

Maura Anderson



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Maura Anderson

Del Fantasma: Texas Tea  
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# Del Fantasma: Texas Tea

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## **Acknowledgements**

For my husband, Chuck, who sometimes believes in me more than I do. For Jo and Lara—yes, you both told me so. For Nikita and Sandra—thanks for believing in me too.

## Chapter One

It took what little energy Lara Saunders had just to climb out of her rental car. Between seemingly endless jet lag and three years of almost non-stop work, she just didn't have much left. *The end is in sight*. She probably even muttered that mantra in her sleep now.

Despite it being only October in Southern California, tendrils of fog trailed in and around the palm trees along the shore and the moist air carried a chill worthy of winter. Now that the sun had set, the growing cold permeated Lara's thin shirt with ease.

Prepared for the vagaries of seaside weather, she snatched up the all weather jacket from the back seat of the car and pulled it on over her polo shirt. A few tugs on her braid freed the now unraveling plait from her coat collar. She rubbed her gritty eyes and pushed a few strands of loose hair away.

The small mission-style building was well-kept and its rock garden and grasses were placed with care. The discrete sign near the arched wooden doors proclaimed that she'd arrived at the right place—"Del Fantasma." The irony of the name didn't escape her. "Of the Ghosts—what an appropriate place for her to visit. She hoped it was merely a whimsical name, more ghosts was something she didn't think she could handle right now.

Lara took a few moments to just enjoy the brief peace. The scent of the nearby ocean carried strongly in the mist and, audible even over the noise of nearby traffic, she could hear the rhythmic pulse of the distant waves. "The heartbeat of the earth," as an eloquent ghost once told her.

Finally ready to meet the amusing and helpful Cody Warren in person, she moved to shut the car door then froze at the prickle of awareness that flowed over her skin. The eerie sensation was followed by whispered words that were as much felt as heard. *Get your keys first or you'll be here a long time.*

Sure enough, the key with the rental agency's tag attached sat on the passenger seat next to the printout of Cody's instructions of how to get from her B&B to Del Fantasma. "Damn it."

She shimmied across the driver's seat to grab the key and picked up her purse from the floorboards as well. It's no wonder she was so forgetful, she was so tired she could barely think at all, "Thanks."

Could they hear her? Never quite sure, she always thanked the ghosts anyway. It seemed like the polite thing to do, even if they didn't acknowledge her speaking to them. She'd certainly never found any believable handbook to tell her proper ghost etiquette, so making it up as she went was the best she could do.

The parking lot of the tidy adobe building was nearly empty with only two cars other than her rental. Cody's chatty emails indicated the bar was doing quite well and was packed most nights, so they must not have opened for business yet today.

Near the entrance another sign was posted with the business hours that confirmed her guess. The bar didn't open for an hour yet. About to retreat to her car to wait, one of the doors swung open and a large male figure appeared in the doorway.

“Lara?”

His voice almost mesmerized her. Combine the deep, gravely rumble with the muscular body in the black t-shirt and dark pants and she’d have drooled if she’d been any normal woman. Even the slight scruffiness of his dark hair was attractive. But it didn’t do any good to drool over something you couldn’t have. She’d finally learned that lesson at great expense.

With a mental shake, Lara reminded herself of why she was here. To meet Cody’s friend, someone who could both guide her around the Old Point Loma Lighthouse and perhaps allow her a little additional access to areas that weren’t normally open to visitors. She was here to finish her book, that’s all. Taking refuge in businesslike formality, Lara extended her hand to the imposing man. “Hi, you must be Cody.”

He took hold of her hand and gave it a strong shake. “Good afternoon.”

Her eyes widened at the tingle up her spine. Despite his warm, calloused skin, despite his firm grip, Cody was something other than human. He wasn’t a ghost either, but something in between. Something with the eerie otherworldly feel of a spirit, but intermingled with a sensation she could only think of as earthy, primal, almost predatory. She’d never encountered anything like it before, anything like him before.

“Ummm... I let my agent know I was on my way here.” Lara hoped her voice didn’t betray her sudden uncertainty.

Cody gave her hand another small squeeze before he released it. “Don’t look so worried, Lara. I’m no threat to you.”

There wasn’t any reason to think he was, not really. Although they’d met online, he’d only offered to introduce her to his Park Ranger friend. It wasn’t like he was asking her for a date or anything. She gulped and pushed away the niggling fear, then allowed herself to be tugged through the door and into the

brightly lit room. Half the chairs were still upended on top of the tables and racks of shiny glasses were set out on the bar surface. An assortment of liquor bottles stood in front of the shelves. Obviously, she'd interrupted the preparations before opening for the evening.

She felt Cody close behind her and spun around, ready to apologize and offer to return later but when she met his gorgeous blue eyes, the words seemed trapped in her throat. For just an instant she was unable to look away or even to move. The slow smile Cody gave her broke the strange paralysis and she struggled in vain to remember just what she'd been about to say.

He gestured toward a table near the bar. "Have a seat. Texas should be here soon. Would you like something to drink while you wait?" A slow wink gave him a rakish air. "Anything you want, on the house."

Confused by what she sensed in Cody as well as her own reactions, she sat and, without thinking, asked for her favorite comfort drink. "May I have some hot tea, please?"

Damn. He probably didn't keep hot tea in the bar. It didn't tend to be a popular evening drink. But he'd said anything she wanted, after all. She challenged him with a steady gaze, her sense of control returning a bit as she waited for him to admit he didn't have her drink.

Instead, Cody just gave her another unsettling smile and pulled a brand new box of Oolong tea from a shelf she could barely see the edge of. At her nod, he disappeared into the doorway behind the bar, tea in hand.

Not only did he have hot tea, but he had her favorite kind? This was just too weird and she should certainly be immune to weird by now.

Neither the situation nor Cody seemed dangerous, at least not to her. The ghosts usually warned her of threats. It was one of the useful side effects of her affinity with them. Too bad their presence also scared off every sane person she

spent any time with until she no longer even tried to get close to anyone. Being alone by choice was easier than the inevitable rejection when the ghosts decided to frighten them away from her.

The sounds of clanking and voices from the doorway Cody had disappeared through drew Lara's attention back to the here and now. The decor wasn't really what she'd expected—from the name of the bar, she'd almost expected a *Dias De Los Muertos* theme of bright colors, skulls and maybe some skeletons but, instead, it tended toward a modern mission style with a lot of wood and earth-toned Southwestern touches. A warm and cozy bar for such an unusual name.

From the corner of her eye, she caught a hint of movement and whipped her head around to follow it. She caught just the briefest glimpse of what looked like a dog before it disappeared down the hallway marked "Private". A dog in a food establishment?

Poised halfway out of her chair, she tried to see if she could spot the animal again. Cody suddenly chuckled directly behind her and she leapt sideways. Trying to not fall on her face, Lara teetered, arms flailing in a desperate attempt to regain her balance.

A hard yank from Cody and she was in her chair again, sprawled with legs spread and heart pounding so hard she thought she would pass out. "You scared me." Her voice sounded breathless and trembling, adrenaline already doing a number on her system.

He had the nerve to laugh at her and she forgot her fear, forgot that he wasn't just a human, even forgot that he was nearly a foot taller and much heavier than she was. Her lifelong hatred of being laughed at made her temper flare. Too exhausted to moderate her impulsive reactions, when he set her mug

of tea on the table and his arm was within reach, she lashed out and slugged it. Hard.

The force of the impact screamed up her arm. The man must be made of stone. He merely laughed harder while she cradled her now throbbing hand to her chest and glared. A small part of her was appalled at her loss of control over her temper and actions but she successfully ignored it.

“You sure you don’t want to act as her tour guide, Code?” The husky baritone voice, sultry, overlaid with a sexy drawl, preceded the man who sauntered from the hall.

*Oh. My. God.* Attractive as Cody was, this man was stunning. Shorter than her host, he was just as muscular but more compact. Her fingers longed to explore the texture of the glossy black hair he wore cut military-short. His face was tanned and clean-shaven with a tantalizing square jaw and high cheekbones she’d bet spoke of more than a touch of Native American mixed with his obvious Latino ancestry.

Every movement was silent and graceful, nearly soundless, even in his jeans and cowboy boots. The sinuous sway of his hips as he walked reminded her of the calculating, smooth motions of a wild animal, a predator.

And his eyes, his eyes were a bright gold she’d never seen before, framed by thick black lashes that only served to make them more piercing. They were an almost inhuman color, one that would be more at home in the face of an animal.

“Texas, this is Lara Saunders. Lara, this is my friend Matthew Martinez. He’s the Park Ranger I told you about.”

Lara continued to gape at the newcomer, oblivious to the hand he held out to her until he forcibly picked up her own from the table to shake it.

Even his touch felt wild and untamed. And it carried the unmistakable touch of the spirit world as well.

\* \* \* \*

Matt had to work hard not to laugh at the open-mouthed woman. It wasn't at all the reaction he was used to from other people. Most women couldn't wait to get away from him; afraid of the way he felt and moved, as well as the way he made them feel. Somehow the age-old recognition of prey for predator remained, even in these times of rationality and logic.

Forewarned of her all-consuming passion for her book project, he'd readied himself to meet a homely, bookish scholar or maybe an eccentric artist. Someone who needed solitude as much as he did. Someone...safe.

This woman wasn't safe at all. Every instinct screamed that she had the power to change his world, with or without his consent. Dressed in practical cargo pants and hiking boots, the shape of most of her body was concealed by a dark olive jacket. Her oval face was pale and free of makeup with lush cinnamon colored lashes that framed hazel eyes, which seemed to move from green to brown as he watched.

She tried to tug her hand away from his grasp and he resisted for a moment, before finally releasing it. It wasn't often that he was comfortable touching other people, but she felt good. He wanted to savor that rare touch as long as possible.

A deep breath let him smell a mix of the cleaners used in the bar, soap, the clean scent of woman and tea. Tea? He slid into the other chair at the small table and picked up the beer Cody dropped in front of him. His Army buddy abandoned him, disappearing into the kitchen.

He took a long drink from the bottle and patiently watched Lara, content to wait silently for her to say something.

Hands wrapped tightly around her mug of tea, she yawned then took a sip. Then another. Finally, she put the mug back down and looked squarely at him. "Thank you for helping me. This is the last lighthouse I need to document for the book I'm working on now and the whole manuscript has to be turned in to my editor in just a week."

"Not a problem, ma'am. I have tomorrow off, then I work the next five days. I've already obtained permission for you to take pictures inside the lighthouse and to go up into the closed lantern tower."

"Lara, please. If you call me ma'am, I'll feel like my grandmother."

She smiled for just an instant. The expression softened her drawn face but she still looked tired, her cheeks pale and a bit hollow. "I know you need to work and I definitely don't need a full-time guide. This is my third book on historic lighthouses and their keepers. Most of what I need to do will be in the public areas of the park."

Glancing down, she ran one finger around the rim of her mug. Gently and slowly, around and around.

He could picture that same finger tracing circles on his chest. In self defense, he took another swig of his beer then shifted in his chair, his jeans suddenly uncomfortable. "The park opens at nine am every day. We can meet at the Visitor Center when it opens and take it from there."

Another smile brightened her face. "That sounds good. I think I need to turn in for the night while I can still drive and find my way back to the B&B. I'm exhausted."

Long-ingrained manners kicked in and he stood at the same time she did, then shook her hand again. She gathered her purse and keys and walked toward the front door, seemingly unaware or unconcerned that he watched her exit.

Her hair was pulled back into a chestnut colored braid, as thick as his wrist and hanging down to her waist. If anything, the fact it appeared close to unraveling made him wonder what it would feel like sliding through his fingers.

Why was he suddenly so interested in this woman when he was less and less interested in being around people in general? He liked sex and liked women, but he normally didn't react this strongly with absolutely no encouragement. Hell, he didn't react this strongly *with* encouragement.

And the feral animal in him recognized the call of something in Lara that wasn't entirely of this world.

No, not safe at all.

He reminded himself and his too-interested libido that he was only doing this as a favor to Cody. His friend saved his life in Afghanistan and that meant Cody could ask anything at all and Matt was honor-bound to do it. He owed a debt that only Cody could declare repaid. Add to that the number of secrets they shared and a bond existed that both men appreciated and respected. Cody becoming a vampire only strengthened it.

Aware that it was getting late enough to calm himself with a run, he drained his beer and announced to thin air. "Cody, I'm taking off."

As expected, Cody heard him and appeared back by the table. Now that they were alone, other than the bar staff, he made full use of his unnatural speed. "Thanks, Texas. I appreciate you taking care of her."

Something about the expression on the other man's face made him suspicious. "You're not trying your matchmaking skills on me, are you? You better not be. You, more than anyone, know that I'm not suitable relationship material for anyone. I'm a loner and I'm destined to stay that way."

When Cody didn't respond, Matt snarled and headed toward the back room, grateful that he didn't have to try to walk with a hard-on. He'd never have heard the end of that.

He neatly folded his clothes and returned them to the shelf reserved for his use. Naked, he luxuriated in a powerful stretch before he relaxed again and called on the magic of his bloodline. The familiar sensation of thousands of ants biting at his skin never lasted more than an instant but always took his breath away.

No one saw the large coyote ease out the back door of the bar and race off into the brush.

## Chapter Two

Lara tucked the receipt for the park entrance fee into her pocket as she got out of her car. Yet another piece of paper to keep track of for her accountant. Hopefully, she'd remember to take it out of her pocket before she washed her pants—unlike the last handful of receipts. They weren't of much use for tax preparation when reduced to a soggy, disintegrating mass.

The fog was so thick this morning that the parking lot and paths seemed to fade in and out of another world. First clearly visible, then shrouded in gray. The chill made Lara grateful she'd decided to wear her thermal underwear under her typical cargo pants, long-sleeved polo shirt and jacket. Uncertain of the terrain, she'd also worn her decidedly unattractive but well-broken-in hiking boots. Wait. When did "attractive" have any bearing on getting her job done? On the fulfillment of her promise?

She shook her head impatiently. Wasn't it bad enough she'd spent a good portion of the night tossing about, fantasizing about the sexy and compelling Matthew Martinez? What he might look like without his tight jeans. What his short, thick hair might feel like when she ran her fingers through it. What the golden skin stretched over his strong jaw might taste like.

Her eyes drifted closed at the thought and she licked her lips as if savoring the imagined flavor. Lost in daydreams of the handsome Park Ranger,

Lara only barely noticed the other visitors as they flowed around her stationary body. Even the sounds of conversations and laughter faded back from her consciousness and she heard only the imagined sounds of Matt's groans, of him growling her name with a feral demand.

How could she be reacting so strongly to a man she met only yesterday? Most men did nothing for her beyond eliciting a distant admiration of their looks and bodies—even if ghosts didn't have anything to share about them. And she'd learned from experience that the opinions of the ghosts mattered.

Well, at least she'd get a new fantasy, or several, out of this to accompany her dates with her vibrator. Her nipples ached and her panties were damp. She rocked from foot to foot, wishing she had a way to make herself come right now, before the object of her lustful thoughts showed up and she somehow made a fool of herself. Apparently the multiple orgasms she'd given herself the night before were insufficient. She really needed to get over this strange attraction and finish this book before it finished her. Maybe then she'd have the spare time to find a man who didn't spook easily.

"Earth to Lara."

Startled from her daydreams by the gentle tap on her shoulder, Lara's eyes flew open and she whirled around, hopping back. "Geez, Mr. Martinez, you scared me to death!"

He smiled tightly. "I called your name several times but you didn't seem to hear me."

Embarrassed, she glanced away from his too-perceptive golden eyes. "Sorry, I was...thinking."

He moved a few steps closer to her, his movements still so smooth and silent she couldn't help but be amazed. No one she knew could move like that.

“Call me Matt. Or Texas, if you want. Too much formality makes me feel like I’m back in the military.”

Lara managed to drag her eyes away. “Okay, Matt it is then.”

Her camera bag made a convenient distraction and she busied herself slinging the long strap over her head and settling the heavy bag across her body. No amount of adjustment could do anything about the fact the strap across her chest insisted on crossing between her breasts. The pressure outlined her substantial attributes even through her jacket, and made her bra rub uncomfortably against her tight nipples. She almost groaned. Yet another distraction from the job she needed to get done.

Matt gestured toward the Visitor Center. “We can start here. I know you’re mostly interested in the lighthouse, but I don’t know what else is useful. There are a lot of displays and information already set up.”

At her nod, he walked the few steps to open the door and held it so she could enter. The small courtesy was as unfamiliar to her as her lingering sexual arousal; she hesitated before she nodded and climbed the steps. Careful not to brush against him, she slipped past then felt the prickle of a nearby spirit.

*He craves you, too.*

\* \* \* \*

Matt stared as the fascinating woman stumbled on the threshold before she caught herself and continued through the doorway. He couldn’t tell what caused her to trip, but he’d felt the briefest touch of a strange sensation just before she almost fell. It was the same eerie tingle he associated with the presence of otherworldly beings like Cody and some of the Del Fantasma

customers. A quick glance around didn't reveal anything out of the ordinary or anyone obviously non-human. He shrugged to himself and followed her into the building that was as familiar to him as his own home.

Except now he could smell the distinct scent of Lara's arousal. Unfamiliar envy made him clench his teeth. He'd not detected the odor of any single person on her in any concentration, so he didn't think her boyfriend or husband traveled with her. But surely a woman so attractive, so clearly intelligent and successful, had to be taken.

Not that it should matter. His horrible track record with women spoke for itself, even without Coyote entering into the equation. Long resigned to slaking his sexual needs through brief encounters with like-minded women, he'd never been so enthralled by any female before. After his moonlit run last night, he'd returned home to sleep, only to dream of Lara Saunders and the many ways he'd like to taste her, to take her. Just to get some sleep, he'd finally resorted to masturbation, something he rarely felt the need to indulge in.

His sudden desire made him uncertain and uncomfortable. He needed to just get this favor over with and then he could return to his regular, solitary life. His comfortable, predictable life. His lonely life.

Despite his arguments with himself, his eyes kept track of Lara as she began to wander through the various displays arranged throughout the Visitor Center. Her face seemed less drawn this morning and she'd even blushed for him. The light rose color gave her a girlish and innocent look, only added to by her clean-scrubbed face and lack of primping.

Unfortunately, it also gave him an unexpected hard-on. He tried to not contemplate what else could make her skin glow pink and warm, let alone what her plump, dusky lips could be wrapped around.

“Hey, Matt.” The volunteer stationed behind the information desk called to him. “What are you doing here on your day off?”

“Escorting a friend of a friend around. She’s working on a book about lighthouses.” His curt response was meant to curb the curiosity of the volunteer, to warn him off, but the stiffening of Lara’s back said she’d heard the abrupt dismissal as well.

“Ahhh. We wondered what it would take to draw you in on your day off. I guess a pretty woman is the right recipe.” The man chuckled, either not recognizing Matt’s hint or deliberately not heeding it.

The other man’s knowing look shifted to the more familiar wariness when Matt leveled an unblinking glare at him. His coworkers weren’t sure what to make of him; maybe on some level they sensed Coyote and feared him. Or perhaps they just feared his military experience and the baggage he may have brought home from his tours in the big sandbox.

