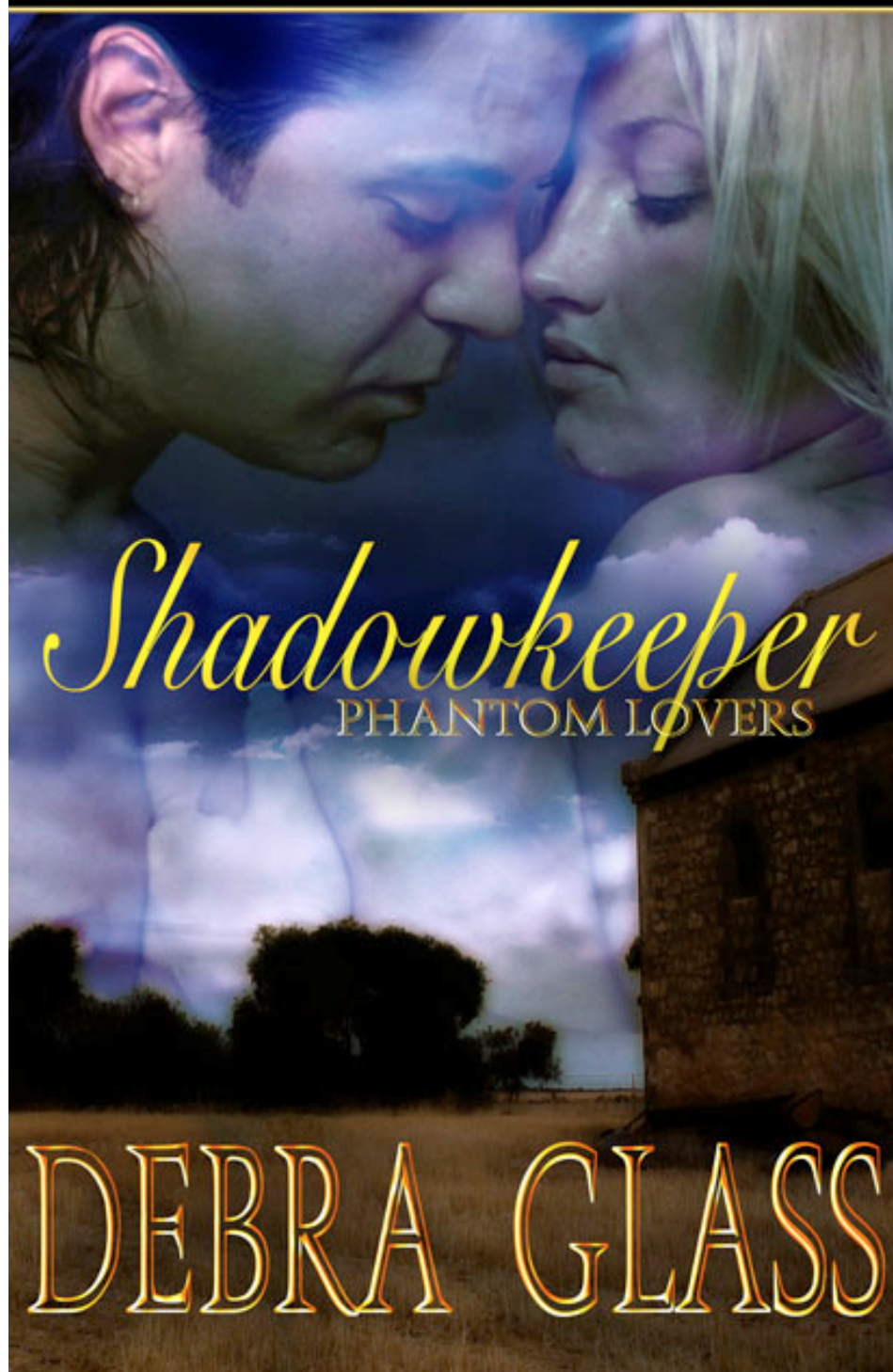


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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Shadowkeeper

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# ***SHADOWKEEPER***

**Debra Glass**

## *Dedication*

For Jeddy Ryan. Thank you for *believing* in me.

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## **Prologue**

*Late Fall, 1846*

“The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could.”

William’s head swam. It throbbed. Shooting pain emanated from the back of his neck. He tried to move but could not.

He recognized the voice as Uriah Winston’s but it made no sense.

Nausea rose and ebbed as William struggled to pull his thoughts into focus.

Clarity struck.

“Or should I say the thousand injuries of William Ryan?”

*Sarah... Oh God, Sarah...*

“But when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge.”

Where had he heard those words before? William heard a scraping sound. He struggled to crack open an eye. A single candle glimmered in the darkness. His vision blurred into a dozen candles, floating, swimming. His stomach lurched. He shook his head as if he could shake loose the cobwebs there.

“At length I would be avenged; this was a point definitely, settled.”

William shook his head again.

“I must not only punish but punish with impunity.”

His vision cleared.

“Ah, you’ve awakened.” Uriah Winston stood before him. In one pasty hand was a trowel and in the other, a thick brick.

William’s senses suddenly flooded back in a torrent. Manacles bound his wrists and ankles. He was in a cellar—*Belle Ruisseau’s* cellar—trapped behind some kind of half-built wall. Spite crackled in Uriah Winston’s eyes as he calmly laid brick after brick, one on top of the other. The opening was closing. Fast.

The pungent scent of wet mortar reached his nostrils.

William’s pulse pounded. He rattled the heavy chains, pulling hard in an attempt to shake loose the bolts.

