brand? He can't think he's going to escape us, does he?"

Eraya stretched out next to her sister, reaching for her hand. The residual power leeches from Zuri's fingers to hers, infusing her veins with a viscous calm that made her arch away from the soft grass, and several minutes passed where neither did anything but savor the moment.

"He is not foolish," Eraya murmured after she'd settled back to the ground. The pale sky glittered above them, alive with their power. "In less than a month, he will be ours. I'm sure he knows that."

"Perhaps. I only regret he didn't bleed more. He always made such pretty designs when he bled for us."

"And he will again. We just have to be patient."

The sisters fell quiet, small smiles curving each of their mouths. Nothing moved.

Until a leaf began to quiver in a tree above.

Zuri's obsidian eyes widened. "No. That can't be."

Another joined in its dance. Then another. And a fourth. A fifth.

And more.

"How is this possible?" Eraya whispered.

"It shouldn't be," Zuri hissed. "The wraith I sent should've drained enough of the marked one's power to curtail his reach."

"Perhaps it's someone else then."

Zuri scowled at her as if she was crazy. "Then perhaps you should go scry and find out who," she snapped. "I'm tired of being disturbed like this. It's unsettling."

As Eraya rose to her feet, a branch snapped and fell to the ground between them. They both stared at it, lips curling in appalled disgust, until Zuri reached and picked it up. It turned to ash within seconds, disintegrating around her hand.

"It's the marked one," she ground out. "He mocks us."

"Send another wraith," Eraya suggested.

"Even if I *could* summon one so soon, what good would it do? It would appear he swats them like flies." Zuri stood and screamed, momentarily blocking out the sound of the rustling leaves. When her voice died away, the trees were even louder. "He'll regret angering us so. He has no idea how long eternity is."

Eraya backed away from her sister's wrath. "Rest as much you can. I'll see what I can do. It might not even be him."

She fled Zuri's sanctuary. She didn't believe that it wasn't the marked one, retaliating in some fashion for the attack, but she couldn't encourage her sister's madness. Things would be difficult enough for him once he was theirs. To stoke Zuri's anger further served no purpose in the short-term.

After all, the marked one would be theirs for an eternity.

Chapter Nine

She would never know how they made it, but somehow, Lydia got Del back to the cabin without either of them collapsing. He stumbled as they crossed the threshold, catching himself on the doorjamb, and she glanced in dismay at the bloody streak his hand left on the wood. That was her first priority. Stop the bleeding. Then get him warmed up. Finding out what the hell happened was so low on the list that it didn't even register.

Del sat on the edge of the bed, swaying but conscious, as she worked to strip his shirt from his body. His eyes followed her every movement, the irises still swallowed by ebony, and when she reached to undo the buttons, he did nothing to stop her. He only flinched when the cotton scraped over his left shoulder and arm, but not even that was enough to draw another word from him. It made her even edgier than she already was.

"The shirt's ruined." She fought the desire to scrub the blood away from her hands and focused on staying calm for Del. "I'm going to tear it up for bandages, but I have to wash you off first. I can't tell how bad the cut is with all the blood."

His nod was slow and cautious, like his head hurt to move it any faster. Lydia made a mental note to check for a head injury, too, as soon as she possibly could.

The slice out of his shoulder was shallower than it appeared. How something could cut him without going through his shirt, she had no idea, but there wasn't time to

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

ask before Del passed out. He simply slumped to his unhurt side without uttering a sound. She was left to finish with only the fire behind her for noise.

He didn't stir when she stretched him out on the bed. His skin was still like ice, in spite of the benefit of the warm cabin, so Lydia began piling everything she could find on top of him, burying Del in a sea of quilts and then laying his coat on top to weigh it all down. He never moved. Every time she caught sight of his pale face, her heart twisted.

He deserved better than this. He had been nothing but attentive and generous with her since her arrival, and if maybe she'd been a little annoyed after accepting the reality of her circumstances, at least she could understand his desire for company. More importantly, she wanted to be able to give it to him. She liked Del, beyond her attraction to him. She didn't want to lose the chance of getting to spend as much time with him as possible. It was already limited as it was.

So she buried herself in work. Two days in the cabin had her reasonably comfortable with what needed to be done, and while Del slept, Lydia lost time hauling the wood he'd cut, cleaning the cabin of her bath remains, and preparing for lunch and dinner. There was still stew left over from the previous night, and since the last thing she wanted to do was skin and clean the rabbit he'd killed, she scrounged through the cellar for some dried fruits and jerky to round out whatever food requirements she and Del might have for the next day or two.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Minutes passed into hours. Del never made a sound. Not a rustle as he shifted in his sleep, not a sigh. For all intents and purposes, Lydia might as well have been alone.

The sun was just beginning to set behind the trees when she finally ran out of things to keep her mind off his condition. Carefully, Lydia returned to the bed, pressing a gentle hand to Del's forehead to test his temperature. Dismay coursed through her at the cool clamminess of his skin, and a quick check elsewhere—at his neck, his wrist—revealed the ineffectiveness of the blankets to warm him. His general pallor didn't alleviate her concern, either. If it wasn't for the visible rise and fall of his chest, she was sure she would have mistaken him for dead.

"What am I supposed to do now?" she mused out loud, and then laughed, a tinge of hysteria sharpening her nerves. "You'd better wake up soon, Del, or I'm going to go crazy talking to myself. How you've done this for twelve years, I will never know."

The key was staying busy. She knew that. With chores out of the way, that left only his books to distract her.

After changing the dressing on his shoulder, Lydia grabbed a book from the shelves and sat down on the floor next to the bed, the better to keep an eye on him in case he moved or made a sound. She read the first page to herself, but when it dawned on her that she had no idea what she'd just read, she changed tactics.

Her voice was low and even, but it seemed to fill the cabin anyway, carrying to the far corners and then back to her ears so that she didn't feel quite so lonely. She didn't know if Del

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

heard or not. She didn't know if it would make a difference in the long run. She only knew that it made her feel better, a welcome sanctuary within the story and a soothing reminder that life went on.

Lydia read long after the light disappeared from behind the curtains. She got up to stoke the fire only when it grew dangerously low, and each time, returned to where she sat next to the bed, her back against the wall, her arm resting next to Del's with only the blankets separating them. His nearness was a balm to her disquiet. She hoped that her voice was a boon to him, as well.

At some point, she dozed, waking up to find her cheek resting on the edge of the mattress. Though her eyes were blurry and her mouth dry, Lydia picked up the book that had fallen from her lap and resumed where she'd left off, pitching her voice a little louder to compensate for her sleepiness. It was simple to fall back into the rhythms of the story, and when she felt him shift on the bed beside her, Lydia's heart leapt.

Setting the book aside, she got up on her knees to look at Del more closely, her hand going to his brow to brush back the lank hair before pressing to his skin. Without a thermometer, she couldn't tell for certain, but he felt a little warmer. His breathing was still shallow, and when she pulled back the blankets to inspect his shoulder, the bandages had soaked through with blood again, but now, she distinctly saw his eyes moving behind his lids.

He was dreaming. This was just sleep.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Lydia sagged in relief, sitting back on her heels. He was going to be all right. She was sure of it.

The rest of the night was spent curled up on the floor next to him, waiting for another sign that he was improving. She slept in fits, waking at the slightest sounds, and when dawn finally peeked through the window, Lydia was sure the end was in sight.

Except he never woke up.

She tried not to think about it as she tended to the chores. Chopping wood was strangely therapeutic, even if half the time she missed the log and sent splinters flying into the air. And when the cabin was warm and smelling like the stew she had only picked at the day before, Lydia forgot for a few minutes that he had been unconscious for over twenty-four hours. He was just taking a nap. He would wake any minute, and everything would be all right.

The cover of darkness banished those optimistic thoughts. When she picked up her book to resume reading, the words danced before her eyes, refusing to take form. Her mind kept drifting to thoughts of what she should be doing, what she shouldn't be doing, how Del would know what to do if only he'd wake up, anything but the distraction she sought. She eventually gave up on it, marking her place to try again by the light of day.

Scratching at the door made her jump. Rising to her feet, Lydia padded silently across the wooden floor, her heart thudding as she debated what she should do. It was probably just a wild animal, she reasoned, and she was better off ignoring it until it went away. She pressed her ear near the

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

hinges, listening to the trees rustle outside, and that was when she heard it. A low humming. Of a man's voice.

Darting to the window, Lydia pulled aside the curtain in time to see Fox turn away from the house and head back to the woods. Hope burned fresh at the sight of the young Kootenai, and she yanked open the door, calling out his name.

Her presence startled him, but Fox stopped a few yards from the cabin and turned around. "God, you have no idea how glad I am to see you," she babbled. She gestured for him to come up to the house. "I have no idea what I'm doing. You have to help."

With a frown, Fox glanced at the open door behind her before saying something in his native tongue.

Lydia shook her head. "I don't understand you. But you have to come inside. Del's hurt, and I can't wake him up. Please. I need you."

Maybe it was the tone of her voice that got to him or maybe it was just that he trusted her because of her association with Del. Either way, Fox approached her with a wary step, following when she went back into the house.

She led him to the bed and pulled back the blankets in order to show him the injury. Behind her, she heard his sharp intake of breath. Then he was pressing past her, moving her out of his way so that he could lay his hands on Del's chest.

Lydia swallowed down the lump of relief in her throat as she watched the young man fuss. His deft fingers skimmed over the cut, and it almost looked like he was tracing the tattoo. When he pressed an ear to Del's chest, his frown

deepened, the concern in his black eyes shifting to determination.

"Can you help him?"

Fox straightened and reached for her hand, placing it in the same spot on Del's chest where he'd just been listening. She could feel the swift fluttering beneath her fingers, but otherwise, it felt exactly the same.

"What?" She looked at Fox in confusion, pulling away when he did. "It's fast. I know. It's been..."

Her voice trailed away when he promptly took her wrist again and returned it to Del's chest. Fox said a single word, and this time when he withdrew his hold, he did so slowly, keeping his eyes on hers.

Frustration made her feel like stamping her foot. "I don't understand."

Fox repeated the word, accompanying it by placing his hand over hers, pinning it in place.

"Oh!" Lydia brightened. "You want me to keep my hand here!" She paused. "Why?"

He didn't answer. Fox walked back to the door, reiterated the command, and vanished out the door.

She stood there for what felt like forever. Was he going for help? She had no way of knowing. Obviously, he was as concerned as she was, but whether that meant he cared enough to bring back some sort of shaman for Del, she didn't know. She didn't know anything. Tears pricked the back of her eyes.

When she grew tired standing, Lydia sat down on the edge of the bed, keeping her hand in place over Del's heart.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Though its tempo never changed, the skin was warming beneath hers, refueling her hope. Perhaps he didn't appear quite so pale, either.

She searched his face.

"You are so going to tell me what the hell happened when you wake up," she whispered.

* * * *

A soft touch on her shoulder roused her from the deepest sleep she'd had since Del's incident. Her temple rested on something unyielding, and when she blinked her eyes open, Lydia saw an older woman with unlined skin the color of copper bending down to peer into her face.

The woman spoke in a soft, unintelligible voice. The hand on Lydia's shoulder urged her to sit up, and she obeyed, realizing she had fallen asleep on Del's good arm. Her fingers still covered the same patch of skin on his chest.

"Did Fox send you?" she asked blearily.

The woman smiled and twisted to look behind them. Lydia followed her gaze to see Fox kindling the dying fire, a fresh load of wood next to the hearth. When she sighed in relief, he glanced up, shooting her the same smile the woman had.

Her brain made the instant connection. Mother and son. Del was in excellent hands.

She allowed the woman to gently pull her to her feet, her knees protesting in anguish from being in one position for so long. They walked to the table, where she guided Lydia into sitting, and when Lydia was covered with one of the blankets

that had been on Del, the woman returned to the bed, leaving her to watch.

The first thing Fox's mother did was strip everything off Del, leaving him stretched out on the bed in his trousers and bandages. Lydia's eyes shot wide when those came off as well, her cheeks flaming in embarrassment when she saw his soft cock resting against his muscled thigh. She hadn't had a single sexual thought in all her frantic worrying, but that was doing an about-face, the sight of his lean, powerful body waking her more effectively than a double espresso from Starbucks. In order to quell her traitorous feelings, Lydia had to deliberately tear her eyes away from his lower half. This wasn't the time.

She snuck one more peek anyway before the woman's body blocked her view.

With water that Fox brought her, the woman bathed Del from head to toe, leaving his hurt shoulder and tattooed arm for last. She ordered her son to bring her fresh water for that task, pouring out the contents of a small bag that hung at her waist before dipping her cloth into it.

"What's that?" Lydia blurted.

Neither Kootenai answered her. A rich, aromatic scent began to fill the warming cabin, growing stronger with every stroke of the woman's cloth over Del's skin. Lydia had to lean to her right, tilting her head, in order to see what it was they were doing.

Fox held Del's arm straight across his body, giving his mother easier access to wash it. She flowed back and forth, murmuring on the stroke up, blowing along the skin on the

stroke down. After what felt like an eternity, Fox finally let go and stepped back.

Lydia's breath caught in her throat when she heard an unmistakable groan come from the bed. Leaping to her feet, she ran over to see Del's lashes flutter open, a grimace of pain wrinkling his brow.

"What did you do?" she asked Fox's mother. The response was a broad smile as the woman pulled the blankets back up to cover Del's legs and hips. As soon as she turned around, Lydia threw her arms around her and gave her a big hug. "Whatever it was, thank you. God. Thank you so much."

Instead of pulling away, the woman took Lydia's wrist and guided her closer to the bed. She pressed the cloth she'd used into Lydia's hand and, holding both, repeated the motion of washing Del's arm, murmuring as she did so.

"She says," Del's voice was hoarse, but it was so good to hear him speaking again that Lydia didn't mind, "to clean it every hour."

Lydia met his eyes. Though his pupils were still blown, there was a corona of bright blue-green around them, making him seem more like himself. "I don't know what she was chanting."

Del glanced at the woman, who shook her head. "You don't need it," he said. "It's only important to keep up with the cleansing."

Fox pulled his mother away, babbling in his native tongue to Del. Lydia listened to their halting conversation, wishing she understood what was going on, until she realized the Kootenai were preparing to leave.

"You're just going to leave me here?" She stared at them, incredulous. "You can't. Del needs you."

"Lydia..." His fingertips brushed against her skirt, and she turned to see him smiling softly up at her. "They're returning tomorrow. They have their own needs to tend to."

"But ... you've been out of it for two days. How do I know I'm not going to lose you again?"

"You won't. I give you my word."

His quiet assurance was a far cry to his vehemence when she'd found him. Lydia had no choice but to nod in acceptance.

She remained silent as Fox and his mother finished gathering their things. It would be better if she knew what exactly they'd done to help Del, but she wasn't going to argue with results. The important thing was he was awake.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Lydia turned back to the bed. "Do you need anything?"

He gazed at her, unblinking. "Water, please."

She started moving before he'd finished speaking. Bringing the glass back to his side, she knelt down, sliding an arm beneath his shoulders and helping him sit up enough in order to sip at the lukewarm liquid. His body was noticeably warmer, though still much cooler than normal, and when he rested back against the pillow, more of his irises were discernible around his pupils.

"What happened?" he murmured.

It wasn't the question she expected. "I was hoping you could tell me. You disappeared, and then ... I found you."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Del exhaled softly. His breathing was returning to its usual unhurried tempo. "No, I know what happened to me. I don't know how I got back here."

"I helped you."

"Did I hurt you?"

Lydia hesitated. The question was posed with his eyes downcast, his fear for the response palpable. "You seemed determined not to let me help," she replied carefully. "But no, you didn't hurt me." She tried to lighten the mood. "Except for being a lot heavier than you look."

"Good. May I have another drink, please?"

As she helped him finish the water, Lydia's gaze flickered to his shoulder. The gash looked smaller, the edges beginning to seal, and the washing made the colors of his tattoo stand out even more. In fact, the red and indigo looked sharper than the black, overwhelming the familiar pattern of the brand and drawing the eye to the unknown whorls and angles.

Her smile was soft and secret. Del would probably tease her if he found out, but she did love his tattoo. Especially when it looked like this.

Chapter Ten

All he wanted was water. When Lydia offered him food, Del shook his head and waved it away, countering her threats to force-feed him with a simple cocked brow. She yielded to his mute insistence with a roll of her eyes, but inside, she was just relieved that he was awake at all. Color was returning to his cheeks, and when it came time for her to wash his arm again, he pushed the blankets down to bare it for her with his own power.

"How long?" he queried softly.

"Were you out of it?" Though it felt a little silly, she blew along his skin as she'd seen Fox's mother do, watching the way the dark hairs on his forearm moved against his skin.

"Two days. Two very long, very scary days."

"Scary? Did something happen?"

Lydia paused, the damp cloth resting in the crook of his elbow, and looked at him with wide eyes. "You mean other than the fact that I couldn't wake you up, I couldn't get you warm, and I was convinced that you'd die any second? No, nothing happened at all."

The lines between his brows eased, to be replaced with a soft smile curving his mouth. "You worried about me."

"Of course, I did." She resumed cleaning his arm, still amazed at how vibrant the other colors were in his tattoo.

"You don't think I'd actually want you to die, do you?"

"No. It's just been a long time since anyone was concerned about my well-being. Thank you."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Her face flamed. "Fox and his mother were plenty worried about you, too, you know. You should have seen how fast he jumped when he saw you lying here." When she blew across his skin this time, she bowed deeper so that her hair fell over her cheeks. The gentle weight of his other hand between her shoulder blades made her breath catch in her throat, but Lydia finished the path to his wrist without interruption.

"I regret alarming you so," Del murmured. His fingers toyed with the loose ends of her hair. "But I regret even more that I lost two days with you."

It was hard to concentrate with his light touch sending tremors down her spine. "You would have been bored," she joked. Anything to keep her mind on what she was doing. "All I did was read to you."

She heard him sigh. "I think I would have enjoyed that immensely."

After another half dozen swipes along his arm, Lydia sat up, but when she tried to pull away, Del's soft touch on her wrist stopped her.

"Would you read again?" Though his fingertips tickled where they caressed her tender skin, his intent gaze kept her from moving. "It would pass the time for both of us. While I regain my strength."

She nodded in mute agreement, bending to place the bowl of herbed water on the floor and to pick up the book. Common sense should have had her on the floor while she continued on with the story, but the solid line of his covered legs pressing into her side was too comforting to give up. So she stayed on the bed, and when his hand came to rest on

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

her bent knee as she read, Lydia didn't brush it away. It felt right. More right than anything had felt in a very long time. And if her voice faltered every now and again when he would absently stroke her leg through her skirt, that was okay, too.

Del was awake. He was recovering.

That was what mattered.

* * * *

The lengthening shadows from the open window marked the passing hours. Lydia read to a silent Del, occasionally glancing at him through her lashes to make sure he was still awake, with her only reprieves his hourly baths. He would ask for water then, and she drank as well, soothing her ragged throat, but otherwise, he never said a word, seemingly content to listen to the sound of her voice. He only spoke when her stomach grumbled, reaching out to cover the page with his broad hand.

"You should eat. And rest. I would hate to see you overtax yourself taking care of me."

Lydia closed the book, missing the weight of his touch as he withdrew his hand. "You need something, too. Water isn't going to do it for you."

"It will suffice for now." The smile he offered was conciliatory. "I will eat in the morning. I promise."

In spite of how certain he sounded, she was reluctant to move, her fingers playing with the spine of the book. The cut on his shoulder looked noticeably smaller and less angry, and his body heat had risen enough for her to be aware of it through the blankets. The improvement in such a short time

was extraordinary, but considering what else she had experienced in the past week, she was done asking questions. He'd explain it away as part of the Kootenai medicines or something like that anyway, she was sure. Hadn't she seen it firsthand?

"Eat," Del repeated. "Please. For me, Lydia."

The simple entreaty worked more effectively than any logic he might have presented. With one last check to make sure he was comfortable, Lydia stood, wincing when her legs protested from having been bent for so long. She felt his gaze on her as she bustled around the cabin, and she heard his soft sigh when she finally sat down again with a plate of the leftover stew in her lap. By the time she risked glancing at him, Del's eyes were closed, his chest rising and falling with the slow, even breath of sleep.

There was an initial moment of panic during which she rushed over to press a hand to his forehead. Warm. A little too warm. Like it was supposed to be. A closer scrutiny showed the flickering of his eyes behind his lids, a sure indication that he was alert and dreaming. There was no reason to worry.

She hesitated before returning to her meal, her fingertips ghosting over his brow. Without the hindrance of agonizing whether or not he would awaken, it was easy to get lost in how innocent he appeared when he slept, how the lines at the corners of his eyes smoothed, how his full mouth became so soft. The temptation to lean down and kiss him was overwhelming; the only way to combat it successfully was to stand and get away from the bed, turn her back on her

growing desire and focus on simpler tasks. Eating. Sleeping eventually.

Tomorrow, perhaps, she'd be able to decipher what it all meant. When the worst of her worrying was behind her.

Lydia was yawning by the time she finished her meal, and though Del still slept, she gathered her nightshirt to change into in the outhouse. She changed in record time and wrapped her heavy coat around her as she raced back for the warmth of the cabin, head bowed against the cold, thoughts heavy with what the next few weeks might bring. By the time she curled up in front of the fireplace, the blankets wrapped tightly around her, her head was brimming with possibilities.

Sleep came quickly, the exhaustion from tending to Del and fretting over his health surpassing any determination to see him through the night. Her dreams were chaotic, a jumble of colors and sensations that defied explanation, and when she woke from them, she half-expected to find the same sort of confusion surrounding her.

What she found instead was quiet.

Dead quiet.

No flickering of the flames in the fireplace.

No soft rhythm of Del's breathing from the bed.

Lydia lifted her head and twisted to check on how he was doing. Her heart lurched when she saw the blankets pushed back and the empty sheets exposed to the cooling cabin air.

Leaping to her feet, she shivered as she made contact with the cold floor, reaching down to grab a blanket and wind it around her as she looked frantically around. The fire had died at some point, now only embers glowing in the ashes, and

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

night still shrouded the room. An unfamiliar shadow at the end of the bed drew her closer, and Lydia frowned when she saw the chest standing open, the darker shapes scattered around it testifying that someone had pawed through its contents in search of something.

That someone had to be Del, she realized. And if he wasn't in the cabin, he could only be outside.

She raced for the door, throwing it open to call for him regardless of the fact that she was barefoot and half-freezing. She had only taken a single step over the threshold when she halted, her eyes going wide at the sight before her.

Just a few feet in front of the cabin, Del stood in the crystal moonlight clad only in his boots and trousers. His torso gleamed with sweat that contoured the sculpted muscles of his back, and he held his hands out to either side, palm down, as if he was trying to balance himself. She hadn't heard it inside, but out here, the sound of his murmuring was unmistakable, with words she didn't understand tumbling from his mouth. It made her heart race, her blood pound. Especially when she saw the slaughtered deer lying at his feet.

Blood dripped from the animal's neck into the ground, staining the snow so that it appeared black in the silvery moonlight. A slight wind began to rustle through the trees, growing louder with every syllable from Del, and as she watched, the blood began to ripple and spread, flowing outward from the carcass as it seemed to race to opposite corners of the cabin. She craned her neck to see it disappear around the building, but before she could turn back, a loud

clap of thunder made her jump, her gaze flying upward to inspect the sky.

It was completely clear. Stars twinkled down at her, mocking her alarm. If there was a storm brewing, it was miles away.

Lydia lowered her head to find herself face-to-face with Del. His eyes burned with blue fire, and his mouth was a thin, tight line. "Go back inside, Lydia," he ordered in a tone of voice she'd never heard him take before.

She bristled. "What the hell are you doing out here? You're the one who should be in bed, not me."

His nostrils flared, and she swore she saw sparks dance from his fingertips to the ground. "I'm ensuring this doesn't happen again. Now. Go. Inside."

"This?" She dared a step closer. "You mean you getting hurt? What happened?"

Another clap of thunder made her gasp, her head instinctively turning in the sound's direction. The blood she'd seen on the ground had come racing back, encircling the house in a black noose, and the snow that had rested in its path was completely melted away.

"Something attacked the house when I was chopping wood the other day," Del said. She shifted her attention back to him, unsurprised that he was still taut with some unseen strain. "The only way to keep you safe from it was to lure it away."

"And let it attack you instead."

"It would have come for me after it was done with you anyway. I was simply interested in keeping its kills as few as possible."

Her mouth went dry at the thought of some wild animal getting so close to tearing her throat out. "How do we know there isn't another one out there then?" Lydia asked.

"Because it was created specifically to come after me," he explained, his voice gruff. "And I killed it."

He said it so matter-of-factly that it took her by surprise, sending a cascade of shivers down her back. Searching his face gave her no additional help, either. It was closed and unyielding, caught in whatever ritual he'd been doing when she'd come out. For the first time since meeting him, Lydia felt the fringes of the power he kept talking about. His words after their kiss suddenly made infinite more sense.

"Why would something come after you?" she demanded. "And don't tell me there's nothing to worry about. If that happened once, it can happen again."

A glint of amusement sparkled in his eyes. "Ever the doubting Thomas," he murmured. "You're right. It could happen again. And if it does, I shall do exactly what I did this time. I gave you my word. No harm shall ever befall you, as long as I'm capable of stopping it." Lifting a hand, Del held it out with his palm up. She swallowed hard when she saw the blood from the deer soaking into his skin like he was a sponge. "Magic comes in many forms, Lydia. Not all of them are pretty."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

She lifted her chin. "You can go ahead and think you're all-powerful, but you're still human. And being out here without a shirt on, after everything that happened..."

Her voice trailed away. As she had spoken, her gaze had flickered to his shoulder, a natural happenstance since it was his wound that drew her concern.

Except ... it was gone.

Like the rest of his exposed flesh, his shoulder glistened with sweat, but the skin was clear and unbroken, his tattoo unblemished. The world would never know that he had ever been hurt at all.

"What...?"

Heedless of the cold, Lydia moved even closer, reaching out to trace over the spot on his shoulder where the gash had been. At the first contact of skin to skin, a jolt of electricity jumped from him to her, shooting up her arm and straight to her veins, but when she jerked back in reflex, Del's hand snapped up and clamped around her wrist, holding her still.

Heat spread from his grip into her flesh, chasing after the fading fire that had just wound its path through her body. She was breathless when she managed to lift her gaze to his and more so when he tugged her against his hard chest.

"Do you know how mad you've driven me over the past twelve years?" he rasped. Though not painful, his hold was unbreakable, and his other hand came up to curl around the back of her neck. With her body flush to his, all thoughts of the chill were banished, his heat and the force of his attention driving them far, far away. "Yet I never dreamed..." Del licked

his bottom lip, lashes lowering as he became transfixed by her mouth. "You worried about me. Why?"

"Because you were hurt."

"There's more. I know there is."

The hard line of his erection was growing increasingly obvious, pressing into her stomach. "You've taken care of me," she managed, though her thighs were tingling, and it was taking all her concentration not to grind against him.

"And I thought we were friends."

"Friends." He muttered the word with such disdain that she wondered what it was that was possessing him. The magic, maybe? Del tightened his fingers in her hair, prickling her scalp as he tilted her head back. "Not enough."

The slam of his mouth to hers was not unexpected, though its voracity was. The kiss was savage, hungry, and everything their first had not been, assaulting her every nerve and making her head spin. Her lips parted of their own volition, making Del groan as his tongue swept past to taste and explore with a thoroughness that had her gasping for breath. He refused to let her go, though. His fingers remained entwined in her hair, and the hand he'd had around her wrist slid down to cup her ass, pressing her harder against his arousal until her legs threatened to give out on her.

"Del..." Lydia tried in between kisses, but it was lost with the growing flood of desire surging through her. Bracing against his chest, she returned the kiss, stroke for stroke, her nails digging unconsciously into the sinuous muscle.

He was panting when he finally pulled back. "Do you feel what you do to me?" he demanded. She stumbled slightly as

he began to inch her back toward the doorway. "I think I can forget every good intention I have when it comes to you, Lydia."