He turned to check on Lara and saw her standing over a display about the local geology and making notes in a small notebook before she tucked it into a pocket of her camera bag. When she shifted the bag to get a small digital camera out, the strap pulled her coat tightly against her body and emphasized the fact that she had an impressive hourglass figure hidden under the bulk of her unflattering, masculine clothes.

*Wow.*

His erection grew improbably harder at the thought of feasting on Lara’s considerable breasts. Unwilling to become a spectacle for his co-workers and the visitors, he stationed himself behind a nearby display about Cabrillo and kept an eye on her while he tried in vain to think of anything other than fucking her.

His erection finally went down enough for him to be able to walk without pain and he joined her while he could. “How are you doing?”

His voice rasped slightly but Lara didn't comment, seemingly engrossed in a mock-up detailing the lighthouse's original construction. She certainly seemed able to lose herself in her work.

For the next few hours he trailed along behind her, alternately thinking about and trying to not think about having sex with her.

At long last she seemed to have gotten her fill of the displays and information in the Visitor Center. She put away the small camera and notebook, then stretched and rubbed her neck before she looked around. She didn't seem to see him immediately and looked concerned before he stepped out from behind the display he'd been leaning up against.

A few quick strides with deliciously swaying hips and she rejoined him. "I think I've seen everything I need to for now. Is there anywhere to eat here? I'm starving."

Lara's tone was light but her face had taken on a distinctly grayish cast and the color had again leached from her lips.

"Not on the grounds. We only have some vending machines, but we can take a short trip out of the park and get something."

White teeth nibbled on her lip as she appeared to consider that option, then she shook her head slowly. "I'd like to finish at least my preliminary survey today. I have to get this book in soon and since the park closes so early, I can't make up any lost time later."

Vending machine food wouldn't be much, but it was her choice. He led her over to where the machines were located and then had to resist laughing when she fished around in a large outer pocket of the ever-present camera bag to come up with a few dollars in coins in addition to a terrific collection of lint, small slips of paper and an assortment of hair ties.

It seemed to take her another five minutes to make a decision on what she wanted from the machines, nibbling on her full lower lip again while she pondered her choices. He wanted those small teeth to nip at his lip, at his chest... his cock. He wanted to nip at her lips himself.

*Aaargh.*

Forced to again disguise his hard-on behind a convenient piece of furniture, Matt barely stifled his groan. For Pete's sake, he had to be desperate to be turned on by watching Lara make a decision between equally unhealthy snack foods. He needed to get laid and soon. Too bad the only woman he could imagine fucking now was a curvy, brown haired photo-journalist that had yet to look on him with anything other than uncertainty mixed with nervousness. Coyote didn't accept strangers easily, let alone seek to be near them, but this woman was an exception for some reason. Coyote wanted her as much as he did.

After Lara retrieved her purchases from the machines, Matt bought several bags of beef jerky and a bottle of water, then joined her at one of the nearby weathered picnic tables. She slipped the camera bag off over her head but carefully placed it right next to her on the bench and looped the strap around her leg before she turned her attention to eating.

Unlike most women he knew, Lara seemed comfortable in silence. She didn't try to make small talk or try to fill any gaps with meaningless chitchat. He liked that, more than he should perhaps. At ease with her company and the quiet, he found himself smiling for no particular reason.

When she removed her coat in deference to the fog's dissipation and the growing warmth of the day, he got a better hint of the lush, hourglass body she hid so well. It took every ounce of willpower to prevent Coyote from yipping in awe.

## Chapter Three

Lara led the way across the parking area toward the cliff-tops; site of the old lighthouse that was just visible through the trees. The bright white of the surprisingly small building stood out in the sunbeams that finally managed to break through the fog. She snapped a few test pictures with her small digital camera as she neared the path entrance.

Though she couldn't hear him, she knew Matt was right behind her. Just his presence caused waves of sensation to ebb and flow over her skin and just under it. It felt a bit like the aura of the spirits, but no ghost ever made her feel so aware, so alive. Little bursts ran up and down her spine, as if each vertebra was caressed in turn by a wild, primal energy that then raced to her pussy.

A shudder ran through her—this was so out of control. She couldn't let the handsome Latino ranger get under her skin. Even if he was interested in some recreational sex right now, he'd run for the hills as soon as any hint of her abilities was revealed. All men did. Hell, all people did. She was unsure what the odd feeling she had around him was, but it wasn't likely to benefit any efforts she might make to seduce him.

It was far safer to just do her job, get this book done and get out of here. If she could manage to concentrate long enough to do so. It took all her willpower earlier to ignore Matt and focus on gathering the information she might be able

to use from the Visitor Center. She constantly found herself fighting the urge to look up and see where Matt was, even though she knew he'd not left the building. This resulted in it taking at least twice as long as it should have to just get a good idea of what information was available, let alone to decide what she might be able to use of it.

Too bad he'd been adamant in his efforts to pretend he wasn't with her. When asked who she was, he passed her off as a duty. True as it may be, the tiny bit of optimistic interest she'd allowed to blossom wilted when she realized he didn't want to be associated with her. Hell, he didn't even want to stand close to her.

If only she could dismiss her fierce attraction to him so easily. Or ignore the electric sensations he caused.

Hoping to distract herself, she strode down the path toward the lighthouse, not concerned with making sure Matt could keep up. Her coat, now tied around her waist, helped cushion the camera bag's bounce, letting her walk faster than she normally would. Sometimes sheer movement could calm her when nothing else did.

Once out of the trees, Lara's awe at the sight of the old lighthouse made her breath catch. No matter how many lighthouses she'd seen or how many she'd photographed, they still had the power to tug at her emotions. Embodiments of honor, dedication and solitude, each one had its own spirit and personality.

She raised the small camera to eye level, unable to resist the bright white of the building's paint in contrast to the dark roof and highlighted by the reflections of sunlight on the glass in the lighthouse tower. Backed by the incredible panorama of the ocean, with the fading mist of the fog and the ships

even now at sail and under power, the pictures would merge the past and the present in one frame.

*It was never white, you know, in my time. The paint is new.*

Lara abruptly stopped in mid-photo and looked at the slightly translucent man, now standing beside her, dressed in a frock coat and clothes from the late Victorian era.

He crossed his arms before him, a sad look on his lined face.

*The highest lighthouse in the country, she is, over 420 feet above sea level. But no matter how well tended, the light just could not be seen in the clouds. Ships were still lost, despite my best efforts.*

A gentle touch on her shoulder made her jump in surprise. Matt. Heat flared when his hand then wrapped around the top of her arm, but she forced herself to ignore him for a moment in favor of the ghost that had come to speak to her. "Thank you" she whispered, hopefully too softly for Matt to catch.

The ghost gradually faded away, never responding to Lara's thanks and never taking his eyes from the small lighthouse.

"Lara, are you okay? Do you need some help?" Concern laced Matt's quiet words.

She gulped. She never outright told anyone about the ghosts anymore, not since she was ridiculed as a child, but her usual excuses wouldn't work now. Matt had been there the entire time she'd been paying attention to the ghost instead of the rest of the world. "I'm fine. I was just imagining the book pages I want to create from this."

Anxious for him to believe her, to not ask more questions, the words came out more sharply than she'd intended. It wasn't the best explanation, but it was the first thing she thought of that was remotely believable. Besides, it was certainly more plausible than her seeing and hearing ghosts all the time.

His hand loosened on her arm and she felt a slight caress, barely enough to penetrate the fabric of her shirt and undershirt combined. Without thinking, Lara reached up and took his hand, squeezing it reassuringly before she released it. "I'm okay. Really."

A glance over her shoulder caught his slightly dubious look and the glitter in his yellow-hot eyes. He didn't look like he was ready to take her words at face value. He didn't look angry or disgusted though. Maybe he'd give her the benefit of the doubt and she could just smooth it over.

Lara winked and motioned toward the white lighthouse and its outbuilding. "Can you give me the grand tour, Matt?"

A slow smile brought his tanned face to life with an almost playful expression. "Of course. But it's a living history exhibit so it's very self-explanatory. There are some volunteers that act out different roles as well as displays."

He stepped forward to walk alongside her as she headed toward the lighthouse, both of them strolling with no real sense of urgency to join the small crowd of visitors gathering in front of a uniformed Park Ranger and several people in Victorian clothing.

\* \* \* \*

Matt watched Lara closely throughout the afternoon. She took a lot of pictures and sometimes stopped to scribble notes, but he'd witnessed several more incidents like the earlier one. From behaving normally, she'd suddenly stop in place and look at one spot for a bit, then un-freeze after a few moments. A whispered thank you, so soft he'd not have been able to hear it without his inhumanly sensitive ears, and she would be back to her normal behavior again.

Each of these frozen moments coincided with his body reacting the same way it did to an otherworldly being. It couldn't be a coincidence.

The first several times it happened, he tried to see if he could locate the source of the eerie sensation. After the third time, he'd been forced to acknowledge whatever was affecting Lara was either not a physical entity or was one he couldn't detect.

Maybe she was seeing the lighthouse's ghost. He'd caught a glimpse of the small girl in her sickbed a few times before. The sight almost made him cry. Instead of walking in the lands of plenty, she was trapped here in the lighthouse. Coyote sang a song of sorrow that night, just for her.

But the little girl's ghost had never been seen outside the room she died in. So what could Lara be interacting with?

Since she didn't seem to be in any distress, he forced himself to stay back and not interfere. Coyote didn't appreciate it, however. Any time he felt his nerves tingle with awareness, Coyote yipped and screamed in protest that something else was speaking to her. He wanted to be free to protect her, to keep her from any possibility of harm.

Most of his life he lived in harmony with Coyote, willing to give control over regularly and enjoying the non-human side of his spirit. Recently Coyote had been in charge as often as his human side had been. But this was one time when he wished he could figure out a way to muzzle the animal spirit. The continual rollercoaster ride of alarm and struggle for control had given him a headache.

The instant the thought crossed his mind, Coyote made his feelings about a muzzle very clear. Painfully clear.

The crowd of visitors started to thin out and he looked at his watch. Only a half hour until the park closed for the day. Surprisingly, he didn't want the day

to end. He'd enjoyed the time spent with her, even without doing much other than stand around, fill in tidbits of information in addition to what the on-duty guides provided, and just watch Lara work.

The volunteers began the familiar closing routine and Matt idly listened while he watched Lara take a last few pictures from the walkway of the lighthouse lantern then disappear inside. A few minutes later, she reappeared at his side.

"Thank you for keeping me company, Matt. You've got to be utterly bored by now, but I really appreciate the extra information and that you got permission for me to go up to the lantern. The view from up there is incredible."

She babbled a bit and fumbled as she tried to tuck her camera back into her bag and he realized she was tired. Even beyond merely tired. More accurately, she seemed exhausted to the point of being barely able to function. The lack of a real meal and the entire day spent on her feet, taking pictures and notes, must have exacted a large toll from the photojournalist. One she couldn't really afford on top of what had seemed to be a severe case of jet lag yesterday. She just didn't seem to have much in the way of reserves.

"Not a problem."

She seemed wobbly as they made their way back to the parking lot and his hand shot out to steady her. This time she didn't protest. A bit emboldened, Matt wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer, the few inches of difference in their heights making her fit perfectly against him, tucked under his arm.

"Let's get something to eat. I know a great little restaurant that serves real Mexican food, not the Americanized crap."

He braced himself for the almost inevitable no.

After a moment of silence, she surprised him by accepting. “That sounds great. I have no idea where anything is around here and I know I really need to eat, even if I don’t feel hungry.”

He only just stopped himself from sighing in happy relief that the day wasn’t over yet but Coyote went nuts at her words. Why did spending more time with this visiting photojournalist matter to him? To Coyote? He had the ominous feeling it mattered more than he could imagine—and when she knew his secret and rejected him for it, it would hurt beyond any other pain he’d ever known.

## Chapter Four

Matt opened his truck's passenger door for her and the wonderful smells of the little hole-in-the-wall restaurant's food hit her with such intensity her achy stomach went into full-fledged growling in an instant. Her missing appetite returned, with a vengeance.

Eyes closed and mouth watering, she could almost taste the Mexican peasant cooking she loved. She licked her lips and opened her eyes again to see Matt standing beside the truck's open door, one hand extended to help her climb out.

He smiled, lips curving into a surprisingly sultry smile given his earlier care to distance himself. "Can I give you a hand?"

Even his voice seemed deeper and sexier.

There were others things she'd like him to give her in addition to his strong, long-fingered hands. Like his lips. Or the not-insubstantial cock she'd seen outlined by his worn jeans. Nearly groaning aloud, she pulled her thoughts back from that particular path. She really did need some nourishment. Maybe it would allow her to concentrate on something other than Matt. She forced herself to focus on his face again.

The expression on his face softened, muscles smoothing out and relaxing, but his golden eyes seemed to be looking through her own, examining her soul. Not waiting for her to take his hand before dismounting from the very tall vehicle, he reached into the cab, grasped her waist tightly, and lifted her out of the truck with ease.

Startled, Lara grabbed his arms. No one had picked her up, or even tried to, since the ghost rescued her when she was sixteen—and she'd been shorter and quite a bit lighter than she now was. Rather than being scared, she reveled in the unaccustomed sensation of being small, almost dainty.

Even after he set her carefully on her feet, Matt didn't seem to be in a hurry to take his hands off her. He slowly grazed them down her hips in a slow, lingering caress before letting her go completely.

The light graze of his fingers over her layers of clothes set her nerve endings on fire as if he caressed her naked skin. Burning heat radiated from her sides and mixed with the wild tingling she'd learned to associate with his presence nearby and created waves of awareness and longing. Her nipples tightened and her uterus clenched in rhythm. If this was what happened through cargo pants and thermal underwear, what would happen if he touched her skin?

Common sense. She had to rediscover her common sense. Lara forced herself to break the sense of intimacy by taking a step to the side and turning to shut the truck door.

Matt seemed to take the hint and didn't stop her. He pressed the alarm button on his key fob and motioned her toward the door of the restaurant.

The interior of the small restaurant was clean, decorated in burgundies and blues, and very crowded. The bitter taste of panic set in at the sight of how many patrons clustered just inside the door, laughing and chattering in Spanish.

She took a half step back in retreat but bumped into Matt before she could escape back outside.

About to turn and suggest they find somewhere less busy, she realized her fear had ebbed the instant she touched the quiet man she'd spent the day with. Heartbeat slowing, she took a deep, steadying breath. Then another and another until her heartbeat returned to normal.

Somehow he calmed her. Just having him close made her feel she had help nearby. The strange wild side she could feel in him now made her feel protected instead of threatened. It was sexy and arousing instead of terrifying. Her rational mind seemed to have no say in the matter, no matter how much she questioned her own reactions.

*What is he doing to me?*

Matt's strong, muscular arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her firmly back against his solid body. Their closeness nestled the ridge of his cock against her butt and sent white-hot needles through her pussy.

Wow.

Arousal blazed up again. Her clit throbbed and she rubbed her thighs together in search of relief, regardless of the very public location. Somehow she couldn't bring herself to be upset at her totally out of character libido, instead she was amazed by the fact she could become so aroused so easily. So much for her a-sexual self-image.

The urge to play a little took over and she moved her hips in a subtle wiggle, rubbing herself against Matt's impressive bulge. He exhaled in an almost inaudible hiss next to her ear before he tilted his hips to rub his thickening cock more firmly between her cheeks. The glorious sensation lasted an all too brief instant before he released her and nudged her away.

She wanted to groan at the loss. Now annoyed at her sudden fixation on Matt, she collected herself and straightened her shoulders. The other customers waiting nearby were studiously avoiding looking at her and she hated wondering if her lack of control was the subject of their amused conversation.

Matt followed her when she resolutely stepped back into the small amount of space available in the waiting area. She still needed to eat some real food or she would be in sorry shape tomorrow. It seemed like the only hunger she would be able to slake would be the one for food anyway. How was she supposed to cope with what was happening if she didn't understand it at all? This was so far outside her experiences that it might as well be happening to another person.

Even the ghosts seemed remarkably silent. By now there would typically been multiple comments or warnings, maybe even some deliberate attempts to freak out the man she'd become interested in. Why not this time?

A plump woman with a smiling, wrinkled face and long black hair liberally laced through with gray wove between the tables toward them, beginning to chatter excitedly in Spanish as she pushed her way through the waiting customers.

When she was near enough, the older woman reached up and grasped Matt's cheeks with both hands while she continued her nonstop monologue. Her obvious affection for, and fearlessness of, the ranger was amazing. Were they related somehow?

Matt flinched away, almost imperceptibly, and broke into the next millisecond pause in the woman's talking. "*Buenos noches*, Ines. This is Lara. I've told her about your cooking."

When Matt spoke in English, she relaxed a little. Her own knowledge of Spanish was limited to a few curse words and asking where to find the

bathroom. Any more than that and she was lost. No matter what, she always had a paranoid fear that any conversations she couldn't understand were about her, laughing at her. Foreign languages only increased that feeling, sometimes to the point of panic.

Matt reached out an arm, wrapped it around Lara's waist with his hand on her hip, then pulled her gently up against his warm and muscular side. She relaxed, almost against her will, fitting her body's contours into his. It felt... natural.

"Lara, this is Ines. She and her sister own this restaurant." Matt gave her a gentle, reassuring squeeze.

Ines stared at them, looked at Matt's arm and then into his face in obvious surprise. Eyebrows raised, she gave Lara an assessing glance before a slow smile turned her expression from questioning to accepting, even welcoming. She took Lara's hand and tugged her away from Matt, then pulled her through the restaurant toward the back of the room. She didn't spare even a glance to see if Matt followed them or not.

Ines finally stopped near a small empty table tucked in the back corner, near the kitchen but not in the path. "This is my table. Tonight it's for you."

Despite Ines' earlier rapid Spanish, she spoke English without much of an accent at all.

Lara glanced back over her shoulder, relieved to see Matt only a few steps away. Looking back, she saw Ines' questioning look and nodded to the restaurant owner. The table was perfect; a little isolated and quiet enough for her to have a chance to calm down and catch her breath. She might even be able to carry on a real conversation with the quiet and gorgeous man accompanying her.

She was eager to know more about Matt. Surprisingly eager. Well aware she only had a few days to spend here and then she would leave, as she always

did, she still wanted to get closer to someone she'd have to leave behind. Her nomadic life and career suddenly felt somehow lacking, no longer as perfect as it had once seemed. Regret wasn't something she acknowledged very often.

Ines fetched two large glasses of water, then disappeared into the kitchen after giving Matt a final pat on the shoulder. He waited until the older woman was gone before rolling his eyes.

The expression on his face was so resigned and long-suffering that she couldn't contain the girlish giggle that erupted from her, surprising even herself. Only able to stifle it with a hand over her mouth, she shook her head and laughed again when Matt assumed an exaggerated expression of innocence.

Ready to get off her feet before she collapsed, Lara reached for her chair. Matt took a single long stride forward, brushed her hands away and pulled it out for her. The old-world manners from the imposing, alpha man gave her a warm, somehow tender feeling of being cared for again.

Lara immediately gave herself a mental shake to dispel the soft feeling. She had to remember that only she could care for herself. No one else could or would do it for her—especially not a virtual stranger. Why was this becoming more and more difficult to keep in mind? Her entire adult life had been built on duty, self-reliance and the fulfillment of a promise in return for the gift of her life. There was no room for ease. No time for more than a quick sexual encounter. No space for a real relationship, however short.