With calculated coldness, Uriah swiped a thick paste of mortar onto a brick. After he placed it, he stepped to the side so that William’s gaze fell on *her*.

Sarah lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. Her pale pink dress was wet. Her blue eyes were wide, staring and glassy in the dim candlelight. She was dead.

*Sarah...*

*She had betrayed him!*

His heart turned over hard. Uriah had found her.

Uriah glanced back at her and then his gaze found William's, his amber eyes sparkling with mischief. "How could you have murdered her?"

William's blood turned to ice. "I—"

"How could you have snuffed out the life of so innocent and beautiful a woman?" Uriah sneered as he shoved another brick into place. "*My woman.*"

He stepped back to admire his handiwork and then his gaze seared William's once more. "You are naught but a savage beneath your fancy white man's clothing."

The opening was closing fast. Too fast. William couldn't think.

Uriah gave a cruel chuckle. "'I continued, as is my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile now was at the thought of his immolation.'"

"Why are you doing this?" William asked, his speech heavy, slurred. But he knew why. Uriah *knew* what he'd done to Sarah. His head pounded. He would have vomited had there been anything in his stomach.

"Do you know what immolation means, half-breed?" Uriah slid another brick into place. The mortar made a sickening squish as he pressed the brick down. "It means to be killed as a sacrificial victim."

"You're insane, Winston." The sharp metallic taste of blood tinged William's tongue and the insides of his cheeks.

Uriah laughed without mirth. "You and I both know who the victim is here, do we not, William Ryan?"

William swallowed. Winston was really going to kill him. He was going to die in this dark and godforsaken place and no one would ever know. His gaze swept the shadowy ceiling above him. Thick bolts held the chains in place. Darkly, he recalled how Uriah had bragged about chaining his misbehaving slaves here. He tugged at the chains again with the same results as before.

The opening was only large enough for two more bricks. His blood pumped in fast, heartwrenching bursts. He was about to be walled up in this hole and Sarah lay dead on the floor. His heart twisted painfully. *Sarah...*

It was all his fault.

He deserved to die.

Still, the knowledge that he was standing, bound hand and foot, in his own tomb seemed unbelievable, unreal.

Uriah placed one more brick, wiping mortar from his index finger along its edge.

Through the tiny opening, William could see his weathered face, shadowed completely on one side by the darkness. Uriah had something else in his hand. It wasn't a brick. It was a book!

William recognized it immediately. *Sarah's book.*

"I really like this fellow, Poe." He peered through the opening and his gaze found William's. It was mocking. Triumphant. "Sarah liked him too. Didn't she?" He turned the page. "In fact, I got this idea from one of the very stories in this collection. 'The Cask of Amontillado'." He closed the book over his thumb and examined the spine. "I think it's a fitting end to your life. Do you agree, Indian spawn?"

William thrashed and struggled. But for what? He deserved this. He deserved to die in this cold, dark and desolate place. He'd done it. He'd killed her.

His gaze fixed on the last shard of light as all the while, Winston's voice droned on. Slowly. Deliberately. "'I hastened to make an end of my labor. I forced the last stone into position; I plastered it up. *In pace requiescat.*'"

Uriah dropped the book and took up the last brick.

William's breaths were quick, shallow. "No!" he screamed.

Uriah's nostrils flared triumphantly. "Rest in peace, William Ryan."

The last brick slid into place.

## Chapter One

### *Present day*

Amy Drew had once been a damned good psychic. Not now. And most certainly not by choice. Just last year, she had been abducted by a psychotic killer and buried alive because she had psychically uncovered a ghost's secret.

The harrowing experience had left her shaken and terrified—and unable to reliably tune in to her sixth sense. She had once been a trusting, unquestioning person who accepted others at face value. She'd loved being psychic and had plunged into all things metaphysical with gleeful abandon, even to the point of being cliché. With long, wild blonde hair and a wardrobe of broomstick skirts, her outer appearance portrayed the eccentric, happy medium she'd been on the inside.

Amy was not happy anymore.

Now she was frightened and distrustful. She questioned everything about her life and herself. She hardly knew who she was anymore. The one thing of which she was certain, however, was that circumstances had forced her to join the real world—to become *normal*.

And the idea of being *normal* left an aching, desolate feeling in her gut. She yearned for the ability that made her who she was, that gave her purpose in life. But try as she might, she'd spent the last year flubbing card readings, staring blankly at her crystal ball and watching in sullen dismay as the little card table she could usually make float with ease sat stock-still on her living room floor—while her clients impatiently held their palms out to get their money back instead of having her read the future in them.

Oddly, the only remotely image she'd been able to pull out of the ethers wasn't even a psychic hit at all. It was a weird, recurring dream.

Dream interpretation had never been her forte but this particular dream needed interpreting. Badly.

She'd had it again just last night and the details haunted her—and aroused her in ways she had previously thought unimaginable.

The dream always began far in the past, in what seemed like a barn, and Amy felt as if she were looking through another woman's eyes...

"Spread your legs."

She was aware of a man kneeling between her trembling knees. The face was hazy, indistinct. The voice was soft as black velvet and dangerously seductive.



Her robin's egg blue voluminous skirts had already been drawn up well over the tops of her gartered stockings and his hand slid over her knee to push her thighs wider apart.

She knew she'd never been intimate with him before, that this was their first time. Her heart raced wildly, thundering against her rib cage while her breasts heaved against her impossibly tight corset.