"You said..." Her tongue darted out to lick her swollen lower lip and caught the sharp taste of blood. "I'm confused. I don't know what you want any more."

"The same thing I've always wanted. You." His broad thumb stroked the line of her neck as Del continued to drive her back, not stopping until she felt the hard jamb against her spine. "You're mine. They've deemed it so."

She was struggling to keep up with him, her body a torrent of conflicting sensations. Fire and ice and soft and hard all mixed together, leaving her head whirling, her skin aflame.

"You feel it, too," he was saying. "I know you do. Tell me you want me."

Her breath came out in a heated rush, with the words he obviously craved. "I do."

The admission had his mouth back on hers before it had faded between them, stealing what little air she had left in her lungs. They burned for the long seconds he kissed her, and when he pulled away this time, she was the one who was gasping for breath.

"What about what you said?" she asked. "The other day. About knowing who you really are."

"I think you know now. You've seen too much to delude yourself to the truth."

Lydia swallowed. "And what truth is that?"

His eyes bored into her as he considered his response.
"The creature I killed to protect us ... it wasn't the first to die at my hands. It won't be the last."

"Are you trying to scare me into thinking you're a killer?"

"I am one."

"But you wouldn't hurt me. I know that."

"That doesn't mean I'm not capable of hurting others."

The weight of his confession slowed the racing of her heart, if only by a fraction. This was her opening, this was the escape he was offering her because, for whatever reason, Del was barely in control of his desires at the moment. He practically quivered from the pent-up power, and she was pretty sure she would find bruises on her body in the morning.

It didn't change a thing.

Without speaking, Lydia leaned in and skimmed her mouth over his, inhaling the heady scent of his skin before trailing along his jaw. His stubble scraped across her tongue, and when she reached his ear, she shifted her angle downward, tasting the line of his neck until it merged with his shoulder.

His arm scooped around her back, hitching her against him. She squeaked when her feet left the ground, but before she could protest, Del carried her inside the cabin, kicking the door shut behind him. Taking her to the bed, he stretched Lydia out atop the mussed blankets and covered her body with his. There was no hesitation as his mouth sought hers out again, as ravenous now as it had been outside, and she moaned in the back of her throat as her arms coiled around his strong back.

Though the cabin had chilled with the absence of the fire, Lydia was oblivious to it, the heat pouring off Del's skin more than enough to warm her through. He didn't give her time to think about the right or wrong of what they were doing. His hands traced down her curves, molding her shirt over her hips, before reaching the bare skin of her thighs, and when he slipped beneath the cotton to run his fingertips along the edge of her panties, she spread her legs wider to accommodate him.

"I imagined this..." Del murmured against her skin. His thumbs slipped beneath the elastic, gliding along the outer lips of her pussy. When he brushed across her clit, they both gasped, and he broke away, pulling one hand free so that he could push himself up and look at her. "But I could not imagine you returning my desire. I feared it."

Her mouth worked. It took a moment for her to find her voice again. "Why?"

His eyes burned with an emotion she wasn't sure she could identify. "Because I have never wanted anything more than I want you," Del breathed. "I know how that can consume your thoughts, compel you to take risks that you might not otherwise." His thumb glided across her slit, sinking into her wetness to outline her opening. "Your body can't lie to me. You wish for this as much as I do, don't you?"

Smoothing her hands down his bare back, Lydia slid her hands inside the back of his pants to cup the taut muscle of his ass. Her boldness took him by surprise, but a pleased smile curved Del's mouth as he pulled her panties off and out of his way.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

"I've waited long enough, I think," he said. He made short work of her clothes, unbuttoning the shirt so that she was bare beneath him, before turning his hand to his trousers. It took only seconds for the wet tip of his cock to drag along her stomach, and even less time for him to angle his hips and position himself at her pussy.

Lydia whimpered as Del thrust inside her in a long, fluid stroke that left his balls heavy against her bottom. Squeezing her eyes shut, she arched her neck back into the pillow as her inner walls clamped around his shaft, but Del wasn't waiting for her to adjust to him. Already, he was pulling back, then driving forward again, rough and deliberate as he burned past her tight muscles.

His mouth settled along the column of her throat, suckling at the tender skin as he licked and kissed a path down to her shoulder. Lydia became aware of words interspersed with the contact, but what he might actually be saying escaped her. Every nerve ending burned, from the ragged edges Del left with his teeth and tongue to the even drives of his length inside her pussy. She wanted it harder and faster and harder again, but the onslaught stole Lydia's voice, leaving her no means to let him know of her needs except through her body.

So she clenched around his cock, and she met him thrust for thrust, and she fought for breath when his mouth finally returned to hers, still hungry, still demanding, still murmuring every time they parted. Del slipped a hand between their bodies and found her aching breast, drawing even more moans from her throat, but the moment he pinched a pebbled

nipple between his fingers, she tore her mouth away from his and cried out as everything unfurled inside her.

Her orgasm seemed to ignite Del further, quickening his pace so that the coarse hair at the base of his cock scraped across her clit on every punishing stroke. He buried his face in her neck, teeth raw against her skin, and now his murmurs were clearer, his choice of sentiment intoxicating and terrifying and almost unbelievable, all at the same time. It left her clutching at his sweat-slicked back, her eyes squeezed shut, her blood a barrage inside her ears. When he came with her name on his lips and the electricity streaming over his skin, Lydia shuddered with the unexpected ripples of a second orgasm and joined him for seconds of black oblivion.

His mouth came back to hers before her body had quieted, his kisses still edged with hunger but softer somehow, more thorough. Without slipping from her depths, Del rolled them onto their sides, holding her so close to his chest that she struggled for a moment to breathe. Then he pulled away, sighing with satisfaction as he rested his brow against hers, and all was right again.

"Stay with me tonight," he whispered. "I would like one night where my dreams might be real."

Lydia nodded, too warm and too comfortable now to consider leaving his side. She watched his eyes flutter shut, and within seconds, his breathing evened out in sleep.

Rest escaped her. Her thoughts were too scattered to focus on any one thing long enough to relax.

He was an enigma, this Del Wessner. So gentle with her by the light of day and yet so forceful and driven at other times.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

She believed that he wouldn't hurt her, but there was no doubt about what he'd been doing in front of the cabin. If she concentrated, Lydia still smelled the blood ringing the house. How much more blood had he spilled in his checkered past? Was that why he was so cautious around her? Was he afraid of what she'd think?

Whatever it had been, Lydia knew she trusted the man who held her possessively now in his arms. What scared her the most, though, was knowing how close she teetered on the brink of feeling even more for him. Her desire was already inescapable. What would happen if her respect turned into something else? She had less than a month left with Del. She couldn't afford to have her heart broken because she had to leave him behind.

But she didn't think she could stop the cascade of emotions, either.

Chapter Eleven

She woke up alone.

With her heart suddenly pounding, Lydia rolled over and blinked as the shape by the fireplace solidified, coming into focus as she dispelled the last vestiges of sleep. Her moment of alarm fled as swiftly as it had struck. Del wasn't gone again. He sat in one of the chairs, head bowed, forearms resting against his knees as he stared into the fire with his long hair hanging over his face, obscuring his features from view.

"Morning," she murmured.

His shoulders tensed at the soft sound of her voice, but otherwise, he didn't move. "Are you cold?" His tone was oddly neutral. "I'm afraid the fire died in the night. I should have watched it more carefully."

Lydia frowned and sat up. The shirt she wore fell open, the buttons still undone from Del's attention the night before, and she tugged it shut, self-conscious in light of his distant behavior. "It was out when you came in. Don't you remember?"

His exhalation was audible, and his tense shoulders sagged. At some point, he had changed his clothes, his chest and injury now hidden from her inspection. "My attention was not on the fire then." When she shifted on the mattress as if to rise, he stood so abruptly that he knocked over the chair. "I'll fetch more wood."

She watched him right the seat and grab his coat, doing everything he could not to look at her. She had spent far too long contemplating the new shift in their relationship before finally falling asleep, but the last thing she had expected was for Del to pretend it had never happened. He had been so insistent, so hungry for it, that the possibility had never occurred to her. Yet here he was, walking out without even being able to meet her eyes.

"Del..."

His hand hesitated on the door knob. "I can draw a bath for you as well. It will take longer..."

"Are you mad at me about last night?"

She hated how needy she sounded but knew if she didn't get an answer, it would eat at her. Three weeks like this would be hell.

Del's head snapped toward her, eyes clouded as he stared at her in disbelief. "No," he said. "The shame is mine. I allowed my magic to take control and used you for my own pleasure." His grip tightened on the door. "I am so sorry, Lydia."

Her mind raced. "So ... what happened between us..." She fumbled to button her shirt up, too aware of how she must look to him. "I thought you wanted it. You asked me to stay."

"I did. Do. But I shouldn't have..." With a frustrated sigh, Del ran a hand through his hair, pushing it out of his way to rub at his eyes. "I shouldn't have taken advantage of you like that. But protection spells are powerful, and you came out when I was still in the midst of it, and ... it's difficult for me to

control my impulses then. It's not how I imagined our first time together would be."

In light of how he had behaved, his explanations made perfect sense, easing her gnawing fear. Lydia stood, and though Del tensed as she approached him, he didn't run away.

"You didn't force me to do anything I didn't want," she confessed when she stood in front of him. There was a slight tremor in her fingers when she reached to push his coat from his shoulders, and he tensed beneath her touch. "If that's why you're running away, don't."

The tip of his tongue appeared to moisten his bottom lip, but she still saw the raw emotion lurking in his eyes. "I'm sorry," Del whispered.

Lydia shook her head. "I'm not."

His mouth was soft and warm when she leaned up to brush a kiss across it. At first, Del didn't react, standing there, frozen, while she lifted a hand to his chest. When she started to caress him through his thin shirt, however, he came to life, reaching to grasp her wrist in his strong fingers as he pulled back.

"Why not?" he asked. The single word was a scant breath, almost lost in the pounding of her heart in her ears.

She remembered his response to her same question just a few hours previous and wondered if he noticed the irony. "You think you have a monopoly on all these crazy feelings? Nothing I said to you last night was a lie."

Lydia stopped his argument with another kiss. It was not in her nature to be so bold with men, but the ice had already

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

been broken, and fear that she'd lose this opportunity with Del because of his self-imposed sense of honor drove her to push her boundaries. Tracing the seam of his mouth with her tongue, she breathed in the smoky scent of his skin, letting it fill her head. It took a few seconds for Del to relax, but when he did, his hand loosened around her wrist, and his lips parted to join her in the caress.

She moaned in contentment as the kiss deepened. A draft from beneath the door wrapped around her bare ankles, but Lydia was oblivious to the chill, the heat of his body seeping through the thin layers of their clothes. She seemed to forget about those kinds of things a lot when she was this close to Del. He had a way of blocking everything out in her world but him.

Pulling her arm free, Lydia fumbled for the buttons on his shirt, never breaking from the slow languor of their kisses. Del jerked when her fingers skimmed across his bare skin, and it wasn't until she guided him back against the closed door that he relaxed again.

"Let me show you how much I want you," she murmured. "You'll see. There's absolutely nothing for you to apologize for."

She edged away to let him watch what she was doing. One by one, she finished with his buttons, then slid her hands beneath the fabric to push it from his shoulders, smoothing over the knotted muscles with every inch. Her gaze immediately went to his injury, except it wasn't there any more, nothing left but her memories of how cold he had been.

"I was so scared." Lydia skimmed her mouth over the whorls of his tattoo, following the inked curves upward with the tip of her tongue. "When I thought you were gone, and then when I thought you would die..." Her cheeks flamed from the combined heat of her breath bouncing from his flesh and the fire that seemed to burn him from within. "You're not the only one who was tired of waiting."

Through her lashes, she saw his hands clench and unclench, though they remained at his sides. "You did not say anything."

"I couldn't." She nibbled the sinew along his neck, finding the soft skin below his ear. "Once you started touching me, my mouth forgot how to work."

Del shuddered as she scraped her tongue across his rough stubble. "I remember..." He swallowed, and she chased the bob of muscles with her teeth. "You didn't forget how to kiss."

"No," Lydia breathed. She straightened and met his eyes. "I didn't."

There was no hesitation from either of them when she kissed him this time. Del's lips parted at the first touch of her tongue, and the hands he'd kept from touching her now came up to cup her face, strong fingers lacing through her hair as he held her still for the caress. She arched into him, nipples pebbling beneath her shirt where they brushed against his hard chest. Already, she regretted doing the buttons back up. She wanted to feel his skin rubbing against hers, wanted to sear with the heat that she feared would combust him some day.

She settled for running her hands across his chest, finding the hard points of his flat nipples and flicking across them with a fingernail.

Del broke away from the kiss, hissing at the sharp contact. "I almost believe you are testing my impulses again," he said.

Lydia shook her head. "I just want to touch you." She glanced down and watched her hands map his carved muscles, fingertips memorizing every line, every curve. "You don't even know how gorgeous you are, do you?"

There was no verbal response, only the sound of his breathing as it grew more ragged with each inch she explored. When she began to slide lower, scratching across his abdomen and closer to the hard line of his arousal, Del moaned and freed his hands from her hair, giving her the liberty to fall to her knees.

Her fingers were clumsy as she undid the leather laces of his pants. Lydia kept expecting him to stop her, to make some sort of excuse about why she shouldn't do this, but it never came, not when she finally got the closing undone, not when she slipped her hands beneath the fabric to push it down his hips.

The sight of his thick cock jutting out from the dark hair made her mouth water. Glancing up through her lashes, Lydia met Del's gaze as she let her hands graze over his thighs, feeling the muscles jump as she inched closer to his heavy sac. "I want to taste you, too," she murmured. Deliberately, she darted her tongue out and caught the small drop of pre-cum collecting on the tip of his cock. When he groaned, she

smiled and gripped him at the base, holding his length steady. "Unless you want me to stop."

"Don't stop," Del rasped.

She hadn't really intended to, but knowing he was as eager for it as she was lent an added edge to her oral attention. Sucking the velvety head past her lips, Lydia held it there as her tongue finished exploring the ridge, swallowing the heat and the tang as his groans grew louder. He tasted of salt and smoke, and though her mouth prickled at the heady mixture, she pulled off, holding his cock up so that she could lick a trail from the dripping tip all the way to his balls.

Del swore under his breath at the gentle contact, tensing as she swirled her tongue around the sac. His legs spread further apart as he braced himself against the door, and his hands returned to her head, tangling in her hair to caress her nape in the same lazy rhythm she set with her mouth. She pumped his shaft in long, slow strokes as she sucked first one ball and then the other into her mouth. Each time brought another groan from Del, inspiring her to continue, but when he began to push his hips forward with every pull of her hand, Lydia knew what it was he really wanted.

Her hand settled at the base of his cock. Following an intricate path toward the head, she sucked away the fresh pre-cum waiting for her, savoring it as long as she could before she heard a frustrated grunt from above.

"You said you dreamt of me." She knew she was playing the part of the coquette as she looked up at him, but the black burn of his eyes only fueled her playful mood. His desire made her feel carefree, something new and dangerous for

Lydia, something she wanted to relish for as long as possible. "Did you dream of this?"

"No," he muttered, then gasped when she licked across the wet slit again. His fingers tightened against her skull. "Yes."

Pursing her lips, she blew across the head and watched him tremble, smiling at the suffusion of power that flushed through her veins. She was doing this, *she* was the one making him react so. It was intoxicating.

"I guess I'd better make it all worth it then," Lydia breathed. Bracing one palm against his muscular thigh, she opened her mouth and took in the first few inches of his length, listening to him sigh in satisfaction. His cock was thick and smooth, and she had to stretch her jaw in order to accommodate sucking him deeper, sliding down and down until she felt the head press into her throat. Then she stopped. Held him there for long seconds. His fingers tensed against her scalp, and slowly, Lydia began the long glide back to the tip. She wasn't ready to take him all the way yet.

She set a slow rhythm, always stopping just before the head would pop free of her lips, always making sure to swipe across the slit with her tongue in order to taste any more of his pre-cum collecting there. Del's groans became constant, the occasional encouragement and awe interspersed with the guttural sounds spurring her to take a little bit more, go a little bit deeper, but as she prepared to swallow him down completely, his hips shifted, breaking the tempo she had established.

"If you continue," his voice was rough, like a kitten's tongue across her skin, and she squeezed her eyes against

the cascade of shivers it sent down her spine, "I will not be able to stop."

His fingers left her hair to trail along her cheek, molding over the way it hollowed as she sucked back up his shaft. "That was kind of the point." Without letting go of where she gripped the base of his cock, she sat back on her heels in order to look up at him. "Don't you want it?"

The rise and fall of his chest was almost hypnotic, and it took Del several breaths to answer her, his gentle strokes along her face never ceasing. "I want *you*," he finally managed. His thumb brushed over her swollen lower lip. "You're all I've ever wanted."

She didn't resist when he bent to grasp her upper arms, pulling her to her feet, and she didn't speak until after he had kicked off his boots and pants, freeing his legs for movement. "And you haven't been disappointed in me?"

His mouth curled into a shy, soft smile as he circled his arms around her. "I could ask the same of you," he murmured.

"I'm not the one who had all these expectations."

"Are you certain of that?" A strong hand cupped her ass, holding her more firmly against his erection, while the other stroked up her spine. "Tell me the truth, Lydia. Seeing me as I finished the protection spell, did it frighten you?"

She started to shake her head in denial but hesitated when she noted the warning glint in his bright eyes. "It ... surprised me," she admitted. "But you don't scare me, Del. Not anymore. I know who you are now."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Everything stopped. All she heard was the rushing of her blood, and all she saw was the hope flaring in his face.

When she reached behind her to take his hand, Lydia felt the distinct tremor in his fingers as they laced through hers. She led him back to the bed and stepped out of the way to press him to the sheets first, too aware of how overwhelmed they both were at the moment. Focus on the physical, she thought as she straddled his hips. Think about the other later.

His cock jumped where it nestled against her slick pussy. As Lydia began unbuttoning her shirt again, Del reached for the ones at the bottom, working wordlessly upward until their hands met in the middle. She shrugged out of the garment while his hands smoothed over her stomach and around her hips, strong fingers digging into the soft flesh.

"I think I like this," he murmured.

Lydia tilted forward, her hands bracing against the mattress on either side of his shoulders. Her long, dark hair curtained them from the rest of the room, but there were still faint glimmers of the firelight dancing across his features.

"Why is that?"

He chuckled. "Well, it *was* because it allowed me to see all of you." One hand released her hip to come up to her breast, his thumb brushing across the dusky nipple. "But now it's because it allows me to touch you as I couldn't last night."

"You seemed to be doing your fair share of touching."

"But not enough." Del turned his head to lick across the sensitive skin of her inner arm. "I begin to wonder if it shall ever be enough."

She had started to lift her hips in preparation for sinking onto his cock, but his words made her hesitate. There was no mistaking the longing in his tone, enough to make her want to ask about the length of her stay. She didn't, though. She wasn't sure she really wanted to hear the answer.

Instead, Lydia sat back up, drawing away from the allure of his sinful mouth. "You can still touch me," she said. She drew her hands down his abdomen, watching his gaze follow the path she took, and stopped when she reached the glistening head of his cock, visible past the apex of her thighs. A groan escaped his throat when she traced around the ridge, then dipped into the slit to spread his pre-cum across the smooth skin. "Even better, I get to touch you."

"Wicked woman," Del muttered, though there was a smile playing on his lips. "And what if I tire of simple touches? Will you insist on torturing me?"

"This isn't torture." Before he could argue, Lydia got up on her knees, giving herself room to lift his cock and angle it at her pussy. She lowered back down onto his length in a single fluid motion, and as the sudden rush of pleasure at the way he filled her made her shiver in excitement, she smiled down at Del. "Not moving now would be."

His eyes were closed, the muscles in his neck working as he pressed his head back into the pillow. As backward as the women's movement might find it, Lydia took silent joy in the fact that she was the reason he was so speechless right then, that it was because of how *she* was making him feel that he couldn't respond. Being considered beautiful or sexy was not the norm for her, even when she was in relationships. She

was the smart one, or the best friend, or the girl to offer a shoulder when a guy needed to unload.

Del was the first man who ever made her feel desirable, in every sense of the word. That alone was enough to make her wet.

There were seconds where she couldn't find the air in her to breathe, seconds where she simply held him inside her, seconds where all the little things and all the big things and all the things in between that had been nibbling away at her peace of mind simply vanished. And when Del finally opened his eyes to look at her, lashes dark, irises so clear and brilliant that it was impossible to misread what lurked behind them, Lydia lost herself in those same seconds, struggling to give voice to the sudden rush of emotion inside her.

"The sweetest torture," he murmured. Fingertips glided over her heating skin, finding new spots and fresh patches to tease and explore. "I fear that if I stop touching you, you'll disappear like one of my dreams."

"No." She ran her tongue over her suddenly dry lips before closing the distance to his mouth. "I'm not going anywhere."

She kissed him almost delicately, waiting until his hands slid around her back before starting to ride up and down along his cock. The strokes were short, allowing most of his shaft to constantly stay buried in her, but Del wasn't fighting to deepen them. He seemed content in her kisses, shifting from the light caresses to full explorations and back again with effortless ease. Even when she moved to taste the growing salt of his skin, all he did was bring one broad hand up to the back of her neck and hold her.

"This was how I imagined it would be," she heard him whisper.

Lydia tightened at the soft words. Though neither sped up their languid tempo, she started to lengthen her strokes, letting him slide out further, plunge in deeper, never ceasing the gentle explorations of their lips and tongues. Her fingertips grazed over his sweaty skin, along his neck, down his sides until the faint trembling in his muscles echoed into hers, and she gasped when one particular thrust had her clit scraping across the coarse hair at the root of his cock.

"God..." She rested her brow against his, her pussy clenching now around his shaft. "This is..." But she couldn't find the words. She could only return to his mouth, hungrier than ever.

Del's grip tightened around her hips, encouraging her to continue the pace, nearly sliding out of her completely before thrusting forward again. Skin rubbed with skin, hands caressed and explored, and still, Lydia felt like she was drowning in his kisses, swallowing his breaths just as Del captured her gasps. The only way not to come undone was to hold him tighter, with her pussy, with her arms, until not even that was enough.

She came with a soft cry, a sudden quivering washing through her body as she buried her face in his neck. It was falling and floating all at the same time, her only recourse to cling to him, and Del followed swiftly after, meeting her hips one more time before her name spilled from his lips.

Lydia lay atop him for several minutes while she struggled to regain control of her aching lungs. His chest was hot

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

against her cheek, and she felt the feathery brush of his mouth across the top of her head, the gentlest of caresses that mirrored those of his hands.

"I think you will be wanting that bath now," he teased.

She smiled, hidden from his view, but didn't otherwise move. "Sleep now. Bath later."

"There is work that needs to be done..."

"Are you trying to get away from me?"

His arms tightened around her. "Never."

"Then stop arguing."

They lapsed into silence, giving Lydia the chance to listen to the steady thud of his heart beneath her ear. Her mind drifted, lulled by the residual languor of her orgasm. She was almost asleep when she mused aloud, "I hope you believe me now."

His reply was barely a breath, so ephemeral that she felt it through the vibrations of his skin more than heard it.

"Always."

Chapter Twelve

In spite of his protestations that he felt infinitely better, Lydia insisted on continuing the hourly baths Fox's mother had prescribed. "Think of it as an excuse for me to get my hands on you," she teased as she prepared the water.

The hunger in his eyes made her thighs tighten. "You do not need to fabricate reasons to touch me." Rolling onto his side, Del reached for her skirt, tugging to force her to sit on the edge of the mattress. "Come back to bed."

Lydia slapped away the hand that had disappeared beneath the flowing fabric as she twisted out of his grip and back to her feet. "As tempting as that is..."

This time, when he yanked her back, she squeaked, falling against his broad chest. The rest of her objections were silenced by his mouth on hers, hard and sweeping as he pushed past her nonexistent defenses, and she sank into the caress for the space of long seconds before bracing against him and pushing up.

"I'm not having you relapse because we're both horny," she said, warning a wagging finger in his direction. "One of us has to be the grown-up here."

Del fell back onto his pillows, a boyish grin splitting his features. "Do not tell me you don't grow tired of always being responsible. I know you. I know you crave the freedom to forget about your obligations, just as I do."

Lydia snorted. "You have obligations? You live by yourself in the middle of nowhere. We'll talk about wanting to escape

from it all once you have a boss breathing down your neck, bills to pay, and a mother who wants nothing more than grandchildren."

He only laughed and made room for her to sit again as she dipped her cloth into the bowl of herbed water. "And why shouldn't she, when she has a daughter who turned out like you?" His gaze followed the sweeps of her hand, climbing up and down his arm, and when he spoke again, his voice had grown soft. "Though I suppose that is to my benefit. If you had married and started a family, I would never have known the pleasure of your company."

She hesitated in mid-stroke. "Would you have stopped sending the music boxes?"

"Knowing how you appreciated them?" Del shook his head. "But perhaps my urgency for your companionship would have been tempered, knowing you loved another. I would not have wished to tear you away from that."

Though there was a wistful melancholy in his tone now, she chuckled at his words. "Somehow, I don't consider waiting twelve years for me to show up as urgent," she said. "You must have the patience of a saint."

That wiped away the last vestiges of his good humor, and his hand fell from where he had been absently stroking the small of her back. She heard him take a breath as if to speak, but whatever it was he wanted to say never came. The room remained silent until she rose and carried the bowl to the table.

"When you return to your life," he had all his attention focused on the ceiling, as if looking at her while he spoke

would frighten the words into hiding, "will you write of me? Of us, what happened here?"

"I thought about it," Lydia confessed. "But I don't know. That might hit a little too close to home."

"I think I would like it if you did. To know that there were words somewhere giving testimony to what happened."

"But we'll know. Isn't that enough?"

Del fell quiet again, his fingers toying with the edges of the blanket. The colors in his tattoos seemed to have ebbed, the black whorls coming back the fore to overwhelm the smaller splashes of red and blue. A trick of the light, she decided, even if it did make her slightly uneasy.

"I find myself growing greedy," he finally said. "Perhaps not so surprisingly."

Her footfalls were slow as Lydia returned to his side, her weight bowing the mattress and bringing their bodies back into contact. "It looks to me like you've been denying yourself a lot," she said. "I don't see what's so wrong in taking a little for your own for a change."

Del closed his eyes for a moment, his lashes long and dark against his cheeks. "You've seen what I've chosen for you to see. There is much about my life that would shock you, Lydia."

These continued hints at some sort of darkness in him—more so than she had already witnessed—were growing thin. "So tell me about it," she dared. "You seem bound and determined to scare me away. Let's see you try."

At the very least, her challenge drew his attention back to her. "I don't need to scare you away," Del murmured. "I shall

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

lose you soon enough as it is. I will not taint the time we have left with sordid stories about my misdeeds."

For as forthright as he had been about so much in his life, this turnabout was a little exasperating. "So you can know all about me but I don't get the same courtesy? I wouldn't ask if I didn't want to know."

He sighed, a sound so soft that she felt it across her skin. "You ask because you cannot comprehend the possible responses."

"I got over the whole magic thing, didn't I? And let's not forget jumping a century back in time. Give me a little credit, Del. If my mind has ever been open enough to accept what you can tell me, it's now."

"Perhaps," he conceded. Abruptly, he pushed the blankets and sat up, reaching for his pants draped over the end of the bed. Lydia rose and moved out of his way so that he could put them on, a sense of unease beginning to curl in her stomach. "I suppose I fear losing what we've gained."

His hair hung over his face as he bent to slip on his boots, and her fingers itched to push it out of the way so that she could read what was going on inside his head. "Maybe you should let me be the judge of that," she said. "You were the one who didn't want me unless I knew who it was I was getting into bed with. I thought seeing you with that deer last night and not freaking out was enough to convince you that I knew what I was doing."

When he straightened, his eyes were inscrutable. "Do you really want to hear about all the men I've killed?"

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

It came out as simply as if he'd asked her what she wanted for dinner. Del remained unflinching, muscles tense, his normally soft mouth pulled into a tight line, and Lydia fought not to reach out to him and try to smooth away the lines between his brows. He was professing himself a murderer. Clearly, he expected it to shock her.