Why was she now feeling like she'd met someone special? Someone who might not be so easy to discard when she needed to start a new project?

*Because you don't really want to be alone.*

The softly whispered words could have been a figment of her own imagination, only she felt the thrum of a ghost's faint presence.

She muttered an obligatory thanks to the ghost as she collapsed into the chair Matt held for her. Not her most graceful moment, by far, but the throbbing of her feet was growing more severe and her mental chaos was increasing as well.

Just as she pulled her chair forward to the table and reached for her napkin, her stomach growled another unmistakable, loud demand. Great. She needed that embarrassment on top of her own turmoil. The heat flooding her face told her she was blushing again, badly. She looked anywhere but at Matt, sure that he'd been disgusted by the unfeminine sound, no matter how natural it was.

Without any comment, Matt merely chuckled and sat in his own chair. He held a plastic-encased menu just out of her reach until she finally looked directly at his face, now annoyed and ready to slap him down if he was actually laughing at her. Or she'd call a cab and leave. He'd talked her into letting him drive and going back for her car later but she still had her wallet and her cell phone.

A ripple of relief flowed over her when she saw only a slight smile on his face—one that seemed more sympathetic than mocking. He handed her the menu, but he didn't seem to have one of his own. "Didn't you get a menu? You can share mine if you want. You have to be hungry after the long day today."

"I don't need a menu. I've probably eaten just about everything here. It's all very good."

He picked up his dripping water glass and drank almost half the contents in a few long swallows.

Mesmerized, she stared at him. The dark hint of stubble just shadowed his strong chin, making his exotic skin tone even more attractive. His high cheekbones gave him an aristocratic, mysterious air but his golden eyes belied that—seeming more like a wild animal's eyes than those of a human. His hair

was thick and blue-black, its gleaming strands saved from perfection by their disarray.

He took another sip of the water, his eyes drifting shut as he drank. If he took this much pleasure in the simple act of drinking a glass of cold water, what else would he enjoy? Lara's newly explicit imagination veered off into mental images of Matt enjoying other kinds of pleasure. Would he relax and throw himself into the moment? Would he fight to control the pleasure instead?

"Lara?"

She heard her name, as if in the distance, but didn't connect it to the sight of Matt's lips moving for a moment. Such intriguing lips. How would they feel against her own? Would they caress and coax? Would they instead demand and compel? Would they open to let her explore the secrets they hid?

"Earth to Lara."

The amusement in Matt's voice snapped her out of her sensual daydream and back to the reality of the small restaurant. He looked questioningly at her and tapped the menu clutched in her hands, still unopened. "Do you want me to order for you? You seemed to drift off for a moment there. You must be really tired."

This was ridiculous. She wasn't prone to mooning over handsome men. She had only just met Matt and, while he was attractive and seemed interested, his playful overtures could have been just that—playing. And she didn't have time for this, let alone the energy. The obligation she owed the dead lighthouse keeper had to come first. Without it, she wouldn't even be here. Her promise still ruled her life, and it would continue to until this last book was completed.

Sex was fun but celibacy had never been difficult for her. Some women spoke of sex as if it were so compelling that it overshadowed common sense, honor or even self-preservation. She'd never been able to understand why. It was

merely a release she could just as easily accomplish with her own hands or a few toys. And that had the added advantage of not having to worry if her lover would wake up screaming when the ghosts decided to torment him.

So why the sudden fixation on Matt?

She shook her head and forced herself to look through the menu, putting aside her questions in favor of nourishment. After deciding what she was in the mood for several times, Lara finally surrendered and closed the menu with a sigh.

“Okay, you order for me. I just can’t decide.” She handed the menu to Matt and closed her eyes, rubbing her temples to try to dispel the building tension.

“Is there anything you feel really hate or can’t have?” Matt’s voice was just loud enough to carry over the background noise of the restaurant.

“I’m not really fond of moles. I’m not actually fond of any stews. Something about the texture just doesn’t work for me.”

Lara continued to rub her forehead until the tension eased a bit and she ran her hands back to her braid. As usual, it was unraveling. It took a conscious effort to not pull out her hairbrush and rebraid the mass. She hated the uncontrolled curls and any time she knew it was escaping the tight control of her braid; she wanted to immediately tame it again.

Her eyes popped open and she dropped the braid the instant she heard someone approach the table. Matt looked at her with a slight frown and Ines now stood beside the table, water pitcher in hand.

“I’m okay, just tired.”

Ines refilled Matt’s empty water glass and pushed Lara’s untouched glass toward her. “Drink. You need water.”

She watched until Lara obediently raised the glass to her lips and sipped, then turned her attention to Matt. “What do you and your lady want for dinner?”

Lara’s hackles rose at the assumption that she was Matt’s anything. She was her own person. But before she collected her wits enough to protest, he ordered what sounded like enough food for four people instead of just two and Ines disappeared back into the kitchen.

Matt reached over and nudged her glass toward her again. She’d only drunk a few small sips, trying to drink slowly so she didn’t drink so much she filled her stomach with just water, or drink so fast she made herself sick.

She was so hot. Now she realized the heat she felt wasn’t due to lust. She still had multiple layers of clothing on and it was warm in the restaurant—quite warm this close to the kitchen. A few tugs and she pulled her coat off, draping it over the back of her chair. She was still too warm, though.

“Where are the restrooms, Matt? I have to get some of these clothes off before I die of heat stroke in here.”

His eyes widened a little as she stood, then he pointed toward the back corner of the room, not far from their table. “Back there.”

She marched toward the area he’d indicated, feeling him watching her all the way. Knowing that his attention was fixed on her, she gave her hips an unfamiliar sultry sway as she walked.

## Chapter Five

She was almost falling asleep in her seat by the time they'd been served their food. Only his persistent coaxing seemed to keep her eating until he thought she might have consumed enough to constitute a full meal. Too bad even Matt didn't believe his own excuse that he had to make sure she ate enough that Ines' feelings wouldn't be hurt.

He wanted to take care of Lara in a way he'd never wanted to take care of anyone else before. He questioned every detail, almost fussing. Did she really eat this little all the time? Did she allow herself to become so exhausted very often? She wasn't wasting away, her figure was lush and full, but she needed to care for herself better.

Ines was probably laughing in the kitchen at his sudden motherly attitude. Not that he'd blame her.

Hell, he'd even made sure to not order chips and salsa or anything she could fill up on that wouldn't provide adequate protein and fat. He'd persuaded her to drink so much water she'd had to visit the restroom twice during dinner. But she seemed to enjoy the large plate of *Pollo con Crema* he'd ordered for her. The rich dish was just what she needed, though it had the side-effect of enabling Lara to give him a hard-on several times when she licked the rich sauce off her fork with a moan of pleasure. It was worth every moment.

Coyote whined in agreement. She needed care and both Matt and Coyote were the ones meant to be there for her. He gave off the impression of implacable determination.

Matt watched her eyes slowly drift shut again as he ate the last few bites of his third entrée. Never a creature of small appetites, he'd gone the entire day without much more than some beef jerky and his fast metabolism needed to refuel if he was to have enough energy for shifting and running. The more often he shifted, the longer he spent in Coyote's form, the more calories he needed to consume. It was counter-intuitive since Coyote's form was smaller, but he'd learned that lesson the hard way and had no desire to be trapped in a single form again because he didn't have the energy left to shift back.

"I need to rest my eyes for a minute, Matt. I'm sorry." Lara covered her mouth as she yawned heavily.

She pushed her plate to the side and put her head down on the table, arms crossed to cushion her forehead. A deep sigh followed and he could see the tension in her back slowly ease until she was so relaxed that only the chair and table kept her upright.

What was it with this woman? She kept putting a wall up between them but it seemed to periodically fail and she would show a little bit of herself that would both surprise and enthrall him. He'd already caught her staring at him several times, but it wasn't in fear or disgust, both of which he was used to from humans. She blushed and looked away whenever he caught her in the act.

Add that to the way she'd rubbed up against his cock when they arrived at the restaurant, and it made him think that she just might be interested in him. At least interested in his body.

He'd initially pulled her against him to lay public claim to her in the midst of the crowd of admiring local men. It was an instinctive reaction to satisfy both

his and Coyote's oddly possessive feelings, but it also told him how tense and nervous she was near the crowd. He'd not thought she'd be able to feel the erection he'd been sporting on and off all day through her layers of clothes and he'd certainly not thought that she'd react to the pressure by rubbing her rounded ass against it, nearly making him double over with want.

It had taken a tremendous amount of willpower to release her.

Ines walked quietly up to the table, interrupting his mental replay. She smiled at the soft, rhythmic sighs now coming from Lara.

"Your woman has fallen asleep in the middle of your date. If you are that boring, it's no wonder this is the first time I've ever seen you with one." Her teasing was goodhearted and their banter long-established.

Matt gave her his most aristocratic, disdainful look. "I'm sure it was the food that put her to sleep. Someday you will learn to really cook and be able to offer a decent meal. In the meantime, I have to keep trying multiple dishes just to stay interested."

Ines sniffed and tried to look hurt, before she broke into soft laughter and dropped the play-acting. "Is your Lara okay? She didn't eat very much."

He pulled his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans, extracted a credit card from it and handed the card to Ines. "She's more exhausted than just about anyone I've seen since my tour in Afghanistan. She pushes herself too hard."

The front of distant concern he'd tried to erect didn't seem to fool Ines and certainly didn't convince himself or Coyote. The older woman's knowing gaze always seemed to be able to see more than he really wanted anyone to and this time was no different.

"You should give her a chance to know you, Mateo. You are too much alone and I'm more afraid for you each time I see you. You have nothing to be ashamed of. Some are just blessed to be closer to the Ancestors and Spirits than

most will ever be. You can't ignore the fact that you belong to two worlds and always will, but that doesn't mean that you must travel through either world alone."

She looked straight into his eyes, her expression more serious than he'd seen her in a long time. "I have a feeling about your Lara. You are good for each other, but you both have secrets. If you don't trust each other with them, you will be turning your back on what could be a very special relationship."

A snuffling snore from the sleeping woman broke the tension. Ines took Matt's credit card and disappeared to charge their meal while Matt waited, watching Lara while he pondered Ines' surprising words.

Ines had been one of the first friends he'd made in the area after following Cody here. On only the third night since his arrival, while he was out running and learning the local area, he'd come across a couple of young thugs mugging Ines on his way home. Not that she wasn't making an effort to take on the bullies herself. She'd gotten in a few good lumps with the large, heavy purse she carried, but the odds weren't in her favor and the muggers were angry.

He'd saved her from the mugging. The sight of a large coyote snarling at them had terrified the young criminals into running off almost immediately. After they'd run off, he'd approached Ines slowly, unthreateningly. Once he'd reassured himself that she was only scared and a tiny bit bruised, essentially unhurt, he'd turned to run off as well but she'd stopped him with a touch.

Her hand caressed his flank, then she spoke directly to him as a person even though he was in Coyote's form, thanking him for risking exposure by coming to her assistance. She knew what he was. She kept touching him while she told him where she lived, that she owned a restaurant and where it was. She even told him that he needed to come there for dinner as a thank you.

She felt a little different than most humans, but only a little—nothing like what he felt around Cody or other vampires. Nothing like what he felt around other shape shifters.

He finally ran off anyway, completely nonplussed by the fact she knew his secret and didn't hate or fear it. Her acceptance was complete and without hesitation.

For several days he'd puzzled over the event until he finally thought to ask Cody about her, only to be told just that Cody knew her and she could be trusted. Pressing for more information only resulted in the cryptic admission that Ines had "Other Sight".

Coyote pestered him endlessly, the animal spirit's natural curiosity pushing him. His own loneliness also beat at him until he stood in the entrance to the small restaurant for the first time. Would Ines know him in his human form? What would his reception be now that there was no threat?

Ines recognized him instantly, hugging him despite his attempts to discourage her but without offending her at the same time. She completely ignored his attempts to retreat and grabbed him anyway, thanking him again for rescuing her.

In the years since then, Matt had become a regular patron of the restaurant and only Cody knew him better than Ines.

His eyes focused on the dark-haired woman sitting across from him. What secrets is she hiding? He'd bet they were nothing like his. They couldn't be.

He'd never disregarded Ines' advice before, but this time she had to be wrong. He'd just help Lara get her pictures and information, maybe talk her into a bout of mutually pleasurable sex, then release her back to her normal life with her normal friends and family. She deserved not to lose that normalcy.

Ines deposited a cup of coffee in front of him and a cup of tea in front of Lara's sleeping form, far enough away so that it might not be instantly knocked over. She set his credit card slip and a pen down on the table. As soon as he signed the receipt, she traded his credit card for the pen and receipt, leaving him just the customer copy. Instead of leaving, she pulled another chair up to the table and sat. Apparently she wasn't done talking to him yet.

Ines' silence made him nervous. She wasn't known for being quiet when she had something to say.

"Your Lara isn't one to relax easily. Yet she fell asleep here, despite the fact the crowds bothered her, despite the fact she only met you a day or two ago. She wants to trust you already and she needs someone she can trust."

Her words slowed, as if she were analyzing as she spoke. "She thinks she's too weird, too far outside 'normal' to be anything but alone her entire life and nothing has taught her any different. No person, no situation. She expects to be hurt and distance is her only defense."

He looked at Ines sharply, a little offended and a lot surprised. Lara wasn't weird. At least not on his scale of weird.

The older woman touched his hand for a moment. "Don't hurt her, Mateo. And don't let your fears hurt you both."

A final pat and she reached over to shake Lara's shoulder. When only a soft groan resulted, she shook her again, a little harder this time.

Lara sat up with a sudden jolt and swayed a bit as her mind tried to come awake enough to fully control her body. Swaying slightly in her chair, she grasped the edge of the table and looked around with wide open eyes, breathing heavily in response to being startled out of a deep sleep.

"Oh man, I'm sorry. I was so tired I wanted to rest my eyes for a moment but I didn't mean to fall asleep. Have I been asleep for long?"

If possible, her eyes grew even wider. "Please tell me I didn't start snoring."

The look on her face was so funny that both Matt and Ines fought not to laugh. She was obviously horrified at the idea that she might have been making noise while she slept. Her earlier reaction to being laughed at made it clear that it was a sure way to piss her off.

To keep from laughing, Matt bit his lip and lied. "No, no snoring."

He pushed her cup of tea toward her, hoping the impression of her watch on her forehead would disappear before she got a look at herself in a mirror. He didn't want to try to pretend he'd not noticed the large circular imprint if she asked him.

She dunked the tea bag a few times before removing it from the cup to first press the liquid from it, then balance it on the saucer next to the cup. Without adding anything, she inhaled the steam deeply, held it in her lungs for a moment, then exhaled with one of her small moans of delight.

True to form, his cock stood up and took notice of her pleasure. He tried in vain to focus on anything boring and routine to get his mind off his cock and Lara. Or his cock in Lara. The list of invertebrates that inhabit the local tide pools didn't even seem to have much effect.

He had to resort to drinking his coffee as slowly as possible while Ines and Lara talked about the restaurant business and where Ines had gotten her recipes. By the time he was done, Ines had scrawled the recipe for *Pollo con Crema* on a page ripped from the small pad of paper she used to take orders on before she disappeared back into the kitchen.

He shook his head. He never understood women. He wasn't sure he wanted to understand them, actually. Ignorance may well be the better option.

“I better get you back to your B&B, Lara. You’re tired and I’m getting there.”

He got up without waiting for her to respond. Lara picked up her shed clothing and he helped her out of her chair, then gestured for her to proceed him out of the restaurant. It was time to take her home, but he could still admire the sway of her rounded ass as she walked, made even more delicious since she’d taken off her thermal pants so only her baggy cargo pants impeded his view.

*Arrrgh.* He was going to have the bluest balls around if this kept up. Either that or he’d have to buy new jeans after breaking the zipper in these.

She glanced back over her shoulder and smiled. “I’m sorry I fell asleep, it really wasn’t the company. But thank you for ordering tea for me. I’m surprised you remembered that I’m a tea drinker.”

He froze with the door he’d just opened held motionless. How in the hell did Ines know to serve Lara tea instead of coffee?

## Chapter Six

Lara's head was still fuzzy in spite of the adrenaline and the caffeine in her tea, and she wobbled a bit as Matt helped her back up into his huge truck. From sheer habit, she immediately reassured herself that her camera bag was still hidden behind the split seat and the cameras were still in it. She recalled that her rental car was still at the Park, and she'd need it tomorrow.

"Umm, Matt, what about my car?" She wasn't sure she was really capable of driving safely but she'd manage if she had to.

He closed her door and circled around in front of the truck to easily swing up into the driver's seat. A sexy smile made her willpower turn to mush before he responded. "I thought I'd take you back to your B&B for the night, and then pick you up for breakfast tomorrow morning."

Reminded to buckle her seatbelt by the sight of Matt fastening his own, she concealed her uncharacteristic relief at being able to let someone else deal with a task. She rubbed her hands up and down her arms, grateful that the heater was quickly chasing the damp cold away. Her warm clothing was lying on the seat between herself and Matt.

Removing of some of her layers of concealing clothing usually made her feel exposed, even vulnerable, but tonight that feeling was conspicuously absent. Matt might be quiet and intense but, somehow, she knew she was safe with him.

He'd follow through on his promises and he'd already had perfect opportunities to take advantage of the situation and hadn't.

When was the last time she'd been relaxed enough to fall asleep in anything but an empty and locked hotel room? Even then she'd sometimes be awake for hours, sure that yet another ghost would decide to visit and scare the hell out of her.

Realizing Matt was still waiting for an answer, she nodded. "Okay. Thanks. It's nice to not have to drive right now."

He'd been the sole reason she actually managed to eat a decent dinner. Typical as it might be for her to lose weight during one of her deadline pushes, it wasn't healthy and she often got sick as soon as her book was in the mail. When she was exhausted, she had no appetite and would always rather spend time sleeping or working than eating. Food was a distant third.

She remembered Matt gently chiding her into consuming the tasty dinner he'd ordered for her. Her plate contained more food than she was used to eating over the space of several days. It did taste wonderful and each bite was a treat. A far cry from generic fast food or a protein bar.

And water. He kept refilling her water glass and pushing it toward her whenever she put down her fork. She thought her kidneys would float away after a while and she'd had to stumble off to the restroom several times. She never really managed to rehydrate well while traveling or working. Unless it was causing her to have a serious headache, she didn't really give it the thought she should.

Why would Matt want to take care of her? It wasn't what she expected, that's for sure.

Even when she'd fallen asleep during dinner and richly deserved being made fun of, he'd managed to resist doing so. Maybe he'd realized how much she hated being the butt of laughter.

Instead, the mysterious Park Ranger had let her sleep until it was time to leave and only then had he and Ines woken her up. In the meantime, he'd finished the rest of his own amazingly huge meal. By the time she'd peeled her head off her arms and persuaded her eyes to focus again, he'd been drinking a cup of coffee.

Oh hell, she hadn't checked to see just what she looked like now. Past experience had taught her it usually wasn't at all pretty.

"Matt, please tell me I don't have a fork imprint in my cheek or something." She blurted out the appeal, hoping she'd escaped that particular penalty.