He was so close...*there*. So close. And coming closer. She tried to swallow but couldn't. Her body trembled with tension – with need.

Part of her wanted him to stop. Part of her wanted to hide herself from view. But another part wanted him to *taste* her. What about this man made her give credence to such wicked, wanton thoughts?

Her lashes fluttered shut as he came so close she could feel his hot breath heating the sensitive little nubbin at the apex of her center.

"Open your eyes," his voice commanded.

No. She couldn't.

"Open your eyes. I want you to watch me. I want you to think only of me."

She obeyed, feeling sinfully decadent and yet so wonderfully alive with anticipation. And then, his mouth touched her nether lips.

Quivering, she cried out and resisted the overwhelming urge to shut her eyes again. Instead, she bit down hard on her lip. Her whole body froze with tension as his tongue flicked her flesh, working its way between the folds and downward.

Then, it was as if her body had a mind all its own.

She no longer cared if this was improper, highly unladylike behavior. All that mattered was this man, this moment, this breathtaking feeling that started between her legs and radiated throughout her body.

Trying but in vain to stifle a moan, she seized his long, silky hair in her hand and bucked up against his mouth.

He groaned into her cunny and his tongue and lips began a deep, hungry assault.

She gasped when his finger penetrated her, delving high inside to explore and pleasure her beyond her wildest dreams. His fingertip found and rubbed a spot within her that made her writhe and wriggle, pushing her body against his mouth, pulling his head hard on her swollen bud.

Something was happening to her. No man had ever made her feel *this*. But something was building and she had only one intent – to assuage this wild desire.

His name was on her lips but she couldn't give voice to it, as if his identity were somehow just out of reach.

But this *feeling* most certainly was not out of reach.

A fiery quickening began between her legs and emanated outward in throbbing pulses of pure, glorious pleasure.

She could hear herself moaning and crying out so loudly that he reached up and clamped a hand over her mouth. "Hush, sweet. They'll hear you," he whispered.

Before she could take her next breath, she was lying back in the hay and he was heavy on top of her. The rigid point of his cock rode through the slick folds between her legs before it breached her and thrust inside.

This was too much.

She was weeping. Her eyelids closed again and tears seeped out the corners of her eyes.

"I want you to see me. Open your eyes," he demanded once more.

But when she did this time, Amy always awakened.

Amy squeezed her thighs together to dispel her arousal but it only made it worse. It didn't matter that it was only a dream. It was still the best sex she'd ever experienced. Bar none.

In reality, she knew her dream didn't need interpreting.

She was horny.

Thanks to her little silver friend and a couple double A batteries, she was always able to finish what her dream lover had started. But it didn't offer the same satisfaction a living, breathing, flesh and blood, well-hung man promised.

Amy Drew hadn't had a fully awake, non-self-induced orgasm in over a year, so maybe her dream was her body's way of relieving some of her physical tension.

Because she'd been unable to make money as a practicing psychic, she'd been compelled to sell her little house in Nashville and move to the Shoals area, where her brother Reed had generously offered to put her up in his guesthouse and train her to work as his assistant.

She had always thought the Shoals area was a beautiful place. Situated on the Tennessee River, it was a boater's paradise, large enough for metropolitan amenities but still quaint enough that neighbors knew each other on a first-name basis.

But right now, she would give just about anything for a dousing rod to point her in the right direction. She felt about as normal and lost as an *ungifted*, non-psychic person could. Frustrated, she attempted to read her MapQuest directions, drive her stick shift VW van in the pouring rain and manage her little black Chihuahua, Boo, all at the same time. The front tire reeled over a curb. Amy gasped as the VW lurched upward and the Big Gulp she'd bought at that last convenient store tipped icy, sugary soda all over her lavender and pink broomstick skirt.

"Dammit." She sat a dejected Boo on the passenger seat as she swiped at the ice in her lap. It landed on the floorboard of the van along with empty chip bags and gum wrappers. She was drenched.

The VW suddenly sputtered and stalled. The windshield wipers screeched to a halt in the middle of the glass.

Amy blew out a sigh and lifted her sweltering mass of blonde hair off the back of her neck. The VW had been without air conditioning for the last eight years.

Peering through the rain-washed window at the row of hidden driveways along the Tennessee riverfront, she searched for her stepbrother's house. It had to be here somewhere.

She'd been here before and knew she'd recognize it when she saw it again—if she could see it in all this rain. A distant memory of the first time she'd come here flitted through her thoughts. This was the place where she'd learned to swim.

She always felt safe with Reed and no matter what else happened in her life, his presence was like an anchor for her. Amy inhaled as she recalled her father's marriage to Reed's mom on the pier. After her own mother had died, her dad had seemed lost. And although Amy missed her mother terribly, she knew her dad needed the companionship a new wife could offer. After the short ceremony, all the kids had wanted to go swimming—but not Amy.

Even as a child, she'd had an inexplicable fear of water. When Reed had heard the other kids teasing her, he'd taken her by the hand, down the mossy steps of the seawall and into the lukewarm water of the Tennessee River.

"Trust me," Reed had said. Somehow he'd coerced her to lift her feet off the silt bottom and he'd held her up with one hand under her stomach. Although she'd never become a fan of the water, Reed had taught her to swim that day and afterward, they'd sat on the pier, their shoulders and faces reddened from the sun. With their toes dangling in the water, they'd shared a crisp, cold orange soda.

When she'd mustered the courage to jump off the diving board, Reed had bragged about it to all her new relatives at the small reception later that night. Other than her parents, no one had ever been proud of her before and Reed's boasting had filled her with a sense of accomplishment and elation.