"I know these are different times," she said slowly. "It's more ... tooth and nail here than it is in my time. If I'm not going to judge you by my society's standards, why do you insist on doing it?"

Lifting his hand, Del cupped the side of her face, his broad thumb stroking her jaw in soft, gentle sweeps that belied the sobriety in his eyes. "You have such a trusting soul," he murmured. "The last thing I ever wished was to take that away from you."

"You haven't."

"I have." Turning away from her to go to the chest, he squelched any hope of a direct rebuttal by changing the subject. "Fox and his mother deserve something for all their help. I'm going to hunt and see what I can catch for them."

It worked. Lydia's brows shot up. "You can't go out. You're supposed to be in bed recuperating."

"I'm well enough for this." Del grabbed his coat and shotgun, but before retreating to the door, he was back at her side, brushing a kiss across her cheek. "I will return before sundown."

It wasn't until after the door shut behind him that Lydia wondered if she could have physically stopped him. Somehow, she doubted it. He was determined to avoid the

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

topic of his darker past as assuredly as he had been determined to keep her from harm. That, in and of itself, wasn't such a big deal. People kept secrets all the time; she certainly didn't go digging around into the past of every guy she had ever slept with if they didn't want her to.

She just couldn't shake the foreboding feeling that not knowing was a mistake.

* * * *

By the time Del returned at dusk, Lydia had banished the worst of her fears, choosing instead to concentrate on everything that had been right about the past twenty-four hours instead of issues that obviously bothered him to discuss.

Like the fact that Del was strong enough to venture out hunting when only thirty-six hours previously, he'd been weak and bedridden.

Like the fact that he made her feel more desirable than any other man she'd known, making her wet and ready for him with a single look.

Like how he didn't stop at just looking.

When she heard his step outside the door, Lydia dropped the book she'd been reading by the fire and raced for the door. Her body was taut with the lush memories of his mouth, and all she wanted was another taste, another kiss, another touch. It was all she had been able to think about for the latter part of the afternoon. It grew even worse when she saw him standing in the soft orange of the setting sun.

His cheeks were ruddy from the cold, his hair disheveled. Though his back was to the door when it opened, he glanced back from where he was hanging up the rabbits he'd killed to meet her gaze.

It felt like all the air was sucked from her lungs. Lydia thought she could see him every day until she was eighty and she would never get over how intense his eyes were. Her feet were moving, and her arms were around his neck before she could stop herself, startling Del into letting go of his work.

"What's wrong?" he asked, holding her tightly against his chest.

She answered him by pressing her lips to his, relishing how quickly he opened to her. The kiss lasted only seconds, but it was as hard and hungry as her rising desire had been in his absence, and it left both of them gasping for breath when she pulled away.

"What was that for?"

Lydia smiled. "I need to have a reason to want to touch you?"

He chuckled, his hands warm where they smoothed over her back. "I wasn't sure you would wish that again, after how I left things."

"I shouldn't have pressed..."

"No." Taking her hand in his, Del led her back to the house. "All I considered while I was out was what I said to you. Yes, I fear how you'll perceive me if you know the extent of my dishonor, but denying you what you wish would be just as harmful, I think. So if you have questions you would like

answered, ask them." He held the door open for her to enter first. "I'll answer as truthfully as I can."

It was a development she hadn't considered. Lydia contemplated the implications as Del disengaged and settled in, taking off his coat as he went to the hearth. He bent over the leftover bubbling stew, inhaling deeply, before glancing back to see her hovering near the door.

"And now you feel the need to stay as far from me as possible?" he teased.

"You keep surprising me, is all."

He held out his hand to her, waiting for her to come to him. "Which is why I offered to answer your questions."

By the time she crossed the room, she knew what her first would be. Lydia let Del pull her to the floor in front of the fire, sitting opposite him with their knees touching. "Your magic," she said softly. "Do you think it's a good thing, or a bad thing?"

His humor sobered in the face of her query, though to his credit, Del didn't pull away. "I should have anticipated such a fearless beginning from you," he murmured. "Are you prepared to be dissatisfied with my response?"

"As long as it's honest, that's all that matters to me."

He nodded. "Then I have to say, it's both."

"Of course, it is." Had she really expected him to say any differently?

Del reached across and took her hand in his. His skin was hot and dry, his thumbs rough where he massaged her palms. "You asked for honest. I've done some terrible things with my magic, Lydia. Committed acts that would shame

most men. But this same magic brought you here. To me. Tell me how that could be bad."

"I thought it wasn't entirely your power," she said.

"It wasn't. But without my magic, without being who I am, doing what I've done, we wouldn't be here, right now, having this conversation. I would do it all again a thousand times over for this." His strokes hesitated before he laced his fingers through hers. "For you."

Her second question came much more easily than her first. "Why?"

Del tilted his head as he regarded her with eyes that glowed from the reflection of the flames. The corner of his mouth lifted, and the compulsion to lean forward and kiss him again was almost too strong to ignore. She did, though. Watching him when he looked like this was just as hypnotic.

"Foolish woman," he murmured, his voice warm and rich. "I've done everything but say the words. Haven't my feelings for you been transparent from the beginning?"

And then it wasn't just his hand on hers, but his mouth coming nearer, pressing to hers in a kiss that left no more room for doubt. He still hadn't said the words. He didn't have to.

Del loved her.

It shattered the dam Lydia had placed on her own feelings. They flooded out, driving her against him, arms around his neck, mouth as hungry as his. She didn't allow herself time to consider them, or to consider his, or to consider anything but the arousal neither of them bothered to hide from the other. Desire was easy.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Loving him only to lose him was not.

* * * *

She made him wait until the sun had slipped below the horizon, but the second their land was blanketed in darkness, Kokanee released her grip on her eager son's wrist and pushed him toward the forest and away from the growing destruction of their homes.

"Go," she ordered in a voice too low to be heard by the marauders. "Bring the marked one back. He is our best hope at stopping them while there is still time to salvage what they do not destroy." She gave her son a final shove. "*Run.*"

She watched until the night swallowed him up, his youthful form as swift as the fox after which he was named. Only when she was assured that he was safely away did Kokanee turn her attention back to the potential devastation resting at the foot of the valley.

Thin plumes of smoke curled into the night sky, obscuring the vista beyond, but these were not the warming fires of her home. At least two of the hide-covered tipis smoldered from fires set by their attackers, and if the men weren't stopped, there would be more destroyed before sunrise. They had chosen to attack as cowards, when most of the men of the tribe were away on a fishing trip, and while those left behind had fought with valor, they could not battle effectively against guns.

Kokanee had slipped away with her son as soon as she heard the first shouts. It had taken all of her control to hide and watch as the men on their horses created havoc amongst

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

her community, laughing as they tormented young girls, turning their aggression into sport. She could have used her limited powers to stop one, perhaps two of them, but there were six, all men she recognized from their trading with the town, all armed with guns they couldn't fight against. Without their warriors, they had no hope of surviving the onslaught.

Only the marked one had the means necessary to help them now.

Provided he came in time.

Chapter Thirteen

Food was forgotten in the face of other hungers that left Lydia soft and sated where she stretched alongside Del in front of the fire. His arm curled possessively around her waist, keeping her firm against his semi-hard cock, and every once in a while, she felt the brush of his mouth along her jaw. Though she didn't look back at him, each one made her smile. There was something infinitely comforting about being held so precious.

"We could stay here tonight," he murmured. The warm brush of his words skimmed over her bare shoulder, and she snuggled deeper into his embrace. "Take the blankets from the bed. Stay in front of the fire. I find myself unwilling to move any time soon."

"Me, too." Lydia stroked the strong lines of his forearm. It still amazed her that only two days earlier, she had wondered if she'd ever see him up again. "I'm not convinced my legs work, either."

Del chuckled, sending reverberations straight down her spine. "Not even to climb on top of me again? I think I'd like to see how beautiful you are with the fire dancing along your skin. You would shine, I believe. Probably take my breath away, more so than you already do."

"It is my turn..."

A crash outside the door made both of them jump, and Del let Lydia go to twist and stare at the door. Within seconds came the sound of furious pounding, followed by Fox's

panicked voice. She didn't understand what he was saying, but Del obviously did, leaping to his feet and grabbing his pants in the same liquid movement.

She barely had time to grab his coat and wrap it around her nakedness before Del threw open the door and Fox came barreling inside. The young Kootenai was wild-eyed and disheveled, a long gash tearing his leather breeches along his calf. He ignored Lydia's presence and began pulling at Del's arm, trying to drag him from the cabin.

Del took Fox by the shoulders and held him still, speaking to him in a low, even voice that should have calmed the boy. Instead, it brought forth a fresh barrage of unintelligible words accompanied by frantic hand gestures, all indicating that he wanted Del to go with him.

"What is it?" Lydia asked. Though she kept her distance, she skirted the pair so that she could better see their faces. If she couldn't understand what Fox was saying, all she needed was to gauge Del's reactions to know what his intentions were.

A brittle tension locked Del's jaw, and any sign of his earlier humor was gone. "His tribe's been attacked."

He spoke again to Fox, this time pointing to the door. With a sharp nod, Fox backed away, slipping out into the dark night more quietly than he had left it.

Del didn't look at her as he marched over to the pile of discarded clothing, doing up his pants before stepping into his boots and reaching for his shirt. "Bar the door after me," he instructed. "The protection spell will work on any wraiths

should they appear, but it won't hold against mortal men if they're on a rampage tonight."

Lydia's eyes widened. "What're you doing?"

His mouth was a grim line. "Stopping them from hurting any more innocent people."

He didn't bother with the buttons on his shirt and held out his hand out to her. It took a moment for her to realize that he wanted his coat, but instead of handing it over, she clutched it closer around her curves, taking a step back.

"So that they can hurt you instead? I don't think so."

"I won't get hurt."

"You're still recovering!"

"I think we can agree that I've more than regained my strength." When he advanced another foot, she countered by backing away, drawing a long, frustrated growl from his throat. "Give me my coat, Lydia. I don't have time for this nonsense. It may be too late as it is."

Her mind raced, desperate to find a compromise. "Then I'm going with you."

She began gathering her underwear, slipping it on without taking off the jacket. She was stopped by his forceful grip on her bicep.

"These men are dangerous," Del said. His eyes glinted with a fury she hadn't seen before. "And likely intoxicated. They usually are when they do this. I won't have you putting yourself in their line of fire."

Lydia yanked away, pulling her panties up around her hips. "You can't stop me."

"I can."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

The finality of his tone made her pause. "You wouldn't."
"Don't force me to do so."

They were at a stalemate, and they both knew it. The only chance she had to get out of the house now was to use logic on Del and give him something he couldn't argue with.

"If those men end up here while you're gone," she said, lifting her chin, "I'm not going to stand a chance. You have one gun, and I'm assuming you're taking it. If they're as dangerous as you say, do you really want to risk leaving me here defenseless?"

A muscle in his jaw twitched. "Odds are greater that you would get hurt coming with me. You stay."

"What if I promise to keep out of the way?" Lydia pressed. "Leave me with Fox if you want. And then you've got extra hands to help take care of anybody they hurt." She risked reaching out and touching him. His chest was a solid wall of muscle, taut and ready for a fight. It amazed her how quickly he could shift from thoughtful lover to warrior with barely a bat of those long lashes. "It'll be better for both of us if I go. I won't be left worrying about you, wondering if this time you're going to end up dead. And you won't be distracted, wondering if I'm in danger where you can't help me."

She witnessed the decision battling behind his eyes. "You'll hide where I tell you to hide?" he prompted. "No questions asked?"

"Yes. Anywhere. Just so long as I can see you."

His nostrils flared. Otherwise, he didn't move. "Swear to me you will stay with Kokanee, and I won't stop you from coming."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

"Tell me who Kokanee is and I'll swear anything you want."

"Fox's mother. She spirited him away from the rest of the tribe when they were attacked. Fox says she's hiding at the edge of the forest, which should keep you from danger as long as you don't do anything foolish."

Lydia was nodding long before he finished speaking, slipping the coat from her shoulders in order to put on the rest of her clothes. "Deal. And thank you, Del."

He didn't say a word, merely regarded her with eyes of steel as he put on his jacket. She finished dressing with his gaze never wavering from her, grabbed her jeans without thought, and followed him out to join Fox in front of the cabin. The Kootenai's brows shot up at the sight of her, but a barked command from Del in Fox's native tongue had the young man scurrying off into the darkness.

She had to rush to match Del's pace when he took pursuit. Hopefully, all of their efforts would matter.

* * * *

The night was a velvet mistress, attempting to take them into her arms as the trio raced through the trees, over dirty patches of snow, down slick embankments. More than once, Del glanced back to watch Lydia's progress, but she held her tongue about her burning lungs or the ankle that ached where she wrenched it. She'd asked for this. She was not going to start complaining because she wasn't in as good shape as he was.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

There were moments when she thought she lost the two men, when she slipped far enough behind that their outlines merged with those of the tree trunks and she had a moment of panic about getting lost. Then she would hear a soft whisper of snow or see something separate from the dark, and she'd find her path again, honing in on their lead as best she could. She hadn't asked how far Fox's home was, but the night stretched distance as well as time until it felt like they had been running forever.

The trees were thinning, the stars overhead now more clearly visible, when Del finally stopped. Lydia was about to ask if they were there when the acrid scent of smoke filled her nose, and she closed the distance to his side to see what had captivated his attention.

They stood at the top of a small hill. At the foot of the valley was a cluster of dark, triangular shapes, and she didn't need Del to tell her they were the Kootenai's tipis. One near the periphery had become a bonfire, sparks wafting upward to dance against the midnight sky, and the light it shed over the camp showed huddled groups of people, all with their attention fixed on a circle of horses at the community's center.

Fox materialized at Del's other side, murmuring something so low that Lydia almost missed that he was talking. Del simply nodded, his eyes blazing as they scanned over the scene.

"What are you going to do?" Lydia whispered.

"Stop them," came the terse reply.

When he took a step forward, her hand shot out and grabbed his arm. Even through the thick lining of his coat, she felt the rising scorch of his flesh.

"You're outnumbered," she argued. "At least tell me what your plan is."

Del covered her hand with his, his bare fingers even hotter than his arm, and uncurled her grip. "To stop them," he repeated. He nodded to Fox, who came up and took Lydia's elbow. "Stay hidden with Kokanee until I come for you. You promised, remember?"

She was beginning to hate her promise, but let herself be led away, along the ridge and away from where Del stood. Glancing back, she caught his eye, offering a small smile in what she hoped was reassurance.

Del smiled back, just as small but definitely there. It soothed a tiny fraction of her fear before he turned his back on her and headed down the hill. He was gone in seconds.

She felt like a lumbering clod compared to Fox and his silent steps, but he didn't give any indication that he disapproved of her noise, taking her behind the trees that edged the hill crest. The vegetation thickened for a few yards before opening into a small clearing almost completely hidden from the valley, and as soon as Fox moved inside it, a shadow separated to approach them.

The worry in Kokanee's eyes was mirrored in her swift words, though his equally rapid response seemed to alleviate it. Her hands flew over his lean form, checking for injuries, but as he continued to speak, stepping aside to reveal Lydia

behind him, Kokanee hesitated, stiffening as her attention shifted.

"Hi," Lydia offered, giving a feeble wave. "Long time, no see."

Fox's ensuing explanation softened Kokanee's stance. When Fox stepped out of the way, she took Lydia's hand and guided her to the dark shadows from which Kokanee had emerged. She gestured for Lydia to sit, then knelt at her side once Lydia was settled. Pointing toward a break in the leaves, Kokanee uttered a single word as she rested her other hand on Lydia's shoulder.

Lydia didn't understand, but she followed the line of sight Kokanee indicated, bowing a little in order to clear it. Her eyes widened when she saw the perfect view of the camp their vantage point gave them, and she squeezed the other woman's arm in appreciation. She would be able to see everything now. If anything happened to Del, she would know as soon as it occurred.

Lydia counted half a dozen horses tethered at the center of the camp. That meant there were at least six men for Del to contend with. Four of them were whooping and yelling around a second fire near the horses, and every once in a while, one would raise his pistol in the air and fire off a shot.

Those sounds were worse than the men's raucous shouts. They cleaved the otherwise calm night and brought a fresh rise of goosebumps to Lydia's arms.

Twisting her head, she tried to find Del moving down the hillside, but the ground was a rolling black morass, sucking away all light except those orange fingers cast from the

flames at the bottom. She inched forward, resting her hands on the cold earth, but when she neared the shrub in front of them, Kokanee's hand pulled at her shoulder.

Lydia turned at the insistent sound of the older woman's voice. She didn't need to understand the words to know she wanted Lydia to move away from where she might be exposed, but it was hard to just sit there and be helpless, knowing Del was so close and in such potential danger. Still, she had made him a promise. He could have used his magic on her and made it impossible for her to come. She needed to stick to her word.

Sighing, Lydia sat on her heels and looked back toward the camp. One of the four had broken away from the group to grab what looked like a young girl from an adjacent huddle. She looked tiny against the large man, and even across that distance, Lydia saw the fear twisting her broad features. He dragged her back to his friends, laughing at her struggles, and threw her to the ground.

When she tried to scramble away, he brought a heavy boot crashing down onto her hand.

The girl's scream of pain made Lydia's blood curdle.

Her fingers curled into the ground on reflex. More than anything, Lydia wanted to be down there with them, preferably with her pepper spray, to show these men what it felt like to be on the other end of the pain. Then a flicker of movement at the edge of the camp caught her eye, and she watched Del come out of the darkness and stride boldly toward the center.

Her gasp of shock was audible. He was unarmed. Somewhere between leaving her and arriving at the foot of the hill, he had stripped out of his coat and left his shotgun behind. He approached the group in his shirtsleeves, his head high, his hands loose at his sides.

The laughter died at his approach, and while the night was clear enough for the sounds of their voices to carry, Lydia was too far away to discern individual words. Del stopped several yards away from the men, exchanging a few more words before holding a hand out to the Kootenai girl on the ground. She whipped her head around to stare at the man who'd grabbed her, but when nobody moved, she pushed back up onto her hands and knees and started to crawl toward Del.

The gunshot came out of nowhere. Lydia clamped her hand over her mouth to stifle the sound of her startled scream as the Kootenai girl slumped to the cold ground.

A fresh round of laughter accompanied the fading sound of the shot. The man who had pulled the gun advanced closer to Del, shorter and stouter in stature than his friend. Smoke still drifted from the muzzle, but he kept it trained on Del as he spoke, threatening him, most likely.

Del remained motionless. The longer tendrils of the hair at his nape began to blow as if in a breeze, but Lydia didn't feel a thing in her hiding place. The shadows from the fire danced across his face, making it look as if he was talking, but he wasn't. She could still hear the distant voice of the man with the gun.

When he failed to get the reaction from Del he wanted, the armed man walked over to the girl's body, kicking it as if to

punctuate his point. His buddies' eyes shifted to him for a fraction of a second.

It was all the time Del needed, apparently.

The flames of the central fire exploded upward, columns of orange and red streaking into the sky. Stray licks reached out to the four men, igniting the hems of their coats, and their mirth turned to shouts of panic. The horses reared, and the Kootenai who had been closest to the congregation scrambled back into the safety of darkness. All the while, the only movement from Del was his hair, whipping around his cheeks.

The men dropped to the ground in an attempt to extinguish the fires. The distinct sound of sizzling when snow met flame undercoated their cries, making Lydia's skin prickle in sympathy. But even as one fire looked to be snuffed out, a new flame would leap from the pyre and start a fresh blaze, leaving each of the attacking men struggling not to burn to death.

Del never moved.

Lydia wasn't sure she could move, either. The pounding of her heart locked her into place.

The man who'd shot the girl stumbled to his feet. His beard was curling in glowing embers from the edges up to his face, but it didn't hide his snarl of rage as he lifted his gun toward Del.

If she had thought the fire created chaos, the leap of brilliant scarlet light from Del's suddenly outstretched hand to the weapon brought upon hell itself.

The gun exploded in the man's grip. Lydia cringed as the force tore the man into pieces and squeezed her eyes shut to

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

block out the worst of the gore. *Del did that.* It was all she could think, over and over again, until Kokanee's arm came around her shoulders, steadying her. The shouts of the other men overpowered the noise of the raging fire and the terrified horses, and she forced her eyes open again to see what that meant for Del.

Other than his extended hand, he still hadn't moved.

"Well, well..." The gruff voice behind them had Lydia and Kokanee whirling around. A man towered behind them, only a few feet away. "Looks like I found two runaway squaws."

Chapter Fourteen

Enough moonlight filtered through the bare branches to illuminate the man's face. His skin was leathered and lined, deep furrows running alongside his mouth, and heavy bags beneath his eyes made them appear sunken and hollow. Right now, they were gleaming with angry anticipation, jumping from Lydia to Kokanee and back to Lydia again as his lips curled into a sneer.

"Little far away from your tribe, aren't you?" he said, taking a small step forward. It dawned on Lydia that with her long dark hair and the coat given to her by the Kootenai that she probably looked like one of them in the nearly nonexistent light. Whether that was good or bad, though, she had yet to determine. "Lucky for me."

Just because Kokanee didn't understand a word the man said didn't mean she couldn't recognize a threat when she saw it. Her hand curled around Lydia's wrist, surprisingly strong, and she pushed Lydia back into the shadows, shielding her with her body.

The man chuckled. "You think you can hide? There's no place to go. You should've learned that lesson a long time ago."

Behind them, the sounds of the other men's screams and the roaring fire still raged. This one wasn't holding a gun, and when Lydia scanned what she could make out of his body, she couldn't see anyplace where he might have one

holstered. Both hands were empty. He probably didn't see two women as a menace.

Unarmed didn't mean slow, though. With a swiftness that belied his size, the man reached forward and grabbed them each by the arm, dragging them free of the foliage. Lydia fought on instinct, as did Kokanee, twisting as best she could in his grasp to try and get away. All it did was give him the leverage to clamp his forearm across her throat, pinning her back against his side, while he struggled to get Kokanee into a similar position of submission.

His jacket reeked of alcohol, making her head swim. Lydia clawed at his grip, her feet slipping on the snow, and when that didn't work, she slammed her elbow back into his abdomen. He only grunted and swiveled her around so that she faced off to the side, with less contact with his solid body.

"Wildcats, aren't you?" he growled.

Kokanee cried out in pain, and Lydia spoke without thought.

"Let us go, you son of a bitch!"

Hearing English took the man by surprise, slackening his grip enough for Lydia to twist free. She fell to the ground at the sudden release, but scrambled beyond his reach, leaping back to her feet as soon as she could.

A flicker of movement in the shadows caught her attention, and Lydia watched as Fox slunk around the edge of the clearing to flank the man. Taking courage in having back-up, she turned to face Kokanee and their attacker, lifting her chin in defiance.

"Let her go," she repeated. Her voice was calm and loud, in contrast with her fluttering stomach.

He stared at her in disbelief. "You're not one of them."

Lydia snorted. "You're a regular Einstein."

"Why would you live with these savages?"

"You mean, instead of living with civilized people like you?" She knew she shouldn't goad the man, but the righteousness of his tone made her bristle. Fox had moved out of her line of sight, which was probably good because then she couldn't accidentally tip the man off about the third presence. "Excuse me for having taste. And a sense of decency."

He exposed his teeth in a malicious sneer, and she winced inwardly when he wrapped his free hand around Kokanee's throat. "Should've wiped out the lot of you years ago," he growled. "It's going to be my pleasure to kill you both. Soon as I get a little taste first, of course."

Without taking his gaze off Lydia, he bowed his head and licked the side of Kokanee's face. The older woman stopped struggling in his grip, her eyes dark and luminous as they seemed to impart an unspoken message to Lydia, but it only made the man chuckle.

"See?" he said. "The squaw mama knows when she's beat. But don't fuss, little girl. You'll get your turn soon enough."

The figure separated from the trees behind him in a blur of black, leaping onto the man's back as a sliver of something shiny sliced through the air and buried itself between the man's shoulder blades. When he roared in pain, Lydia jumped forward to grab Kokanee free from his hold, yanking her away as their assailant tried to dislodge Fox from his back. Instead

of rushing back to the edge of the clearing, though, the two women proceeded to attack him from the front, kicking and hitting to add to Fox's efforts.

Fox grabbed the hilt of his knife and twisted, sending a fresh spray of blood splattering across his locked jaw. With a gurgled cry, the man crumpled to his knees, then fell forward, his head hitting the frozen ground with a sickening thud.

Only after several seconds passed did Lydia become aware of her burning lungs, of the ache in her knuckles where she'd scraped them in her struggles. Kokanee appeared far more composed than she felt, and when Lydia's knees quivered, threatening to give out on her, the older woman slipped a strong arm around her waist to help her to a downed tree.

As she sat down, Lydia watched Fox kneel by the man's inert form and pull his weapon free from the thick body. It made a squelching sound as it came out, but she hid her grimace of distaste by bending over, putting her head between her knees as she sucked in huge breaths of air.

"Watching Little House on the Prairie is never going to be the same again," she muttered. A gentle fluttering on her shoulder made her lift her head enough to see Fox hovering worriedly in front of her. "It's okay. I'm fine. I'm just..."

Dimly, she became aware that the screams of the other men had vanished, though the smell of smoke was thicker in the air. Panic about Del drove Lydia back to her feet. She brushed past Fox, crashing through the undergrowth and trees to emerge on the other side. Who cared if anybody saw her now?

The sky was blotted out by the dark plumes drifting up from the ebbing fires in the Kootenai camp, but the scattered groups of women and children were breaking up, figures weaving amongst the tipis like ghosts taken form. She searched the area, and it took only a few moments to find Del with the horses, appearing and disappearing behind the large animals as he calmed them down.

If the others were moving around, the danger was probably past, she reasoned. That was all it took to begin her hurried descent down the hillside.

She caught her heel on an unseen hole at one point, sliding down the slippery slope for more than a few yards until she regained her footing. When the Kootenai at the border of the encampment saw her, they darted out of her way, whispering as they melted into the darkness. They were wary of her presence, but for whatever reason, not fearful. Maybe it was because she was headed straight for Del.

He was just swinging his leg over a horse when she reached him, a frown immediately darkening his features when he spotted her. "You promised you'd stay with Kokanee," Del accused.

"I did, but I figured everything was okay now..."

"It's not." He curled the reins tightly around his fist, drawing her attention to the long black streaks that covered the backs of his hands. "There are six horses, but only four men. Two are still out there."

"One." When his frown deepened, she elaborated, "Kokanee and I got jumped while we were watching. Fox showed up and killed him."

Mention of their attack had Del pulling the horse closer, leaning out of the saddle in order to brush her hair out of her face. "Are you all right?"

"We're fine." Lydia figured he didn't need to know the details. It would only distract him when he had work still to do. "What about you?"

Her soft probing made him sigh. With one last caress of her cheek, Del straightened, turning his head to stare out into the darkness. "I can't let the sixth get away," he said. His voice had grown hard again, though if he meant to keep his tone neutral, he was failing miserably. "If he saw what I did and returns to Troy, it will get ... unpleasant."

Lydia swallowed, trying to calm the churning in her gut. Del didn't want witnesses to his magic. This had to be part of what he'd been trying to warn her about. "What do you want me to do?" she asked, shifting the subject.

The fires still burning behind him outlined his profile in gold. There was no compassion in the set of his jaw, any vestiges of the gentle man she knew he could be stripped away to leave this grim resolution in its place. This was the world he walked in. This was part of what it took to survive when so many forces conspired against you. The trepidation Lydia had felt seeing him dispatch the marauders receded, leaving behind a growing sense of awe and respect for him.

"Help Kokanee tend to the wounded," Del replied. The horse danced a little in place, too impatient to stay still for so long. "I'll return as soon as I've done what's necessary." With a quick click of his heels, he spurred the horse away from the others, disappearing into the night.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

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Though she knew her exchange with Del had been witnessed by at least a few of the Kootenai, everybody avoided Lydia for several minutes following his departure. She watched the women of the tribe pull children into their tipis, and she stepped out of the way when some teenage boys came to lead the remaining horses out of the center of the encampment. In many ways, Lydia felt like a ghost, wandering amidst the ebbing chaos of the attacks. It was as if she didn't exist. She shivered. Maybe to the Kootenai, she didn't.