He darted a look at her, his face betraying a bit of surprise. "I promise you don't have a fork imprint anywhere on your face. Your cheeks are a blush pink but there isn't a mark on them."

Was it her imagination or did he look the tiniest bit guilty? "That's a relief. One time I woke up with half my laptop's keyboard pressed into my face."

She could laugh a little now at just how silly she'd looked. Not that she'd thought it all that funny at the time. It had taken a good hour for the marks to go away enough so that she could go out again.

Instead of staring out the truck windows into the darkened streets, she contented herself with watching Matt's brow furrow in concentration as he steered the vehicle out of the small parking lot's narrow stall, then out the driveway and into the busy street.

Despite their earlier easy silence, Lara wanted to know more about Matt. He was a creature of mystery and exuded a wild sensation she couldn't escape. That she no longer really wanted to escape.

"Cody told me you saved his life in Afghanistan."

*That was subtle. I should have just said "Hi, won't you tell me about your horrendous war experiences?"* With effort, she managed to not roll her eyes in self-disgust.

Matt was silent for so long she wondered if she should somehow withdraw the question. Chancing a covert glance in his direction, she saw the muscles in his jaw clench and release, then do so again. Oops. Her remarkable talent for blurting out awkward questions at just the wrong time had once again raised its head.

Just as she'd given up on him answering, he sighed. "The Middle East is not a subject for light conversation. Let's just say Cody and I saved each other and leave it at that."

The upcoming light turned yellow and the truck coasted to a stop. He shot a look her way, made even more intense by the way the dim lights along the road cast deep shadows on the planes of his face. "I still owe Cody. At least until he declares my debt paid."

A debt of honor? She understood the burden of debts of honor.

Eyes back on the road, Matt steadily accelerated from the stop. While he seemed wholly focused on the driving, she was free to admire him. He really was an incredible man. Sexy, muscular, and with an aura of such a dangerous Alpha, he was nearly irresistible. But as much as she admired his body, the way he worked hard to not take over every situation and didn't try to order her around, made him even more compelling. He had a presence that spoke of steadiness and dependability. He could be counted on.

What woman in her right mind wouldn't latch onto him the instant she could?

Oh shit. She'd never thought to ask whether he was already involved with someone. Maybe he was even married. Just because she didn't recall seeing a ring on his finger didn't prove anything other than that he didn't wear rings. She didn't think he could have a girlfriend or a wife waiting for him and be hitting on her anyway. But she'd been wrong about men before.

She'd never share and certainly wouldn't poach on someone else's territory either.

How could she casually ask him if he was in a relationship? Was there any way to ask that didn't sound like the inquisition? If there was, she was just too tired to figure out how to come up with it. Nothing she thought of could be remotely considered casual. Finally, she decided to just blurt it out.

"Are you married?"

No sooner had the blunt words left her lips than regret hit. Slapping a hand over her mouth, she could feel her face grow incredibly hot in embarrassment.

"Never mind. None of my business." Her words were muffled by the hand still plastered across her lips.

Matt reached his arm over and pulled her hand away from her mouth, still managing to keep most of his attention on the road.

"I'm not married, engaged and don't have a girlfriend. If I did, I certainly wouldn't be...stuck cursing the unforgiving nature of denim pants." A hint of humor and what seemed like frustration overlaid his voice.

He tugged her closer until he could press her captive hand on his crotch, right over the long, thick bulge that clearly indicated just how interested he was.

A feral groan rumbled from him when she allowed her fingers to gently squeeze the oh-so-hard length of his cock.

Reveling in the animalistic sounds he made, she explored him at her leisure—fingers caressing and nails rasping on the taut fabric of the concealing jeans.

He reached down and snatched her hand away from his lap. “Behave. I can’t safely drive while you do that. You need sleep more than sex anyway.”

Despite the crossed arms and dramatic pout she affected, she knew he was right. On at least her third wind by now, she’d eventually have to surrender to sleep again—no matter the inconvenience or whether she would rather be doing something else. She’d hit that wall hard before and could feel it nearing again.

Hopefully Matt would get her back to her B&B before she simply fell asleep again. Humiliating herself by doing that once was enough, she had no desire to do it again. She’d probably drool or something worse.

Her tired brain had another random epiphany. Matt hadn’t asked her where she was staying or requested directions, but he seemed sure of where he was going. Concern reared its ugly head. “You said you’re taking me back to my B&B but how do you know where I’m staying? I didn’t tell you.”

The corner of his mouth titled up and, even in profile, he looked slightly smug. “Cody told me.”

She hadn’t thought of that, but it made perfect sense. The brief flash of fear and suspicion vanished, leaving only more exhaustion in its place. Even her libido had again vanished under the overwhelming haze.

She still wanted to know more about him. Resting her still hot face on the truck’s cool window, she tried to decide what to ask him next. Just as she

thought she had a question, the mental haze thickened and closed around her, pulling her down into an irresistible darkness.

## Chapter Seven

When Lara had been completely silent and still for a few minutes, Matt glanced over to find her head propped up against the window with her eyes closed. Her rhythmic breathing and lax muscles made it clear that she'd fallen asleep again.

Coyote grumbled but Matt chuckled silently to himself. He'd already decided that she had to be off-limits for tonight. The intense desire he felt for her wouldn't be slaked with less than many hours of sex and she was so tired she might not have lasted more than a single round tonight, at best. Neither he nor Coyote would be content with that.

Better to let her sleep tonight and take a long run to calm himself. She might be more lively tomorrow.

He finally pulled up in front of the B&B she was staying at. The large house was a pueblo-style building with several separate outbuildings within the surrounding fenced area. It was obviously an older mansion given new life as a B&B. The entry and grounds lights were still on, not too surprising since it was only about nine pm. Parking on the street, he reached over and gently shook Lara.

The first attempt to wake her had no effect. The next few shakes only resulted in her moving away from the door—only to try to lie down on the seat. Not a very successful attempt since she still had her seatbelt on. Now she was off the door but hanging, leaning over toward the center of the truck still partly supported by the shoulder strap of her seatbelt. It certainly looked uncomfortable.

He hopped out of the truck and crossed around to the passenger side. He took a quick, deep breath of the night air, savoring the scents of the surrounding area. People, a few dogs and cats, a rabbit or two—nothing that might be a threat to either himself or Lara.

He opened the passenger door and shook Lara's shoulder again and again.

"Come on, Lara. Let's go. You need to go to bed and I need to get home. Wake up."

She moaned his name and finally sat up, eyes still closed. Finally the combination of his relentless shaking and the cold air seemed to get her to a level of awareness that allowed her to unfasten her seatbelt and make motions as if to get out of the vehicle.

Reaching up, he plucked her from the seat and stood her next to him. He kept his hands around her surprisingly narrow waist until he thought she was standing well enough to not fall over. The second he let go, she leaned into him and wrapped her arms around his body, resting her lush curves against him with a purring moan that set his libido on fire yet again.

She wasn't going to make it inside by herself, that much was pretty damn clear.

He shuffled her around to the side so he could reach in and grab her discarded clothes and the heavy camera bag. A few strategic maneuvers and he

got her securely pinned between his body and the truck with just enough room for him to be able to close the door. He slung the strap of the camera bag over his shoulder and tucked the clothes around the bag's top handle so he'd have both hands free to help Lara.

The feel of her warm body flush up against his again made his plan very difficult to adhere to. Coyote yipped loudly at the injustice of being kept away from the female he wanted to fuck. The female he wanted to lay claim to.

For the first time in years, Matt had to forcibly exert his dominance over the animal spirit to keep Coyote in check. Both his and Coyote's instincts said to lay full claim to Lara and to do so now, before another male could claim her. But his human logic knew he couldn't just claim her without her knowing his secrets—and him knowing hers. Ines was right, there had to be trust.

He rested his cheek on the top of her head for just a moment, inhaling her delicious scent. How the hell had this one curvaceous and slightly odd woman managed to enthrall both him and Coyote in just a day and a half? What was it about her? She didn't resemble the women he was typically attracted to. She certainly came from a vastly different background than he did. At least she didn't seem faint of heart. Maybe she would be able to accept the fact he wasn't fully human.

She squirmed slightly against him, trailing a fleeting path of kisses along the side of his neck and muttering something he couldn't make out. Almost as if she tried to crawl closer.

*I sure hope she's a dog person.*

Coyote yipped shrilly at the very idea of being compared to a dog, loudly enough Matt winced.

He'd stopped fooling himself that all he wanted was a one night stand with Lara. She made him feel alive and eager for new experiences. He wanted more. Coyote wanted more.

Right now he needed to get her to her room without making a spectacle of her. The last thing he needed was to be the cause of her embarrassment. She didn't seem to be too fond of embarrassment.

Pushing her a little ways away from him, he gently shook her again until her eyes opened, hazy and unfocused.

"What room are you in?"

She muttered something he couldn't understand and he repeated his question. The second time he got an answer from her, she was clearer. "Cottage in back."

He could see a well-lit gravel path that led past the right-hand side of the main building and toward the back of the grounds. Matt wrapped an arm around her lush body and pulled her to his side, her arms still locked around his waist. The walk down the short path to the back cottage was slow by necessity. Walking entwined was very awkward and the heavy camera bag hanging from his shoulder banged annoyingly into everything, including his own hip.

When they reached the door of the small outbuilding, Lara woke enough to fish in the pockets of her cargo pants for the door key. One pocket yielded a small collapsible hairbrush and several hair ties. Another seemed to have only a few receipts wadded up at the bottom. He hoped she'd not misplaced the key. With a cry of triumph, she pulled a key attached to a kokopelli keychain out of the third pocket she searched.

She was so funny. Such pleasure at just locating a key that she had to have put in the pocket herself anyway.

Lara wobbled a little, grasping him again to steady herself.

Gently taking the key from her, he opened the cottage door and guided her inside. The interior of the cottage was small, maybe three or four rooms at the most. A coffee table was covered with pictures and notepads. The top pages of a few seemed to have a mix of scrawled notes and crude sketches. He dropped the heavy camera bag off his shoulder onto one of the nearby mission-style chairs.

He spotted the edge of a bed visible through the doorway directly opposite them. That had to be the bedroom.

After maneuvering Lara into the room, he shoved a closed laptop to one side of the bed and pulled the covers back. No small feat since Lara still seemed totally unwilling to release him while he did so. He sat her down on the side of the bed, forcing her to release him though he instantly missed her arms around him.

She flopped backward onto the bed with a groan. Her eyes closed almost instantly and a content smile curved her rose-colored lips.

He couldn't leave her there to try to sleep draped off the side of the bed. Even though he knew undressing her would just about kill him.

"I may never walk again." He muttered to himself, shaking his head.

He knelt in front of Lara and untied her hiking boots. The tight double-knots took some work to undo before he could loosen the laces and tug the boots off. Despite the mess in the room, his own time in the military had instilled some habits in him that he'd never broken and he almost laughed at himself when he realized he'd placed the two boots neatly side-by-side, perfectly lined up with the laces folded up and tucked inside.

When he tugged off her boot socks, he was treated to a surprise—the woman who dressed in bulky unfeminine clothing had bright fuchsia pink toenail polish on. He carefully examined her narrow feet and dainty toes for any

signs of foot problems or blisters, trying to ignore the fact that even her feet were sexy.

Her feet seemed in good shape, though he had to resist nipping one.

She wasn't going to sleep very comfortably in all her clothes. He wanted her to get as much rest as possible so he should change her into her pajamas or whatever she wore as night clothes. She had to have brought them with her.

A short search later and he'd discovered no trace of nightclothes. Apparently Lara slept in the nude. The mental image of her covered only by a sheet was amazing, not that he could allow himself to contemplate that image for long.

She also seemed to have a liking for sexy, lacy, and skimpy lingerie. The underwear and bras he'd found while looking for pajamas looked like they belonged to a completely different person from the one that owned the ugly cargo pants, thermal knit shirts and flannel barn coats. He couldn't think of two styles that could be more different. She had some secrets just under her clothes.

But if she normally slept naked, she definitely wouldn't sleep well in all her clothes. He had to undress her so she could sleep properly and be rested for tomorrow. The excuse sounded thin, even to him. Coyote yipped in mockery, as close to a laugh as he got.

Standing beside the bed, he pulled her thermal knit shirt up and over her head, then extracted her arms from the long sleeves. Just awake enough to realize she was being undressed, Lara tried to help but only succeeded in hitting him in the head with one flailing arm.

After his eyes uncrossed from the blow, he saw that she was indeed wearing a bright, celery green, lace bra with black trim. The bra lovingly clasped her lush breasts, enhancing her considerable cleavage. Her dusky nipples were

visible through the elegant lace, almost more decoration than mere functional garment.

A few nudges and he succeeded in getting her to turn onto her side so he could undo the back clasp of the bra and tug it off. Thank the ancestors that he had a moment to try to calm himself before having to resist her luscious breasts in all their bare glory.

He resolutely reached over her hip and unfastened her loose cargo pants. A few tugs and the pants were pulled off her hips to reveal the second half of his self-induced torment—a thin, lacy green thong that matched the bra. The deep breath he took to steel himself to resist the temptation she embodied backfired when he inhaled the scent of musky, damp pussy.

He was in trouble now, major trouble.

Considerable willpower was needed to move her fully up onto the bed and tuck her under the covers of the bed. He couldn't bring himself to actually remove her panties. He didn't think he could do that and still resist taking her right then and there.

He neatly folded her clothes and left them beside the hiking boots, then cleared the various documents and computer off the bed. She'd locked the laptop to the heavy wooden bed frame, so the best he could do was to place it carefully on the floor, leaned up on the wall so it wouldn't be accidentally stepped on.

Lara probably wouldn't remember that he was going to pick her up tomorrow. If she did, it would be darned near a miracle. He should leave a note so she'd know for sure. Remembering seeing notepads and pens on the coffee table, he returned to the living room to write a note.

How to make sure she saw it... Ah. The perfect solution was the most obvious—he propped it up on top of the camera bag with Lara's name on the front. He placed the cottage keys there as well.

He checked her again to make sure she was okay. The phone on the bedside table had a phone number taped to it for incoming calls and he took a moment to program the number into his cell phone before turning his attention back to Lara.

Tucking the covers a little higher on her shoulders, he bent over to give her a gentle kiss. She whimpered as his lips met hers and her dainty tongue traced over his lips until he found the strength to pull away.

He really, really needed that run now.

## Chapter Eight

At first, the insistent ringing of the phone seemed like the lingering remnants of a bad dream. Lara turned over without fully waking and tried to hide her head under the pillow, determined to go back to sleep. Before the ringing interrupted it, she'd been enjoying one of the hottest, sexiest dreams she'd ever had.

Matt had been slowly undressing her, kissing and licking each part of her body as he bared it. All his attention and lust was focused on her and he seemed ready to eat her alive. She was a completely willing meal.

Finally the insistent ringing stopped and she drifted back toward her dream. What would Matt's muscular, golden body look like naked? What would he taste like?

The ringing sound began again and she suddenly realized it was the phone on the table beside the bed. She sat up abruptly, covers falling to her waist and scrambled to answer the phone.

"Hello?"

Her voice was hoarse and groggy sounding. She coughed and tried again.  
"Ummm, hello?"

The warm chuckle on the other end of the phone line made her pussy throb. "Good morning."

"Matt, how did you get this number?" She was sure she hadn't given it to anyone other than her agent. Cody had her cell phone number but not the one for the guest cottage. Hopefully, if she'd told him that while nearly comatose, she'd not told him anything embarrassing.

"I got it off the phone and programmed it into my cell when I took you back there last night. Since I had to put you to bed, I wasn't sure you'd remember any of our plans for today. I thought you might need a wake-up call."

Oh shit. He'd even put her to bed? She spotted her boots and a small pile of clothes on the floor near the doorway, neatly folded. She was never that tidy; that had to be Matt's doing.

She normally slept naked and she was still wearing panties—something she'd not realized until now. Not something she'd normally do, either. He'd undressed her while she was pretty much helpless but had left the thin scrap of lace in some sort of gesture to modesty?

Why didn't she feel violated? Taken advantage of? He'd seen her naked, after all. But he'd also taken care of her and then left her alone to sleep. How many men would have done that? Most would have either dumped her just inside the door or would have taken advantage of her. Hell, some of them would have left her at the restaurant or outside the door.

Matt was a very different man.

"Lara?"

"Oh. Ummm... What time is it?" She looked around in vain for her travel alarm clock. It must still be in the bathroom where she'd had it yesterday morning.

“It’s seven a.m. I have to be at work at nine, so I thought I’d pick you up in an hour and we can have breakfast before we go to the park for the day. Would that give you enough time to get ready?”

“I can be ready in a half hour. I don’t take very long.”

“Okay, I’ll be there at seven thirty then.” Was it her imagination or did he seem happy to come earlier.

“I’ll be ready.”

“Oh, just so you know.” His voice lowered to a sexy drawl. “I like women who don’t hog the bathroom for hours and I *love* the underwear collection. I’ll see you shortly.”

Before she could respond, he’d hung up. She gaped at the phone for a moment before she hung it up.

Now fully awake, she hopped out of the bed and grabbed some clean clothes. She picked up the first knit shirt and pair of pants that came to hand but when she got to her collection of underwear, she made a more careful choice. He liked her underwear collection, did he? She finally decided on a chocolate brown and cream set made of lace and velvet. It was one of her favorites and Matt would probably like it, too.

Her lingerie fetish had always been her own personal secret, her way of having a hidden feminine side that no one could judge her for and that she didn’t have to justify to anyone. Now someone knew—Matt knew—and she found it surprisingly...exciting. She wished she’d seen his face when he discovered what her casual, loose work clothes hid.

Only fifteen minutes later and she was showered, dressed and ready to go. Thanks to the amount of sleep she’d gotten, her jet lag was almost gone as well. It was a relief to finally be clear-headed again.

Looking around the bedroom, she realized what was missing. Where was her laptop? Always careful to lock it up wherever she was, having it out of sight was unusual. She kept multiple copies of her books as she worked on them, but she relied on the laptop and her portable printer while she was working. She'd not unpacked the printer yet and its box was still on the floor by the dresser.

At a loss, she climbed onto the bed, crawled over the top and looked down onto the floor on the other side. Piled neatly beside the bed was a stack of the papers that had been on the bed yesterday. Her laptop was next to the stack, tilted up against the wall so it was safer from being accidentally stepped upon.

Relief made her a tiny bit light-headed and a warm sensation filled her chest. Matt had been careful—not just with her, but also with her work. He seemed to understand that it wasn't just a hobby or pastime, as past boyfriends had. Their interest seemed to drop when she told them she wouldn't take nude pictures for them.

Cameras. Where were her cameras? She had the vaguest memory of seeing the camera bag in Matt's truck so they were either still in there or maybe Matt had brought them home with her. She went out into the main room of the cottage to check. The camera bag was sitting safely on one of the chairs.

He *had* brought them in for her.

A piece of paper sat on top of the bag with her name printed on it with strong, slanted strokes.

She picked up the paper and opened it to find Matt had left her several reminders in the same bold handwriting. One was that her car was still at the park. The other was that he would be by to pick her up for breakfast and would then take her to the park with him. He'd even said what a nice time he'd had with her at dinner and how smart and attractive she was.