She twisted the key in the ignition and the van rumbled to life. Her chilly, soda-soaked skirt clung to her thigh as she mashed the clutch and then gassed the accelerator. As the wipers came to life and the van heaved forward, she craned to look out the cracked-open window at the imposing, affluent lake homes as she rolled by.

Through the rain, she finally caught sight of her stepbrother's mailbox. "Reed Severin," she read aloud. "I knew I could find it."

Veering into the pebble-paved driveway, she accidentally bounced over the curb again with the front tire, nearly taking down the decorative wrought iron fencing. She gasped and cursed. It wouldn't do to destroy Reed's house and yard before she officially arrived.

Boo yelped.

Wincing, she pulled the VW around the main house and down the steep, curving driveway to the A-frame guesthouse in back. She stared and fought down the sense of melancholy that nipped relentlessly at her insides. This was her new home.

At least until she was able to get her ability back.

She sighed. *More like if you get your ability back.*

Her stomach tightened. A new life. A new home. She knew she should feel grateful but instead, she wanted to cry. Her shoulders rose and fell with another heavy sigh as she shot an uncertain smile at her dog.

The trembling Chihuahua's black eyes bulged as she stared up at Amy questioningly.

She stroked the little dog's apple shaped head affectionately. "This is it, Boo-bug. Our new home." Scooping Boo up in her arms, Amy grabbed her duffle bag and rainbow-colored hemp purse and climbed out of the VW. Although the rain drenched her hair and clothes, she paused to allow her gaze to travel up the facade of Reed's lake house, which sat higher on the hill. He'd renovated it completely since the last time she was here.

"Wow." There was no comparison between this and her tiny cottage in West Nashville. Reed was a successful builder and nice looking to boot, so Amy found it difficult to believe he lived here all alone. She'd been surprised when he'd invited her to stay in his guesthouse.

"It's just temporary. I'm only here long enough to get a fresh start," she reminded herself and summoned up her courage. She'd never had what anyone would consider a *real* job. She'd been a psychic, giving readings at her house and at her friend Gwen's metaphysical shop in Franklin.

She hoped beyond hope this was only temporary. But what if her abilities never came back full force? She drew in a deep breath to dispel the dark thoughts lurking just beneath the surface and reminded herself to live in the present. The past was the past. Although it haunted her, she knew she had to move on.

Still, the raw fact she'd been clubbed in the head by a trusted friend and stuffed into a coffin because she held the secret to why a spirit was earthbound left her full of doubt and suspicion.

Amy wasn't sure she would ever be able to understand or accept it.

She forced away the ghosts of her past and turned her full attention to exploring her new surroundings.

Reed had told her the door to the guesthouse would be unlocked and had urged her to make herself at home. She tucked Boo tightly against her chest and darted down the slippery, wet steps to the door, flung it open and ran inside.

The sight of the A-frame stole her breath, dispelling a few of the qualms she had about selling her house. It was beautiful. When Reed had said *guesthouse*, she had imagined the little white, mildewed frame house that had been here when she was a kid. The fact she'd been so *wrong* when she'd imagined it gave her an empty feeling.

As she slowly lowered Boo to the beige carpeted floor, her gaze drank in the stylish décor.

A huge plasma screen television occupied one corner while a large, comfortable-looking, fawn-colored sectional sofa stretched around the opposite wall. Although rain pelted the massive vaulted window, Amy could see the immense concrete deck which served as an extension of the cozy A-frame. A covered hot tub sat invitingly in one corner. Dark green umbrellas, standing sentinel in the midst of trendy furniture, were fastened down against the storm. There was even a covered section with a full outdoor kitchen.

She bit her bottom lip. *No slummin' it for this gal!*

Amy brushed her wet hair back from her face. "Wow," she exclaimed again as she strolled toward the sliding glass doors.

She brushed her fingertips against the cool glass. The wide expanse of the Tennessee River stretched across for what appeared to be a mile. Just downriver was the massive Wilson Dam and Amy shuddered to think of the sheer volume of water the concrete structure held back.

An enormous barge chugged toward it, creating a roiling wake as it sliced through the water.

This was nothing like her little house in Nashville. Nothing at all. "This place is nice," she said aloud. But it wasn't *her*. She was accustomed to her moon-and-star-print fabrics, mismatched secondhand furniture and her varied array of crystals and spirit bells.

She turned and surveyed her new home. A small but well-appointed kitchen was tucked underneath a loft reachable by a modish pewter-colored ladder. The crisp scent of citrus potpourri filled her nostrils.

Home.

Well, home for now—at least until she was able to get her ability back or establish herself financially.

She resisted the urge to search in her purse for a stub of sage smudge stick to clear the place of any negative residual energy. She'd thought it best—especially since she could no longer access her psychic senses—to leave all things metaphysical in the past and she'd discarded all her stuff on the curb of her home in Nashville. Dismally, she recalled pulling out of the driveway for the last time and watching with heartwrenching emotion as a crowd of Goth Vanderbilt students went curb-diving for her secondhand goodies.

She breathed a deep sigh and told herself to accept the change. This was a new life. Reluctant as she was, she knew it was time to turn over a new leaf.

That meant no more psychic readings and definitely no more talking to spirits. She just wasn't that person anymore. Teary-eyed, she'd hung up her shingle—the one that read *Psychic Readings by Amaranth* in big purple lettering over a palm emblazoned with a big eyeball—and had bade farewell to anything psychic or remotely psychic.