Without direction, she wandered closer to the smoldering fires, her nose wrinkling from the distinct smell of smoke and charred flesh. It was impossible to tell from the distorted shapes consumed by the flames that they had once been men, but Lydia doubted the memory of seeing them turn into pyres would leave her any time soon. She pulled her coat more tightly around her. She couldn't even dismiss this as random violence; her own time was just as riddled by such ignorant attacks. The difference was, she had never witnessed one firsthand before.

A soft touch on her elbow drew her from her reverie, and Lydia turned to see Kokanee watching her regard the dead bodies. A moment of silence passed between them, and then the older woman nodded, taking Lydia's arm and leading her away from the crackling fires. Neither of them looked back.

She spent the next few hours following Kokanee from tipi to tipi, holding supplies for her as they checked in on the

other Kootenai, helping her assist the wounded into more comfortable positions. Dark eyes followed Lydia wherever she went, but no one made a threatening move or raised their voice to her, seemingly content to wait and see what she would do to them first. Occasionally, Kokanee would glance in her direction as she was speaking, but whether she was talking about her or not, Lydia couldn't tell. In the end, it didn't matter. She had been tasked with helping, so that was what she was going to do.

She was kneeling beside an elderly woman, holding a bowl of water for Kokanee as she washed away the blood that still oozed from a nasty cut in the woman's stomach, when the distant pounding of hooves brought a fresh edge of alertness to the Kootenai. Heads turned in the sound's direction, and Lydia found herself looking as well, sagging with relief when Del appeared out of the darkness. A chorus of gleeful shouts arose from several of the younger people, and they accompanied their welcome with a rush toward the slowing horse.

Though he nodded to them in greeting, there was a lethargy to Del's body that sharpened Lydia's instincts, drawing her to her feet. The reins that had been so tight in his hand when he'd left now hung slack, barely coiled around his fingers, and he put up no resistance when several of the taller youths pulled them away from him. He even accepted their aid in getting off the horse.

Fox appeared at the front of the welcoming party. There was no smile as he addressed Del in a low, almost

indiscernible voice, and when Del shook his head, the others surrounding them visibly sobered.

Lydia didn't need to understand their language to know that Del hadn't found the sixth man. He bore his failure like a heavy weight upon his shoulders.

Fox led him toward a nearby tipi. As they passed in front of one of the fires, Lydia got a better look at Del, gasping audibly at the markings he now bore. Blood dripped from a jagged cut above his brow, clumping in his long eyelashes so that they caught for an extra second every time he blinked. There was more blood on his hands, falling into black splotches onto the packed snow, and a dark stain on his jacket could only mean that he was bleeding somewhere on his torso as well.

At her side, Kokanee stood and grasped Lydia's wrist in a firm grip. Her first instinct was to pull away, but when she saw the concern in the older woman's gaze as it followed her son and Del to the tipi's entrance, Lydia forced herself to relax.

"Can we help him?" she asked, knowing Kokanee wouldn't understand a word she said but needing to voice the request anyway.

Stooping, Kokanee picked up the bowl Lydia had set aside and pressed it into Lydia's free hand, guiding her to a different tipi several yards away. The interior was dark and scented of herbs, familiar and oddly comforting, but they only lingered for a few minutes while Kokanee bustled around, navigating the darkness with expertise as she gathered

unseen items. Then, they were back outside, back into the smoky air, taking the same path Fox and Del just had.

As they approached the tipi, Fox slipped out through the flap in the hide, his smooth features still and somber. Kokanee spoke a few words to him, but he didn't reply, only shaking his head as he moved out of their way. His eyes met Lydia's. Though he didn't say a word, an understanding passed between them, one she carried within her after he continued on his way, one she held close as she followed Kokanee inside.

Candles clustered together on a small stool illuminated the dwelling, casting flickering shadows against the sloped walls as the two women entered. Del knelt next to a pile of furs that was probably a bed of some sort, his back bowed over a carved basin of water as he rinsed off his face. His jacket had been dropped in an untidy pile near the doorway, and without its cover, Lydia saw the stain soaking the side of his shirt.

"I've never known anybody who ruins as many clothes as you do," she commented as she and Kokanee approached him. She kept her tone light, belying the knots inside her stomach at seeing him hurt, but when Del glanced back, some of that forced humor dwindled.

His eyes were bloodshot, a detail that had escaped her outside. At the open neck of his collar, the black streaks that she had noted earlier on his hands slashed across his unblemished skin, disappearing beneath the white fabric, and for the first time, she saw the grass stains smudging his pants.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

"It's not my blood this time." His voice was a coarse whisper, roughened from smoke inhalation. "Not my fault."

In spite of everything, Lydia couldn't contain her abrupt giggle. He was making jokes. It couldn't be as dire as it looked.

Del dipped his hands back into the basin, the water swirling with a rainbow of colors as the blood ran clean from his skin. He murmured a few words in Kootenai, and Kokanee pressed past Lydia to skim skilled fingers over his left shoulder, down his arm, and along his side. She shook her head in reproof, but when she pulled his shirt away from his skin to look beneath the bloodstain, her prolonged stillness seemed to confirm his assertions.

"If it's not yours," Lydia asked, "whose blood is it?"

Del sat back on his heels and pushed Kokanee's hands away. He uttered a few words that made the older woman nod and rise, and she only cursorily met Lydia's eyes before leaving the tipi, securing the flap shut upon her exodus.

"We'll be staying here tonight," he said, pulling his shirt from his body.

It didn't escape her notice that he hadn't answered her question, but when he handed the shirt to her and presented his side more broadly, she decided that she could wait.

They weren't going anywhere.

Chapter Fifteen

"How much did you see?"

His question came out of the blue, interrupting a respite of silence as she washed away the black and scarlet that tarnished his skin. Lydia covered her hesitation by drawing away, sitting back on her heels to dip the cloth into the bowl of water and rinse it out.

"I saw what you did to those men." Though she kept her voice to a murmur, in the confines of the tipi, her words seemed harsher than she intended, compelling her to lower her tone further. "I know you didn't have a choice."

Del already had his back and shoulders bowed to allow her ease in cleaning his upper body, but at her absolution, his head lowered as well, his hair hanging down to hide his features from her. "There's always a choice. Don't forgive me because of who I am. I'm not any better than they are." He snorted softly. "Were."

She pulled at his arm, forcing him to sit up and face her. He looked tired, the spidery veins of red running through the whites of his eyes only making him look worse. The faint lines at their corners were deeper, too. Without thought, Lydia leaned in and brushed a kiss across his temple.

"Don't think about it," she instructed. "You're going to drive yourself crazy analyzing it to bits, and there's nothing you can do about it now."

"I should have caught the other one." Dropping his hand to cover hers where it rested between them, he stroked the back

with his fingertips, his gaze lowered to watch the absent-minded caress. "I don't know how much he saw, or if anyone will believe his stories, but his escape cannot bode well for the Kootenai."

"Do you think they'll get attacked again?"

"I don't know. I don't think this was an organized attack, just some of the townsmen getting drunk and wanting to create trouble. But it got out of hand because of the Kootenai men being away on their fishing trip." Del lifted his head again. Worry shone brightly in his piercing eyes. "I think it's very likely that if his stories are believed, I'll be targeted as well."

The solemnity of his suggestion made a lump form in her throat. This wasn't a possibility she had imagined. To the people in town, Del wouldn't have been a threatening savage, an unknown to be exterminated as they'd treated so many of the Native Americans. But maybe the frontier justice that still had a way of rearing its ugly head didn't care about that. It would see someone arbitrarily killing five white men—because he was likely to get blamed for the one Fox had killed, too—and take matters into its own hands.

"What does that mean?" Lydia asked carefully.

Del sighed. "I haven't decided, yet," he confessed. "Part of me thinks it would be wise to stay here until it's time for you to leave. I can help protect the camp that way. Do for them what I've always done in protecting their land, just at closer range."

"But...?"

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

A wry smile softened his mouth. "I'd like to be selfish and not lose what little time we have together."

His comment relaxed Lydia enough to pull away and resume cleaning him off. "Maybe we can have both," she said. "Maybe we go back to the cabin, but you schedule to come out here regularly to check up on the Kootenai. I think I can find ways to keep myself busy without you hanging around all the time."

Del shook his head. "I wouldn't want to leave you unprotected, should others attempt to avenge their friends' deaths."

She wiped away another smear of blood from his chest. "Trust me. I'm not so keen on the idea of you putting yourself in danger on a daily basis, either. I'm just saying, we have options." Something he said came back to her, making her frown. "Why would you only stay here until it's time for me to leave?"

Something shuttered behind his eyes. "This is how I'm viewing my time right now," he said. His voice was barely a whisper, and his body moved with a lethargic grace as he pulled away from her ministrations to stretch out on the pile of furs that acted as a bed. Resting a forearm across his brow, Del sighed. "There is my life with you in it, and there will be my life without you. Everything else is superfluous."

Setting aside the water and cloth, Lydia shrugged out of her coat and toed off her shoes. Gently, she stretched out alongside Del, smiling when he automatically curled his arm around her back in order to pull her closer against his body.

"I have a feeling that I'm going to be seeing things in those terms when I get back to LA, too," she murmured. She dragged her fingers along his abdomen, watching the muscles twitch beneath his unmarked skin. "We're not going to get interrupted again tonight, are we?"

"No." The hoarseness of his voice was deeper, and she saw the outline of his cock hardening in his pants. "I asked Kokanee for privacy. And Fox will see to it that we don't get disturbed."

"I told you, you were like a hero to them." Lydia let her hand trail downward to his waist, plucking at the leather laces. As the material loosened, she caught a glimpse of pre-cum pooling on his lower stomach. "They didn't know what to make of me, though."

"They're still in shock, most likely." His breath was warm where it fanned down her neck, and his fingers warmer where he tugged her shirt free from her jeans. "Fox would have told them about your arrival, but in light of the attacks, they'll be mistrustful of any stranger who suddenly made an appearance."

Turning her head, Lydia licked a circle around the nearby nipple, faint and feathery as she listened to him moan in approval. "I don't blame them," she said quietly. "What happened to them was awful."

Del made a sound that sounded like agreement, but then his hand was slipping up her shirt, smoothing over her back as he pressed her more tightly to him. "Let's not think of that. I want to spend the next few hours celebrating the fact that you didn't get hurt."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

She didn't need to be told twice. Pushing open his pants, Lydia exposed the now fully hard length of his cock to the brisk air. It jumped when she brushed her fingers along the shaft, reaching down to find the sweaty weight of his balls, and when she stroked the sensitive skin of his sac, Del groaned.

"Every time you touch me," he murmured, "I think, it can't get any better than this. And then you do something else..." His words cut off in a grunt when she let her nails rake across his inner thighs, his hips thrusting upwards into the air. "Temptress."

The contrast between the velvety skin and the coarse hairs made Lydia itch to feel them against her tongue. Pulling away from his strong embrace, she brought both hands to the waist of his pants, tugging them down to free his legs. She had to stop at his ankles to get rid of his boots first, but it didn't take long until Del was stretched out atop the furs, naked and hard while he watched her with desire-darkened eyes.

"Your turn," he said. "Let me see how beautiful you are, Lydia."

His words made her suddenly self-conscious about her body, a pink stain spreading over her cheeks and down her neck at the hungry tone of his command. Del had never done anything to disparage her curves. In fact, he seemed to like the way she was built. But that didn't mean it was impossible to forget a lifetime of conditioning to wish she was a size two with an ass she didn't have to squeeze into her jeans or breasts that often won battles over straining buttons.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

When she hesitated, Del propped himself up on his elbows to gaze at her more intently. "Don't. You're beautiful, and nothing anybody says can change that."

Lydia smiled in embarrassment, ducking her eyes as she began to fumble with her clothes. "It just takes getting used to, I guess."

He didn't say another word as she peeled away her shirt, exposing the ripe swells of her breasts. His gaze followed her hands as they moved down her body, and when she stepped out of her jeans and set them aside, he held a hand out to her.

"Come here."

She obeyed, though those few feet that separated them seemed like miles. As she tried to stretch out next to him, however, Del stopped her with a strong hand on her hip.

"Not like that." He trailed his fingers across the top of her thighs, brushing over the curls on her mound before dipping between her legs to gently prise them apart. Rolling onto his side, he placed an almost chaste kiss above her knee and proceeded on a wet, fluttering path upward.

Lydia's gasped as he dipped his thumb between her swollen labia. It came away sticky and wet from her arousal, and Del brought it to his mouth to suck away the taste.

His lashes shut in a thick, curly sweep as he sighed in satisfaction. "I would like for you to let me do this," he rasped, looking up to her. "I dreamed of it after you took me into your mouth the other day."

Her breath hitched. "We could do it for each other." At his slight confusion, she grinned, feeling wicked and mischievous all at the same time. "Let me show you."

Pushing him so that he was lying on his back again, Lydia knelt down and shifted so that she faced his cock. When she began to throw her leg over Del's chest to sixty-nine, she heard his murmured, "Oh," seconds before his strong hands came up to grasp her hips and pull her the rest of the way over his face.

Though she was now open and exposed in much closer detail than Del had ever seen before, Lydia dismissed her sense of insecurity to focus on the gorgeous cock in front of her. She gripped him at the base, tilting his length away from his taut stomach, but the moment she swiped her tongue across the wet tip, she felt his teeth nibble at the tender flesh of her inner thigh, making her pussy clench in reaction.

"God..."

It came out as a forceful exhalation, sweeping across the cock only inches from her mouth, and a shiver noticeably wracked through Del's body.

"I almost think you're trying to kill me," he taunted.

The amused thought that she could say the same thing about him flitted through Lydia's mind, but she shoved it aside, her mouth already watering in anticipation of getting more of his cock than the faint taste she'd been able to glean. Holding his length steady, she sucked him past her lips, her tongue running around the velvety helmet as she slowly sank down his thick shaft. Del's fingers dug into her soft flesh, a

sharp pinch to keep her focused, and then came the almost delicate bites as he made his way to her waiting pussy.

Moaning, Lydia squeezed her eyes shut at the dizzying sensations. The vibrations went straight through his cock, making it jump in her hand, but rather than slow Del down, it only made him redouble his efforts. His thumbs pulled her outer lips apart, and she was open like that for long seconds, waiting and waiting, before his tongue dipped between her folds. That was when she forced herself to begin sliding up and down his length, keeping the strokes shallow to concentrate on the sensitive head. It was the only way to keep from grinding against his wicked mouth.

Somehow, Del started caressing her inner thighs as he explored every wet nuance of her pussy. It made her muscles tremble, threatening to have her topple on top of him, and she slowed her languorous sucking in order to savor every new feeling he created. There were the casual glances across her clit, almost like he didn't even know it was there. There were the deliberate licks around her opening as he seemed to try and catch every drop of her juices that were flowing so freely. And then there were the random bites to her lips as if he wanted to eat her whole.

Lydia began pumping him in time with her sucking, each time taking a little bit more of his shaft into her mouth. The ends of her hair tickled along his hips as she moved, and every once in a while, she heard a contented sigh rumble through his chest. Her body was already starting to tighten with its need to come, but she wanted more, wanted to hear

him whimper and groan, wanted to feel the hot blasts on the back of her tongue when he finally exploded.

She slid her hand down as far as she could, flattening her palm against the sinewy muscle of his lower abdomen. Taking one last swipe around the smooth ridge of the tip, Lydia sank down the length of his cock, her lips tight around the shaft as her tongue embellished hidden designs along the searing skin. She only paused when she felt him nudge against the back of her throat, and even then, it was simply enough time to take in a deep breath through her nose. With a deep swallow, she took him down at the same, languid pace she'd already set, until her nose was buried in the coarse hair at the base of his cock.

The sound that came from Del could only be described as a growl. His entire body stiffened beneath her, and the distinct edge of his teeth sank into her clit. Lydia cried out at the contact, though it was muffled by his cock in her throat, and slid her mouth off, forcing herself to go as slowly up as she had down. She assumed a steady rhythm, but the renewed attack on her clit was quickly driving any coherent thought from her mind.

Her free hand moved between Del's legs and found his heavy balls, rolling them between her fingers. Another moan vibrated through him, and within seconds, his sac was tightening, his climax careening toward completion as quickly as hers. Lydia swallowed as quickly as she could, but the first hot splash of cum hit her tongue before she could bury him in her throat. Instead of being able to concentrate on the salty

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

tang, however, she shuddered with her own orgasm as Del shifted his hold to thrust three fingers deep into her pussy.

They stayed locked like that for long seconds, each lost in the throes as their bodies calmed. Then Del slid a callused hand over her bare bottom, caressing it as he gave one last lick to her wet slit.

"That was ... more than I ever imagined." The softness of his slurred voice washed over her, wrapping her in contentment. "Thank you."

Lydia giggled. She felt a little high from the entire experience. The sound elicited another twitch of his cock and another groan from his throat, and she eased off, allowing her tongue to circle around the sensitive head before resting his softening length against his stomach.

"Told you it would be good," she said. Under the guidance of Del's touch, she sat up on the rugs, her back to the cold wall of the tipi, and gazed down at his etched body. It still amazed her that someone that looked this amazing wanted *her*. By the time her gaze crawled up to meet his, her heart was pounding again.

Del reached and took her hand in his, tugging just enough to pull her off-balance. She fell onto his side, and he guided her to stretch out, as much on top of him as against. The warm circle of his embrace was potent and dizzying, lulling her into closing her eyes even more than her orgasm had.

"I do love you, Lydia Nicholls."

Though he had intimated as much back at his cabin, hearing the words out loud suffused her with heat, even more so than being held by him. Somewhere, she gathered the

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

strength to lift her head and brush a kiss across his mouth, and somewhere, she found the coordination to wrap her arms around his body and hug him as tightly as she could.

Del nuzzled his nose into her hair, inhaling her scent. "I think it would destroy me if something happened to you and I couldn't stop it."

"I say, as long as we stay in bed together, nothing can happen to either of us," Lydia offered.

He laughed. "An excellent suggestion." Another kiss tickled across the top of her head. "Now sleep. Tomorrow, we'll see what we can do to make your plan a reality."

She nodded, too drowsy to do more. Tomorrow. They would face it together.

Chapter Sixteen

Sometime before dawn, winter decided to reassert its presence. The whistling and howling of a bitter wind woke Lydia from a dream-filled sleep, but Del's arm was too snug around her waist, the fur blankets that covered them too warm to venture out and see what was happening. She contented herself with the steady puffs of breath where he had his face buried in her neck, and if slumber never came fully back, that was more than okay. It had been a long time since she had felt so treasured.

Del was the first to alter the circle of his embrace. It was hours after she had heard the first signs of the storm, but dawn had yet to peek inside the tipi. Maybe it was her head distorting time due to lack of sleep, she thought, still not quite conscious. Like dreams that seemed to last for hours but in actuality occurred in the space of just a few minutes. But then Del was pushing aside the thick curtain of her hair, and his mouth was nibbling along her shoulder, and her silent debate ended almost before it began.

"Good morning," she murmured.

The arm he had around her waist shifted beneath the blankets, his hand sliding up her ribcage to cup a full breast. "I think it's afternoon, actually." Her nipple tightened and puckered as his thumb grazed over its tip. "I heard the men return some time ago."

Surprise jarred her from the euphoria his simple caresses created, and Lydia twisted to meet his amused eyes. They

were back to being their clear blue-green, no remaining vestiges of the bloodshot threads through the whites. "How long have you been awake?"

"Long enough to know that you drool in your sleep when you dream."

Her hand flew to her mouth, obsessively wiping at the corners. "I do not!"

The mirth dissolved into rolling laughter, and Del hugged her tight. Lydia slapped at his chest in protest, trying in vain to hold out on his good mood, but when his arms turned into steel bands around her back, she knew it was pointless.

"You're feeling better obviously," she said, relaxing back into the furs. They tickled against her cheek when she set her head down. Del mirrored her pose and let her go enough to brush his knuckles along her jaw in a gesture that made her itch to kiss him. "No aftereffects from everything that happened last night?"

"Only tired. I expended a lot of energy. It takes some time for that to come back."

He didn't need to elaborate further. She'd seen how wasted he'd been after the spell that had brought her to him.

Her gaze slid over his body, assessing the extent, or lack thereof, of his injuries. It caught on the vivid colors of his tattoos, and she lifted tentative fingers to dance along the whorls.

"It's weird," she mused out loud.

"What is? My markings?" She caught him grinning. "You said you liked them."

"I do. It's just ... maybe it's how the light hits it. Sometimes, different colors look brighter than the black." Her index finger stopped on a patch of red. "Like this. Usually, I don't even notice it. But now..."

Del glanced down, but only for a moment, more interested in her than his own body. "Perhaps it's your vivid imagination," he teased.

Lydia snorted. "Maybe." She let her hand drop, looking back at him. "Did you decide what we're going to do?"

His answer was slow in coming. In the quiet interim, Del seemed content to trace the curve of her features instead.

"I would like to stay here for a few days," he replied. "If there is going to be retaliation, it will likely come swiftly. And I think the men will require someone to keep them from acting rashly. I don't want to make matters worse for them."

After seeing how impulsively he could act, the notion of Del being the one to be calm and collected was a little frightening, but Lydia accepted it without hesitation. After all, he hadn't been the one to lose family members in the attack. There was no telling how the Kootenai men might react.

"It wouldn't be fun to have to go home in the middle of all this wind or snow, either," Lydia said. "Staying cozy wins in my book."

Something she said made his gaze fly from the set of her mouth to her eyes. Wonder appeared in the piercing depths, and a shy smile curved his lips.

"Is that how you see it?" he murmured.

She frowned. "See what?"

"My cabin. You called it ... home."

The distinction hadn't even registered with her, but now that Del was drawing attention to her word choice, Lydia saw that it was true. "It *is* my home for now, isn't it?"

"Of course, but ... I suppose I had not dared to consider you would ever truly see it as such."

It was her turn to smile, her turn to reach up and cup his face. "Tell me how I couldn't," she dared.

The kiss that came was hard in contrast with the tenderness of his earlier tone, a caress meant to claim more than to arouse. With a growl deep inside his chest, Del crushed her against him, rolling onto his back so that she was forced to sprawl atop him. The hard line of his erection pressed into her belly, and her lungs burned by the time she was able to lift her head and stare down at him.

"What was that for?" she breathed.

"For bringing hope back into my life."

He was stopped from pulling her back into another kiss by the soft call of Fox's voice outside the tipi. Letting Lydia move off and snuggle into his far side, Del pulled the blankets up to cover her nudity before calling out to the young Kootenai in his native language.

When Fox lifted the flap and entered the small space, Lydia had to blink against the sudden blinding light that streamed in behind him. The world was a wash of white, no discernible shapes in view before the hide fell closed again, and the whistle of the winds was even louder.

When he saw how they were positioned, Fox averted his eyes and pretended to be absorbed by Del's stained shirt on the ground. He spoke quickly, his hands dancing as he did,

and each word drew Del's brows closer and closer together. Del asked a few brief questions—she could tell from his tone of voice—but none of Fox's answers seemed to satisfy him. Finally, he nodded, and Fox ducked back out into the bitter winds.

"What's going on?" she asked as Del slid out from beneath the furs.

Grabbing his pants, he stood up and slipped them on, giving her an excellent view of his tight ass and muscled back. "The men are angry, as I feared. There is talk of a raid on the town as vengeance."

That sent all her lusty thoughts scattering. "You're not going to let them do that, are you?"

"No. There's been enough death already." He pulled his coat on without bothering with a shirt, ignoring the bloodstain on its side. Lydia reminded herself to ask him about it later; she had forgotten all about it in the aftermath of the night before. "I'll impress upon them that their land is still safe, and that I'll stay to help them with any battles that might arise. Hopefully, that'll be enough."

Lydia wrapped the blanket around her as she sat up. "What do you want me to do?"

He paused where he was slipping on his boots. "Could you help Kokanee? I can send her in with some clean clothes for you and some toiletries, if you like."

"That sounds good."

She watched him finish getting ready, but when he stepped forward to go outside, she snagged the hem of his coat and tugged, drawing him to a stop. Before he could

question why, Lydia was on her feet, her arms around his neck as she planted a thorough kiss on his unsuspecting mouth.

His arms came around her body automatically, the stiff edges of his coat pressing into her soft flesh. She supposed that in a different time, a different place, she would have felt self-conscious about her nudity or the wantonness of her actions, but here, in Del's embrace, Lydia didn't care. She had a funny feeling she was glowing by the time they pulled apart, and she matched his smile with one of her own.

"Go work your magic," she said, pushing him away. She didn't move as his smile broadened and he turned to lift the flap to go outside. So what if somebody saw her?

She had nothing to hide.

* * * *

Regardless of what Del's decision had been, the storm that had woken Lydia made it clear that neither of them was going anywhere any time soon. Snow blanketed the valley in thick whiteness, with an icy crust already forming across its surface by the time she emerged from the tipi. The skies roiled with dark clouds, ready to burst with even more flurries, and the wind that had only sounded bad when they'd been inside cut to the bone, even with the thick coats the Kootenai wore.

Lydia followed Kokanee as she went from tipi to tipi, feeling like a lost puppy. The reactions from the other Kootenai, however, were far different than the ones she'd gotten when she'd first arrived. Now there were smiles, and hands pulling her inside, and eager chatter that sounded far

friendlier than the mutterings from the previous night. Once, she caught two young girls whispering to each other, hands cupped around the other's ear for privacy, who burst into flushed giggles as soon as they realized they'd been seen. Fox must have been spreading his stories about her arrival, Lydia realized. She probably should have been embarrassed, but in light of her current situation, she was simply relieved that she wouldn't have to struggle to fit in.

When snow began to swirl in blinding eddies again, Kokanee took her back to the tipi she shared with Del, her arms laden with clothes, food, and other sundries they would need. It took longer for Del to return, but when the flap finally pushed aside and he slipped in, Lydia was there to greet him, tugging him closer to the fire that warmed the small space.

"Is everything okay?"

There was a fresh scratch on one of his hands, and his hair was wild and unkempt. But Del was oblivious to his appearance or any discomfort, immediately pulling her against his chest.

"God, you smell good," he murmured, burying his nose in her hair.

Lydia smiled as she circled her arms around his back. "That's because I smell like the stew Kokanee was making. And you didn't answer my question."

His hands slipped beneath her blouse, rough fingertips gliding along her spine to start a ripple of goosebumps up her neck. Otherwise, he didn't move from where he nuzzled her. "The men are calmed. For now. Let's go to bed."

"When did you eat?"

"I didn't." With a nudge of his hips, Del started to back her toward the pallet. "I've missed you."

"You should eat. After everything, you can't risk running yourself down."

"I will. Later."

He fell with her when her feet hit the edge of the furs, covering her body with his as his mouth began to rain wet kisses through her shirt. In spite of wishing he would eat something, Lydia welcomed his attention, moaning softly when teeth joined tongue.

"Kokanee's going to ask how come I keep making so much laundry," she joked.

Del propped himself up on his knuckles to gaze down at her. His pupils were almost fully dilated, the reflections from the fire dancing across the ebony. At the junction of her thighs, she felt the unmistakable press of his arousal against her clit and arched up to increase the contact, stifling her smile of satisfaction when he groaned.

"Kokanee and the rest of the tribe know how I feel about you," he said. "They would expect nothing less."

Then he was kissing her again. And Lydia had no more room for argument.

* * * *

One day with the Kootenai led to two. Two led to three, four, and before she knew it, a week had passed. The storms stopped, leaving behind a crystal blue sky and sparkling snow that hurt her eyes to look at, and the morning came where

Del pulled her back against his chest, kissed her ear, and murmured, "Perhaps we shall sleep in our own bed tonight. Would you like that?"

Her response was to snuggle into his arms, letting his morning erection slide between her thighs. As much as she was growing to like the Kootenai, privacy sounded like a godsend.

Though the weather had been less than ideal, there had been no overtures of an attack from the town. Under Del's guidance, the men had honed their weapons and strengthened their protective measures, leaving the women—and Lydia—stockpiling supplies. There was nothing more to be done now except wait for a fight that might not ever come. It was time for them to go. She, for one, was glad.