By the time she finished reading the note, Lara was torn between laughing and being a bit weepy. The wonderful man claimed to have had a good time with a woman who had fallen asleep during dinner, and had needed to be delivered home and undressed like a child. But his words, and his phone call, seemed sincere.

And he thought she was both pretty and smart. A man who accepted her for what she was. At least for most of what she was. He still didn't know her big secret.

*He won't care, you know. He can accept all of you.*

The tingling sensation came and went almost instantly, the ghost apparently only interested in delivering its message as quickly as possible.

"Thanks." She said in a random direction since she had no idea where the ghost had spoken from.

She glanced at her watch to find she still had a few minutes left before Matt was due to arrive. She needed to make sure she was ready to really dive into her work today. After removing her wad of clothing from the handle of the camera bag, she opened the bag and started her equipment check. She quickly changed the batteries in all her cameras, including the digital SLR that would be her primary tool today. The batteries she removed went into the chargers she'd stationed on the small kitchen counter and the previously charged ones were moved to the bag as spares. Several spare memory cards were tucked inside the bag as well.

Thankfully, the keys to the B&B cottage had been sitting on top of the camera case, no doubt due to Matt as well. She needed them to lock the deadbolt as she left, so she laid them on top of the zipped up bag again. Matt's thoughtfulness had saved her from the normal process of trying to figure out where she'd last put that set of keys, but she still had to find the keys to her

rental car. She started with the outside pockets of the camera bag and was happy to discover them in the first pocket she searched. She moved them to one of the pockets of her cargo pants.

Money. She might need money. She certainly needed her driver's license. Just as she retrieved her wallet from the pair of pants she'd been wearing yesterday, a knock sounded at the cottage's front door.

Darting out of the bedroom and toward the front door, she couldn't wait to see Matt again. Only when her hand was already on the doorknob did she have a brief moment of trepidation. How would he behave today? Would he treat her differently? The man had seen her naked. And commented on her choice in underwear. Worse yet, he had seen the fact she was far from tidy.

She quelled her fears as best she could. It's not like he'd run or had said anything critical, after all. She opened the door to see Matt's tall body, more sexy than ever in his pressed and formal Park Ranger uniform.

His lips curved in a slow, hot smile. "Good morning, Lara."

He shocked her by opening his arms and pulling her immediately into them. Like an animal pouncing, he covered her open mouth with his own. His lips played over hers, gently teasing her skin with the texture of his own warm lips. Almost as quickly as the kiss started, it ended and Matt just held her close to him.

Lara sighed, surrendering to the sense of comfort and leaned her body into his. She was surprisingly content just resting in the circle of his arms. Wanting to be even closer, she wrapped her own arms around his slender waist and hugged him to her. The sense of peace and acceptance quickly changed to arousal when she felt what she did to the self-possessed man. His uniform pants didn't conform to his body as well as his jeans did and she could feel his cock grow thicker and harder against her.

A foreign sense of power rippled through her. Plain, weird Lara had one of the most attractive men she'd ever met hard and wanting sex with her. With *her*.

She rocked her hips gently, pressing herself against Matt. The combination of the ridge of his cock against her mound and the tug of her skimpy thong against her clit sent her arousal spiraling into a veritable storm.

Matt made an animalistic sound and reached around to ease her away from his body. His face was tormented and his features appeared somehow sharper, more feral. Even the teeth biting his lower lip seemed sharper.

The sensation she'd noticed the first time she met him, the hint of the spirit world, became stronger and more intense. She reveled in it and the heady power in having the sexy man at her mercy.

She finally allowed Matt to disengage her arms from his waist and move her an arm's length away from him. When her body lost contact with his, she felt a fundamental sense of loneliness, almost emptiness. She tried to remind herself that he wasn't necessary to her existence, no matter what her body seemed to think at that particular moment.

"We need to get breakfast now, if we want any." Matt smiled a tight smile down at her. She could swear his teeth were a little long, the tips of his canines just showing when he talked. Why hadn't she noticed that yesterday? It was odd but very sexy in an untamed way.

Food wasn't the top item on her list anymore but, remembering the only food available at the park was snack food from the vending machines, she knew Matt was right. Now that she was feeling more energetic, she didn't want to come near collapse again. "Can we stop at a grocery store too? I'd like buy some snacks to bring with me."

He nodded and seemed to relax a little.

Leaving the door open and Matt standing in the doorway, she turned to pick up her camera bag, the keys on top of it, and her jacket. A quick visual survey of the room didn't show anything obvious she was forgetting. Not that this was a guarantee, she reminded herself, but she certainly had the necessities for today's tasks.

She turned off all but one light in the main room and made sure she'd left one on in the bedroom. When she came home alone, she hated coming home to a dark house. And last night was the only time in recent memory that she hadn't come home alone.

Maybe tonight she wouldn't be coming home alone either. The thought of actually inviting Matt over and just how she might entertain him made her fancy thong instantly wet. The man could kiss beyond anything she'd even imagined—surely the rest of his skills would measure up. His cock certainly did.

Another bolt of lust tore through her at the thought of being able to touch and admire all of him. This might become a very long day.

She brushed past Matt at the door, turning to wait for him to shut the door so she could lock the deadbolt. The keys securely back in one of her pants' pockets, she tossed on the jacket, not bothering to fasten it. At his gesture, she walked down the path to the street ahead of him, slinging the camera bag over her shoulder with the ease of long practice.

"I got your note, Matt. Thank you for bringing me home and being a gentleman about it." She smiled as she just spoke to thin air, trusting he would hear.

She heard what sounded a little like a snarl before Matt answered. "Don't get the wrong idea. I didn't want to be a gentleman. I wanted a lot more, but I don't take advantage of unconscious women."

He really didn't want to accept the idea that he might be a nice guy. Most men would glory in it, deserved or not. How interesting.

Now even more sure that her lust for him was reciprocated, she allowed her hips a bit more freedom, a bit more of a feminine sway. Skills she'd never had opportunity to use before came to her as if she channeled the sexy spirit of a siren.

She almost giggled at the low growl she heard from the man behind her. "It's true. How many men would have taken care of me the way you did?"

"I have no idea how many would. I only know I wanted to." An almost surly response.

She waited by the truck's passenger door for Matt to open it and help her inside. As he carefully tucked the camera bag securely behind her seat, she leaned over until her face was next to his, separated by mere inches. "By the way, Matt, I'm really glad you liked my underwear. Wait until you see what I'm wearing today.

With that she gently pushed him out of the way and shut the truck door, trying not to laugh as he ran around to his side.

## Chapter Nine

Between the long run Coyote had taken, the multiple orgasms he'd given himself and his near arctic-cold shower this morning, he should be totally spent. Unable to get it up for anything. Then he endured the painfully arousing experience of watching Lara eat a hearty breakfast at one of his favorite diners.

Right. Maybe his body had become immune to anything resembling satiation.

That theory of being completely orgasmed out hadn't even stood up to giving her a good morning kiss.

*I wonder if blue balls can cause permanent damage? Mine are quickly moving from navy to indigo, so I sure hope the next step isn't them falling off...though they might not ache so much if they did.*

The mental image of himself being gelded like the horses he'd grown up around in Texas wasn't one he really wanted to consider. Coyote cringed right along with him.

Lara was now deliberately flirting with him. Licking her fingers slowly and sensually when jam from her toast got on them. Running her tongue along the rim of her tea mug before taking a sip. She even found ways to make the consumption of hash browns somehow enticing.

He knew he'd been celibate for a while, but he'd been content. It really hadn't bothered him. Was that why he suddenly wanted to throw Lara onto the table and start consuming her for breakfast? Maybe he'd spent too long alone and now his hormones overflowed into lustful insanity.

He might be able to understand wanting or needing sex, but why her specifically? He'd been propositioned by very lovely women on a regular basis at the park and didn't really have any interest in them. But he had no resistance to this one woman.

Coyote began to yip and pace in the background. He really didn't like Matt paying attention to or thinking about any other woman. Unfortunately Coyote didn't think in words and the only thing Matt could figure out was that Coyote was set on having Lara.

Ignoring Lara's seductive moves, he polished off the second half of the large omelet he'd ordered. This diner had some of the best country breakfasts around and in huge portions. The various meats packed into the omelet provided even more of the protein he craved. Just what a hungry shifter needed.

Focused on finishing his meal so they could stop at the grocery store down the street and make sure he'd still be at work on time, he was startled by the small, feminine hand that snuck a thick piece of bacon off his plate.

He tensed, ready to fight Coyote's instinctive reaction to anyone taking his food. No one ever stole Coyote's food without dire consequences. He waited. And waited. Finally, he felt for Coyote to try to get a sense of what was going on, still on his guard.

Coyote was pleased. Proud that Lara was eating his food. Happy to cede some of his meal to her. This wasn't normal at all.

He looked up to see Lara nibbling on the last half of the bacon strip with a teasing smile. The rest of her plate was already empty, so she must be waiting on him now.

“Ready to go? The store is down the street.”

At her nod, he grabbed the check sitting on the edge of the table before she could and quickly stood up out of his booth seat.

She devoured the last of the bacon in two quick bites and scooted down seat to the edge, dragging her jacket after her.

Once he was sure she didn't need help out of the booth, he paid for the meal in spite of Lara's protests. She thought she should pay because she'd be able to write it off but his mom hadn't raised him to let a woman he invited to a meal pay for any part of it. He'd be damned if he allowed it now but, in deference to her protests, he handed her his copy of the receipt. It would probably just be wadded up in her pocket but he didn't need it.

Once they were in the truck, she broached the subject yet again. “Can I take a turn paying, please? You're making me feel like a kept woman here.”

Her tone was studiously light but he could tell it really bothered her. He wasn't quite sure why he was so certain of her feelings, but he was. And it was genuine; it wasn't the show of false feminism some women put on that was really just a test to see how much a man cared. Or, worse, the ones who refused to let a man do anything for them as if the mere act of courtesy was an insult to their ability to operate a door.

Lara's feelings didn't have those nasty overtones.

“Okay, sorry. My mother raised me with some strict rules of how a gentleman behaves toward a lady.”

Watching her face carefully, he saw the muscles relax as she considered his words. She hadn't actually been angry; she really didn't seem to like confrontation and pushing him to understand had caused her some stress.

He was fascinated by her complexity. She really was a surprising mix of bravado and vulnerability, shyness and seduction. Almost like her masculine, overly large clothing covering sexy wisps of lace and satin.

He wondered what secrets she was still hiding to protect herself. What would she do when she found out about Coyote?

\* \* \* \*

The trip through the grocery store was an interesting introduction into Lara's shopping habits. She wasn't actually chaotic, just...disorganized. His own shopping trips were conducted in regimented marches up and down every aisle in order, sometimes with list in hand but usually with only a mental idea of what he needed.

In comparison to that, her whim-of-the-moment method made him almost dizzy. She flitted quickly from drinks, to snacks, to the deli, then back to snacks. By the time she was done, she had a basket brimming with everything from sports drinks to sandwiches, to potato chips, to trail mix.

He helped her unload the collection onto the cashier's turnstile, bemused at both the selection and the methodology. She had nearly enough food there to satiate him when he was really, really hungry. It was about twice or three times as much as any normal human would eat for lunch. Where in the world would she be able to put all this if she actually tried to eat it all?

"Thanks for the help." She looked up into his face and burst into laughter.

“Don’t worry, I always like to have some extra. Just in case.”

She patted his arm and turned to pay for the large bag of food, then walked back out to the truck. She was already accustomed to allowing Matt to open doors for her and waited by the passenger door. Once the door was open, she put the bag on the floorboard and tugged out her camera bag. Unzipping an expansion zipper on the top of her camera bag, she stuffed the newly revealed space with her snacks and re-zipped the compartment. The two bottles of sports drink she’d left out were then packed into the mesh side pockets of the bag and the plastic grocery bag was twisted up and tucked into the main compartment.

Now fully packed, she shoved the camera bag back behind the seat and hopped up onto the truck’s running board. As she pulled herself into the passenger compartment, he couldn’t resist reaching one hand up and caressing her round ass. No panty lines—she had to be wearing one of her sexy thongs again.

He winced even before his pants cut into his cock. This really was getting old. It also made it rather difficult for him to get into the truck.

Lara’s sultry smile told him she’d seen how slowly he’d walked around and how carefully he’d sat. She knew what effect she was having on him. And she loved it.

“Matt. How long will it take for us to get there? I’m not making you late, am I?” Her innocent question didn’t match her grin.

A look at the clock in the truck showed that he had twenty minutes before he had to be clocked in and it was only a ten minute drive.

“No problem. I’ll be on time.”

\* \* \* \*

Lara watched Matt until he disappeared into the Visitor Center to clock in. In a constant state of arousal since he'd shown up at her B&B, she hoped it would ease now that they were going to be separated for the day. She'd not thought to bring spare panties with her.

She'd almost soaked through her thong multiple times already today. Growing wet while imagining Matt's taste or while touching him was easy to understand, but a few times she felt herself almost dripping when she felt an increase in the sense of wildness, the nearness of the spirit world. It was almost like a part of him was reaching out to her, rubbing on her.

It took a great amount of effort to shake off her fixation on Matt, and remember that she had to get her pictures and information if she were going to finish this book. Today the crowds seemed quite a bit smaller and she might be able to get some pictures with fewer spectators in them. For her purposes, this was a good change.

She took out the digital SLR and began walking down the path toward the lighthouse itself, snapping pictures as she went. At the same time, she mentally reviewed the places she'd gotten good test shots from yesterday and tried to remember to take similar shots today on top of any impromptu pictures she might snap.

She quickly lost herself in the visualizations of the finished pages but a small part of her was tracking just how long it would be until lunch and she could see Matt again. Maybe even kiss him again.

## Chapter Ten

She bent backwards, a fist braced against her spine to try to stretch the stiffness from her muscles. Pulled from her picture-taking when her body got so tense and sore she could no longer ignore it, she glanced at her watch. Only ten minutes until she and Matt were supposed to meet at the tables near the vending machines. She'd better get moving.

At least her very successful morning had temporarily taken her mind off the gorgeous man and how long it would be until she could see him. The light, the weather and even the ghosts had cooperated. She had several tidbits of information she would be able to weave into the words of her book.

While walking, she snapped the lens cover over the lens of the SLR and stowed it safely back in her bag. She took the path out of the woods and saw Matt had beat her to the picnic tables and was staring into the vending machines, jingling a handful of coins as he seemed to ponder the selection. It was almost certainly the same exact selection as it had been yesterday and the week before, even, so she wasn't at all sure why he needed to ponder it.

The gravel of the area surrounding the tables crunched and rustled under her boots making Matt quickly turn to face her. Man, he'd be nearly impossible to sneak up on. The man must have the hearing of a bat.

The desire she'd thought was banked flared back into an inferno at the sight of him. Her nipples hardened into rigid, aching nubs that seemed to be abraded even by the soft lace of her bra. Every step made them throb.

Her pussy grew instantly wet and she could feel the small muscles of her vagina spasm as if begging for Matt's hard cock. She craved the thick, rigid erection she'd fondled through his pants.

Her body had turned into one huge erogenous zone.

Golden eyes half-hooded in a look that reminded her of a predator intent on eating her for lunch, Matt licked his lips and smiled a secretive little smile as she approached him. His eyes ran up and down her body, seeming to glow with yellow hot fire. Apparently he liked what he saw.

His approval gave an extra sway to her hips, an extra thrust to her chest that made her already substantial breasts even more prominent.

Her normal reserve deserted her when she got near enough to feel the tingle of her spirit awareness. The extra sensation of the awareness mixed with her already aflame desire made him completely irresistible. The last few steps were at a run before she threw herself at him, arms and legs wrapping around his neck and torso.

And he caught her easily. How incredible was that? No gasping complaints that she weighed too much or was too old to act like a child. He never even stumbled or swayed.

Instead, he wrapped one arm around her shoulder, one under her butt and held her unwaveringly against him. She barely had time to savor the hard ridge now rubbing against her pussy through both their layers of clothes before his head swooped down to capture her lips with his own.

The sensual friction of lips meeting and moving quickly turned to a mix of nibbling little love bites and licks. She gasped when Matt bit her lower lip with a

little too much enthusiasm and he took advantage of her parted lips to snake his long tongue into her mouth and explore the tender flesh inside her lips and cheeks. A hot, sensual exploration that left her desperate for more.

She needed him closer, inside her, part of her. Somehow he was already sharing a part of her soul, but she wanted him to share her body too. The rhythmic thrusting of his tongue made her hips echo its motion, circling and pulsing against the hard thickness of his cock.

A loud wolf-whistle pierced the air, instantly freezing her in mid-motion. She pulled her lips away from Matt's as clapping and laughter broke out from somewhere behind her, from the direction of the walking path.

The sound that would normally have sent her into a frantic, albeit angry, retreat only pissed her off. Who the hell was making fun of them? She wanted to scream at them, to slap them. They'd interrupted the slaking of her starved sexual appetites.

Whoa, where did the usual embarrassment and fear go?

Still clutched against Matt's chest, she rested her head on his shoulder and realized that she really didn't care who was watching or what they thought. She'd be damned if she'd run from Matt for the sake of some stranger's approval or lack thereof. Fuck them.

*No. Fuck me. Matt needs to fuck me.*

She lifted her head again and tried to capture Matt's lips but he dodged her, breathing heavily.

A small mewling sound escaped her as he turned and walked the few steps to one of the picnic tables and set her gently down on it. Then he pried her legs from around his body, running his hands up and down them as he did so, clearly reluctant to let go.

“We have to stop. I can get fired over this.” His voice wasn’t steady at all.

Horrified, she instantly released him. Oh my god, who had seen them? Who had whistled? Suddenly this was about far more than what anyone thought of her, it could have an enormous negative impact on Matt.

And it was her fault.

She’d thrown herself at him and initiated their kiss. “Oh no. I’m so sorry, Matt. I don’t want you to get into trouble.”

She pulled away from him and straightened her clothes. “Did you see who was whistling at us? Maybe I can talk to him and make sure he knows it was a private moment.”

She hopped off the table, feeling the heavy camera bag she’d managed to forget about bang into her hip. Turning in a slow circle, she only saw a few people at all and none of them even seemed to be looking toward her and Matt. “I can’t tell who it was.”

“You’re making me dizzy with the spinning.”

Matt’s voice was tight but with a hint of heat and amusement. Bringing her to a sudden stop with his arm encircling her waist, he hugged her to him briefly. He released her and gently spun her to face him again. “It’s okay. Let’s have lunch now. Did you eat all your snacks already?”

Distracted by Matt’s touch, it took a moment for her to remember she had lunch for both of them still packed into the waterproof compartment of her camera bag. “Oh, of course. You made me forget.”

Lara hurriedly yanked the strap of the bag over her head and discovered her braid was wrapped around it when her head was yanked painfully to the side. She yelped and her eyes watered almost instantly. Having her hair pulled had always been the worst sort of torture, despite how long she’d let it get.

Without being able to see the problem, she struggled to somehow tug the bag strap away from her hair but couldn't set the bag down. Twisting at the waist, she frantically tried to force a hand up behind her back, contorting her body more and more. Trapped. She was trapped and couldn't get away from the pain. Unreasonable panic was setting in, her fear of being unable to escape something that was causing pain coming to the front with a vengeance.