The door burst open behind her and she whirled to find her stepbrother. "Reed! This place is beautiful. I never would have expected this in a million years."

"You? Little Miss Psychic? Come on." He enveloped her in a big brotherly hug. She and Reed had always been close despite being stepsiblings and he knew just about everything there was to know about her. "Have you been here long?" he asked. His blue eyes sparkled.

"No, I just got here."

"Then let me get your bags. That's a helluva climb when you're trying to carry something." He gestured toward the ladder and then darted back out into the rain.

Amy hardly had time to deposit her purse on the table before Reed returned carrying four of her six bags.

"Let me get those," Amy protested but Reed dismissed her and started up the ladder with two of the bags under one arm.

One bag managed to slip loose and it crashed to the floor. Makeup, three chocolate bars, her vibrator and several fat brown medicine bottles scattered, the pills rattling telltale.

Amy gasped as Reed's gaze ignored the bullet-shaped vibrator and shot straight to the pill bottles before lifting to her eyes.

To divert his attention, she dove on the contents, hastily shoving them back into the beige canvas bag. "I'll pick it up."

Reed hesitated momentarily and then scurried up the ladder.

Amy's heart raced. Reed had seen all the pills she took daily—not to mention the vibrator.

Now he was going to think she had serious mental problems.

The trouble was, she *did* have problems. She hadn't slept a full night since her abduction and attempted murder. The absence of her psychic ability left her feeling vulnerable. Being in confined spaces propelled her into frightening panic attacks. She avoided people and acted with suspicion, wondering what hidden motives lurked beneath the surface of every banker, clerk and even the kids who worked part time in fast-food restaurants. Social situations made her paranoid.

Her psychologist sister, Jillian, had told her those feelings were normal given the circumstances, but Amy disagreed. She was scared—not just of the things she could see, but also of the things she *couldn't* see. Her lack of *sensitivity* made things doubly worse.

No, there was nothing normal about it at all.

"There," he said after he returned once more to the main floor. His gaze swiveled to Boo and Amy said a silent prayer Boo wouldn't piss on the carpet right in front of Reed as the little dog sniffed around the baseboards.

Reed breathed a sigh and wiped a mixture of perspiration and rain from his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt. "I'll get the rest in a minute. Let's sit down and visit."

*Visit?* That didn't have a good sound to it. He was going to ask her how she was doing since the abduction.

He tugged open the refrigerator. "Want a beer?"

Amy shook her head. "No thanks."

He popped the top off with a grinning three-eyed bottle opener mounted under the lip of the counter and flopped down on the corner section of the sofa. Amy followed, slipped off her flip-flops then sat, drawing her legs up underneath her voluminous damp skirt.

Reed turned up the beer and guzzled a quarter of it before blowing out an audible damn-that's-good breath. "You know me, Aim. I'm gonna get to the point about this," he said, finally making that eye contact she'd been dreading.

Amy's heart sank.

"How *are* you?"

"I'm okay." She wound a strand of her long hair around her index finger. Her pulse sped up. Why did she feel so defensive whenever anyone asked her how she was doing?

Reed studied her and nodded, his dark wavy hair stealing across his forehead. He had that look about him Amy had seen on everyone's face since her abduction. It was a look of fear mixed with pity.

"Those are some pretty strong pills you're taking." He propped his feet on the leather coffee table. "I've never known you to take any *doctor* prescribed...anything. I mean, you usually take that herb shit and go to those homo doctors, don't you?"

Amy laughed. "Homeopathic doctor," she corrected. "Besides, it's just temporary." She eyed a bowl of mixed nuts on the table and grabbed a handful. Since she'd stopped giving psychic readings, she'd gained ten pounds from her love of junk food. Now it took not one but two candy bars at a time to assuage her sweet tooth. She shifted on the sofa and said a silent prayer of gratitude for whoever invented the drawstring.

When she'd been a practicing psychic, she hadn't thought twice about eating a dozen piping hot doughnuts. Communing with spirits and the act of tapping into her psychic senses burned calories faster than an aerobics class. She sucked on a salty almond.

"Jillian said it was okay—for now." Amy devoured the nuts and then nervously arranged the flounces of her pale pink skirt to keep the part drenched by the overturned soda from freezing her thigh.

Boo bounded into Reed's lap. At first he eyed the Chihuahua with suspicion but the friendly little dog demanded to be petted so he complied. "Man, this isn't a dog. This is a doglet."

Amy giggled.

He looked into Boo's little black eyes. "Tripod would eat you up alive."

"Tripod?"

"My Doberman. He's around here somewhere. He's friendly but the dumbass got himself hit by a car last year and I had to have one of his back legs amputated. His name was Brutus but now I call him Tripod."

As Amy relaxed to settle into a conversation about dogs, Reed abruptly brought the subject back to her situation. "Whatever it takes, Sis. But I'm really worried about you."

She needed to feel blissfully numb and normal, even if it was medically induced. But with that numbness, she'd lost joy and her sense of direction in life – not to mention her meager income.

Reed gulped his beer. "Are you really sure about giving up telling fortunes for a living?"

"I...I can't do that anymore," she said, unable to hide the dismal tone in her voice.

*A cold, damp, musty grave...*

*The knowing she was going to die, alone and in the dark...*

Reminding herself to breathe, she forced the dark thoughts from her mind and focused on toying with her rhinestone dragonfly toe ring.

Reed crossed his ankles and peeled off the label of his beer bottle. He finally broke the awkward silence. "Amy, do you think you might be running from *yourself*?"