Del slipped out to tell the chief of his plans while Lydia gathered what few belongings they had. Kokanee had insisted she keep the clothes she'd worn throughout the week, and there were some bits and pieces Del had collected, but otherwise, her arms were light by the time she ducked out of the tipi. She came up short when she saw Del and Fox on a pair of horses outside the doorway.

"We're riding?" she asked.

Fox hopped down and took the items she carried, packing them away in the bags hanging from his saddle. Del maneuvered closer to where she stood and leaned over, holding out his hand.

"The forest is too dense near the cabin to get us all the way back," he explained. When Lydia grasped his hand, he pulled her almost effortlessly up into the saddle in front of

him. "But I thought this would make the journey easier for us. The snow will still slow us considerably, but this way, we'll be home before nightfall."

Her knuckles were white where she gripped the hard leather. "I've never been on a horse before." She gasped when the animal began to prance restlessly, its powerful muscles undulating against her legs. "City girl here, remember?"

Del reached around and took the reins, his forearms firm against her sides. "Relax," he murmured. "She can tell you're nervous."

"Smart horse."

"You don't even have to do anything." His breath was warm against her ear. "I haven't let you get hurt yet, have I?"

No, he hadn't, she thought, but he'd never made her ride a horse yet, either. Still, Lydia forced herself to take a deep, calming breath, ignoring the lurch in her stomach when Del turned the horse around and guided it slowly to the edge of the camp. Think of it as a ride at Disney, she told herself.

The horse snorted all of a sudden, its breath a white plume in the air. Her hand shot out to grab onto Del's forearm.

At least she didn't have to worry about this ride breaking down.

The journey was as slow and laborious as Del had warned, but after watching the horses' hooves sink knee deep into the drifts, Lydia was glad she didn't have to walk through it. Her feet would have been numb by the time they got to the cabin, and any thoughts of intimacy would have been shoved aside

in favor of soaking in steaming hot water. After a few minutes enveloped in Del's strong arms and thighs, any sense of trepidation faded, and she allowed herself to lean back and savor the warmth he always exuded.

The sun was high overhead when the trees became thicker. The horses were starting to falter in their paces, and Del clicked his tongue as he pulled on the reins, drawing the animal to an immediate stop.

"This is as far as we can go," he said.

Sliding from the saddle, he reached up and settled his hands on Lydia's hips, supporting her as she swung her leg over and followed him to the ground. Just as she'd imagined, her feet sank through the crusty surface of the snow, and she grimaced as some of the cold managed to snake its way up her jeans.

"Remind me to tell you about snow plows some time," she muttered.

Del laughed. Taking the reins in hand, he led the horse back to Fox, exchanging the leather straps for the packs carrying their things. He slung them over his shoulder, and after a brief conversation, turned his back to the young Kootenai to come back to Lydia's side.

"Let's go home," Del said.

They held hands for the remainder of the way, only letting go when the path prevented them from walking side by side. Before she knew it, the trees were clearing, and she saw the familiar shape of the cabin blotting the distance. Lydia smiled. Nothing had ever looked so good.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

"It's going to be cold inside," Del warned as they rounded the corner of the house. "Keep your coat on until I get the fire going."

"You mean you can't just magic one before we get in?" she teased.

He pretended to be shocked. She loved seeing him so relaxed. "Now why would I do something as frivolous as that?"

When she swatted at him, he simply laughed and quickened his pace, pulling her along to the front. The momentary burst of energy had her gasping, but then Del came to an abrupt halt a few feet before the door, causing her to collide against his broad shoulder.

"What is it?" she panted. "What..."

Her voice trailed off as her gaze followed the line of his.

Nailed to the front door of the house was a black rabbit. Blood dripped freely from its dangling feet, pooling into a macabre welcome mat for them, and around its neck hung a gold chain so fine that it was almost invisible.

Lydia's heart leapt into her throat. There was an oval charm clearly visible against the black fur. She could even see its tiny hinge.

It was the locket she'd discovered the first afternoon Del had gone hunting. The one with his mother's picture in it.

Chapter Seventeen

The only thing that could drag her gaze away from the spectacle on the door was fear for Del's reaction.

He had gone utterly still. All the color was leached from his face, making his eyes blaze even brighter as they stared at the dead rabbit. Lydia watched for long moments, waiting for him to blink, but the only movement he made at all was a single, compulsive swallow.

She didn't want to speak. Somehow, the thought of her voice ringing out and shattering whatever spell had wound around Del at the ghoulish display made her flesh crawl. So she simply waited, her breath coming in quickening bursts, her anxiety growing with each passing second.

Finger by finger, Del disengaged from her hand, and he swallowed again before taking a tentative step forward. Lydia didn't follow. Whatever this was, it was obviously meant for him, and she wouldn't interfere unless he asked her to. To say anything would be admitting she knew the significance of the necklace, and after all this time, she wasn't sure how he'd react if she confessed to snooping through his things that first day. Better to keep her mouth shut and wait for him to volunteer the information.

Each lift and fall of his feet was painstaking, slow and methodical as he approached the cabin. Unlike their travels since leaving the horses, there wasn't even a whisper from the fallen snow as he broke through the crust, and if it wasn't

for the wisps drifting around his head, she would have wondered if he were a specter carving a path in its wake.

It wasn't a ghost that came to a halt before the door, though. Lydia held her breath as Del lifted his hand to touch the locket.

The blood ignited the second he made contact with the cold metal. Flames shot up from the pool on the threshold, surging like a firecracker being set off as they consumed the carcass. Del staggered back out of the way, and his nostrils flared as the scent of burning flesh filled the air, but almost as quickly as it had started, the fire erupted in a shower of sparks and vanished.

All that was left behind was a sooty smear along the door. Lydia supposed it was caused by the dead rabbit and the trails of blood, but without the physical evidence there, it looked remarkably like the elongated shadow of a man.

A man the size of Del.

His mouth had curled into a furious sneer, and when he turned his head to scan the vicinity, she saw his eyes sparkling with a fresh anger. "Zuri..." Del hissed. Before she had the chance to ask what that meant, he lifted his foot and slammed his heel into the door, sending splinters of wood flying through the air as the latch shattered.

Lydia raced after him when he marched inside. In the doorway, she lurched to a halt when she saw him standing at the shelves, reaching for the same box she'd found the locket in. But when he pulled it out, the gold chain spilling over his callused fingers like cobwebs trapping him, her blood ran cold.

"That's ... that's..." She took a steadying breath and tried again. "That looks like the one on the..." She couldn't say it. "...thing on the door."

"Yes. It does." Sight of the jewelry had sapped his fury. As he returned the box to its place, his hands shook, but Del kept hold of the necklace, hypnotized by its shimmering dance. "The other wasn't real, though."

"It looked real enough."

"So do many things when you first see them. An illusion. That's all it was."

"An illusion that goes up in smoke when you touch it? What was the point then?"

He didn't answer.

With the brisk air at her back and the sooty shadow still haunting her peripheral vision, Lydia stepped inside the cabin and shut the door as best she could behind her. It wouldn't latch properly, so she took a chair from the table and propped it against the door, holding it closed. Del didn't move or speak, lost in his own world.

The house was cold and musty from being shut up for so long, and now there was the distinct smell of burned meat marring the otherwise clean air. Rubbing her hands together to warm them, Lydia went to the fire and picked up the poker, stabbing at the dead ashes in the hearth.

"How do we get this going again?" she asked, glancing back at Del. Maybe bringing up routine would snap him out of whatever daze this new turn of events had sent him into.

"We'll need wood."

But other than the shaking in his hands, he didn't move.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Lydia sighed. So much for that plan.

"I'll bring some in," she said, heading back to the door. She wasn't surprised when he let her walk out without saying a word. Whatever the import of what had happened, it had shaken him to his core.

Focusing on the task at hand, Lydia hauled in two loads of logs and finished with a bunch of kindling. In that time, Del moved to the bed, sitting on its edge and staring down at the chain he now had wrapped around his fingers. She tried not to watch him out of the corner of her eye as she struggled to get the fire going herself, and after several unsuccessful attempts to recreate the steps she'd seen him and the Kootenai do, she finally had a small blaze going that didn't look like it would go out like candles on a birthday cake.

Lydia sat back on her heels in front of the hearth. Time for stalling was over. "Are we going to talk about what happened?" she asked. "Or, you know, you talk and I listen."

His voice was low, but at least it was calm. "I am uncertain what you would wish to hear."

"The truth is always a good place to start."

"I have never lied to you, Lydia."

"I never said you did." Shrugging off her jacket, she set it aside and inched closer to where he sat. "But there's stuff you haven't told me, isn't there?"

He sighed and lifted his free hand to push his hair off his face. "I never thought it would be important enough to tell you. This month was supposed to be ... not about that."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

This month was supposed to be a lot of things, Lydia thought. She'd certainly never expected to be falling for a man who lived a century before her.

"Who's Zuri?" she tried instead.

Del winced at the name. "Someone I knew a long time ago. Before coming here. I haven't seen her since..." His hand made a fist around the locket. "...since my mother died."

At least she'd been right about who owned the necklace. What wasn't so comforting was hearing him refer to a woman in his past. Lydia had known her feelings were deepening for Del, but she'd never thought of herself as the jealous type before. It was unreasonable and a waste of energy, she'd always felt. But seeing his reactions to this Zuri made her hackles rise. Lydia didn't like her already.

"You think that whatever was on the door has something to do with her?" she asked.

Del finally lifted his head. Sparks danced in his eyes, a shadow of the frenzied passion that had moved him to kick in the door. "There is nobody else," he said. "Nobody knows I'm here. Nobody with that kind of power."

"Does that means she sent whatever it was that attacked you?"

His mouth thinned to a tight line. "That is very likely, yes."

"But you did that spell to protect the house. Didn't it work?"

"It did. That's why she was compelled to use an illusion of the necklace and not the real thing. She couldn't cross the threshold to retrieve it."

"But why?"

And there was the million dollar question. It was obvious Del didn't want to talk about it. The shift of his eyes and the way he slid back against the wall to further the distance between them made that perfectly clear. But after everything that had brought them together, everything that they had endured since she arrived, Lydia thought she deserved to know the whole story. He claimed to love her. That should count for something.

"I cannot be certain. Beyond the annual offerings, I've made no contact with Zuri or her sister, nor they with me. If it were anybody else, I would think it was a portent of some fashion, but I can't fathom why they should turn against me now. My life is as it always was."

All of a sudden, all she could hear was the thundering of her heart. "Except for me," Lydia whispered.

Her conclusion startled him, but he shook it off with a wave of his hand. "They sent you to me," Del said. "They have no reason to be angry about you."

She was tempted to tell him that jealous women were rarely reasonable, but Lydia stayed silent in favor of joining him on the bed. Stretching her legs out alongside his, she hesitated before resting her hand on his thigh, feeling the taut muscles even through his thick trousers.

"They're obviously angry about something, though," she said. She kept her voice gentle, non-confrontational, hoping to coax him into revealing more. "Did you part on bad terms?"

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

At her question, Del opened his hand to look at the locket again. He fingered the chain for a moment, and then held it out, letting it dangle as he waited for her to take it.

"That's my mother," he said when Lydia opened it. "I inherited my powers from her."

His confirmation seemed to make the resemblance even more glaring, and she gave him a small smile that was meant to be comforting. "She's beautiful."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "She was. Her powers were even greater than mine. Something about her being a woman. She never said, but I think she regretted not having a daughter who could be her equal."

Lydia handed the necklace back, but this time, Del let it nestle in his palm. "I'm sure she loved you very much," she said. "What about your dad? What did he think of all this?"

Del shrugged. "I never knew who he was. As far as I know, he's unaware I even exist. Mother refused to speak of him."

"What does this have to do with Zuri? From what you said, obviously, she has these powers, too."

His eyes were sober as he absently played with the locket. "She doesn't *have* these powers. She and her sister are the *source* of our powers." With a heavy sigh, he curled his fingers around the necklace and leaned his head back against the wall, closing his eyes. Maybe it made it easier for him to tell her, or maybe the day and the past week were finally catching up with Del. "I don't pretend to understand it completely. But my family has always been ... in servitude of sorts to Zuri and Eraya. In exchange for the power, they ask us to do something, and we do it."

The tone of his voice made it sound like those *somethings* weren't always nice. It also explained his insistence that he'd done some terrible deeds in the past. "But you've seen this Zuri," she said. "This isn't like she comes to you in a vision, is it?"

He must have thought the image was funny. Del chuckled and turned his head, opening his eyes to regard her. "Not that she doesn't have the conceit for that, but no. All of my encounters with Zuri have been in the flesh. I have never actually met Eraya. I wasn't worthy enough for her attention."

Another piece of information, another scrap of Del's history to try and understand. It helped a little, but the more she got, the more Lydia felt like the puzzle kept shifting like quicksand in front of her. Del sensed her bewilderment and settled his larger hand over hers, stroking the back of her fingers.

"Once upon a time," he murmured, "a young, eager man met an exotic, mysterious woman who thought he was the most fascinating creature she had ever seen. At least, that's what she told him. And he believed her. Because nobody, not even his mother, had ever said such wondrous things to him before." He snorted. "And he was eighteen and callow and completely incapable of controlling his baser urges."

The flare of jealousy simmering in Lydia's stomach turned into a bonfire. She didn't want to think of Del with other women. She knew it was selfish, but thinking that he might have showered the same kind of attention he'd given her on somebody else demeaned what she thought they'd built.

"You loved her," she offered.

He was quick to correct her. "I was infatuated with her. And in lust." His fingers tightened around hers; she found the added warmth a mild balm. "I did not understand what love truly was then."

All of this brought back her original question before he'd shown Lydia his mother's pictures. "If it ended badly, why go to the lengths you did with the offerings to get me here? I would have thought you'd want to cut all ties to them."

For some reason, this amused Del, and his wry chuckles filled the space before he answered. "You do not cut ties with Zuri and Eraya," he said. "My family's bond with them is eternal, and mine, even more so."

"So tell me how it ended. Tell me why they would want to hurt you now."

Releasing her hand, Del rose from the bed and walked to the shelves. Lydia watched him return the necklace to its place, but when he shrugged out of his coat and turned his attention to stoking the fire without saying a word, she realized he was avoiding answering her. Though she had tried to be gentle with her probing, apparently this was a line not to be crossed.

"We can't not talk about this," she said, scooting off the bed. "Obviously, they're pissed off. There has to be a reason for that." When she touched his shoulder, hoping to show him they were on the same side, he flinched. A swell of anger bubbled up inside her, and she lashed out without warning.

"You know, I think I've been pretty darn well understanding about all of this so far," she snapped, taking a step back. "I get pulled out of my cozy little life to play house

for a month, in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of *winter*, in the middle of the wrong damn century! I swallow every sense of logic that I have to believe in your magic, not to mention worry myself sick taking care of you when somebody decides to attack you. I even help you help Fox and his tribe, because I believe in what you're doing. And you don't have the decency to tell me what the hell is going on? Well, go to hell, Del Wessner. I don't need this."

She stormed for the door, remembering to grab her coat along the way. She might be furious, but she hadn't forgotten the lesson she'd learned the first time she'd run out of his house. No way was she going to freeze to death this time.

Lydia didn't make it six feet from the door before it opened behind her. Whirling, she faced Del outlined in the entrance. He didn't wear his jacket, but that didn't mean he wasn't prepared to venture outside to drag her back in. She'd never known anybody so unbothered by cold.

"Don't you dare try and tell me I don't have any right to be mad," she warned, pointing an accusatory finger at him. "All I've ever asked from you is to be honest with me. And before you remind me, *again*, that you've never lied, withholding information is as bad as altering it. Especially when it comes to burning bunny rabbits and crazy ex-girlfriends."

He remained silent throughout her tirade, his eyes solemn. When she was done, he waited a moment, most likely anticipating her starting up again, before saying, "Please, Lydia. Come back inside."

"Are you going to answer my questions?"

"You will not like the answers."

"And that's different from everything else the past two-and-a-half weeks, how?"

Her defiant attitude was starting to anger him, she could tell. His nostrils were flaring, and his grip on the jamb visibly tightened until his knuckles were white. Good, she thought. Maybe it would prove to be enough to crack his shell.

"My relationship with Zuri never *ended*, Lydia. Not even when they allowed my mother to die, all in service to their name."

His implication made her want to throw up. The worst of it was, she'd believed every pretty thing he'd said to her, about how beautiful she was, how he would never hurt her. "So she's not the crazy ex, huh?" she said. Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked to keep them from falling. "I'm just the convenient fling. Because you got lonely waiting for her to come back or something."

"No."

Lydia refused to cringe away in fear when he marched toward her, his eyes blazing with a mix of anger and determination. Only when he grabbed her shoulders and attempted to pull her into his arms did she put up her hands and flatten her palms against his chest.

"Let me go," she ground out. "You don't get to do that."

"Then listen to me." Yielding to her refusal to be held, Del still gripped her with an almost bruising grasp, forcing her to meet his gaze. "I do not love Zuri. I have *never* loved Zuri. If you had heard me inside, you would know that whatever relationship I have with her is no longer my choice. Just because I wish it, won't make my powers go away."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

"Why? You've been on your own for twelve years, Del. Why would she poke her head in now?"

"Because it all ends when you leave. That was the bargain."

Something about the darkness in both his words and eyes made her shiver. "What bargain?" she whispered.

His breath came out in harsh rasps, exacerbated by their tempers. "Zuri only agreed to grant my reprieve if she got something in return. I gave her the only thing of value I possessed." He finally let her go, turning to look back at the sooty stain defacing the front door. "My soul."

Chapter Eighteen

She wanted to think she had heard him wrong, that her anger was clouding her judgment and her brain was making leaps off cliffs when it should be standing still. It was easier to think that, to go on believing that this exotic Zuri capable of striking fear into his heart was messing with Del because he was cheating on her.

But Del was not the sort of man who could easily hide his emotions. He never had been. From the moment she'd first opened her eyes by that fire and seen the awe light up his face at the sight of her, it had been impossible for Del to refrain from showing her exactly what he was thinking, what he was feeling. And then he had broken down and told her, confirming all of it. Why did she think he was suddenly able to change that?

"You didn't," she accused, her voice hushed. "That would be crazy."

"No, that would be the reasoning of a man who felt he had no other choice. A man who never believed that his soul was worth anything anyway. I've always considered it a small price to pay for the freedom I've had these past few years."

"Freedom?" Lydia grabbed his arm and forced him to look back at her. "You've *exiled* yourself. That's not freedom. That's a prison."

"You only perceive it that way because you cannot comprehend the boundaries I was forced to live within before," Del explained. "If you had been condemned to a life

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

where you had to service every black whim of a capricious madwoman, you'd consider the peace and quiet of solitude a welcome gift. Do not judge my life by your standards, Lydia. I have never done that with you."

The mild rebuke stung enough for her to withdraw her hand, though it didn't make accepting his story any easier. "But your soul? How can you stand there and be okay with that?"

He shook his head, and with his anger dissipating, it seemed almost a melancholy gesture. "You give me far too much credit. My soul ... it is *not* a prize."

If she had thought herself confused when he had started the story, Lydia knew she was downright baffled by this. The concept of souls was an immutable one for her; it had been ever since she was a child and listened to her great-grandmother rant about heaven and hell. She wasn't a religious person, but life had thrown too many curveball people at her over the years. Believing in souls and believing in punishment gave her hope when things got ugly.

There was no way Del fell into the category of those worthy of eternal torment for his misdeeds. And she would've believed that even if she weren't falling in love with him.

"Please." He held out his hand to her, palm up. "Come back inside with me. Nothing has changed."

He was wrong. A lot had changed. But with those eyes pleading with her, she couldn't refuse him.

His touch was light where he held her hand, his fingertips caressing her palm as he led Lydia back to the house. Her gaze strayed to the shadow staining the door as they passed

it, but Del seemed oblivious to anything but getting her inside. Once the chair was back in place, he released her long enough to ease her coat off her shoulders, but as soon as she was free of it, he slid his arm around her waist and pulled her back against his chest.

"Whatever has displeased Zuri," he murmured, his breath hot in her ear, "it has nothing to do with you. It isn't possible. You would not be here without them."

It was a small point, but a good one, nonetheless. Lydia leaned against his solid form, closing her eyes as her head tipped back to rest on his shoulder.

"I wish you had told me this before," she said.

"I couldn't, in the beginning. Look at how difficult it was for you to accept that you could even be here."

"You could've said something after."

His protracted sigh was accompanied by a tightening of his embrace. "Perhaps," Del conceded. "But I must admit, I feared your reaction would be exactly as it was. And the last thing I wished was for our remaining time to be tarnished. This changes nothing. I love you. I will still love you when you return to your proper home. What happens to me afterward is of no consequence."

She wanted to say, *But it matters to me*, but his warm hand had slipped beneath the hem of her shirt, and his fingertips were leaving scalding trails across her stomach where he caressed her soft flesh. Lydia groaned in approval and molded her hand over his, losing herself to his tender exploration. Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips, and

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

the fears and fury that had wracked her consciousness receded to dark corners she would consider later.

Del continued the hushed litany of his devotion, soft and shivering in her ear, as his other hand settled at the fastenings of her jeans. He popped the button languorously and pulled the zipper down even more slowly, tormenting her with the deliberate tempo of his movements. By the time he let his fingers slip beneath the elastic band of her panties, she was wet and trembling.

"Dreaming of you these many years..." When he nibbled down along her neck, she clutched at his powerful thigh in order to combat the wave of dizziness the sensations created inside her head. "...gave me far more than you can ever imagine, Lydia. What you taught me far outweighs anything I could ever hope to give back. All I can offer is my love and the promise that I will fight to the death to protect you from harm for as long as I'm in a position to do so."

Though she knew he meant the sentiment in the best possible way, unbidden tears rushed to the fore, making her squeeze her eyes shut even tighter to keep them at bay. Forget her tentative thoughts about falling in love with Del. She was already there. Otherwise, the thought of being without him after this was all over—and worse, that he was going to end up some eternal plaything for a crazy witch with a *Fatal Attraction* fetish—wouldn't create such a sense of loss inside her heart.

Lydia twisted in his arms before he had the chance to see her reaction to his words. Their mouths fused in a desperate kiss, and she ignored the roaring in her ears to meld their

bodies together. Her nipples ached where they crushed against his chest, but when Del attempted to return to the pace he had set, she whimpered in frustration.

"I don't want soft," she said. Breaking free of his tempting hands, she turned her back to Del, needing those few extra moments to banish her tears. She kicked off her shoes as she pulled her shirt up over her head. "I want to feel how much you want me. I want you to pound into me until I can't walk straight."

His sharp of intake of breath sent an electrical charge down her spine. "I don't want to hurt you."

Lydia pushed down her jeans, and as she bent over, she glanced back, knowing the fall of her hair would shield her weakness from him. His gaze was riveted to the bare slope of her back, slithering down her skin as she bared her buttocks, and his nostrils were flaring from the quickening of his hunger.

"You won't," she promised.

Before her jeans could pool at her feet, Del closed the distance between them, dragging her back against his chest and attacking her neck with renewed lust. His teeth scraped across her shoulder as a strong hand cupped her breast, tweaking her already puckered nipple into an even harder peak. Everywhere his mouth and hands touched, her skin inflamed, coming to life as he poured his desire for her into every caress. It matched the return of his murmured declarations, though this time, they were colored in shades of want.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Lydia arched her arms back to tug blindly at his clothes, fumbling with his pants' lacings in order to free his straining erection. His cock was hot when it slapped against her palm, the tip slick with pre-cum, and Del groaned when she wrapped her hand around it.

"You bewitch me," he breathed. "How could I want another woman when I have such as you in my arms? Believe me, Lydia. There is no other for me. There hasn't been since I first dreamed of you."

Her chest tightened, but she covered the swell of emotion by focusing on the physical reality of his throbbing length in her hand. Slowly, she pumped up and down, gliding over the wet head with each pass, letting her fingertips brush against his balls when she reached the base. It didn't take more than a couple for Del to push her toward the table, his hand abandoning her breast to come to her back and bow her down onto its flat surface.

The wood scraped across her nipples, but those tingles were minor compared to the way his callused hand stroked down her spine. His other settled between her thighs, coaxing them apart before dipping past her slick folds, and the contrast of hard and soft soon had her quivering.

"No more doubts," Del said. Somewhere along the way, his voice had gone rough, adding to the sensations bombarding her like sandpaper being dragged across her most sensitive skin. The hold she'd had on his cock was taken away as he angled his hips against hers, allowing his shaft to glide along her lubrication. "Tell me you believe me, Lydia."

She gripped the edges of the table, preparing for the first thrust. "I believe you."

It didn't come. Instead, Del's fingers joined his cock, slicking with her juices. "Do you believe me enough to let me have whatever I desire?" he demanded. Lydia gasped when his hand left her pussy to graze upward between the full cheeks of her ass, and twisted to meet his burning gaze. "You said you didn't want it soft." The tip of his index finger circled the tight opening. "Would you let me take you here?"

The possibility had never occurred to her, but now, seeing the hungry gleam in his eyes, a thrill of excitement rippled through Lydia. "I've never..."

"So I would be your first?"

She swallowed. "Yes."

"So would you?"

Even quieter ... "Yes."

A sly smile curved his full mouth. "Perhaps next time."

Before she could react, Del shifted his hips and slammed into her pussy, sheathing his cock in a maddening thrust that had her scrambling to keep hold of the table. Abandoning his gentler touching, both of his broad hands gripped her body as he assumed a punishing rhythm, not giving her time to adjust, not giving her space to breathe. It took all Lydia had just to try and keep up.

"Oh, God ... oh, God..."

Any prospect for coherent speech disappeared as she met him, stroke for stroke. The sound of their skin slapping together filled the cabin, each moment of contact growing slicker with sweat. More than once, Del had to reclaim his

hold on her when his fingers slipped, but when that grew too difficult, he curled an arm around her waist and hauled her up without his bruising pace ever faltering.

"Tell me you believe," he whispered.

"I do. You know I do."

"Tell me you won't let any of this ugliness spoil what time we have left."

Lydia closed her eyes, but it didn't block out the sudden image of the stain on the door that his words evoked. When she didn't respond as quickly as he wanted, Del growled.

"Tell me," he repeated.

His free hand went to her mound, honing straight in on her clit. The deliberate pinch made her pussy spasm as she screamed out her agreement, her head slamming back against his shoulder as her orgasm ripped through her flesh. She was barely aware of his pistoning growing rougher, or the way he sank his teeth into the sinew of her neck, or the guttural cry when his body stiffened and he shot deep inside her passage. It retained that edge of reality feel until the fire tearing through her began to ebb, and the vigorous grip of his hand eased to slide up her ribcage and find her breast.

She felt his apologies against her skin mere seconds before his voice became discernible. Arching an arm back, Lydia tangled with the damp hair at his nape, fingertips soothing the taut muscle.

"What on earth do you have to be sorry for?" she panted.
"That was incredible."

"I shouldn't..." He stopped as he stifled his ragged breaths by sealing another kiss to her shoulder. "It's not right for me

to make such demands," he tried again. "Especially when we're like this."

"It feels like an excellent strategy to me," Lydia said. "And I wouldn't have said it if I didn't mean it."

"Truly?"

Carefully, she eased forward, allowing his softening shaft to slip from her pussy. Entwining her fingers with his, she turned and leaned against the table, pulling him close to her again.

"Am I thrilled about everything you told me?" she said softly. "No. But you know that, I think."

"Lydia..."

"That doesn't mean I want to keep fighting about it. I'll let it go. I promise."

The doubt that had clouded his aspect took a moment to clear, but when it did, it brought back with it the boyish smile that made her heart flip-flop. His hands came up to cup her face, and he held her still as he leaned down and kissed her, a tender caress that sent a flush over her skin.

"Regardless of what will come," he murmured against her mouth, "I would make the same bargain again and again and again to have these moments with you. If nothing else, you should know that to be true."

"I do."