"Stop. Lara, stop thrashing. Hold still and I'll get it untangled." Matt's warm voice and firm hands magically broke through her panic and allowed her to hold still long enough for him to gently untangle her hair and take the camera bag from her to set it on the table.

Insistent hands turned her and pushed on her shoulders until she sat on the corner of one of the benches. Strong fingers rubbed her shoulders and stroked over her upper arms while she breathed deeply to calm herself.

"Your braid is a mess. Do you have a hairbrush with you?"

She pulled the camera bag toward her and found the small brush she always carried, then reached back to try to fix her braid. She hated having her hair a mess.

Matt plucked the brush from her hand. "I want to brush it for you. Will you let me?"

She nodded silently, almost without hesitation. No one else had brushed or even run their hands through her hair in years. In a strange way it was her shield, something she and only she controlled. But Matt was already so much a part of her that she trusted him to care for her.

Thinking was hard. Trying to make any sense of her feelings and her current situation was even harder. She needed to regain some semblance of calm and control. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath of the warm air scented

with the smells of the ocean and the scent she already associated with the large man behind her.

Without her sight, she could feel every tiny tug and movement of her hair as Matt released it from the braid. Over and over he stroked his long fingers from her scalp down through the length of her hair, stopping to carefully untangle any snags he encountered. After a few strokes uninterrupted by snarls, he began running the brush through the thick mass. Slowly and rhythmically, the strands of hair crackling with the static generated by the brush. Finally the brush clicked on the table as he set it down and she felt the familiar motions of braiding.

It was such a tender, nurturing action, she was almost in awe. It made her feel wonderful, cherished and cared for. A simple thing, yet so profound.

“Done. You have gorgeous hair and it’s a shame to have it all confined. I love it loose.”

Reluctantly, she opened her eyes again, taking a moment to readjust to the brightness of the daylight. She turned on the seat and looked up with a smile. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now we need to eat while we have time. Do you still have any of your snacks left?”

She almost laughed at the idea she could have eaten all that, even if she’d wanted to. “Of course. Almost everything I bought was for lunch and I don’t eat nearly as much as you do.”

Turning again, Lara tucked the hairbrush back into the pocket of the camera bag and zipped open the large waterproof compartment she’d tucked the food for lunch in. She emptied it out, setting the assortment of sandwiches and snacks on the table.

“Let me see what I want.”

Confused, she watched him head back to the vending machines. “Matt, don’t you want the picnic lunch I brought?”

Had she gotten things he didn’t like? She knew he wasn’t a vegetarian after having dinner with him. She couldn’t imagine him being too proud to take food she’d paid for—he was courteous and courtly, but not prejudiced. Not that she could tell, anyway.

“You brought lunch for both of us?” He spoke slowly, almost hesitantly.

Maybe he thought all this was only for her. For all his care and courtesy toward others, hadn’t anyone ever made those same small gestures of caring and concern toward him? Lara felt her temper flare at the thought of Matt being taken advantage of.

*Not everyone perceives him as you do. Nor does he treat others as he treats you.*

The whisper of a ghost’s voice ran over skin just beginning to shiver with awareness.

“Thank you.” Her whisper was only barely audible as Matt returned to the table.

Determined to enjoy the picnic she’d planned, no matter how unconventional it was, she set most of the sandwiches and a bag of chips in front of him after he sat down. She started to worry she would have to open the food to get him to eat but he finally picked up one of the roast beef sandwiches and unwrapped it, then took a large bite.

She began to eat the portion she’d saved for herself, not realizing how hungry she was until she smelled the food. The casual meal passed without much talking, both she and Matt contented themselves with eating and drinking, sharing quiet company and the beautiful weather for the few minutes they had out of their busy day. A low thrum of awareness and sexual attraction swam just below the companionable silence.

As soon as they had eaten, Lara gathered up the wrappers and containers, depositing them in the lidded garbage can nearby. Instead of sitting back across the table from Matt, she nudged him over so she could sit next to him on the very end of his bench, leaning against his side.

He tucked her under his arm and ran his hand up and down her side, causing her banked desire to flare back to full life. The heat ran through her veins, concentrating in her nipples and pussy and making them throb in a relentless rhythm. Oh man. She had to resist the urge to throw herself at him. This was not the time or place. She refused to get him in trouble with his bosses.

"I need to get back to work. Can I meet you after the park closes? Maybe we can have dinner again." He reached over and tilted her head up with his free hand.

"I'd love to have dinner with you."

She really didn't want dinner, she wanted him. But she thought she'd better not tell him that or she'd seem desperate. A small voice in the back of her head laughed at her. She was desperate, desperate for him.

"I won't be off until six p.m. tonight, but there's a beautiful walking trail you can take after the lighthouse closes, until I can clock out. It's called the Bayside Trail and it's a great place to see everything from historic buildings and wartime sites to the local wildlife. Just be careful to not come too close to any animals you see. It used to close at five but they've decided to keep it open until sunset again."

He bent his head down to hers, then he tenderly and gently kissed her. "I'll meet you at the parking lot a little after six, okay?"

"I'll be there."

Helping her up from the bench, Matt stood as well, hugged her and started to walk away. He stopped in mid-stride, turned and took a quick step

back to her. His golden eyes glinted as if they belonged to a predator that had sighted its favorite prey and he growled quietly. Snatching her up against him, he captured her lips again, but this time in a kiss that demanded, that took. No longer the gentle seduction, this was a full out possession.

As quickly as he'd grabbed her, he released her again and left in the direction of the Visitor Center at a trot. She watched him race off and was struck again by the smooth, almost silent movement of the large man. He moved like an animal—a dangerous, wild animal.

## Chapter Twelve

She was done for the day after these pictures. She probably had enough information now to allow her to sit down and start to lay out the pages she needed for the remainder of the book. This had been one of the easier and faster lighthouses to document because so much of the work had been done for her by the National Park Service. She'd only had to fill in the more personal and esoteric items.

Standing on the railed walkway surrounding the lighthouse's big Fresnel lens, she took a moment to stare out over the gorgeous, cloudless panorama. Such a tremendous view. The new lighthouse could be seen down below and the tall cliffs that the old lighthouse sat on appeared even taller from the added height of the lantern tower.

Back inside, she took an additional picture of the view looking down the narrow, tightly spiraled staircase, fascinated by the geometry and sense of movement. She felt the ghost before he spoke.

*I walked that staircase every day for eighteen years to tend the oil lamp. A beautiful site, a beautiful French lens, but all for naught.*

The spirit of a middle-aged man, dressed in the uniform of a Victorian lighthouse keeper paced back and forth on the small landing at the top of the

stairs. From the pictures she'd seen in the Visitor Center, she recognized him as Robert Israel, the last keeper of the lighthouse.

*At times only firing my shotgun was sufficient to warn the ships from the rocks. Even so close, the light could not penetrate the fog.*

Israel's ghost looked sad and troubled even as it faded away, merging into the walls of the old stone building.

"Thank you, Mister Israel." She sympathized with the former keeper. His time was over, but he was so invested in his job and duties that, even after death, he chose to remain near the lighthouse he'd served as keeper of for eighteen years. She'd yet to meet a keeper's ghost that was trapped at their lighthouse or the remains of it. They simply could not bear to be separated.

This last lighthouse fulfilled her promise and, as much as she'd loved learning more about the history of the lighthouses and the people associated with them, she wanted to try something new. Maybe some freelance work or articles. Something less draining and shorter than a book. Maybe something that didn't keep her on the road all the time so she could have a life for a change. What a concept.

She packed her camera away and descended the tightly winding staircase, replacing the barrier after her exit and nodding to the ranger that had let her in. There were still a few hours left until Matt was off work and she could use a nice walk. Maybe she'd be able to think about her wild attraction and uncharacteristic reactions to the handsome and compelling man without the immediate distraction of his presence.

The two-mile trail was as gorgeous as she'd hoped. Winding around through the native habitat, she saw all sorts of birds and quite a few squirrels, even a rabbit. In contrast, there were also signs of human habitation and of war—old pillboxes and defensive structures.

There weren't many other people walking along the trail and she took her time, strolling slowly and not taking any pictures. She needed time to think about what was going on and what she was feeling, without becoming distracted by scene composition or capturing something on film.

She was very attracted to Matt and it was clear he returned the interest. But, she felt more. So much more it scared her. She'd liked her prior sexual partners, of course, but Matt had an ability to get under her skin. She was afraid he'd permanently embed himself in her heart if she gave him the chance. Her thoughts were scattered and chaotic, nearly as much so as the seagulls she stopped to watch.

She knew the cold facts—she was no one's idea of a great catch. She had enough problems making and keeping casual friends. Every attempt at a long-term intimate relationship had ended, usually badly. None of her boyfriends had been able to cope with her cover story of being an eccentric artist who stopped to listen to her muse, so she never told them about the ghosts. What man would want to share his woman with invisible figures and voices? Or admit their girlfriend heard voices? Hello, psych ward.

Maybe she could enjoy Matt while she was here. A little no-strings sex and they would go their separate ways when her work here was done. Surely he'd go for that. Men liked no-strings sex and he was obviously interested. Why shouldn't they both have the milk for free?

A plan in mind, she turned to walk back up the trail only to see a medium-sized dog sitting by the side of the trail. She didn't see anyone around that the dog might belong to, though. Was it at least friendly? It looked non-threatening enough with its tongue lolling to the side of its mouth and staring at her with bright gold eyes.

Someone must have let their dog off-leash. Or maybe it had run away or gotten lost. A surge of sympathy ran through her at the idea the dog was lost and she approached it with her hand held out for it to sniff.

“Hi honey. What are you doing here? Did your humans lose track of you?” She spoke in a low sing-song voice. The dog was a little funny looking with a medium-length coat of mixed brown and tan fur and surprisingly large ears. Probably some sort of mutt—maybe part collie, based on its size.

When the dog whined a little and lowered its head, she moved a step closer. Slowly approaching, she was finally within reach and the dog sniffed her fingers before licking her hand with a warm, wet tongue. It accepted her.

She laughed in delight. Encouraged by the dog’s actions, she first checked for a collar but the dog wasn’t wearing one. There wasn’t even any sign it had worn one recently. She knelt next to the dog and ran her hands over it, petting and checking for any problems. Nothing seemed wrong but it seemed to enjoy the attention. Laying down, it let her continue to pet it.

“Are you a girl or a boy dog?” She couldn’t keep calling the dog “it”.

The dog stood up again and paced around her slowly enough that she could tell it was definitely a boy dog.

“Ahhh, you’re a boy.” She laughed at herself. As if the dog would understand her. She’d always loved animals—they didn’t judge her by what they expected her to be or how they thought she should behave. They understood loyalty and unconditional love.

He was about the size of a lab but with a bushy tail he didn’t hold erect. Flopping onto his rear in front of her, he hunkered down with his head close to her face.

She laughed again. He was cute and obviously intelligent. She moved off the trail onto the sand and sat down with the dog following her. Laying down

beside her, he pressed against her thigh and seemed happy to just keep her company.

She went over her plan again, second guessing her decisions. Maybe talking out loud would help. "What am I going to do? I really feel something special for Matt but I'm not sure that anything more than a fling is a good idea. He's so...normal."

The dog startled her with what sounded like a snort, making her laugh again. "You don't think so? Well, he is a lot more handsome than the average man and a whole lot more chivalrous, I'll give you that."

She idly continued to pet her mysterious canine companion as she stared out at the ocean. Rhythmically stroking the dog calmed her and seemed to please him. What a sweet dog. Though tame and obviously very social, he had the feel of the spirit world around him. It wasn't unheard of—many animals had greater ties to the Land of the Dead than most people did.

"I'm in trouble. Real trouble. I think I've already started to fall for him. It's going to really hurt to leave, but I can't bear the thought of seeing disgust and fear in his eyes when he finds out that I can see and hear ghosts. That they seek me out." She felt a huge lump in her chest at the thought.

The dog turned and rested his chin on her thigh. He licked her hand and his bright gold eyes captured hers. She had an eerie sense that he understood what she was saying, what she was feeling.

The animal's gift of total acceptance, nothing held back, no conditions, nearly made her cry. She threw her arms around the dog's neck and buried her face in his fur. His warm coat was thick and a little coarse, and he let her hug him without struggling to get free.

She must already be in love because even the dog reminded her of Matt. He smelled a little like Matt and even felt a little like him—wild and with untamed depths. Releasing the dog, she shook her head with a laugh.

She felt the presence of a ghost and looked up to see a woman standing before her, dressed in an elaborate wedding dress with long sleeves and a hoop skirt. Her veil was pushed back from her face and spider webs of fine lace covered her dress. Unlike most ghosts, this one looked straight at her. Her eyes were happy and an excited smile was on her face. Lara got the impression of a woman thrilled to marry her soul-mate. But why was she here?

The ghost walked a few steps closer, never disturbing the sand under her feet. She held out her left hand and Lara could see a ring of made of entwined strands of silver and gold with a single red stone on her finger.

The dog whined and nudged at her arm with his muzzle. Without taking her eyes off the ghost, Lara patted him. "It's okay, it's just a ghost that has something to tell me."

But this ghost acknowledged her. The only other time in her life that a ghost had done that had been extremely life-altering. The ghost of the lighthouse keeper had saved her from drowning and his price had been paid over the last five years of her life. She'd done her best to make sure his wish, that the lighthouses and the lives of their keepers would be documented and not forgotten, was carried out.

Would this be the same? She waited to see what the ghost would do or say, if anything.

*Love can do anything. Love can overcome anything. Two souls really do become one and love is everything. When you're ready, my ring will find you.*

The ghost smiled at her and turned, walking out into the surf toward where the faintest image of a huge sailing ship flickered, waiting for her.

“Thank you, lady.” Lara’s voice wobbled.

The behavior of the woman’s ghost worried her. Love? It was far too much of a coincidence that she spoke about love just when Lara was beginning to accept she’d fallen for Matt, ghosts or no ghosts. The spirits had never led her down the wrong path. Maybe she’d been given a hint that Matt could handle her secret and the uninvited guests that followed her.

The dog suddenly stood, licked her cheek and trotted off into the brush beside the trail. He seemed to know where he was going so she let him go.

She stood up and stretched, then checked her watch. Time to get back to the parking area so she could meet Matt. Re-adjusting the camera bag, she insured her braid wasn’t caught on anything then turned to walk back.

Just as she rounded the second uphill curve, she met a Park Ranger walking toward the beach. “Good afternoon, Miss. Are you enjoying the Park?” His warm brown eyes reflected the color of his uniform.

“Oh yes, it’s beautiful.”

Taking the inquiry as a standard question for any tourists, she eased to the side of the trail to allow them to pass each other on the narrow trail, only to have him stop her.

“I just saw a big coyote running near the trail. Did you see it earlier? Did it approach you at all?”

“No, but I did meet a really sweet and friendly dog on the beach that kept me company for a while.” There was no way her dog was a coyote and he certainly wasn’t wild.

“Hmm, a coyote looks a lot like a dog if you’re not familiar with them.” He pulled a worn guidebook from his back pocket and opened it to show her a picture. “This is what a coyote looks like, just in case. Be sure you don’t go near

any animal, just to be safe. And don't feed any of them. It can cause a whole host of problems."

She nodded in agreement. The instructions were common sense and no surprise. The dog she'd met looked like a coyote. Would a coyote have been so sociable and friendly? So tame? It didn't matter now since he was gone.

The ranger tipped his hat and continued down the trail past her.

Falling into an efficient hiking rhythm, she made her way quickly back up to the top of the trail. Each step brought her closer to Matt. Every yard made her heart lighter and her libido hotter. She couldn't wait to see him, to touch him, to taste him.

Faster and faster, her walk turned to a jog.

She couldn't wait to love him.

## Chapter Thirteen

Matt sat down on the bumper of his truck to wait for Lara to return from the trail. Appearing calm was second nature, but he wasn't calm at all. When he'd shifted into Coyote's form and followed her down the trail, he'd not expected to find out what he did.

Her big secret was she saw ghosts? That was nothing compared to his secrets. If she thought the ghosts were bad, he feared to see what her reaction to Coyote would be.

It did explain the twinge of the spirit world he felt whenever she went into one of her staring bouts. It also explained who she was thanking when she'd whisper so quietly.

Interesting that she didn't seem to have any control over the ghosts, almost as if a door had been left permanently open and any spirit that wanted to, could walk through. The other people he'd met who communicated with the spirit world were able to choose when and on what terms they visited. Lara either wasn't able to exercise that control or didn't choose to.

Happily, she'd not run from Coyote. True, she thought he was a dog. Not a misconception that sat very well with Coyote, though he let it stand when he realized it resulted in pets and caresses from the woman they were both fixated on. His human skin rippled at the memory of her hands burrowing into his fur,

rubbing his ears and stroking him. The smell of her skin through Coyote's sensitive nose imprinted her on him forever. No perfume, no artificial scents, just natural woman. His woman.

When Coyote licked her, he'd tasted something so perfect it was hard to believe. Salty, sweet, spicy. She tasted like woman, like lover—like mate.

The realization hit him like a ton of bricks. Mate. Oh fuck. Mate recognition was such a rare thing among his kind, he'd never thought to be so incredibly lucky. He'd been taught the signs by his parents when he'd reached puberty, as all children were taught when they began to shift.

His parents had not been mates but they were loving spouses and life partners. He'd always thought that was the best he could even hope for and even that was a long shot, especially for him.

Not only did he and Coyote share lives, spirits and bodies, but he carried a lot of additional baggage from his military service as well. Not just his own secrets, but those of others, too. Secrets he would carry to his grave.

It would take a special woman to understand him. His prior fiancé had been someone who shared his Apache heritage and whom he thought would be his wife and partner for the rest of his life. It turned out she was unable to accept that he had things he could not share with her. She was jealous every time he went out for a run, convinced he was cheating on her. Her lack of trust meant she really didn't understand him and he'd ended up breaking the engagement when he returned from Afghanistan. The move to California to follow Cody and his debt made it a clean break. Last he heard she was happily married to a local stone mason and expecting a baby.

He'd always wanted children but accepted her decision not to have any, willing to sacrifice that dream for her. Her child-free status didn't seem to have lasted for long after he'd left. She just hadn't wanted to have a child with him.

Lara had to be his mate. Only a mate would have been able to shred his prized self-control without effort. Only a mate would have both him and Coyote panting after her and ready to bite anyone who even looked at her with interest. Yet they wanted to take care of her, to keep her safe, to protect her from anything and everything that might hurt her.

Brushing her hair earlier had almost pushed him beyond his limits. Her trust in him to not hurt her and perform the intimate task amazed him. Then to find out she'd planned ahead to take care of him, to make sure he was fed, touched his heart.

Ines and his mother were the only women who had tried to take care of him before this. Accepting their attentions had always made him feel like a child. There was nothing childlike in the love and desire her felt for Lara, in his need to return the care.

He heard running footsteps and looked up in time to see Lara running towards him. He hopped up and braced himself, somehow knowing she would launch herself at him again. The sight of her made his cock instantly hard. He knew the lush body that she hid under her loose clothing and couldn't wait to see it again. See it, lick it, taste it.

He didn't just want her, he needed her. The Desert Song People mated for life and she was his mate, even though she didn't know it yet.