She looked at him and touched the tip of her tongue to her lip gloss. It tasted like green apples, a biting blend of sweet and sour. "Jeez, you sound just like Jillian. I'm not running. It's just...it's just I can't *pick up* anymore." Her gaze fell once more to her dragonfly toe ring which winked in the light as she curled her toes.

Triggered by the tart tang of the lip gloss, a distant memory of the first time she'd used a Ouija board crept into her thoughts. "I knew the first time I ever touched a Ouija board this stuff was nothing but trouble. Jillian was terrified of it." She stared at the toe ring until her eyes blurred. "And I should have been too."

"Come on, Aim. You're a damn good psychic."

Amy shook her head. "I *was* a damn good psychic." She gave a little self-deprecating chuckle. "That first time, I remember asking the Ouija who Jillian would marry. It spelled out some name..."

"Oh yeah," Reed chimed in. "Ben somebody. I remember you teasing Jillian until she was red in the face about some dork in her class named Ben."

Amy laughed – but the sound abruptly ended as her gaze collided with Reed's.

His lips parted and his eyes lit up with insight. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Her stomach had tightened into a hard knot. She nodded.

Reed stared at his amber beer bottle. "Wow. Isn't her husband's name Benton?"

Amy swallowed. "Yes it is."

A cold chill elicited a shudder from her shoulders.



Reed laughed nervously. "And what sage advice did the trusty old Ouija have for you?"

"Something stupid," she said but the memory of the words was burned into her brain like a brand. "I lit a candle and I remember the whole room smelled like wax and apple bubble gum. I'd saved up the money to buy the board at a toy store, of all places, and couldn't wait to sit down and chat up the spirits." She waved her hands in the air like a looming ghost and laughed. "I had to threaten Jillian to make her do it with me. I guess we both thought the other was making the planchette move but when I asked it who Jillian would marry and it spelled out 'Ben', she jerked her hands off and announced she'd never marry Ben Morgan because he ate scabs."

Reed burst into a bout of raucous laughter.

Amy's voice grew quieter. "And when I asked it who I'd marry, it spelled out 'change your fate or the red feather cannot return'."

Reed's dark eyebrows knitted together. "Huh?"

"That's what I thought. I was expecting it to say Sting or something. Anything but some crap about changing my fate. What ten-year-old gives a rat's ass about fate? I was mad as hell. I kicked the thing across the room. It's a wonder I ever picked it up again."

But she had. She'd gotten quite adept at using the Ouija, tarot cards, crystals, automatic writing, table tipping – all the metaphysical tools needed to tap into the great beyond.

She snatched another handful of nuts and her gaze found Reed's. "And then...my ability just disappeared." She popped a salted cashew into her mouth. She loved those the best.

"I hate to hear that," he said, "because I can sure use the help. Do you remember Charity Clanton? She was a friend of my mother's."

"I don't remember meeting her but I do recall hearing about her."

"She finally bought an old dilapidated house she's had her eye on for years and she's hell-bent on me fixing the place up so she can live in it. As soon as this rain lets up, I'll take you over there and show it to you. I found something I wanted to get your take on – your *psychic* take. Think you're up to giving it a try?"

Amy stared. *Psychic take*? Maybe this wasn't going to be the change she'd expected.

But what would it hurt to try?

## Chapter Two

Amy watched the quaint little city of Florence, Alabama, flash by as Reed weaved his massive four-wheel-drive truck in and out of traffic. She wrung her hands nervously in her lap. Hopefully Reed had been kidding about wanting her psychic take on anything. What part of “I can’t do that anymore” didn’t he understand?

Still, a sense of excitement fluttered like a butterfly in her stomach.

She shot a glance at him. Gripping the steering wheel, he sang along blissfully out of key to an Eighties metal song on the radio. Why couldn’t she be that carefree – *and normal*?

Her heart swelled heavily in her chest. Reed had taken a real chance in allowing her to work for him, and although she’d known he’d given her a pity job, just being with him made her feel safe and cared about. Still, she couldn’t shake the fish-out-of-water feeling. And yet, this place, this job, felt very, very *right* in a strange and inexplicable way, as if the job and relocation would lead to bigger and brighter things.

Was that just hope – or, God willing, a psychic impression?

“First thing we’re gonna do after we leave here is take you straight to the mall and get you some jeans,” Reed said and affectionately slapped her on the knee.

“Jeans?” The last time she’d donned a pair of jeans was in high school.

“Hell yeah. You can’t be climbing ladders and hanging dry wall in those hippie skirts of yours.” He gestured toward her pink and lavender, sparsely beaded skirt.

A smile tugged at Amy’s lips. Her gaze swept the bangles around both wrists and the folds of her flouncy skirt while she tried to imagine herself in a pair of constricting, formfitting jeans. She nodded. Maybe this was exactly the type of change she so desperately needed. “I want some of those work boots too.”

Reed laughed outright. “I never thought I’d see the day when my gypsy fortuneteller sister would be wearing work boots.”

Amy tried to envision herself wielding a hammer while tromping around in boots but somehow, the image just didn’t gel in her mind.

Reed slowed the truck and turned onto a side road off the main drag through Florence. The pavement quickly disappeared behind a gas station and Amy found herself staring at an aluminum cattle gate and two bold No Trespassing signs.

Reed got out and as he unlocked an industrial-sized padlock and lifted the big gate to push it open, the muscles in his arms bulged.