They sank back into their kisses, and for a moment, she debated telling Del the depth of her feelings. The temptation to give that to him was strong; she wanted to see the delight illuminate those blue-green eyes, see him smile and laugh as if he didn't have a care in the world because she returned his

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

love. But as she clung to his broad shoulders, Lydia suppressed the urge.

They were still raw and delicate in the aftermath of their argument.

She had only just come to the realization, and the emotion was too fresh for her to properly have a grip on.

But most importantly, she didn't want to make it harder, for either of them, when it came time for her to leave. Nobody had ever touched her life like Del had, from the annual music boxes to everything he had done since she'd arrived.

Lydia doubted anyone would touch it the same again after he was gone.

After she lost him forever.

Chapter Nineteen

By unspoken agreement, the subjects of Zuri and Del's future were left untouched. Lydia had no desire to be reminded of how hard it was going to be when she left—denial seemed like an excellent practice in order to enjoy what time remained—and there was plenty to do around the cabin to keep them otherwise occupied. Del fixed the door with minimal effort, while Lydia set herself to household tasks like laundry and cooking.

Staying with the Kootenai had taught her a lot about how they survive, and she put those lessons to good use as she scrubbed the house from top to bottom. Del watched in amusement as she scrubbed his shirts against the washboard she'd found tucked away into a corner, but not once did he say a word against it, even going so far as to step in and empty her basins the moment she was done.

Throughout all of it, whenever they were in the same space together, they talked. It was frivolous at first, like Lydia's comparisons between Del's life and modern convenience, and Del's penchant for preferring risqué literature. But as they grew more confident that another fight wouldn't ensue, topics started to veer toward more serious matters. After answering his questions about the summers she'd spent with her grandparents growing up, Lydia broached the subject of his mother, gently probing to try and understand his relationship with her.

"She had the most delicate hands," he mused. He sat at the table, sorting through tins of herbs that she'd pulled from the shelves while cleaning. It had taken him a few moments to collect his thoughts before answering Lydia, and when he did, his voice had grown soft, his eyes wistful. "I remember when I was ten and holding my hand up to hers, and my fingers were longer than hers were. I found that the oddest thing." He held his hands out in front of him, turning them over and flexing them as he relived the memories. "I always wished I had her grace."

Though he hadn't shown them to her, Lydia thought back to the rings she'd found in the jewelry box, how the smaller of the pair wouldn't even slip past her first knuckle. That one must have been his mother's. But Del had said he never knew his father. Why had there been two rings, then?

"She must have had a hard time, raising you on her own," Lydia said, hoping it would elicit an answer of some sort.

Del shrugged. "We weathered what we needed to. My mother moved us around a fair bit. Every time she didn't like the way our lives were shaping." He snorted and returned his attention to his sorting. "It usually happened when men started to pursue her more than she cared for. She had no interest in a serious relationship. She told everybody she was a widow, but that didn't seem to deter them, so she started wearing a wedding band, like she would be mourning her dead husband for the rest of her life. And when *that* didn't work, she made another ring to wear around her neck." Del shook his head. "It took me a long time to understand why she would want to be alone."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

This was veering dangerously close into the realm of what they didn't want to talk about, so Lydia shifted the subject yet again. By the time they retired for the night, their good moods had returned, and she snuggled in against him in the narrow bed, his arm warm and secure around her waist.

The next two days passed by in a whirl. On the morning of the third, Lydia woke to the sound of voices outside. She was alone in the bed, and the vague shape of a man's shadow was cast across the small window by the door. It had to be Del. She frowned as she wrapped the blanket around her and stood up. Who was he talking to?

A glance out the window showed Del and Fox standing in front of the house. There was a brief moment of fear about why the young Kootenai would come around, but the smile on his face and Del's answering chuckles were enough to alleviate that. They were laughing. It couldn't be bad.

She was just slipping on her jeans when the door opened and Del came back inside.

"You're awake," he said with a lopsided grin. He crossed the room and hooked a finger through a loop on her waistband, tugging her off-balance to fall against him. "Pity. I was rather looking forward to waking you up myself."

Lydia groaned with satisfaction at the warm slide of his mouth along her neck, tilting her head to the side to encourage him to continue. "What did Fox want?"

"To let me know that everything is fine with the tribe." His large hands cupped her ass, grinding her against his burgeoning erection. "He wanted to save me the trip of checking on them."

"So they haven't had any more attacks?"

Her words made him sigh, and he pulled back to gaze down at her. "No," Del said. "Which actually does worry me a bit."

"Why?"

"Because of the one that got away." Letting her go, Del went over to the shelves to start pulling out dishes for breakfast. "He is an unknown, Lydia. I don't know if he made it back to Troy to tell others what happened, or if he got killed on the way, or if he's organizing forces at this very moment to retaliate for the other deaths. The Kootenai shouldn't have to live in constant fear of something happening."

Lydia went to the fire to fetch the pot of porridge he'd had cooking and carried it over to join him at the table. "There's not much we can do about that, is there? I mean, you never saw who it was, right?"

As he watched her dish up the food, Del shook his head. "Which is another reason to be worried. But I was thinking..." He toyed with his spoon, his gaze pensive. "How would you like a ride into town today?"

The suggestion came out of the blue. Ever since she'd dismissed staying in Troy as a means to get away from the so-called stalker who knew too much about her—and it still amused Lydia that she'd ever thought that about Del—she hadn't given the town any consideration.

"I don't want you staying here by yourself," he said when she remained silent. "I know I put the wards up, but without knowing whether or not I was identified, I'd feel better having you where I can protect you directly."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

She stirred her porridge, blowing across its surface to cool it down. "What will going into Troy accomplish?" she asked.

"I need to know if there's been any talk about what happened. If it looks bad, I promise, we'll leave as soon as I know that. But we're not going to know, waiting here, sitting on our hands."

He had a point. And going into Troy would prove a distraction from their normal routine. Lydia was mildly curious about seeing what an old-fashioned frontier town was like anyway. She also believed that he wouldn't suggest the trip if he didn't feel it was absolutely necessary.

"I guess I'd better wear my walking shoes then," she joked with a smile.

His answering grin was one of relief. "No need," Del said. "I asked Fox to go home and meet us with one of the horses. You're going to need to dress more like the women in town, I'm afraid, and walking through the snow in that skirt will not be comfortable."

His reminder about the other women brought up another question. "Won't people wonder who I am?"

Del shrugged. "Perhaps. It's not their business."

He'd lived too long uncaring of society, but Lydia knew this had the potential to make things very difficult for them in Troy. "Maybe," she acquiesced. "But I'm a stranger to them. Do you want them too busy trying to figure out who I am to give you what you need?" She looked down at her bowl, her nerves bubbling to the surface at what she was about to say. "Tell them I'm your wife. It'll give you an alibi if someone

tries to accuse you of something, and it'll keep them from asking questions we can't answer honestly."

Lydia rushed to spoon a bite of porridge into her mouth, too anxious about his response to tear her gaze away from her food. When he didn't speak right away, she dared a glimpse through her lashes.

Del stared at her in astonished disbelief, his meal forgotten before him. His mouth opened, closed, opened again only to close in a long, drawn-out sigh as whatever words he was hoping to summon failed to appear. He finally ran a hand through his hair and leaned back in his seat.

"I can't ask you to do that," he said. "As much ... it wouldn't ... I can't."

"You didn't ask. I offered."

"Why?"

It was the perfect opportunity to tell him the truth of her feelings for him. Say the words out loud instead of repeating them in her head every time he murmured something endearing or professed his own love. Lydia knew nothing would make Del happier than to know that she felt the same way, but at the same time, making it that real would make their eventual separation, only days away, all that much harder to bear.

"Because it's the easiest solution to stop any gossiping about you," she said, keeping her tone light. She shot him an impish grin. "And frankly, I suck as an actress. If I have to pretend not to think you're sexy as hell and that I just want to drag you to the nearest bed, then we're screwed before we even get there."

Her glib treatment of the matter made him chuckle, his hands relaxing from their knots. "Then that will be our story," he said. "But only if the issue arises. If we're fortunate, nobody will say anything."

Lydia smiled and nodded, though she thought Del was being overly naive about their situation. The question *would* be asked. It was just a matter of when.

* * * *

Fox waited for them at the same spot they'd parted at previously, the horse tethered to a nearby tree. He leapt up from where he'd been sitting, his words tumbling out at their usual breakneck speed before his feet touched the ground. For a second, it looked like Del was going to tell him to slow down. Then a frown settled across his features, and he was answering Fox in far more subdued tones.

The young man deflated like a balloon being pricked, but when Del stepped past him to check out the horse, Fox caught Lydia's eye and seemed to gather a second wind. Pivoting, he followed after Del, chattering on every step, even going so far as to take the reins out of Del's hands when Del started to argue again.

"What's going on?" Lydia said, edging closer.

Her interruption fueled a new burst from Fox, though Del merely rolled his eyes.

"He's inviting us to the camp when we're done in Troy," he said when Fox stopped.

Lydia frowned. "Why is that a problem?"

Fox looked to Del expectantly, as if he had understood her confusion and seen it as a good sign for his side.

"They'd want us to spend the night."

"So? It's not like we haven't done that before."

Another exclamation from Fox was hushed when Del took the reins back. Fox glared at him in annoyance for a moment, then darted back to grab Lydia's hand, dragging her up to the horse. He began babbling as he pressed her hand to Del's chest, moving it back to her stomach, then up to Del's chest again.

"I don't..."

"For God's sake," Del muttered. Clearly cross about the whole conversation, he extracted Lydia's hand from Fox's grasp. "Tomorrow's my birthday. Fox is attempting to get us to the camp so that the tribe can celebrate it." He looked pointedly at Fox, and though he spoke in English, his tone made his intention clear. "But we're not going."

Her eyes flew wide. "Your birthday? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it is not important. I never even remember when it is any more until this one comes banging on my door to drag me out."

"How old are you going to be?"

That one stumped Del for a fraction of a second. "Thirty-five," he said. His eyes narrowed. "We're not going, Lydia. If you thought they were fussing over me before, they'll be all over me, all day long. We won't get any privacy until we leave, and then that's another day we won't have to spend together."

His implication was clear. He wanted to be selfish, wanted to get as many hours with her as he could until she left. But Lydia felt a little selfish, too, and sidled closer.

"I want to go," she said softly. When he opened his mouth to protest, she rested her palm against his chest to cut him off. "This is the only chance I'm ever going to have to celebrate your birthday with you. I'd like to do this."

Her reason made his gaze soften. "We can celebrate at home if you wish," he replied, matching her tone.

"And miss out on getting spoiled and pampered all day because I'm your girlfriend? Not on your life, buster. Tell him we'll be there."

Maybe it was because she had referred to herself as his girlfriend. Maybe it was because of that, on top of the upcoming pretense of posing as his wife. Maybe it was only because he loved her.

But before the last word had faded away, Del had molded his hand around the back of her neck and pulled her to his mouth in a hard kiss that left her breathless and her skin tingling. She melted against him, oblivious to the cold and their audience and everything that wasn't his raw strength and hungry need.

"What was that for?" she panted when they finally parted.

His lips quirked. "For being insufferable and irresistible." Turning to Fox, he said a few words in Kootenai that lit up the young man's face.

Fox backed away from them, smiling and chattering with his recovered earnestness. Del waved him off, but his laughter after Fox was gone contradicted his mock irritation.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Lacing his fingers together, he bent over, indicating Lydia should use his aid to mount the horse. "I'm going to remind you that this was your idea when you have half a dozen children following you to the outhouse," he scolded.

Gingerly, Lydia set her foot in his makeshift stirrup and squeaked when he lifted her effortlessly to the height of the saddle. "It'll be fun," she said as she gripped the horn, trying to find her balance. "Will there be cake?"

Her innocent question made him laugh. "Probably not. Though don't be surprised if half the tribe is drunk by sunset. They love an excuse to have a party."

Wrapping the reins around his hand, Del clicked his tongue, prompting the horse to follow his lead as he headed out of the trees. Lydia gasped when she swayed sideways, but she quickly righted herself, using the weight of the skirts she hated so much to find a new equilibrium.

"This town has a general store or something like that, right?"

A quizzical line appeared between Del's brows. "Of course. Why?"

"Birthdays require gifts." She shot him a dazzling grin. "Though I don't think I can top twelve years of music boxes."

Del tilted his head to look up at Lydia, and what she saw made her heart skip more than a beat. His heavy gaze lingered on hers, a caress more fervent than if he'd pulled her into his arms, and his slow smile was one of wonder. "You already have," he murmured. "Just by being here."

Chapter Twenty

Her cheeks were numb by the time Del tied the horse to the post in front of the Troy mercantile, and Lydia was grateful for his warm hands as he reached to help her down. As soon as her feet touched the ground, she burrowed her face into the thick collar of his coat and slipped her arms around his waist, desperate to steal some of the heat he always seemed to have too much of.

Del chuckled. "It's not that cold," he scolded, though he rubbed his broad hands over her back to help her warm up.

"California girl, remember?" Reluctantly, Lydia pulled away and glared at the dirty snow that had been shoveled out of the street. "Hollywood lies. Winter sucks."

His laughter deepened. Lacing their fingers together, Del led her up the low stairs to the wooden walk that ran along the front of the shops. "And here I thought you'd started to get accustomed to it." He held the front door of the mercantile open for her, his eyes dancing in merriment. "Make sure you thaw out enough to last the ride back," he said. "I'd hate to have you miss the party you were so keen for."

"I'd have to be on my deathbed to miss *that*," Lydia retorted. With a toss of her head, she flounced past him, his continued mirth drifting after her.

The store had a slight claustrophobic feel to it, its walls lined from ceiling to floor with merchandise of every shape, size, and color. Barrels edged the long counter that ran the

length of the rear, with a stairwell leading to an upper floor and a door that probably went to a storage room behind it. In the center of the room stood a cast-iron stove, the small grille on the door glowing orange from the fire inside. Not a spare inch of the place was wasted.

Del captured her hand before she entered too far, pulling her back to his side. "The owner is one of the few people in town I trust to be fair to the Kootenai," he murmured, his mouth barely moving. "I can find out from him if there are any rumblings about a reprisal because of what happened. Let me do the talking, all right?"

Lydia nodded. She let him take the lead as he walked to the counter, but when nobody appeared, he rang the small bell that sat on its glass-covered top.

"Joel?" he called out.

Footsteps overhead drew their gazes upward, and it took only moments before a middle-aged woman came rushing down. She was reed thin and taller than Del, with callused fingers that had obviously seen their fair share of work through the course of her lifetime. But the pale eyes she turned to Del were bright with intelligence, and the smile she greeted him with was genuine.

"Well, we haven't seen you around here for a coon's age, Mr. Wessner," she said. Her attention flitted to Lydia, a brow shooting upward when she noted the clasped hands. "And I see you brought along company this time."

"I've been a little busy out at my place." Del let go of her hand to rest it in the small of her back. "Lydia, this is Mrs.

Bruce. She and her husband own the shop." He shifted back to the older woman. "And this is Lydia. My ... wife."

She didn't know if she only heard his hesitation because she was aware of its falsity, but regardless, the introduction took Mrs. Bruce by visible surprise.

"Well, now, how in glory did *that* happen?" she exclaimed. "Not that it isn't wonderful news. Goodness knows I've always thought you spent too much time on your own, Mr. Wessner. A man can go addled with only himself for company."

Del began to fidget long before Mrs. Bruce stopped speaking, and Lydia jumped in to help out, knowing more untruths would make him uncomfortable. "Our families are old friends," she said. "When he moved up here, we started corresponding, to keep in touch." She stepped closer into his side. "He always sent me the most beautiful music boxes for my birthdays. How could I not fall in love with a man as romantic as that?"

It was as close as she would ever be able to get to telling Del that she loved him. Lydia heard his soft, sharp inhalation of surprise, but he covered it by brushing a kiss across her temple, his fingers sliding and tightening around her waist.

Mrs. Bruce beamed. "Now that's the kind of story I like to hear. It gives me hope for the future."

Her mention of the future subdued their response, but already, the shopkeeper was barreling onward in the conversation, talking about what young newlyweds probably required and making suggestions of her own.

Del held up his free hand to stop her. "We're here, actually, because I need to speak with Joel. Is he around?"

She jerked her head toward the storage room. "He's out back. I'll take you around." The creak of floorboards overhead made her shoot a glance toward the ceiling, but her smile never faded as she went to the end of the counter. When Lydia moved to go with Del, though, Mrs. Bruce waved her off. "Why don't you stay in here and see if something catches your eye?" she said. "It's a fair sight warmer, and just maybe you'll find a little pretty to talk your husband into buying." She gestured toward the stove. "You can take your coat off and warm it up for your trip back, too."

"Oh, I don't..."

"I think I like that idea," Del agreed. He shot her a wink and a smile. "Didn't you say something on the way here about wanting to do some shopping anyway?"

Though she knew he was playfully referring to her desire to buy him a gift, Lydia played along with the charade, mildly grateful to be able to stay inside. She hung back as Mrs. Bruce led him through the storage room door, but as soon as she was alone, she slipped her jacket off her shoulders, carrying it to the middle of the room and draping it over a group of shovels displayed near the stove. Her plaited hair rested heavily against her back as she leaned over to warm her hands, but the heat seeped through her numbed fingers almost immediately.

Lydia sighed in relief. This was one thing she was not going to miss about Montana. Her thin California blood couldn't take this cold.

Behind her, the stairs creaked, and she glanced back to see someone descending from the upper level. It was a young

man, his pale eyes and gaunt features making it all too obvious he was related to Mrs. Bruce, but it was the jagged scratch on his forehead, disappearing into his hairline, that drew her attention.

"Hi," she greeted, smiling cheerfully though something about his suspicious gaze made her uncomfortable.

He didn't respond, coming down the rest of the way to stand behind the counter. His clothes were rumpled, as if he'd slept in them for a week, and he loomed impossibly tall, his limbs long and gangly with the final effects of puberty. When he set a hand on the glass-covered top, Lydia noted the pale pink scratches climbing over his knobby wrists, disappearing beneath his shirtsleeve.

Her eyes flew back to his face.

He was still staring at her. Only now, his brows were beginning to come together in a thick, dark line.

"Are you looking for Mrs. Bruce?" she asked. Her voice sounded high and patchy to her ears, and she wondered if she looked as nervous as she felt. "She went out back, but she shouldn't be gone long."

Her attempt to direct his disconcerting presence elsewhere failed. When the man didn't move, Lydia turned to grab her coat, her braid swinging. She was going to feel infinitely better waiting out with the horse instead of with this guy.

"You..."

The low rasp of his voice made her skin crawl, and she whipped around to see him emerge from behind the counter. His steps were long, headed directly for her, and she edged back around the stove, placing it between them.

"I don't think we've met," she said.

Without breaking stride, he pointed a finger at her, eyes narrowed to slits. "You were there."

Her heart pounded, her skin throbbing in fear. She curled one hand into a fist behind her back, her nails digging into her palm to ground her from showing how he affected her. "The only place I've been is my husband's home. You must think I'm someone else."

She cried out in shock when he suddenly lunged forward, grabbing her by the upper arms and shaking her. His force knocked her into the display of shovels, and they clattered to the floor, the wooden handles rolling around to block the easy path to the front door.

"I saw you," he hissed. "With those Indians when they killed Caleb. Ma had me half-convinced it was all pretend, that I must've dreamed the whole thing when I bumped my head or been so scared that it made me addled." He shook Lydia again, his fingers bruising. "But you were *there*. That means it's all true."

"I wasn't! Let me go!"

Though she squirmed against his lean body, all it did was force him to grip her even more painfully. But more overwhelming than the panic about being hurt was terror for Del. If this young man could place her at the Kootenai camp the night of the attack, did that mean he could do the same for Del? Had he seen what Del had done to the other men?

Unable to do anything with her upper body, Lydia lashed out with her feet, her toes connecting solidly with the young man's shins. He howled in surprised protest, letting her go to

clutch at his leg, but the abrupt release made her stumble, and her hands flew out for anything to keep herself from falling.

The first thing they hit was the potbellied stove.

Her fingers curled into the cast iron on instinct, but even as it managed to stop her from landing on the floor, the searing pain shot through her fingers and palms, scorching her skin with its fiery temperature. Lydia screamed and let go as quickly as it registered. Her balance wasn't steady yet, and she lurched sideways, trying to get further away from the young man.

"Get back here," he snarled. He sounded possessed, fury spurring him beyond the pain. A long hand grabbed the folds of her skirt and yanked, throwing her to the ground. "You're going to tell Ma you were there. You're going to tell her I'm not crazy."

Her second fall jammed the heels of her hands against one of the shovel handles. It rendered her helpless for a fraction of a second, but it was all the time he needed to grab her around the waist and haul her back against him.

As she struggled to get free, Lydia heard the distant slam of a door. There might have been footsteps then, but the pounding could just as easily have been her blood in her ears, or the roar of adrenaline through her veins, or even the staccato beats of her heels hitting anything and everything as she tried to kick the man again. She didn't have time to try and figure out which it was. She needed to get away.

A shout rang through the store. Then another.

The world fell out from beneath her as she was lifted off the ground. Lydia cried out in frustration, but then a familiar warm hand glanced off her arm as it pried at young Mr. Bruce's, and she looked up in time to see Del tearing the man away from her.

Their eyes met.

Then she was crashing to the floor again as her attacker was pulled off.

Del scooped her against his chest within a moment of her fall. Her burned hands brushed against the rough material of his coat, and Lydia winced in pain, drawing them tight into her body to protect them.

"What happened?" he said. He pulled her away from the center of the room, his strength giving her fresh equilibrium. "I heard you scream. I should have been here. I'm so sorry."

He helped her sit on a wooden stepladder. The respite gave Lydia a chance to see what was happening to the young man. He struggled against a man as broad as he was tall, fighting from being dragged toward the stairs, while Mrs. Bruce pushed both of them along. They were actually making progress until one of the youth's rangy limbs lashed out and struck her across the face.

"She was there!" he was ranting.

His pale eyes were wild, his actions more so, but the determined set of his father's jaw eased some of Lydia's alarm that he would get free again. It didn't stop his accusations from flowing, though. And with each word uttered, she felt Del stiffen beside her.

"Shut your mouth!" Joel Bruce roared. He wrapped a meaty arm across the young man's throat. "Shut it!"

Lydia tore her eyes away from the spectacle. With the pressing threat gone, her heart was starting to slow, but it did nothing for her trembling. If anything, that was getting worse.

Del pried her hands away from her body, forcing her to expose the burned palms. She could have sworn she heard him growl in anger, but his touch remained gentle, his fingertips skimming over the singed skin.

"We'll have to wrap these," he murmured. "God, Lydia..."

"It's okay." It was an automatic response. She didn't feel okay. She felt like throwing up. "But we should go. We should get out of here." She lifted pleading eyes to his, trying to get him to understand the gravity of the situation. She had no way of knowing how much he'd had a chance to talk with Joel before rushing back in. "I want to go home."

He nodded. "We will, we will."

"I had no idea Matthew would go after your wife." Mrs. Bruce hovered behind Del, knotting her hands in front of her. "It's like we told you outside. Ever since he got back from that hunting trip, he hasn't been right. All this talk about people going up in flames, and saying how that snowstorm was a sign from God..." She sighed. "If I thought he was dangerous, I would never have left her alone in here. You have to believe me, Mr. Wessner."

A derisive snort from Matthew made all heads turn to him. "You don't know," he spat. "You didn't see what happened to Caleb and the others. Those Indians..." He fought against his

father's grip for a frantic moment, but when it became clear he wasn't getting loose, Matthew jabbed a condemning finger in her direction. "But she does. And if she does, you can bet he..."

"Finish that sentence, and I'll tie you to your bed until you're thirty, boy," Joel warned.

With Del's arm strong around her back, Lydia rose from the stepladder in spite of the wobbling in her knees. "You don't want us around," she said to Mrs. Bruce. "My being here is only making your son worse."

Del frowned. "Your hands..."

"Here." Mrs. Bruce bustled back behind the counter and, after briefly digging around, came back with a long, flat box and some cotton strips in her hands. "They don't fix anything, but if you wrap your hands first, they'll keep you covered until you two get home."

She held out a pair of sheepskin-lined leather gloves, but Del hesitated to take them. "I didn't bring money with me today," he said. "I can't pay for them."

"You don't need to." When he didn't move, Mrs. Bruce pressed them into his free hand. "It's the least we can do after what Matthew did."

"You have to believe I'm not who he seems to think I am," Lydia said.

The older woman nodded. "I know. He's got those Indians on the brain, and with your dark hair..." Her gaze grew critical as it assessed Lydia. "Maybe if you wore it up instead. After all, you're a married woman now."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

A bubble of hysterical laughter threatened to erupt from Lydia's mouth, but she tamped it down. Fashion advice in the face of everything was ludicrous, but there were more serious things for her to focus on. Like getting out and away from Matthew Bruce's indicting eyes.

"I'll remember that," she murmured.

Del grabbed her coat from where it had fallen to the floor, holding it for her as she slipped it on. "My apologies for disrupting your day, Joel," he said.

"I should be the one apologizing to you," Joel replied. "If we'd known..."

"Nobody could know." Del's smile was conciliatory as he guided Lydia to the door. "Good luck with everything."

The Bruces' responding, "And to you," floated after them as they stepped out of the store.

Chapter Twenty-One

"Are you certain you're all right?"

They stood next to the horse, Del's worried eyes searching hers. He had wrapped her hands, but the sheepskin lining in the gloves still chafed against her burns. At least, her fingers were warm, and the added distance from Matthew Bruce was calming the worst of Lydia's shock. It helped that Del kept a reassuring hand on her the entire way out of the store, and that he still touched her as he waited patiently for her reply. She smiled, and it almost felt natural.

"All right enough to get out of this place," she replied. When he laced his fingers to help her into the saddle, though, she shook her head. "Can I walk? It's going to hurt too much to hold on so that I don't fall off."

"Of course."

Lydia stepped out of the way as Del untied the reins from the post, looping them loosely around one hand while he guided them onto the street. Neither of them spoke as they retraced their steps out of town. It was as if each knew there would be ample opportunity for it once they were clear of suspicious ears.

Del was the first to shatter the silence, a quarter mile past the furthest homestead.

"I guess I don't have to tell you that Matthew Bruce was the one I couldn't find that night," he said. His voice was pitched low, somber and dark with the memories. When she glanced at him, his gaze was fixed on the sweeping snow-

covered terrain ahead of them. "I know it doesn't help what happened today, but I'm relieved now I couldn't. I wouldn't have liked knowing I'd killed Joel's boy."

"What did Joel and his wife tell you?"

"That Matthew said he was going hunting with some of his friends and their fathers. Joel doesn't hunt, so he let the boy go, no questions asked. Matthew didn't get back until lunch the next day. When he showed up at the house, he was bleeding, frostbitten, half-delirious from being stuck out in the storm. They didn't pay no never mind to his ramblings while he was sick, but then his fever went away, and he kept talking about what he'd seen."

It felt like her skin was constricting around her flesh, drawing tighter and tighter until it was hard to breathe. She had had a vague idea of what would come with Del's intervention, but she remembered all too well what a shock it had been when she'd first witnessed his powers. How would that look to a nineteenth century boy with no potential frame of reference?

Like the devil incarnate.

No wonder he'd been so terrified.

"He said he saw me and Kokanee," she offered. "He freaked out when I refused to tell him he was right."

"Joel and his wife don't know what to think," Del said. "They're God-fearing people, and the notion of magic doesn't fit into their view of the world. They were shocked when Matthew told them why he'd really gone out. And then the rest of it..." He let out a long sigh that left a gossamer plume floating behind him. "I'm not sure how this is going to affect

the tribe. The Bruces aren't going to tell anybody what happened, but they can't keep Matthew locked away for the rest of his life. Some day, that boy is going to talk. And some day, someone is going to believe what he has to say."

Though her palms still ached, Lydia reached out and brushed her hand against his, lending her support without bringing undue attention to it. "You're not worried about what that'll mean for you?"

His mouth formed a tight line for a long minute before he answered. "My future's already been decided. Nothing Matthew Bruce can do will change that."

Of course not. Because you've sold your soul to your psycho ex for a few years of peace and quiet.