Lara flew through the air toward him, completely trusting him to catch her. Arms wrapped around his neck and legs around his waist as he yanked her to him. One hand under her ass to support her, his other hand grabbed the back of her head and held it so he could possess her mouth.

His lips devoured hers, hot and consuming. She tasted of spice and honey, an addictive taste he'd never get enough of. Her lips parted on a gasp and his tongue dove past her teeth to entwine with hers, flirting and dancing to a song of

love and lust. Parry and retreat, tease and coerce. The velvet feel of her tongue stroking against his made him long for more.

Lara tightened her legs around him and rubbed herself against his rock hard cock, whimpering into his mouth.

He felt like he could come any second, just from the friction through both their clothes. He pulled his mouth from Lara's, gasping for breath and praying for enough control to get somewhere more private. Ignoring her protests, he carried her to the passenger door of his truck, his hand caressing her rounded ass the whole way. Bracing her against the vehicle, he wrestled the door open with one hand, disengaged her legs from around him, then lifted her up onto the seat. He reluctantly released her and forced her to look at him.

"Lara. I want you. Badly. But I need you to be sure. I can take you to your rental car and try to stay away from you from now on. Or I can take you home with me. But if you choose that, we'll spend the night making love." His voice grew fierce. "You'll sleep with me, if we sleep at all."

He needed to make sure she understood what she was agreeing to. There could be no room for misinterpretation, no doubt about her choice. Watching her face for any hint of regret, of fear, of indecision, he saw none.

"I want you, Matt. I don't understand why my feelings are so strong, but I want to go home with you. I want to spend the night with you." Determination shone in her eyes.

He tucked her legs into the truck and pulled her head down for another kiss, just a quick one to last him until he got into the truck. He jogged around the truck and got into the driver's seat as quickly as possible, yanked his seatbelt on and started the truck.

He tried not to look at her as they pulled out, instead pushing the speed-dial button for Ines' restaurant. Luckily, Ines herself answered. "It's Matt. I need

my usual and a dinner for my date, Lara. To go. I'll be by in about twenty minutes."

Ines sounded highly amused but agreed to have the dinner ready. He was sure to hear about this later, probably at great length and with great amounts of laughter at his expense. She was entitled.

When he hung up the phone, he looked at Lara and she gave him a devilish little smile. Managing to extricate herself from the camera bag strap, she set it on the floor. Loosening her seatbelt, she scooted over just enough to be able to reach out and take his cell phone away and tuck it into the cup holder in the dash.

"You're so sweet to still remember dinner."

"We'll need food to keep our strength up, trust me."

Food wasn't his top priority. Instead he was focused on the various ways he wanted to devour his mate. He wanted to tie her to him, to create an unbreakable link between the two of them that would weather the storms to come, separations that may be necessary. Even something to sustain him for the rest of his life if she were unable to accept him as he was.

The silence during this drive was tense, filled with anticipation and the desire growing and building between them. He had to work to keep his attention on the road. In only a short while he could have his fill of his mate, or at least slake his lust for a little while. It seemed like it took forever to get to the restaurant but it was really only a little over twenty minutes by the clock. He'd managed to resist the urge to speed by reminding himself that it wasn't worth a possible injury to himself or his newfound mate to get there a few minutes earlier.

After he parked in the lot for the restaurant, he started to get out, only to see Ines bustle out the door with several bags in her hands. Instead of coming to

him, she went to Lara's side of the truck, opened the passenger door and handed the bags to his mate.

"Here's your dinner, I'll collect for it later." The last bag was transferred  
"Remember, two souls become one."

Her mysterious words didn't mean anything to him except maybe that Ines had, again, known something he'd only just realized. That Lara and he were destined for each other, meant to be mates.

He shrugged off the incident and headed for his small house, his sole goal to get his mate home and into his arms, into his bed.

\* \* \* \*

Lara puzzled over Ines' words. An echo of what the ghost of the bride told her, they seemed to encourage her to trust in love and believe in soul-mates. If she were to have a soul-mate, something she'd hoped for until she'd decided there would be no such thing in her life, Matt would be it. But would he disappoint her as so many other people had over the years?

If so, at least she'd have this time and the memories she'd always carry of it.

She glanced at the man beside her. He was determinedly focused on the road and not looking at her, his jaw clenched and hands so tight on the steering wheel she could clearly see the tendons in his fingers.

But his cock knew she was there. The magnificent hard-on she'd felt back at the park hadn't subsided at all, straining against his uniform pants. Unable to resist, she scooted a tiny bit closer and trailed her hand up and down his thigh.

The muscles in his leg tensed at her touch and she licked her lips, relishing the effect her touch had on him.

She ran her fingernails lightly along his inseam, nudging closer and closer to the ridge of his erection. He groaned and reached down, capturing her hand and moving it off his leg and onto to the seat of the truck.

“I can’t drive safely while you’re doing that and you know it. Behave until we get home, then you can have your way with me.” His voice tried to sound amused but she could hear the tension in it.

It still amazed her that she could have this much of an effect on anyone, especially Matt. But there was no mistaking the evidence.

“Okay, I’ll be good. The drive better not be long though, I might get too hungry to wait.” She looked at his crotch and licked her lips. His long groan told her that he’d understood her hint.

True to her word, she kept to her side of the truck’s cab for the remaining part of the trip, as difficult as it was to keep her hands off him. She had to entertain herself with images of just what he’d look like and what she wanted to do to him. To do with him.

Finally, they passed from the typical suburban scenery of densely packed houses that all looked alike to an area where the houses were much more spread apart with larger yards. The buildings varied widely between older ranch styles, a few that looked like the newer “open floor plan” styles, a lonely cape cod and a few in pueblo styles. Just off the main road she saw a small corner market and a café.

It had a delightful feel—like a tiny rural town had been dropped into the dense impersonality of big town Southern California. Distracted, she stared out the window, admiring the hominess of it all. This was the kind of place she’d love to live. Who knew it even existed here?

Matt turned off the main street and onto a smaller residential road. After a few blocks, he turned off the paved road and onto a gravel road.

There were still gravel roads around here?

“This is great! You live here? It’s like a different city entirely, almost like a different state.”

“Yep. I’m really not into urban crowding and it took me a long time to find the right area and the right house for me.”

When they turned off the road and up a gravel driveway, she craned her neck to try to see through the thick screen of pine trees and bushes. A lovely craftsman-style house was nestled in the midst of the trees, its brown and green paint scheme making it appear right at home in its surroundings. The fieldstone accents reminded her of the cliffs at Point Loma.

Matt pushed the button on a small remote and the carriage doors that hid a garage swung open to allow the truck to pull in.

Suddenly her stomach felt full of butterflies. Excitement and nervousness mingled with a touch of fear. This was almost too perfect, too close to her long discarded dreams of a happily ever after.

The truck door opened and Matt stood next to her, looking up with a devilish smile, perhaps tinged with a bit of his own nervousness. “We’re home. Let me give you a quick tour while I can still restrain myself enough to do so.”

She unbuckled her seatbelt and turned so he could lift her down. So nice to be cared for, helped without the fear of future guilt or expectations. There was no doubt in her mind that if she asked Matt to stop, he would do so. No matter how difficult or painful. It wasn’t in him to do otherwise.

Instead of just setting her on her feet, he pulled her body against his and slowly let her slide to the ground with a full body caress. Her arms wrapped

around his neck, as much to steady her now shaky legs as to stay in contact with him.

A kiss, she really wanted another of his devastating kisses. She lifted her face to his, but instead of kissing her, he unwrapped her arms from around him so he could pull away.

“We need to get us and the food inside. I refuse to let our first time be against my truck in the garage.” Matt’s chest was heaving now, the effort it took for restraint taking its toll.

He handed her the camera bag and grabbed the food they’d picked up. Shutting the vehicle’s door, he led the way to the door into the house. Unlocking it, he gestured for her to enter first.

Lara noted the new-looking front-loading washer and matching dryer in what seemed to be a combined laundry and mud room. Walking through it, she emerged through another door into a gorgeous kitchen. Granite counters and cherry cabinets, along with a sizable island, gave the room warmth that somehow worked in conjunction with the normally cold feeling of brushed stainless steel appliances. Matt opened the large refrigerator and stuffed the bags of food inside haphazardly, but there seemed to be little else in the way. At least that detail was typical of a bachelor.

As soon as he’d closed the refrigerator door, he pulled her by the hand through the doorway opposite the one they’d entered through and up a wide, wooden staircase and into what had to be the master bedroom. A huge mission-style bed with slatted headboard and footboard dominated the large room. It was neatly made with a quilt that echoed the geometric stained glass in the windows and lamps.

Matt spun her around, not giving her a chance to examine the room any further and held her face between his warm, long-fingered hands. He tilted it up to look straight into her eyes, suddenly solemn.

“I can’t give you the grand tour yet. I want you too much. If you don’t want this, please say so now. I’ll always stop, no matter what, if you tell me to but I’m dying for you now. I don’t want to start something you don’t want.” His golden eyes were almost the color of the midday sun and the heat in them set her blood to boil.

“I do want this, Matt. I want it so much that I think I’ll die if you don’t—”

His mouth devoured hers, cutting her off in mid-sentence, and the first touch of his lips erased all thought from her mind. He ran his hands down her back to her ass, cupping and kneading it as he pressed her pelvis against his hard cock. His tongue alternately invaded her mouth and retreated in a simulation of the joining to come, driving her more and more crazy with need.

She’d had enough of waiting. Foreplay was wonderful but she needed more and she needed it now. She tore her mouth away from his, dodging his attempts to recapture her lips.

“Clothes off. Now.” A whimper escaped her. “Please, now.”

Her words seemed to be the permission Matt was waiting for. He released her to tear at his own clothes. He only managed to partially unbutton his shirt before growing impatient and merely ripping the shirt the rest of the way off. Buttons clattered to the floor, unheeded.

Lara froze in the midst of tugging her own shirt off, mesmerized by the sight of his sculpted chest. The dusky skin was touched with only the lightest sprinkle of black hair around his dark, taut nipples and in an enticing trail down toward his cock.

He grinned at her. “Like what you see?”

“Oh yes, you’re gorgeous.” She could hardly speak through her suddenly dry mouth.

“You’re falling behind. Do you need help? I’m dying to see what underwear you chose for me.” His teasing words made her realize she had pulled her shirt halfway up and then stopped in mid-tug.

“If you finish getting naked, I’ll let you unwrap your present for yourself.” Not quite sure where this seductive siren side of herself came from, she was pleased to see Matt’s explosive reaction.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he tore at the laces of his boots until he could untie them and pull them off. Tossing them aside, he threw his socks after them. He leapt back to his feet and unbuckled his belt, unbuttoned his uniform pants and slid them and his underwear off together.

Stunned, she could do little beyond stare and hope she wasn’t drooling too badly. The trail of hair from his rippled abdomen trickled down until it made a short nest around his huge, thick, uncircumcised cock. So hard it stood straight up, it was roped with veins and its ruddy skin made her lick her lips in anticipation.

“Now can I have my present?” He stalked toward her, silent and fluid. A predator closing in on its prey. Except this prey didn’t want to escape.

Eagerly, she stood and waited for him to reach her, to touch her. She quivered with anticipation and desire, her panties now soaked with her own juices.

He knelt at her feet and untied her boots, urging her to lift one foot at a time so he could remove them and her socks. She kept her balance with her hands on his shoulders but couldn’t resist a brief exploration of his lush black hair, running her fingertips through the short strands and relishing the soft texture.

When her fingers strayed to oh-so-lightly trace the edges of his ears, he shuddered and let out a groan before pushing her hands back to her sides and standing. “No. I want to enjoy unwrapping you. No distractions. Hold still.”

His ears must be very sensitive. Lara made a mental note of that for future reference.

He moved behind her and she felt him undo her braid and run his fingers through the thick rope, unraveling it until her hair draped against her back like a curtain.

An almost feral growl was all the warning she got before he nuzzled the back of her neck through her hair, then held it aside and nipped the sensitive skin with unusually sharp teeth.

The sharp sensation sent lightning bolts straight to her pussy, her clit throbbing in time to each rapid beat of her heart.

He released her hair and grabbed the hem of her shirt, sweeping it off over her head in one motion. His breath caught and his hands reached around to caress her breasts through the chocolate and cream bra. “I love my present. It’s beautiful. You’re beautiful.”

His big hands cupped her substantial breasts as if testing their weight. “Perfect. Just perfect.”

Strong fingers firmly teased her already aching nipples to even harder peaks, somehow knowing the exact amount of pressure to walk that fine line between pleasure and pain. Pinching, then soothing, pulling and rolling them until she felt like she would go crazy.

So much sensation. He seemed in no hurry to move on. Soon the attention he lavished on her breasts had her writhing in need, unable to hold still. Hips thrusting, thighs rubbing, she unclenched her hands and reached down to satisfy

her need for just that little bit more stimulation. One touch to her clit and she'd go off like a rocket.

Before she could give herself release, Matt grabbed both her hands and pulled them behind her back, then held them there. "Oh no, that's my present and I'm very possessive of my presents."

She heard the sound of frantic mewling and realized it was her. She'd never been so aroused before and Matt didn't seem inclined to give her the orgasm she needed. Not just yet, at least.

He used one hand to unbutton and unzip her cargo pants, pushing them down off one hip and then the other until they fell to the ground at her feet, leaving her dressed in just her bra and thong.

An intense snarl made her nerve endings tingle, then Matt released her hands and pulled her back against his naked body. His skin so hot she felt it might burn her, she felt the long length of his cock between her ass cheeks, soft and silken even as it was impossibly hard. Unable to remain still, she rubbed her ass against him in a blatant plea for him to fuck her. To take her.

"You're mine, Lara. Mine." His possessive whisper filled a space in her she didn't realize was empty. She liked his possessiveness. At least for now she belonged to someone, with someone.

"Yes, I'm yours. Now take me, dammit."

A dark chuckle and he gently pushed her forward a few steps until she stood next to the large bed. A long-time fantasy begged to be acted on and she bent over at the waist, resting her hands on the mattress and tilting her pelvis to better enable Matt to fuck her.

Another bolt of lust ran through her when he yanked her thong down to her ankles with a single violent motion.

Instead of the cock she craved, she felt a warm breath just before a hot, wet tongue licked her from clit to anus in a single, slow motion.

“You taste so good, Lara. Sweet, hot, spicy.”

Another long lick. “Perfect.”

His long tongue pushed inside her pussy, circling the sensitive rim of her vagina before thrusting inside and retreating. Then he suckled her clit into his mouth, flicking it tenderly, releasing it before she could come. He tortured her with his mouth, never quite giving her enough of any one sensation to push her into orgasm but instead keeping her poised on the knife edge.

Nearly incoherent, she begged. “Please, please Matt.”

“Please what?” His voice was muffled but amused.

“Please...come...let me come...” Whimpering, she could no longer support her upper body and dropped to her elbows, further presenting her ass and pussy to Matt.

She heard a drawer open, then the crinkle of a condom wrapper as Matt sheathed himself. His thick cock pushed against her, slowly thrusting and retreating, then thrusting a bit further. She was so wet that though his size stretched her neglected pussy, it didn't hurt.

Now, she wanted him now. All of him. She tried to push back against him to encourage him to give her his whole cock right now, but he only swatted her ass, the sting adding a dark note to her already approaching orgasm. “No, it's my present, so I get to play with it as long as I want to.”

He held her hips still and continued his gradual invasion until finally he was embedded fully in her pussy. So deep. She'd never had a cock this big inside her. It felt like he could touch parts of her that no one had ever touched before.

He started to thrust slowly, deeply. She wanted him wild and out of control. She wanted him to piston into her in irresistible need.

“Fuck me, Matt. Hard. I need it hard.”

He stopped for a moment, shuddered, then seemed to finally lose control and began pounding into her faster and faster, harder and harder. She braced herself on the bed and pushed back with every thrust. The hot sex became a wild, untamed mating.

Just as her orgasm came within reach, Matt draped himself over her back and pinched her nipples, rolling them between his fingers mercilessly. The added sensation drove her over the precipice into the strongest orgasm of her life, screaming Matt’s name as she came.

Matt continued to drive his cock in and out, pounding through the clenching of her orgasm until he gave a final thrust, shouting as he came and pulsed within her. Chest heaving with the exertion, he collapsed over her, careful to support his weight on his arms.

Just as she thought her legs would give out entirely, he pulled his cock free. The exquisite sensation made her gasp but she felt empty the moment he withdrew. She immediately ached to have his cock inside her again.

Eyes closed and exhausted, she heard the sounds of him dealing with the condom. He lifted her upper body off the bed just long enough to pull the covers back and slip her onto the smooth sheets. He took a moment to rebraid her long hair and pull off her bra, then his warm body climbed in behind her. A strong arm pulled her back against him before he covered them both with the sheet.

Just as she drifted off to sleep, she thought she heard a whisper. “My mate.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Matt woke with a feeling of contentment so profound he couldn't remember a time when he felt more whole, more at peace. Relaxed, without having to run for a good part of the night to get that way. Coyote wasn't struggling to get out, despite the lack of a run, he seemed happy to be with Lara, with the scent of her permeating his bed.

He opened his eyes to see his mate still asleep next to him. Relishing this chance to look her over to his heart's content before she woke, he stared at her. It would make her nervous if she knew he was doing it. He turned on his side and propped himself up on one elbow, the full moon visible through the large windows gave him just enough light to clearly see her with his sensitive eyes.

Her beautiful chestnut hair was still in the loose braid he'd put it in before they both went to sleep. With as much as she'd freaked out when her hair tangled up with her bag strap, he thought it would be safer to confine it for the night. He didn't want to hurt her by laying on it, much as he'd love to feel it wrapped around him as he slept.

A light sprinkling of cinnamon freckles dusted over her nose, her pale skin making them all the more visible. He ran his thumb down her cheek, amazed at the contrast between their two skin tones. Her lips were so soft, such a beautiful shade of dusty rose, an almost perfect match for her nipples.

His already partially erect cock grew fully hard the instant he thought about her breasts. Carefully, he teased the sheet down her chest until he'd exposed her to the waist. The cool air in the bedroom made her nipples tighten into erect points, impossible to resist. He looked until he could no longer hold back and bent his head to taste one of the rose-colored peaks.

Lara shifted slightly in her sleep and sighed. "Matt."

Satisfaction filled him, followed by tenderness. His mate knew it was him, even in her sleep.

Lapping and tonguing her nipple, his cock grew harder with his need to be inside her. To be one with his mate again. A stark contrast to the wild joining of a few hours ago, he wanted this time to be a slow, tender lovemaking. He wanted to show her how much in love he was, even if he couldn't say it yet.

Love. The moment he thought the word, he knew how right it was. That she was his mate undoubtedly came into play, but love was the only word that fit. He'd never really been in love before but he had no doubt and he relished the feeling.

He pulled the sheet the rest of the way off both himself and Lara, then grabbed a condom and slowly spread her thighs to move between them. Her pussy was waxed with just a small patch of curly chestnut hair at the top. That little touch was enticing, drawing his eye. She moaned and spread her legs further apart, exposing more of the tender pink lips of her pussy to his gaze.