The fine blonde hairs on Amy’s arms stood on end – usually a signal of nearby spirit energy.

Excited, she took a deep breath and made an attempt to tune in psychically.

Nothing happened.

She clenched her fists in her lap.

*Just give up and try to be normal!*

"Get off this land or I'll shoot!"

Amy's head snapped in the direction of the sudden voice. A little old lady dressed in a navy ball cap, flannel shirt and overalls had come from seemingly out of nowhere—and she had a .38 special revolver aimed straight at Reed.

Amy gasped but Reed looked as calm as ever.

"Now, Miss Lettie, you put that gun down," he said gently. "You know Charity Clanton bought this place."

Lettie wagged the pistol at Reed. White wisps of hair escaped her cap and fluttered in the breeze. "That no-account Jezebel put me out of my home!"

Reed reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. Amy couldn't hear what he was saying but she watched as Lettie lowered the pistol and took a folded bill from Reed.

The old lady's bottom lip protruded in a sullen pout as she turned and stalked toward a seventies-model station wagon.

When Reed got back in the pickup, he flashed Amy a conspiratorial smile before he gassed the truck down a deeply rutted road toward the hulking relic of an antebellum plantation house.

"Who was that?" Amy demanded.

"That's Miss Lettie."

"Aren't you going to call the police? She had a gun!"

He laughed. "It's not loaded."

"How do you know?" Amy asked, twisting in the truck seat to watch as the station wagon spewed black smoke and pulled out of sight.

"The police have been called on Miss Lettie more than once. She used to live in the house as a caretaker for the former owner."

"Apparently, she hasn't accepted the fact someone has bought it."

Reed shook his head. "Nope. I doubt she ever will. She was born here but the house is in such disrepair it's not livable in the condition it's in. The cops had to come force her out."

Amy shivered. An overwhelming sense of *déjà vu* flooded her, settling uncomfortably in her chest, right in the area of the fount of her psychic information—her solar plexus. Again she tried to open, to explore it, but not one iota of a psychic hit invaded her thoughts. Disappointment surged.

"Look at this place," he exclaimed as the truck slowed to a mere crawl. "It's not anything like those grand old restored-to-the-hilt plantation houses you have around Nashville."

Amy swallowed. The imposing deserted house loomed eerily against the deep blue October sky, chasing away the incident with Miss Lettie.

Reed's specialty was historic reclamation – but *this*?

"Are you out of your mind?" she asked, incredulous.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?"

Amy grimaced. "Did you see this as some sort of challenge?"

"Challenge, little sister, is not the word."

"This place looks more along the lines of *impossible*."

A rotten, fallen oak stretched across the remains of the front porch. One crumbling chimney lay in a heaping pile of faded crimson brick. A similar pile of bricks was all that remained of an outbuilding Amy assumed had once been a kitchen. Plywood covered many of the windows and weathered green shutters hung haphazardly from their fastenings. Trees laden with multicolored leaves leaned protectively around the whole house. Tall, wheat-colored weeds swayed in the early October breeze as the truck came to a halt in their midst.

If ever a house should have been labeled haunted, this was it – and Amy knew if she couldn't pick up something here, she was done. A has-been.

Reed switched off the motor. Amy stared, stunned by the utter and pervading silence of the place despite the fact it sat smack-dab in the middle of a bustling city. The entire plantation had a dark aura, as if some sort of sinister hush had long ago descended on the whole place.

"Welcome to *Belle Ruisseau*," he said proudly. "In its day, this was a showplace."

Amy blinked.

*Towering fountains, white wicker furniture on an immaculate lawn, gleaming white posts on the porch, towering chimneys...*

"What are you getting? You've got that cat-in-the-litter-box stare."

Amy's gaze found Reed's. His voice had broken the slight trance. Still, she was elated she'd gotten even that much. She tried to open to it again but in vain. "Not much. Just old furniture. Wicker stuff. Images of the place before it became run down."

An easy smile stretched across his lips. "Pretty good, Sis. It ain't on the level of John Edward but they did have wicker furniture here." Reed yanked up the door handle. "Come on. Let's go inside and see what else you get."

Amy shivered. There was something foreboding about the decrepit old house – something evil. Bad things had happened here.

She sat stock-still in the truck, rubbing her big toe against the thong of her leather flip-flops.

"Are you coming or ain't ya?"

With trembling fingers, she slowly pulled the door handle. The heavy truck door swung open as if pulled by an unseen hand. Amy slid out but when her feet hit the ground, it felt as if the earth shuddered. A tingle swept up her spine.

*Leave this place.*

Alarm bells went off in Amy's head at the warning from her inner voice.

"Come on," Reed called impatiently and they both shut their doors simultaneously.

Reed stood, hands on his hips, and stared up at the rust-colored tin roof. "This is gonna be a blast." With the excitement of a kid, he reached into the back of the pickup and grabbed a sledgehammer before starting toward the house.

*I don't want to go in there.*

Amy's feet, however, betrayed her and panic threatened to gush as she followed Reed up the crumbling stone steps, over the decaying oak and through the weathered front door. She half expected to hear a ghostly voice ordering them to *get out*.

Standing in the shadowy foyer, her gaze scanned the soaring walls. Ancient wallpaper peeled and hung in timeworn and faded shreds. A gracefully curved staircase swept upward at the back of the hall.

A flash of gray suddenly darted at them. Amy screamed an obscenity, ducked and covered her head as a rush of air fluttered through her hair. Her heart pounded.

Reed was laughing. "I forgot to tell you to watch out for the pigeons."