As tempting as it was to argue with him about it, Lydia knew it would be a wasted effort. Not only would it ruin what little time they had left, but it would distract Del from the more serious issue of the Kootenai. She didn't want to be the cause of that.

"So what are we going to do?" she asked instead.

Her tone must have alerted him to her wayward thoughts. Slipping his free arm around her waist, Del leaned in to skim a warm kiss over her jaw. "I thought you wanted to torment me with this birthday celebration."

His touch was all she needed to surrender her fears. "I didn't think we were still going."

"We have to. The horse is theirs."

He was deliberately lightening the mood, just as she had deliberately chosen not to pursue the argument about his

future. Lydia met his eyes, and understanding passed between them.

"You do know one of the birthday traditions is a spanking, right?" she said with a half-smile. "One for every year since you were born."

Del slid his hand down her side to cup her ass through her skirt and coat. "Considering you're probably going to hurt too much to do it properly, I think I'll have to be the one spanking you," he teased.

She laughed. Because he made it so easy to.
And because she loved him.
He made that easy, too.

* * * *

They were greeted with open arms and wide smiles, Fox and Kokanee leading the small entourage. The setting sun outlined everybody in burnished gold and orange, making them glow with life, and any shred of grief she might have harbored about the trip into town or Del's future was banished at the sight of the Kootenai. There was something comforting about them. A sense of coming home. It was easy to understand how Del had grown so attached to them.

While Fox took the reins from Del, he murmured a few words to Kokanee, whose dark eyes widened and shot to Lydia. The older woman pressed forward, grasping Lydia's wrists with a gentle touch and pulling her arms out in order to look at her hands. She peeled off the gloves and cotton strips, and Lydia winced as Kokanee grazed cold fingertips across the burns.

"Kokanee has some ointment that will ease the sting," Del said. Slipping his hand around the back of her neck, he pulled her close, kissing her with lips that were warm enough to make her cheeks flame. "I'll see you at supper."

She allowed herself to be led away, only glancing back at Del and the others once. His light mood was gone with her absence, and he spoke to two of the older men with solemn eyes and a grave tone.

Lydia shifted her attention away. The issue of Matthew Bruce and the Kootenai wasn't her concern. She would probably be long gone by the time that situation came to a head.

It was a relief to let Kokanee fuss over her. She took Lydia to the same tipi that she had shared with Del on their last visit, already prepared for their new stay, and she pressed the younger woman onto the bed while she ducked back out for the ointment Del had said she had. Lydia snuggled into the furs while she waited, closing her eyes in an attempt to block out the events of the day.

Party. Del's birthday. Spending it with the Kootenai.

These were good things.

It would be an excellent celebration. If Lydia could forget the look in Matthew's eyes as he'd lunged for her.

Kokanee returned with more than ointment. There was a dress of the softest leather, with boots to match, and fresh laces to bind her hair back. There was even a pot of musky perfume. Lydia started to protest, but one glance from Kokanee shut her up, and she rose to her feet to make it easier to change clothes. It was a good thing this was a one-

time deal. She felt more than a little decadent being waited on so.

By the time they emerged from the tipi, the sun had set and a certain tranquillity blanketed the valley. Lydia paused and tilted her head back, gazing up into the starless sky. Nothing moved. Not a leaf. Not a cloud. All she could hear was the distant crackle of the central fires in the Kootenai camp.

And Del.

Lydia turned her head in the direction of his voice. He stood a few yards away, his face cloaked in shadows. They had given him a change of clothing as well, fresh trousers without the hems soaked through with snow, and a clean shirt visible beneath his open coat. But it was his eyes that caught her, glowing with scattered slivers of light from the dancing flames off to their side.

"You mean I pass inspection?" she said with a coy smile.

He walked toward her, and the slight illumination that had outlined him dissipated, leaving him masked until he stood before her. Then she could see everything, from the swirling emotion in his eyes to the sudden flare of his nostrils as her perfume assailed him. It took her breath away.

"Happy birthday," she murmured.

The slide of his gaze along the curve of her cheek was palpable, and he lifted his hand to echo the path. "It won't be my birthday for a few more hours yet," he breathed. "You've shamed the stars into hiding tonight, do you know that?"

Even now, after hearing Del say such things for weeks, Lydia blushed at the obvious appreciation. "And you are a big

flatterer trying to distract me from what's important right now."

"It's just another day."

She leaned into his touch, nuzzling his hand with her cheek. "Birthdays are never just another day. Not to me."

His fingers tensed just enough to hold her still. Leaning in, Del skimmed his mouth over hers, tasting the seam of her lips with the tip of his tongue. He captured her soft exhalation, but while Lydia acquiesced to his tender exploration without pause, Del didn't intensify the kiss. He seemed content to seek out the warm recesses of her mouth, to tickle along her tongue until her toes curled, to nibble at the soft flesh of her inner lip so that it was impossible to breathe. Lydia had to lift her wrapped hands and rest them gently against his chest to keep from swaying dizzily.

It took her touch for him to break away.

"How are your hands?" he asked, settling his free one over hers.

"Better." She gradually became aware of Kokanee still standing somewhere behind her and ducked her head in embarrassment. "Shouldn't we go eat?"

"Probably. But I'm bringing you back here as soon as we're done."

"What about your birthday party?"

Del chuckled. "It starts tomorrow. This is just supper."

Gently, he took her hand, leading her to the center of the camp. The rest of the tribe was scattered in clusters around the fires, and the smell of roasting meat filled the air. Lydia's stomach rumbled, and Del laughed again, this time letting it

ring out amongst the others. When he sat down onto a woven mat an elderly man pointed out to him, he pulled her down with him, settling her between his legs so that she leaned against his chest.

Chatter and laughter surrounded them as the meal was dished out, bowls piled high with steaming meat and small cakes that tasted remarkably like cornbread. When a diffident, young girl appeared with theirs, Del kept one arm secure around Lydia's waist while taking the dish with the other, setting it on Lydia's lap where they could both reach it.

"You hold me like you're afraid I'm going to disappear," she teased.

He plucked a slice of something that looked like beef from the bowl. "I hold you because I like the way you fit against me," Del murmured in her ear. "And it fills my head with wicked thoughts about everything I'm going to do to you once I get you alone."

She shivered, burrowing closer against his unyielding body. The same thoughts were filling her head, too.

They lapsed into silence as they ate, though it was difficult to stay focused on the Kootenai when Del kept stealing moments to brush a kiss across her neck. In spite of the welcome earlier, nobody bothered them, continuing on in their small circles as if they hadn't a care in the world. Random thoughts about what Del might have already told the elders about Matthew Bruce flitted across Lydia's mind, but just when she would think to turn and ask him, Del dropped another caress against her bare skin.

The moon was high in the night sky when their empty bowl was taken away, and Del immediately released his hold on her waist, rising to his feet. She scrambled up with him, her ass gone numb from sitting for so long, but after exchanging only a few words with one of the men nearby, Del cupped Lydia's elbow and began guiding her back to the tipi.

"They're actually going to let us go to bed?" she asked in surprise.

The look he shot her was amused. "You're the only one who seems to think we should be celebrating my birthday early."

"I just thought after how excited Fox got, that it would be a bigger deal."

"It will be." They reached their tipi, and he drew back the flap to reveal a warming fire already blazing inside.

"Tomorrow."

The moment they were inside, his hands were on her, pushing off her jacket, pushing her hair away from her neck. She heard him murmur, but the words were lost against her skin, his mouth busy with other, more tingle-inducing activities.

"What did you say?" she managed to get out.

His hand found her breast, tweaking her nipple into a peak through the supple leather. As Lydia arched into him, she felt his erection grind against her ass and nearly missed it again when he settled his mouth at her ear.

"Forgive me for failing you today," Del murmured.

The sentiment made her pause, her eyes flying wide as she twisted in his arms. "You're not talking about what happened at the store, are you?"

Her question did nothing to slow his ardor. "I should have been there," he said simply. With his hands now at her back instead of her breasts, he worked to undo the fastenings of her dress, slipping it from her shoulders even before he was done speaking.

"You..." The rest of it was strangled in her throat as Del bowed his head and clamped his mouth around her hard nipple as soon as it was exposed. His tongue circled the tight aureole before flicking across the tip, but if she thought he was stopping there, she was sorely mistaken. His hands pushed the dress down her curved hips, letting the leather pool to the ground as his fingers dug into her soft flesh.

She wanted to touch him like he was touching her, sculpt his hard muscles with her hands and feel his muscles quiver beneath that taut skin. But her bandages made that impossible, and the best Lydia could do was loop her arms beneath his and tug him upward.

He came off her breast with an audible pop. There was a moment where their eyes clashed, and the words to assure him that he wasn't in the wrong, that there was no need for apologies or blame between them rose to her lips. Del refused her the opportunity to utter them, though. His mouth came crashing onto hers in a ravenous kiss that spoke of a hunger kept at bay for far too long. She had no choice but to mold to him as he pressed her back into the bed.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

He did all the work, removing his clothes without breaking contact with her, as if stopping the kisses even for a moment would be an eternity too long. When his hands were free from that task, they set back to touching Lydia in every possible way, dancing along skin to ignite nerve endings she would never have associated with lovemaking, scratching where she was most sensitive, skimming where she was least. The barrage had her trembling long before Del nudged her legs apart with his knees. She finally tore away from his mouth to swallow long, thirsty gulps of air.

"You've never failed me," Lydia panted. "I—ah!"

His long, forceful drive into her pussy choked off her voice, and the slam of his lips back to hers chased away coherent thought. One hand gripped her hip so tightly, she was sure there would be bruises in the morning, while the other crept back to her breast, kneading and fondling to send scalding shivers down her spine. Lydia didn't care. She was lost to the oblivion he created, taking his rhythm for her own, her muscles electric from the power of his thrusts.

Their skin started to slide against each other's as sweat erupted in small beads from their exertions. Nothing seemed to slow Del, the next kiss more savage than the last, and even when she came with his name on her lips, he only propped himself up high enough to meet her with blazing eyes.

He didn't speak.

He didn't have to.

It was her words that pushed him over the edge, her power of speech finally restored.

"I love you, Delaney Michael Wessner," she whispered.

There was a moment, frozen and infinite, where his eyes widened. She looked into those brilliant irises and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he believed her. And that was all that mattered for her.

Then his body stiffened, his hips crashing into hers once, twice, again and again, as he came deep inside her.

She wasn't entirely sure why she'd told him. After all her certitude about why she shouldn't, it didn't make a lot of sense. Until he bent and kissed her, his breath hot and spicy as it mingled with hers. Then she knew. Because she needed him to realize how much he'd actually given her. It didn't matter how much it might hurt her after she left. What mattered was the time they had left.

He rolled onto his back, pulling her over with him so that she lay atop his chest. Beneath her cheek, his skin pulsed from how hard his heart was beating, and the scent of smoke that always clung to him corralled her runaway nerves with its soothing familiarity. Her vantage even allowed her to see the intricate designs of his tattoo, only inches away, the red and blue stark against the black.

Lifting her head, Lydia skimmed her lips along a nearby whorl, the tip of her tongue darting out to capture the sweat that clung to his skin.

"Keep that up, and we'll never get any sleep tonight," Del rasped.

She rested her chin against his chest. "Considering I'm not going to get you to myself tomorrow, I'm thinking that's not such a bad idea."

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

His gaze softened, and he brought a hand up to brush back a strand of damp hair from her cheek. She saw the words form on his tongue long before he uttered the question, but the shy curve of his mouth kept her from pre-empting him from saying it.

"Did you mean it?" he finally whispered.

Explanation was unnecessary. "I'll always mean it."

It banished the shyness from his smile, and he wrapped his fingers around the back of her neck to pull her down for another kiss. When she rested her head again, his hand stayed where it was, caressing her in distracted patterns.

"Thank you," she heard him murmur. She closed her eyes, sighing in contentment.

It was better she told him. He deserved it.

* * * *

The world slept.

In the obsidian sky, the moon carved its place and stood still, waiting like so much else for the next breath to be exhaled. It cast silvery splinters across the snow-covered earth, odd tracks that broke the crust's precision, and it watched as shadows emerged from the steadfast forest. They slithered closer and closer to the slumbering Kootenai, every inch silent, and not even a stray bird betrayed their approach.

Nothing moved. Nothing dared to. The central fires sank into subdued embers.

The shades separated, two from one, but their path didn't slow as they neared the tipi that drew them. Their travels had been more circuitous than anticipated, but their target was a

beacon not to be ignored. They would have found him if he'd buried himself six feet in sand. He was theirs, a part of them, and it was time for him to return what he had so long ago promised.

They stopped before the entrance of the tipi. Lifting a pale hand, Zuri traced her fingertips over the seam, absorbing the heat that emanated from within. "He's here," she said. Her black eyes turned to Eraya, glittering from more than the stolen moonlight. "Can you feel him? How can he sleep, tonight of all nights?"

"Perhaps he still believes he can forego his vow." Eraya smiled. "His hope will feed us for centuries."

When Zuri slipped her fingers beneath the hide, ready to pull it back, Eraya's hand shot out and curled around her sister's wrist. "Not yet," she said. Both heads tilted back to stare up at the moon. "We must wait."

Their profiles were etched in shards of pale light as both watched the skies. Minutes passed, whispering away to dissolve into the ether, and then the calm was altered, only a fraction, only an infinitesimal change, but the scant movement denoting the passing of the midnight hour was all that they needed.

This time, both sisters smiled as their gazes returned to the tipi.

"It's time," Zuri whispered.

Chapter Twenty-Two

She never meant to fall asleep, but Del was so warm beneath her and the thudding of his heart was so hypnotic that Lydia couldn't help going adrift in that place between dreams and wakefulness where time carried little meaning. Every time he moved, she moved with him, their breathing stealing each other's rhythm, their bodies fitting as muscles shifted and smoothed.

So when his hold stiffened around her back, she grew uncomfortable, stiffening as well.

And when his tattoos seemed to turn to fire beneath her outstretched arm, she shifted to let them have the air to cool.

And then she heard it. A woman's voice coming from outside the tipi.

Lydia lifted her head at the same time Del rolled her off him and away from the entrance. "Did you hear that, too?" she asked.

He didn't respond. His gaze was riveted to the closed flap.

Long seconds passed where the only sound to reach her ears was the rushing of her blood. In all that time, Del remained as still as a statue.

The hide wall rippled, and the fire that had been keeping them warm went out, like someone snuffing a candle's flame between their fingertips. It plunged the tipi into blackness, and Lydia blinked, trying to adjust to the change in illumination. She felt Del roll off the furs, and the weight of his pants from the bottom of the bed disappeared.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

"Something's here." His voice was pitched for privacy, and she loathed how the dark made it so disembodied, distant and foreign even though she knew he was well within arm's length. "Don't move."

She hadn't considered it until he said something. Sitting up, she slid her hand out to find the wall, but at the first contact, yanked it back. Even through her bandages, the hide was blistering hot.

"Del..." Lydia clutched the blankets closer, wishing she could see him. "Be careful."

"Always."

The shadows lightened as he lifted the flap to go outside. Del paused, and his hand curled into the hide, faint tendrils of smoke seeping through his fingers. "No," she heard him murmur.

Beyond his outline, a form separated from the inky background, gliding forward to approach the tipi. "You would still deny us?" it said. A woman. Her low alto didn't so much carry as it oozed.

"I'm not denying you anything," Del replied. "But it's not time."

The woman laughed. "It's your birthday, isn't it? And you made a blood vow to us. You can't contest that."

Everything in Lydia froze. She didn't need to see clearly to know who was outside the tipi. But judging from the tense set of Del's shoulders, he was as nonplussed about Zuri's arrival as Lydia was.

When he didn't move or speak, Zuri took a step closer. "Why are you so surprised to see me?" she asked. "Did you really believe whatever you've done would make a difference?" She reached to touch him, and both Del and Lydia flinched at the same time when her fingertips ghosted down his tattooed arm. "Your markings..." Her hand caught the moonlight as she drew back. Spidery veins were visible through the porcelain skin. "What have you done?"

The hand that didn't grip the open flap fisted at Del's side. "This was not the arrangement," he said, his voice cold and clear. "I have four more days. Go. Or I shall make you regret attempting this farce in the first place."

Lydia scrambled for clothing. Del didn't want her involved, but hell if she was going to get caught in the middle of some kind of fight buck naked. Her bound hands made her clumsy, and as she grabbed the first shirt she found, something toppled over in the dark, falling with a thud to the soft earth.

The shadow outside shifted. When Del immediately countered to block more of the opening, Lydia realized that he was trying to shield her from view and hurried even faster to get the shirt pulled over her head.

"You have a companion!" Zuri's laughter rang out into the night, and the walls of the tipi rippled again. "A last minute dalliance. How quaint. A waste of your time, but quaint."

"I won't warn you again, Zuri."

Del's ensuing murmur made the hair on the back of Lydia's neck stand up, and she tugged the shirt down over her head in time to see his fingers begin to glow from within, outlining the curve of his fist. She fumbled to find her skirt, and when

her bandaged hands hindered her attempts, she sat back and tore them off. It didn't matter that her burns still stung. She'd live with the pain if it meant a little more flexibility to do what she needed to.

A sharp crack split the air. The fire that had been extinguished before Zuri's arrival suddenly flared back to life, long orange flames shooting up to lick along the sloped walls of the tipi. Lydia recoiled from the burst of heat, but when sparks showered and ignited the edges of the blankets, instinct took over.

She kicked off the furs, her bare heels skimming over the fiery threat. Ignoring her search for clothes, Lydia threw herself off the end of the bed to find Del's strong arms waiting to pull her out the rest of the way. When her toe caught on something hard, she stumbled, but Del was right there, his arm around her back, guiding her from the inferno that now blazed behind them.

She was coughing from the thick smoke by the time he pulled her into the crisp night air. Her eyes watered, and she rubbed at them to clear her sight, vaguely aware of waking Kootenai emerging from nearby tipis. Nobody approached. Frankly, she didn't blame them. If she could be anywhere but in the presence of an annoyed madwoman, she would be, too.

The cold wrapped around her bare legs, slinking up beneath the hem of Del's shirt to taunt her nude body with a chilly reminder of her first night in this time. Lydia was tempted to press into Del's side to stay warm, but his rigid stance and the muscle twitching in his jaw warned her that

was a bad idea. He was too busy staring down the two women who faced them.

"Why do you do this?" he demanded. "First, the wraith, then the rabbit. I've never done anything to deny the claim you have on me, so why play games with my life now? My soul is yours. You know this. There's no reason for you to resort to foolery that only serves to terrify Lydia."

She thought terrify was a strong word to describe what she'd felt, but Lydia held back the urge to correct him. Instead, she watched as both women slid gazes to her, one so dark that her eyes looked like black hollows in her head, the other's so pale that they looked like something out of a horror movie.

"Is that her name?" the light-eyed one said. Her voice was different from the one who'd spoken at the tipi door. This had to be the sister. Eraya.

Lydia caught his frown when he glanced at her. "You know that," Del said. "You sent her to me."

Their gazes shifted back to him simultaneously. "And why would we do that?" Zuri said.

This time, there was no mistaking Del's confusion. "It was part of the agreement. My final gift."

Zuri laughed. Lydia wanted to smack her. There was nothing funny about any of this. "That's ridiculous. You're ours. It makes no sense that we would let someone else share that." Her dark eyes raked over Lydia in disdain. "Especially a lowly creature like this. She has no powers. She's useless."

"She came from the offerings," Del argued.

"What offerings?"

That one stumped him.

When the silence stretched, Lydia summoned her nerve and stepped forward. "Maybe you should just go now," she said to the two women. They exchanged an amused glance that made Lydia bristle. "Del might think he owes you for whatever you've done for him, but I don't. I think this whole deal is insane. And I definitely think that ruining what little time we have left together is selfish and mean. But then again, you seem to specialize in that. I mean, what kind of bitch would bring up his mother's death just to make a point?"

Del's head snapped to the side. "Lydia!"

But she was too busy watching Zuri and Eraya. Though Lydia had no delusion that her opinions actually mattered to them or would make a difference, it had felt amazing to say them out loud. This whole situation frustrated the hell out of her, and she was tired of sitting on the sidelines.

"You know nothing of who we are," Eraya said.

"I know enough."

Zuri's eyes flickered to Del. "Sharing secrets in bed now, are we?"

"He told me because he loves me," Lydia cut in.

Any mirth in their demeanors fled. "No..." Zuri hissed. Eraya's hand caught her sister's elbow, but Zuri yanked away, her palm coming up with a brilliant flash.

Lydia screamed. It felt like thousands of tiny barbs tearing into her flesh and ricocheting inside her skin to shred everything in their paths. Her eyes burned, and the taste of

copper filled her mouth, draining into her throat to make her choke.

And just as quickly as it assaulted her, it stopped.

She fell forward onto her hands and knees, retching blood into the trampled snow. The cold no longer seemed like such a big deal, not compared to the residual heat rampaging through her body. It seemed forever before it eased enough for her to lift her head and glare at Zuri. That was when she saw the singed earth surrounding Zuri's skirts. Her head swiveled to Del.

The power still crackled between the fingers he had aimed at Zuri, and the tendons stood out in his neck from the strain of holding it. Beneath the silvery moonlight, his bare chest glistened with a sheen of sweat, and his tattoos looked like they were writhing across his skin. She had never seen him look so ferocious.

"Leave her alone." The softness of his voice cut below the crackling flames behind them, sending a fresh chill of foreboding through Lydia's veins. "Try that again, and I will destroy you, Zuri."

"Fool," Zuri muttered. "You are *nothing* without us."

A slight breeze circled around Lydia's wrists and knees, and she inched back carefully in order to push herself upright. "You don't know him at all," she said, ignoring the wave of vertigo that threatened to topple her over again.

"And I suppose you think you do?"

"Go back to Kokanee's tipi, Lydia." Though Del still glowered at the women, his tone hadn't changed. "I'll take care of this."

"Afraid we'll hurt your little plaything?" Eraya taunted.

As much as she didn't want to have to suffer another of Zuri's attacks, there was no way she was leaving Del's side. Lydia hugged her arms around her body to keep the growing wind from lifting her shirttails and exposing more than she wanted, and glared at the women.

"I'll bet that was part of your game all along," she said. "Rip me out of my time and throw me into Del's, then watch us fall in love just so we're miserable when it's time for me to go back. Brilliant. Got any kittens to drown while you're at it?"

The more she said, the darker Zuri's frown grew. "He's filled your head with lies. He's played with forces he doesn't understand in order to anger us, and he has you believing..." The wind blew a lock of her hair across her cheek, and she clawed it away, turning savage eyes to Del. "Will you *stop* it?" she screamed. "You've done nothing but create noise for weeks now. It's driving me mad."

His eyes narrowed as he risked a glance around. Lydia following the path of his scrutiny, noting the leaves rustling in the forest, the flames of the fire dancing in haphazard patterns. They were little things, hardly worth noticing. And yet, they bugged the hell out of Zuri apparently. Lydia had to fight not to grin.

Del's gaze fixed again on Zuri. "It's not me."

"It must be!"

She lifted her arms overhead, throwing her head back as a series of words Lydia didn't understand flowed from her lips. Power crackled between her hands, erupting with a sharp crack that flooded the valley in light for a split second. When

Lydia looked around afterward, she fully expected to see something different, some kind of change, some result of whatever it was Zuri had thought she was doing.

The world was exactly the same. All the way down to the flip of the hem of her shirt as the wind whistled around it.

"See?" Zuri demanded, scowling at Del. "It's been like this ever since you decided to play with time. And don't deny that was you. We followed the magic."

"Why would I deny it?" he said. "Lydia is standing right here." He took a small step forward, some of the tension easing from his stance. "Why do you keep insisting you don't know who she is? She's here because of my annual offerings. To *you*. I asked for companionship before I turned myself over. To *you*. Everything I have, everything I've done, it was with the end in mind. Which is why you shouldn't be here. I was promised a month with Lydia."

"Not by us."

He paused. "Then who?"

The wind exploded into a frenzied gale. It made Lydia stumble, her numb feet working against her, and as she struggled to get upright, she saw Del doing the same, his power momentarily disrupted. Her hair whipped in front of her face as her head snapped toward Zuri and Eraya, but they were just as surprised by the forces as she and Del were. Her stomach plummeted.

What's going on?

The Kootenai didn't seem as perturbed by the winds. As if by some unspoken agreement, they shifted, parting to allow one of their ranks to step forward. Lydia squinted and then

gasped when she recognized Kokanee. The woman was completely unfazed, her long skirt unmoving, not a hair out of place. She glided forward with uncharacteristic grace and came to a stop beside Del, a steady hand coming to rest on his shoulder.

Their skin glowed in amber where they made contact. Del jerked once, but in the next moment, his shoulders were squaring and he was standing upright with the same fortitude Kokanee exhibited.

"Who is this?" Zuri spat, lifting her chin in disdain.

"My friend."

Kokanee squeezed Del's shoulder one last time before releasing him and stepping forward. "I am the Spirit of the Creator. And *I* am the one who has rewarded the marked one."

* * * *

From his hiding place at the top of the hill, Matthew Bruce watched the conclave with growing excitement. He had known. He had known all along. From the moment he recognized the woman in his parents' shop, the thought that maybe he wasn't losing his mind like his parents seemed to think had fueled his every moment, and everything he had done after their departure had been geared toward this moment. It was why he'd played along when his father had locked him in his room. It was why he'd waited until they'd gone to bed to climb out the window and come to the Kootenai camp.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

He had known. His friends hadn't died in the snowstorm. He hadn't imagined seeing them go up in flames or watching the Indian slaughter Caleb. Wessner and his wife had murdered them. With the powers of Satan or whatever devils the Kootenai worshiped.

Now everybody else would know, too.

He cradled the gun he'd brought in his lap, caressing the cold metal.

And Wessner would pay.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lydia had no idea how she could understand Kokanee all of a sudden, but the name the other woman called herself was familiar, a memory niggling at the edge of Lydia's awareness. She wracked her brain, trying to coax it forward, but the effort made her head throb, and she swayed with an unexpected wave of dizziness.

Strong arms appeared around her waist, and Lydia lifted her head to meet Del's worried eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said in a voice that was barely a whisper. "I never wished you to get involved in this."

Leaning her forehead against his broad shoulder, she soaked in his heat and stability, nestling closer as his embrace tightened. Things made more sense when he was near. He made her forget about the pain and the confusion, and reminded her that she wasn't alone. For now, at least.

When the worst of the spinning was gone, Lydia pulled away, reluctant as she was to leave his arms. "What's going on?" she asked in a hushed murmur.

"I don't know." Together, their gazes returned to where Kokanee faced off with the intruding Zuri and Eraya. "I think ... I think the Kootenai's Spirit-Creator has chosen to inhabit Kokanee, though I don't know why."

The shred of memory that had been eluding Lydia came rushing back. "That's like their god, isn't it? Isn't that what you said?"

"In a fashion. Their sole purpose is to protect the land for the Spirit-Creator." His frown deepened. "But I've never taken part in their rituals. Why would the Spirit make an appearance now?"

Del might not get it, but Lydia did. All the little pieces seemed to fit into a picture that, if not whole, was certainly more complete than she had before.

"You've been protecting them ever since you moved here," she said. "And Kokanee was the one who helped with your tattoos." Her fingertips followed the delicate lines, concentrating on the red and blue paths instead of the black design she recognized from the brands. "Every time Kokanee helped you, and every time you helped them, Zuri's marks faded a little. Remember? I asked you about that."

He did remember; she saw it in his eyes. But Del didn't answer her, breaking away to rejoin the confrontation.

"What have you been doing?" Zuri demanded before he could speak. "You are *ours*. You have always been ours. You always will be."

"That doesn't stop me from having my own life," he replied. "Or from making choices independent of you. The Kootenai needed my help, so I gave it. Freely."

"Without thought of recompense," Kokanee added. "So his sacrifices were repaid."

Zuri turned her head toward Lydia, and Del automatically stepped between them. "This changes nothing," she said. "Our bargain supersedes anything that has transpired since, so if you are attempting to use this to forestall the inevitable, you are gravely mistaken."