Mouth watering, he needed to taste her spicy-sweet flavor again. He eased quietly, slowly down until he could ease his tongue between the lips of her pussy and gently stroke her clit. He paused and did it again. Then again. Lost in her scent and taste, he didn't notice she'd woken up until she grabbed his hair and moaned his name.

"Matt. Oh god, Matt. That feels so good."

The rhythmic bucking of her hips taught him the speed she wanted. She gasped when he inserted a finger gently into her hot, wet vagina and found the textured spot that would drive her crazy. He rubbed his finger firmly over it in circles, his tongue continued to alternate between stroking her engorged clit and trailing around her vagina and perineum.

It wasn't long until he felt the grip of her pussy tighten on his finger as she began to come. She screamed out his name and bucked wildly. He slowed down but didn't stop until her body stopped pulsing around his finger, the last bit of pleasure wrung from her.

He pulled away from her grasping hands just long enough to slip the condom on and then knelt back over her. Holding his cock in his hand, he circled the sheathed head around the entrance to her vagina, teasing her.

"Matt, please. Please fuck me again." Breathless, she begged him.

"No, this isn't fucking any more. This is making love."

He rocked his hips, gently and gradually, entering her in a tantalizing cycle of advance and retreat until he was fully seated inside her, all the while kissing and nuzzling her face and neck. His gentle, soft caresses a loving counterpoint to his hard cock. They were as close to being in a single body as possible. He stopped to relish the intimacy for a second before he began to move in earnest.

Alternating long, slow strokes with short, quick thrusts, he had to fight off his own orgasm. He needed Lara to come again before he did and she had to know who was making love to her.

"Look at me, Lara. Open your eyes and look at me."

Gorgeous hazel eyes looked into his own, wide and filled with an emotion he was afraid to name.

“Play with your nipples. I want to see you touch those delicious breasts.”

To his delight, she obeyed him and cupped her breasts in both hands, pushing them together and then sliding her hands to the tips until she teased her nipples. She pinched them between her fingers then ran her nails across their puckered tips. All the time her eyes were locked on his.

A devilish smile was all the warning he got before she lifted her breasts and bent her head so she could snake her tongue out and lick her own nipples.

The erotic sight turned the fire in his groin into an inferno. Desperate to make sure she came before he did, he eased a hand between their bodies and found her clit. Caressing it in ever quickening circles, he thrust faster and faster, unable to make himself slow down. Just as he felt his balls tighten and his orgasm explode up his spine, he heard Lara scream his name as she came at the same time.

Afraid of crushing her, he rolled onto his back and took her with him, his cock still deep within her. Needing to touch her, caress her, he ran his hands up and down her spine as their breathing slowed back to normal.

Unable to put off the necessity of dealing with the condom any longer, he gently pulled his cock from Lara, rolled her off and soothed her sleepy protests with kisses until she settled on her side. After a quick trip to the bathroom, he crept back into bed and curled around his mate again.

Coyote sighed in approval and drifted off to sleep as well. For now, all was surprisingly right with the world.

\* \* \* \*

Lara woke gradually, warm and incredibly secure in the arms of the man she realized she'd fallen in love with almost at first sight. She savored the warmth and cozy peace of being held and snuggled. How many years had it been since she had actually slept the night with a man? She'd never spent the night with a man she loved before.

She realized Matt was awake when he trailed light kisses along her shoulders, nipping at her neck and soothing the small bites with tender licks. "Time to get up, sleepy head. I have to work today and we both need a shower. Plus we need to figure out how to set you up for whatever you need to get done today."

He nibbled on her ear lobe. "I can tell you're awake, you're breathing differently and your nipples are hard."

No longer able to contain herself, she laughed. "Okay, I'm awake."

She pulled away from his hard body and sat up, facing him. Completely naked, she felt a little awkward and pulled the sheet up to cover at least her legs and lap. She tried to smooth her hair to find it loosely braided, only then remembering that Matt had re-braided it after the first time they made love. A warm glow ran through her—how many men would even think to do that?

Seeming completely unconcerned with his nudity or his morning erection, Matt lounged on his back on the bed. He reached a hand out and caressed her hip, sneaking under the sheet. He made no demands with it, just seemed to want to touch her.

"What time do you have to be at work?" She really didn't want to leave, despite the fact she knew she had a deadline in four days and had no clean clothes here. She didn't even have a toothbrush.

"Nine again. It's only six right now, though. What do you need to do today?" His hand continued to stroke her leg.

“I took most of the pictures I need yesterday. Today I need to do some layout work and actual writing.” So close to being done, she’d have once wanted to celebrate, but now she tried not to think about it too much. It meant the end of her visit here.

“Okay, how about we both shower, then I’ll take you back to the park and you can retrieve your car. This evening I’ll meet you at the B&B for dinner.” His eyes narrowed for a moment. “And we’ll really eat our dinner this time. I don’t suppose you’d care for Mexican food for breakfast?”

This time both she and Matt started laughing and couldn’t stop. They had become so wrapped up in each other and in the fantastic sex, they’d completely neglected to eat the dinner he’d made a special stop to get. No wonder she was starving.

“How about if I take it back to the B&B with me and we can reheat it for dinner tonight? I think I’d like coffee and some pancakes for breakfast today. Maybe a slice or two of your bacon.” She teased him with a smile.

“Deal.” Matt hopped out of the bed and tugged her over for another kiss. “Let’s shower and get moving.”

\* \* \* \*

Matt finally dropped her off by her car only a few minutes before nine. It took her a lot longer than normal to get ready to leave. Each task was interrupted by caresses and kisses. She’d really not wanted to leave, so she didn’t try to evade Matt and even instigated a few encounters of her own. It was a good thing they’d managed to stop short of making love again or they would have been considerably later than they were.

The keys to her rental were in the second pocket of her pants that she checked and she loaded the bags of food into the trunk of the car. Thankfully, the morning was cool enough that the food would be fine for a little while. At least long enough for her to take another walk and try to make a few decisions. Big decisions.

Walking along the Bayside trail again, she tried to make sense of the jumble of emotions and desires. Somehow she'd managed to fall for Matt in just a few days. Never a believer in falling in love instantly, she'd have to change her tune now. It's hard to disbelieve when it happened to you.

She would be free after this book was turned in, no longer tied to a hideous travel schedule or a goal that ate up years of her life. She had a good amount of money set aside and would get another portion of her advance on acceptance of this book. She'd meant to go home and rest, maybe try to live a normal life for a while.

At the bottom of the trail, she sat down in the sand to try to think. Eyes closed, she tried to picture her home but all she could come up with was the image of a sterile apartment, an office full of pictures and files and a few dead houseplants. While it might be the place she returned to between trips, it wasn't a home.

She had no real home. Her parents were traveling the country in their retirement RV and she occasionally got a postcard from them, but they seemed relieved when she'd moved out of their house in the first place. She certainly had no home with them.

A cold, wet nose pushed against her elbow, startling her out of her melancholy realization. It was her companion from the prior day, apparently ready to keep her company again. She examined him carefully, comparing him to the photo the ranger had shown her. He had to be a coyote.

But so what? She knew deep down that he wasn't out to hurt her. He wasn't even trying to get food from her. Her innate love of animals and their acceptance of her made her not care what breed he was. The coyote just seemed to want to help her feel better and talking to him seemed to help her.

"Hi, boy. You know, a ranger finked on you and told me you aren't a dog, you're a coyote. And I'm not supposed to fraternize with you."

The coyote whined and set his head in her lap.

The expression was so blatantly pitiful that she had to laugh. "It's a good thing I'm not afraid of you. I try to make up my own mind about people and animals. And I like you."

She started petting the coyote, rubbing his big ears and digging her fingers into his dense fur.

"You know, I've spent five years fulfilling the promise I made to a ghost when I was a teenager and I'm almost done. But what then? I think I've fallen in love with a man here but I'm scared. Scared that he won't be able to accept and love me."

His golden eyes looked up at her when she stopped petting.

"Sorry." She went back to rubbing and thinking out loud.

"I could be safe and just leave. Cut my losses and not risk being hurt by giving up in advance. But I don't want to give up and I really don't want to lose what I think I've found with Matt. So I think I really have only one viable option—I have to tell him about the ghosts and take a chance that he can deal with it."

She sighed heavily. "I'll have to do it within the next couple of days. Maybe tonight, if I can manage it. Then there are a few days left for him to digest the reality before I actually leave."

The coyote sat up and nudged her cheek with his nose before giving her a huge lick along one side of her face.

“Ewwwww.” She complained at the same time she was laughing and wiping the canine saliva off her face. “I’m glad you approve of my plan.”

Suddenly the coyote’s head whipped around and he took off into the brush. A few seconds later Lara heard the crunch of shoes on gravel. She stood up, ready to return to the B&B now that her mind was made up and she had a plan to put into action.

A polite nod at the older man on the trail and she headed back to her car. There was a lot of work to do today to get the book finalized.

Then she could take the risk of her life.

## Chapter Fifteen

Matt had to take more than one deep breath before he could manage to get out of his truck in front of Lara's B&B. He was afraid, something he wasn't used to feeling, but he also wasn't used to having this much to lose.

She loved him as a man. She'd told Coyote so and he'd wanted to weep in joy at her admission. What about Coyote? What about the reality that he was of the Desert Song People, a coyote and a man in one body but who could wear either form? Could she love that?

He'd never told his ex-fiancé. Never trusted her enough to share that secret with her. Now he had to tell Lara if he was going to convince her to marry him, to love him for the rest of their lives. He already belonged to her, was mated to her. They were meant to be together—there would be no one else for him now.

He'd just raised his hand to knock on the door of her cottage when the door swung open and Lara bounced out and threw her arms around him. She pulled his head down for a long, slow kiss.

Embracing her, he pulled her firmly against him and returned her kiss, trying to convey all his love and passion in that act. He ran his hands up and down her back and gently while rubbing his hard cock against her. Damn, he couldn't get near this woman without getting a hard-on. Hell, he couldn't even think of her without getting a hard-on.

She pulled him into the cottage and he saw the coffee table now had a sealed box on it and there were only a few scraps of paper loose on the surface. "Where's the manuscript you were working on?"

"It's done. I managed to finish a few days early and it's ready to mail to my editor tomorrow."

She almost vibrated as she told him the news, clearly thrilled to be done.

"Congratulations, honey. That's great. I'm sure your editor will love it, too."

He was right; he had to tell her today. She might still change her mind and decide to leave now that her book was done, despite the plan she'd developed earlier. He gave her a huge hug of congratulations, chuckling as she continued to wiggle excitedly.

Her news did provide a great excuse, though. He'd already called Cody and arranged for his friend to provide a safe place at Del Fantasma for him to tell Lara his secret. Cody would be able to help her if she ran from him or became hysterical. He didn't think his mate was the type to completely freak out, but he didn't want her to be at risk if she did. He needed her to be safe, above all else.

"I wanted to ask you out for a drink tonight anyway and Cody wanted to check in with you. How about we celebrate with a visit to Del Fantasma for an hour or two, then we can come back and have our leftovers?"

She looked a little hesitant but she nodded. "Okay. We probably should talk anyway. Now that I've finished the book, I have some decisions to make and want to talk to you about them."

His stomach felt as if it tied itself into knots. He didn't want to lose her for anything, ever. Was she reconsidering?

Lara got her coat and wallet. For once she left her camera bag behind, though he noticed she tucked it under one of the living room chairs where it was almost completely out of sight. After locking the deadbolt, they climbed into Matt's truck and headed toward the bar.

The drive was silent, uncomfortably silent for them. Lara seemed worried and very on edge. He was only a step away from throwing himself at her feet and begging. Too many questions were waiting for answers, too many secrets were at stake and their future seemed cloudy and unformed.

They finally arrived at the bar. Since it was still an hour before it opened, no patrons were there. He helped Lara from the truck with only a brief kiss then led her around to the employee entrance off the kitchen. "Cody and I have been friends a long time. He said it would be okay to come early so he'd have time to talk."

The wary look from Lara worried him for a moment, but she entered the kitchen ahead of him. Cody was already there, waiting for them while his kitchen staff worked furiously to prepare for the evening to come.

"Hello, Lara. I'm glad Matt convinced you to come." Cody's innate vampire powers made his voice extremely soothing and persuasive. It made Matt want to growl, even though he knew his buddy wasn't intentionally using them on his mate.

Cody shot him a warning glance, obviously picking up on his jealousy. "Come back to my office, you can have some privacy there."

He led the way down the employee hallway and into his office, opposite the storeroom. Matt watched the lovely flex and sway of his mate's ass as he followed her. Arrgh. Now was not the time for a painful hard-on. He tried to look anywhere else instead.

“How is your book coming, Lara? Has Matt been able to help you?” Cody played innocent disturbingly well.

Lara’s face lit up with a return of her prior excitement. “It’s done. Completed and ready to go to the editor for acceptance. I’ll still have to make some changes after the editors get a chance to work on it, but the bulk of the work is done.”

“Congratulations.” Cody sounded genuinely pleased for her.

Cody motioned toward the four leather chairs clustered around a round table that already had two dark drinks set out on it, their glasses beaded with condensation. “I know you usually just have tea, Lara, but Matt said you needed to have a talk and I’ve made you a different kind of tea—Texas Tea. It’s my special choice to be drink of the day today. Just be careful, they’re potent.”

Cody looked at him and nodded almost imperceptibly. “I’ll be getting ready to open. Call me if you need me.”

His friend left and closed the door quietly behind him.

Lara sighed and sat back in the chair. “I should be angry with you. This is obviously some sort of set-up you and Cody cooked up together.”

Her face looked pinched and she twisted her hands together nervously. As if realizing she was fidgeting, she picked up the drink in front of her and took a large swallow.

He winced at the coughing fit that followed. “It’s only called tea, honey. It’s really a mix of about five hard liquors. I don’t think there’s any real tea in it.”

Her face flushed from the coughing, she choked out a few words. “Who in the world would drink this? Yikes.”

All too soon she'd stopped coughing and he had to face his demons and start the conversation. "Lara. I know that you can see and hear ghosts. I know they speak to you and some of your book information is from them."

She stared at him in shock. "How did you find out? Who told you?"

How to break it to her that he wasn't the normal average man she thought he was? He hesitated, trying to think of some way, any way, to tell her the truth that might not make her doubt his sanity.

"You're dumping me, aren't you? You're just afraid to tell me. Is that right?" She looked and sounded as if she was about to cry. "Why don't you just tell me the truth? You wouldn't be the first person to think I'm too weird to be around."

She collected herself a bit and threw her shoulders back, prepared to bluff her way through the pain he knew she must be feeling. She was already hurting and preparing herself for worse.

He winced as she took another drink of the Texas Tea. This time she didn't actually cough or choke, though. "I'm not dumping you, Lara. I'm in love with you. You may not want me when you learn my secret, though."

She stared at him, mouth frozen open in disbelief. "You love me? You know I'm a weirdo that hears dead people and you still love me?"

He nodded, trying to tame his anxiety a little. "Yes. You need to see my secret, though."

He couldn't think of any words she might believe, so he'd decided the only way to make sure she understood and believed the truth of the Desert Song People was to demonstrate for her. To shift for her. He stood and quickly stripped off his clothes, not bothering with finesse, only concerned with speed. He needed to get this done before she had a chance to run.

She watched and waited, sitting tensely on the edge of her seat.

He reached deep within him and called Coyote to take his form.

\* \* \* \*

Matt's gorgeous, naked body appeared to shimmer and waver, then a large coyote was standing in place of the human man. A coyote with the same golden eyes as Matt. It was her coyote, her beach companion to whom she had spilled out her secret and her thoughts.

The relief hit her first. He'd told her he loved her and had freely shown her what had to be one of his most closely kept secrets. He really wasn't dumping her. And he didn't just see and hear ghosts, he changed into a completely different creature. A creature of night and desert. How fascinating. But she'd worried about telling him her secret for days, for no reason. He'd known the whole time.

"Change back. Now." She snarled at Matt's coyote self. She needed him back in human form so she could chew him out. He deserved it and was going to get an earful. She was so mad she couldn't hold still and needed to do something.

The air around the coyote shimmered and Matt's human form replaced it. He looked at her with an expression that clearly spoke of his fear that she would now reject him.

She walked up to him and glared up into his face. "Let's get something straight here, Texas. If you ever spring something like that on me again, you're going to be sleeping alone on the couch for weeks. I was terrified that you would think I was weird, but it turns out that I didn't need to fear that, did I?"

She poked a finger into his chest as she spoke, punctuating every few words with a hard stab. Her voice grew louder with each word as well.

Matt smiled a huge, relieved smile. He wrapped a hand around hers, stopping the painful poking and lifted her hand to his mouth to nibble on the pads of her fingers. "I'll do my damndest to never do that to you again, but I can only speak for my own secrets, not those I keep for others."

"Okay. But you are in so much trouble if it happens ever again."

Unable to resist touching him any longer, she hugged him, ran her hands over his arms and around his waist. Still angry, she lashed out and bit the heavy muscle on the top of his shoulder, hard.

His large body shuddered and tensed. "Honey, that's not punishment, that's foreplay."

His mouth captured hers and he devoured her lips, licking and nibbling as he used his hands to strip off her shirt and tried to pull down her pants and underwear. He panted heavily and his eager, thick cock stood at attention. He wanted her as much as she wanted him.

She wrapped her hand around his erection, stroking gently from root to tip over and over. How far could she push him before he lost it? Her body was already dripping for him, anticipating his possession of her.

He finally got her pants down and flipped her around so she faced away from him, bending her over the arm of one of the leather chairs. She braced herself as best she could, dying to feel his hot cock in her again. He tested her pussy with his fingers, growling in apparent approval to find her already wet. A rustle, then the blunt head of his thick cock replaced his fingers and drove into her in a single, strong motion.

"Yes. More. Faster." She was dizzy with lust and the strength of the orgasm she already felt, just out of her reach.

Faster and harder, Matt pounded into her. Finally he bent over her and took the skin at the back of her neck between his teeth. He held her there, thrusting over and over into her until she came with an unintelligible scream that wasn't muffled much by biting her own arm. A few more thrusts and she felt him pulse strongly with his own orgasm.

"Mate. You're my mate."

He panted heavily, but took care to not rest all his weight on her. Finally he withdrew from her body, both of them moaning at the pleasure. She turned and collapsed into one of the chairs, too exhausted to get dressed yet.

Matt removed the condom, wrapped it in some tissues from the desk and disposed of it in a nearby trashcan. He turned and grabbed his pants, fishing in a pocket to remove a small velvet box. He crawled to kneel in front of her, opened the box and pulled a ring out of it. "Lara, I love you and you're already my mate, but will you marry me? Be my wife and love me forever?"

Her heart felt as if it would burst. Joy rolled over her along with a sense of coming home, of belonging. "Yes. I love you, too."

Matt placed the unusual ring on her hand. "When I saw this ring at an estate jewelry shop, I just knew you needed it. It was meant for you."

She looked at the ring and realized she'd seen it before. It was two colors of snakes wrapped around a beautiful red stone. It was the ghost bride's ring.

The End

## Del Fantasma: Texas Tea

We hope you enjoyed this debut story in the Del Fantasma series. Visit [www.AspenMountainPress.com](http://www.AspenMountainPress.com) and sign up for our newsletter so you can be informed of when the next Del Fantasma story is due.

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