"I'm not attempting anything," Del argued. A note of desperation had crept into his voice. "But you must see why I thought I had more time. I've been alone for over a decade, and I finally have the opportunity to steal moments with the woman I love. You're going to have my soul for an eternity, Zuri. What difference will a few more days make?"

It was a rational argument, and maybe, if Del was dealing with rational beings, it might have made an impact. But Lydia saw what he didn't. She saw the jealousy burning in Zuri's eyes, the anger that he'd share himself with someone else. It was possessive and childish, and he could fight with her all night but it wouldn't make a difference. Not in the end.

Lydia was going to lose him. Now. Tonight.

The abrupt realization tore a hole through her heart.

The untamed winds numbed her legs as she dared a small approach. Del blocked her direct path with an outstretched arm, but the movement did more than stop her. It directed her attention away from Zuri for split seconds, long enough for a flicker of movement on the hill behind them to catch her eye. A man. With gangly limbs. Her swift recognition as he half-stumbled, half-ran toward the group made her heart thump against her ribs.

Then she saw the gun.

"No!" she screamed.

She threw herself toward Del at the same moment a shot pierced through the wind's howls. Nobody else had been looking, nobody else had had the chance to react, nobody else knew about the impending threat until it was too late, until he was already mostly upon them and her only hope of

saving Del was to do something herself. She didn't even consider other options. There were none.

Something slammed into her side, and Lydia stumbled from the unexpected force. Del had turned at the sound of her shout, and his arms came up to catch her, his body hard and unyielding as it braced her from falling.

"What...?" she heard him start to ask. The query faded as his muscles shifted against her, and she looked up to see him staring over her shoulder. Less than a moment later, the temperature of his skin jumped to sear hers where they touched, and he twisted her within his arms to free the hand closest to the new arrival.

His incantation was lost in the wind. Lydia glanced back in time to see Matthew thrown to the ground, the gun torn out of his hand and sent flying harmlessly into the night. When she felt a fresh tremor vibrate through Del's chest, she summoned everything she had to reach out and grab his wrist.

"Don't do it. You'll never forgive yourself, Del."

Del faltered. Under the pale moonlight, his eyes were black pools, unreadable until he turned to look at her. What he saw made them widen, and his sharp intake of breath accompanied the softening of his grip.

"No..." he breathed.

The hand he'd just used to attack Matthew skimmed Lydia's side. She winced at the contact, but when he drew it back, sticky with blood, her mouth went dry. She didn't fight him when he lowered her to the frozen ground, and she didn't

argue when he tore the fabric to expose only the wound. She simply held her breath and waited as he probed at the injury.

"Don't move," he said, though she was as still as the wind allowed her to be. "This might..."

A searing pain shot through her stomach. Lydia cried out, arching away from the ground, but Del's hand came up to her shoulder and pressed her back down.

"Kokanee," he called. The Kootenai woman appeared and crouched at his side. "I can't get it to stop. Help me."

Instead of touching Lydia, Kokanee laid a hand on Del's arm. "There is nothing to be done," she said. There was an odd resonance to her voice, one Lydia hadn't caught when she'd spoken before. She wondered if it had always been there or if she was going into shock and sounds were getting distorted.

Yanking free of her grasp, Del shook his head. "No. There's always a way. There has to be. I promised I'd take care of her. I cannot fail her now."

"You've done everything you can. The power of life is not yours to control."

Another jolt of pain blocked out what Del said next. When Lydia opened her eyes again, he was gazing down at her with a fierce anguish that had his hands trembling against her skin.

"I should have killed him this afternoon," he murmured. "I should have known."

"You couldn't have," Lydia managed to say.

"It doesn't matter."

His judgment was there, lurking beneath his grief. She knew it, had expected it even, probably saw it before it registered on Del's consciousness. She also knew she could never let him act on it.

"Let him go," she said. His head snapped from where his gaze had strayed to Matthew's prone form on the hillside. "You're a better man than that."

His mouth curled into self-deprecating sneer. "A better man would never have let you get hurt."

"And I wouldn't have fallen in love with a lesser one. I'm asking you, Del. Don't kill him."

Indecision warred across his face. His bloodstained hand curled into a fist, and his throat worked as he struggled to contain his emotions. Not once did he look away from Lydia.

Finally, he nodded. A short, single movement that said far more than any words he might have uttered.

"Some great love." From somewhere above, Zuri's mocking voice floated to Lydia's ears, and she appeared at the edge of her vision like a pale wraith against the sky.

"Where has your spine gone, Delaney? There was a time when you wouldn't have hesitated to tear the boy apart, simply for looking at you the wrong way. You would have acted, without hesitation, without fear, and you would have moved on without looking back. Has she tamed you so, that you'd turn your back on what you are?"

Slowly, Del rose to his feet. "Perhaps I'm not the man you always assumed I was. Funny thing, though ... I respect the man I am now a hell of a lot more than the one who was

foolish enough to believe you were the most wondrous thing he'd ever seen."

She recoiled as if slapped. "An eternity of torment is not enough for you," she scoffed. "Maybe you need a reminder."

It all happened so fast that Lydia wasn't sure who moved first. One moment, Del and Zuri were squaring off on either side of her. The next, there were flames and smoke and screams blocking out anything discernible.

She choked on the thick smoke, each cough exacerbating the aches from the gunshot wound. Though her eyes stung and her muscles felt like lead, Lydia rolled onto her good side, trying to get away from the fight. Strong hands scooped beneath her arms and dragged her across the snow, and when she blinked away the worst of the sting, she saw Kokanee bending over her.

"Breathe," Kokanee said in that weird voice.

"I'm trying," she gasped.

Kokanee laid her hands across Lydia's chest and pushed. For a moment, Lydia thought she was going to crush her ribcage, but then a bubble of something wet and thick rose in the back of her throat, and she turned her head in time to vomit more blood onto the packed snow. It kept coming, vicious contractions of her stomach and lungs, until she was left shaking, wondering how in hell she could still be alive, almost wishing that she wasn't.

But then she rolled onto her back and stared up at the starless sky. Some of the pain was gone from her side.

"What did you do?" she whispered. Though her muscles were wobbly, she pushed herself up, first onto her elbows, then into a sitting position. "You said you couldn't help."

Kokanee's smile was soft and melancholy. "I can't. Only you can make a difference now."

She searched Kokanee's eyes for some kind of clue about what she meant, but saw nothing that helped. Only she could make a difference. Right. Well, she couldn't do that on the ground.

Holding her side, Lydia lurched to her feet, peering through the haze for any sign of Del. She found him ringed with fire, sweat and soot streaking his face and torso, with Zuri and Eraya flanking him. Her stomach clenched. These flames weren't like those she'd seen the night the Kootenai had been attacked. These were devoid of color, white-hot and spiraling in wild licks instead of dancing in smooth streaks. These weren't Del's.

The hill was bathed in smoke, obscuring what might have happened to Matthew. There was no time to contemplate whether the young man was alive or not, however; her priority was Del. If it took her last breath—and at this point, she wasn't so sure it wouldn't—she'd fight the bitches for him. He would do no less for her.

"Stop it." Her voice cracked, and it sounded weak, even to her ears. When nobody in the tableau responded, she moved a few feet closer and kicked at the snow, sending a wet spray that sizzled in the flames.

Del was the first to turn his head, and the flare of hope in his eyes at seeing her stand upright stabbed worse than

seeing him trapped. She offered a smile of reassurance, but looked to Zuri and Eraya before he saw too much. This was going to be hard enough as it was.

"I'm not going to pretend to like you," she said. "There's so much wrong about this whole situation, I don't even know where to start. It's insane that I'm even here, but you know, I'm okay with that now. Because there is one thing that turned out right in all this. I got to meet an amazing man. He's kind, and he's generous, and he's smart, and he loves more deeply than anybody I've ever met. He doesn't deserve this. He sure as hell doesn't deserve you. So I want to make you a deal."

Zuri and Eraya exchanged an amused glance. "Didn't you hear me before?" Zuri said. "You're nothing to us. There is nothing you can say or do that is going to change our plans."

"Really?" Lydia stood up straighter. Whether it made her more in control or not, she didn't know. But it made her feel stronger and that was enough. "Huh. I would've thought the idea of taking my soul instead of Del's would appeal to you. I mean, I've never killed anybody so my soul's probably not as colorful as his, but as much as he loves me, I can't think of anything he'd hate more than knowing you had your claws in me."

His panicked cry of her name almost shook her resolve. The prospect terrified her; she couldn't pretend it didn't. And she had no doubt that Del would react exactly as she'd predicted. But the one thing that kept her firm was the knowledge that, regardless of whether or not he grew to hate her for this sacrifice, Delaney Michael Wessner would at least

be alive. He would live a long, fruitful life as *he* wanted, not as these crazy women wished, and he'd be able to help the Kootenai long after Lydia was just a fleeting memory. The good outweighed the bad. There was no other choice to be made.

Matching gleams appeared in Zuri and Eraya's eyes.
"Interesting," Eraya said.

"*Not* interesting," Del barked. "Don't listen to her, Zuri. The blood loss is clouding her mind."

They ignored his protestations, though the power they were using to contain Del never wavered. "Why would you suggest this now and not when we first arrived?" Zuri asked.

Lydia snorted. "I hadn't been shot when you got here. The way I see it, I'm going to die anyway. It might as well mean something."

"Lydia..." Against her better judgment, she glanced at him when he called her name. As soon as she met his blazing eyes, she knew it was a mistake. His pain was more real then. "You don't want this," he said. "You have no idea what they're capable of. I always knew this would be it for me, but you..."

"Love you too much to *not* do this," she finished. "What kind of woman would I be if I stood aside and let them hurt you when I could do something to stop it, Del?" Tearing her gaze away, she looked back to Zuri. "Well? Do we have a deal?"

But Del wasn't done. "Kokanee! She's here because of you! How can you let her do this?"

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

Lydia glanced back to see Kokanee shake her head. "She is here because of *your* dedication, marked one. The wheels have already been set in motion. All we can do is follow their path."

Her strength was fading. Whatever the Spirit had done to her, by the time Lydia faced Zuri again, it was gone, the numbness in her legs returning, the pain in her side making her vision darken. The steady drip of blood onto the snow was starting to become louder to her, and she had to dig her nails into her palms in an effort to stay focused on what she needed to accomplish.

"The choice is yours," she said. "Gonna go for what's behind door number one? Or do you feel lucky enough to go for door number two?"

She didn't know how long it took Zuri to respond. Time was taking on a whole new meaning for Lydia, stretching out and collapsing in on itself to leave her feeling punch-drunk and ready to fall over. More than once, the thought that it was all time's fault that she was there in the first place flitted through her mind, but she shoved away the irony, trying to keep it together while she waited for an answer.

The wind continued its blustery crusade. If anything, it grew worse, buffeting against her legs, picking up snow and blowing it around to make her eyes water. The only good part of it was that the force made it easier to stand, deadening her to the worst of the pain. She only wished she couldn't count every single droplet of blood escaping her and falling to the ground.

It was on drop eighty-seven that Zuri smiled.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

"Done," she said.

Del's scream was echoed by the wind's. Lydia barely saw the circle of fire vanish from where it surrounded him before the white flames consumed the earth around her.

Then she saw nothing at all.

Chapter Twenty-Four

An insistent buzzing made her grimace in distaste as Lydia's arm flopped out to grope for the button on her alarm clock. Habit found it without pause, and the room slipped back into blissful quiet, allowing her to burrow deeper into her pillow. Just a few more minutes of sleep, she thought. It had been a very long night.

Her eyes shot open.

The first thing she saw was her alarm clock announcing that it was eight o'clock. Her *electric* alarm clock. Her electric alarm clock back in her apartment.

Lydia bolted upright, adrenaline surging through her veins as she drank in her surroundings. Same burgundy quilt she'd splurged to buy at a local crafts' fair. Same stack of books to be read standing on her oak nightstand. Her clothes from work were still hanging discarded on the vacuum cleaner she hadn't put away. The faint smell of her shampoo even drifted in from the attached bathroom.

She frowned as her gaze slid back to the vacuum cleaner. She could have sworn she'd put that away the morning of her birthday. Trying to get her mind off the impending storm, she'd done housework instead, bustling around her apartment until there was nothing left to do but wait for four-eleven to come.

Pushing back the blanket, Lydia rose from the bed and crossed to look at the clothes more closely. Though it had been almost a month, she was pretty sure it was the same

skirt and blouse combo she'd worn to work the day before her birthday. After having spent so much time with only her jeans and a dress or two to call her own, her wardrobe stood out with surprising clarity.

Her fingers faltered where they stroked the soft cotton of the hanging blouse. That meant today was her birthday. What had happened with Del? Had the Kootenai Spirit-Creator sent Lydia back to her own time before the deal with Zuri could be completed? But she'd heard him scream, she'd seen the flames engulf her, she even thought she'd seen Zuri's pleased smile at the sound of Del's anguish.

Unexpected tears stung her eyes. If all that were true, then Del was gone. Forever.

I'm so sorry, Del. I tried. I'd do anything to make this different.

Her knees weak, Lydia sat down on the edge of the bed. She stared blankly at the wall in front of her, replaying the events as she remembered them until they blurred like a watercolor washed in the rain. It was only when the tears finally began to slow that a specific thought struck her.

She had been shot. She had been *dying*. How could she be sitting back in her apartment with only fatigue ailing her?

Considering what Kokanee had told Del, there was only one possibility for that. It hadn't been real.

But it felt real.

With a sudden burst of energy, Lydia ran for the bathroom, stripping her nightshirt over her head along the way. By the time she pulled the door open to expose the full-length mirror on the other side, she was naked except for her plain white

bikini briefs. Her gaze flew immediately to her stomach, and she turned to the side in order to get a view of both the front and the back. The pale skin was unblemished. As she trailed her hands over the area again and again, wondering why there wasn't even a mark, another memory returned, and this time, she turned her hands over in order to inspect the palms.

No burns. No evidence at all of falling and grabbing the Bruces' wood stove.

Bile rose in the back of her throat as she made her way back to the bed. It had been a dream. It had to have been. She'd fallen asleep, dreaming about getting her annual gift, and her brain had concocted the most bizarre scenario possible as a result, including Indians, and black magic, and a man with the most mesmerizing eyes she'd ever seen.

But it felt so real. How could I have made Del up?

She didn't have any answers. Without thinking, she went to the closet. There, on the floor with a stack of shoe boxes arranged on it, was the plastic bin in which she stored the music boxes. Her hands were shaking as she pulled it out, and her throat was dry as she set it on the bed. One by one, she inventoried its contents.

Until there were twelve music boxes sitting haphazardly atop her mussed quilt.

Twelve. Not thirteen.

The shrill ring of the telephone made her heart lurch inside her chest, and Lydia wiped at the tears that clung to her cheeks as she picked up the phone on the nightstand. "Hello?" Her voice was rough, like she'd just woken up.

Lydia looked at the music boxes and felt the tears begin to return. Maybe she had.

"Oh my God, did you pick a great day to stay home from work."

Noelle's chirpy voice cut through the line like a brilliant ray of sunshine slicing through a thick cloud. It staved off the fresh onslaught of grief sluicing through Lydia, and she sank onto the bed, closing her eyes as she focused on her best friend.

"Why?" she asked. Then she remembered the time. "And what the hell are you doing there already?"

"I left at the usual time, but there was zero traffic, so I got here in, like, fifteen minutes instead of my usual hour. There was nobody on the road this morning. Between it being Friday and the weather reports, I think everybody else is taking the day off, too."

The weather reports. That was right. She'd almost forgotten about the storm she'd thought would prevent her gift from arriving. "Someone on the radio said it's going to be one for the record books," Lydia offered.

"Yep." The sound of Noelle's gum-smacking drifted over the line. "Rain, wind, possible flooding. The whole shebang. But you're not going anywhere, right? Gotta be there for the magical moment. Good for you. Because this place is d-e-a-d, dead."

She knew Noelle was teasing, but her friend's phraseology intensified the sense of loss that had settled in Lydia's gut. Del might have been a dream, but the feelings were as strong and as powerful as they had been when she'd been standing

in the middle of the snow, facing down Zuri. She loved him, or she felt like she had loved him in the dream. Regardless, it was probably better that she wasn't going to be at work today. She needed time alone to sort it all out.

"I'll make sure to batten down the hatches," she tried to joke. "My apartment could use a good cleaning anyway."

"Just remember it's your birthday. You're supposed to enjoy it, not spend the whole day on your hands and knees. Well, not if you're alone, at least. If you've got some hot guy there you're not telling me about, that's an entirely different ball of wax."

"I'll remember that."

"Call me when your gift gets there, okay? I want all the juicy details."

Murmuring agreement, Lydia said her goodbyes and disconnected, her hand and phone falling limp at her side. Juicy details. Right. Apparently, those had all been in her head. She wondered how Noelle would react to the story of a man with magical powers hiding away from the world in Montana.

Lydia snorted. She'd probably say it was romantic and tell her to write it down to sell to Harlequin.

Something about the idea made her open her eyes. Writing it down. While the memories were still fresh and vivid.

For the first time since waking, a smile curved her mouth.

Del had asked her about that once, querying whether or not she would record the events of their time together. She finally understood why it had been such an appealing idea.

* * * *

She heard the winds start to howl around lunchtime, but Lydia was too focused on what was she doing on the computer to do more than get up and pull the blinds. The details were spilling out of her like a geyser, every scent, every sight, every sound that she remembered taking on new life for her. On a pad at her side, she scribbled down snippets of dialogue as they came to mind, making a mental note to incorporate them into her document when she was done with the broad strokes. It wasn't a story, not yet. More of a hodgepodge of memories trailing across the page. It wasn't even in chronological order, but Lydia figured that would come later. There wouldn't be a book if there weren't details to sell the book.

Through it all, the image of Del hovered in the back of her mind, silent and amused as he regarded her frenzied attack. How many times had he told her she wasted her talents writing medical copy? Too many to count. In spite of the pain thinking about him still aroused in her, she smiled when she contemplated what he might say. It wouldn't be *I told you so*. He wasn't the type.

God, she missed him.

Retrieving one of the music boxes from the bedroom, Lydia wound it up and placed it next to the computer, using the haunting melody as inspiration to continue. It evoked images of the first night in the cabin, when she'd made the connection that Del had sent them, how terrified she'd been that he was a stalker, how he'd been so patient in coming after her. She chuckled, shaking her head. Her imagination

could be really crazy sometimes. Someone stalking a thirty-year-old single copywriter? Her dreams were rife with delusions of grandeur.

When it started to rain, she had no idea, but the hard drops pelted against the windows hard enough to rattle the glass. It gave her apartment an artificial coziness, and she glanced wistfully at the wall with the entertainment center. Maybe she could find a new apartment with a fireplace. Was that possible on a budget in LA? She wouldn't know until she tried. But the room didn't seem right without the slight smell of smoke or the radiant heat of the flames.

Lydia shook herself out of her reverie. It had just been a dream. Fireplaces were impractical in Southern California. Just because Del had one didn't mean she needed one. That would be taking the fantasy a step too far.

She was trying to remember what Fox had been wearing the first time she'd seen him when a distant knocking broke through her concentration. Frowning, Lydia lifted her head from where she'd been resting it on her arms and cocked her head, listening more closely for the sound to be repeated. Only the wailing storm answered her.

"I need coffee," she muttered, pushing away from her desk. Rubbing her eyes, she was halfway to the kitchen before remembering she hadn't saved the most recent changes in her document. With the weather raging outside, not saving was practically begging for a power outage. No way was she going to lose all her hard work.

The second knock came as she was bent over, hand on her mouse, finger poised to click on the save icon. It was her

apartment door, but as she swiveled her head to look at it with a frown, wondering who'd be out in this storm, her gaze dragged over the timestamp in the corner of her monitor.

Lydia gasped.

Four-eleven.

In her obsession to write down the details of the dream, she'd completely forgotten about the arrival of her gift.

Hastily, Lydia saved the document before rushing to answer the door. Except for the one sitting next to the computer, the other music boxes were scattered on her bed. Maybe after she'd unwrapped this one, she'd bring them all out like she had in her dream. It would be interesting to see how number thirteen was different from its mates.

The smile for the DHL guy was already plastered on her face when she pulled open the door. "You're brave to be out in this..."

Her heart stopped at the same time as her words.

It wasn't the paunchy delivery guy holding her annual box.

There was no box.

There was only Del.

He looked exactly the same. The rain plastered his hair to his head, long hanks dripping water into his open shirt collar. The white shirt was glued to his muscled torso as well, the fabric now translucent to reveal the dark lines of the tattoo adorning his arm, and it hung untucked from his favorite trousers. Her breath hitched as her gaze caught on a loose button near his waist. It was the same shirt she'd slept in. It was the same shirt she'd convinced herself wasn't real.

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

By the time she was able to look into his face, her heart had jump-started again, choosing to go from zero to a hundred in the blink of an eye. Raindrops clung to his long lashes, but the familiar blue-green pinned her in place as effectively as they had the first time she'd looked into his eyes. There was wonder there, and shock, but there was also fear, like he was terrified she was going to slam the door in his face.

"I thought you were a dream," she murmured.

His mouth softened, curving into a smile. "Perhaps now you'll understand why I was so dumbstruck when I first saw you," he teased gently.

It made her laugh, like she hadn't laughed since waking that morning. The release of the tension that had wound through her propelled her forward, out of the shelter of her doorway, into the rain, against the wet wall of his chest. "You're real," she said as she threw her arms around him. She buried her face in his neck, tasting the rain, inhaling the ever so subtle scent of smoke that still managed to cling to his skin. "You have no idea how much it hurt thinking you weren't real."

"I know," Del murmured. His arms were comforting where they wrapped around her, and she felt his wet lips skim across her cheek. "But I'm here now."

He was. He was warm and solid and *right*.

And here.

How long they stood like that, Lydia had no idea. Soon, though, the cold sting of the driving rain broke through the

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

luxury of his embrace, and she pulled away, taking his hands in hers to drag him inside her apartment.

"I'll get you a towel so you can dry off," she said once the door was shut firmly behind them.

As soon as she turned her back on him to go to the bathroom, though, his hand shot out and grabbed her wrist, drawing her back against his wet body. "Don't go yet," Del murmured. He pushed her wet hair off her face. "Tell me first. Are you hurt in any way? When I saw you daring Zuri to"—he swallowed, the words sticking in his throat ... "accept your proposal, all I could think about was how I'd failed to protect you from Matthew. How I failed to protect you from any of..."

"I'm fine," she cut in. "Not a mark on me. That's why I thought it was all a dream. Because I woke up in bed, and it was my birthday, and I didn't have a shred of evidence to prove that any of it had ever happened. Not even the last music box you made me."

"Your birthday?"

She smiled. "What time do you think it was when you knocked on my door?"

Delight brightened his eyes. Then he was crushing her against his chest, his mouth hard and possessive as it claimed hers in a searing kiss. Lydia returned it with a matching fervor, unmindful of the water they were dripping on the carpet or how tightly she clung to his neck.

Only the ringing of the telephone was able to separate them.

Del started at the sound, his hands tensing at her waist as he searched the room for the source. Laughing, she pulled away and crossed to the end table to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Well? Did it come? You didn't call me."

Noelle's bright voice broadened her smile as she glanced at Del. "It came. Kind of."

"Oh, no. Was it late? It didn't get broken, did it? You should totally sue those delivery guys for ruining your birthday."

"It's not broken, Noelle. It's just ... bigger than a music box this time." She knew what was coming, and considering how many questions she had for Del, Lydia had no desire to deal with her best friend at the moment. "I'll tell you all about it on Monday, okay? I promise."

"You better. You know I live vicariously through you, right? I need my fix."

She smiled at Noelle's tease. "I'll see you next week," she said before hanging up. Facing Del, she tilted her head toward the bathroom. "Why don't we go get you dried off now? You can experience all those modern conveniences you've been dreaming about, live and in person."

His answering smile warmed her even more than his kisses had.

* * * *

They ended up lying in her bed, on their sides and only inches apart, as if to tear their gazes away would cause the other to disappear in a puff of smoke. Their clothes hung in

the bathroom to dry, and though they were under her blankets, Lydia kept shivering as Del ran fingertips over her bare curves.

"What happened?" she asked. "If it was all real, how am I not dead and how can you be here?"

He took a moment to answer, too absorbed in touching the soft swell of her hip. "Kokanee happened," he finally murmured. "Well, the Spirit-Creator using Kokanee as a vessel. Have I told you yet how beautiful you are?"

"No, and you're changing the subject."

A glint of mirth danced in his eyes. "We are the subjects. It's because of what you offered to Zuri that any of this is possible. It proved that your feelings for me were genuine."

A sharp pang shot through her chest. "Did you doubt me?"

He was swift to close the distance, to slide his hand beneath her still-damp hair and hold her still as his mouth slanted over hers in the tenderest of caresses. "Never," Del breathed. "But the Spirit-Creator doesn't know you as I do."

The hurt changed to anger in the space of a single blink. "I can't believe she was testing me!"

"She wasn't. What happened with Matthew..." Del propped his head up on his hand, keeping his fingers tangled gently in her hair as he caressed her nape. "That was unfortunate. Nobody had the means to predict that he would follow us, though perhaps I should have known his feelings ran deeply enough for such desperate action." He paused, and the confusion he couldn't hide from her darkened his eyes. "Why did you do it?" he whispered. "Why would you damn yourself for my sake?"

The answer came as quickly now as her decision the previous night had. "Because I would've been damned anyway for allowing you to suffer when there was something I could do to stop it, to give you your life back. You don't have a monopoly on not wanting to see people you love get hurt, you know."

His eyes fluttered shut at her words, his lashes dark and velvety against his skin. He lay there for long minutes, just holding her, his warm breath fanning across her cheek, not uttering a sound. Maybe in another time, Lydia might have grown impatient for more, but not today. Today, she simply wanted to relish that he was here.

"When you offered your soul in my stead," Del finally said, picking up the conversation as if he hadn't stopped, "you forced Zuri to choose. By picking yours, she relinquished all claim to mine."

"Yeah, that was kind of the intent."

"The Spirit-Creator returned you to your proper time before Zuri could take you."

"But I saw the flames. They moved from you to me."

Del looked at her, the memories mirrored in the clear depths of his eyes. "As did I. I think that was the single, most terrifying moment of my life. When I thought I'd lost you forever. But we both forgot why and how you were there in the first place. It was the Spirit-Creator's will that you be there for me, and apparently, it was the Spirit-Creator's will that I be here for you now."

Her mind raced. It was hard to get angry about being manipulated when she had everything she wanted within

touching distance. So what if she'd almost died? The important thing to remember was that they were together, and that they had their whole lives to spend as they saw fit.

The shadow of his tattoo caught her eye. The ebony whorls still laced with the intricate red and blue patterns, but they seemed paler than before, less stark against his unblemished skin.

Del noticed the shift in her attention and shook his head. "They'll always be a part of me," he said, "but I'm not bound to them any longer. I don't have to hide, and I don't have to do anything I don't wish any more. I'm a free man." His thumb brushed over her lower lip. "You gave me that."

His kiss started as gently as his words, but with the shackles of fear stripped away from both of them, it deepened within moments, allowing them to sink into each other's embrace with an abandon that left Lydia's body humming. As he pressed her into the mattress, his arousal hard and heavy against her thigh, she surrendered the desire for more details about what had happened in favor of the contact of their skin, the hunger of his touch. Their paths had been a long time getting to this point, with twelve years of gifts and dreams and hopes paving the way. She would not forfeit the price either of them had paid just to satisfy her curiosity.

She would not forfeit it for anything.

The End

About the Author:

Vivien was born in a house very familiar with the written word. The daughter of an author and sportswriter, she fell in

Price of a Tattooed Soul
by Vivien Dean

love early on with the stories that played inside her head, transcribing the first of those at the age of five. She moved on to explore other formats, including acting and film production, but always came back to her storytelling roots.

Currently, Vivien resides in northern California with her British husband and two beautiful children. She's thrilled to be back to her romantic roots, and looks forward to sharing with you some of the voices that have been living inside her head. *Under a Rogue Moon* is Vivien's second book; her first, *Chains of Jericho* is a 2006 EPPIE finalist. Visit Vivien online at www.viviendean.com

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