Amy glared at him but as her heartbeat returned to normal, her lips pulled into a smile. Although he'd been her stepsibling, Reed had been a typical brother. He'd picked on her at every chance but if anyone else ever messed with her, Reed was the first to land a punch.

She arched an eyebrow. "I know about the birds. *Now*. Are there any snakes?"

Reed hesitated before saying, "I think you're right about those work boots. We'll get you a pair on the way home."

That was hardly the reassurance she wanted. Amy inhaled the scent of the musty house as her gaze swept fallen chunks of plaster and ancient dust littering the floor. *Snakes?* She wished she hadn't asked.

Reed leaned the sledgehammer against the wall and picked his way through the plaster bits. He pushed open a tall mahogany door. The rusty hinges groaned.

Amy noticed the witch's cross pattern in the dark wood. Most people only noticed the square panels in the pattern but Amy knew it was a symbol designed to ward off evil spirits. Another shudder rushed up her spine. This one more violent than the last. Apparently, the witch's cross hadn't worked here.

"Look at this," Reed called.

Hugging her arms, she stepped through the threshold—and gaped. A massive walnut four-poster bed with an elaborately carved cornice and green silk-paneled tester canopy stood tall in the midst of an otherwise deserted room.

The bed looked incongruously timeless and pristine in the dilapidated old house. “Wow,” she exclaimed as her feet carried her across the heart-of-pine floor toward the bed. It smelled faintly of lemon oil and something else, something she couldn’t name—something hauntingly familiar.

As if drawn magnetically, her fingers extended toward one of the carved posts.

*Kissing me... Hands roaming over my body... I want this... I want this forever...forever...*

“Aim?”

She blinked and was once more with Reed. Her hand lifted to her lips where she could still feel an antiquated kiss. She trembled.

“You don’t look so good.”

“I’m okay.” But that was a lie. The power of the kiss—and the psychic images—had left her knees weak and shaking.

“It’d be cool if that old thing could talk.” Reed gave the solid post a pat and strode from the room.

Amy took one step backward, her gaze still riveted to the stately old bed. *It can talk, Reed. You just don’t know how to listen.* But she wasn’t about to tell her stepbrother what it had told her.

She contemplated touching it again but the power behind the images was too strong—and far too personal.

There were some things she didn’t want to know.

“Come on, there’s more.” Reed’s voice echoed from another room in the cavernous house.

Amy practically fled from the room, stumbling over a hunk of fallen plaster before she found Reed standing in one of the double parlors. He pointed at a weather-beaten square grand piano which sat in the center of random pieces of furniture—the wicker chairs she’d seen in her vision, a broken mirror and a dusty settee that looked as if it had once been a deep rose. Other odds and ends were scattered throughout the room as well. Amy moved to the piano and dragged her fingertips across the uneven, chipped and yellowed ivory keys but this time she wasn’t deluged with extrasensory images.

When Reed plunked a note, an eerie twang echoed through the vast parlor as an ancient hammer struck a time-rusted string.

“Who’d leave all these things behind?” Amy went about like Helen Keller, unable to resist the magnetic temptation to touch and explore. Fleeting images fluttered in her thoughts but she could never quite grasp them long enough to get a clear picture.

“Reed!” a voice trilled from the doorway.

Amy whirled to find a fashionably dressed woman with chin-length salt and pepper hair standing in the arched entrance to the parlor.

From the descriptions she'd heard growing up, she recognized her at once — Charity Clanton.

The woman's gaze descended on Amy, taking in her Bohemian attire. Amy swallowed, wishing she'd changed into clean clothes. She shifted to hide the glaringly obvious cola stain on the front of her skirt.

Charity's attention moved to Reed and her fuchsia lips drew into a model worthy, flashing white smile.

"Amy, this is Charity Clanton. She owns the house."

Amy took a step forward and offered her hand. Charity grasped it and Amy noticed her well-manicured nails and tasteful plethora of jewels.

"This must be your little sister. So nice to meet you."

Amy suddenly felt mousy as she muttered a greeting in response.

Charity turned her attention back to Reed.

"Have you gotten your man to clear out that brush to the cemetery yet?"

Reed glanced at his watch. "He should be here anytime. It was too wet this morning."

"Fabulous." Charity shifted her weight, one very pointed crocodile shoe peeping from beneath her expertly creased trousers. "Did I just see that vagrant leaving?"

"Miss Lettie?"

Charity crossed her arms over her chest. "I swear I'm going to have to get a restraining order on that woman. Last week, she threatened the utility men."

"She's harmless."

"Poppycock! Have you seen that gun?"

Reed snickered. "It's not loaded."

"Well, at any rate, she's a menace."

Amy shivered despite the unusually hot and humid October day. As Charity and Reed began to discuss plans for renovation, Amy's gaze drifted to the wavered glass-paned windows behind the other woman. The plywood had either been removed or had fallen down, enabling Amy to see across the expanse of the unkempt lawn.

A monstrous faded orange Bush Hog rumbled along, clearing the waist-high weeds toward the back of the property.

"That'll be Eddie now," Reed said.

Charity audaciously reached out and patted Reed on the cheek. "That's why I hired the best." She then took a step back, folded her arms across her chest once again and turned a probing gaze on Amy. Diamonds glittered from wrists as well. "Are you helping Reed out?"

Amy nodded excitedly.

Against the backdrop of gray wallpaper, Charity's pale greenish-yellow aura glowed faintly. A vicious shard of dark gray stabbed into it from the top, closely surrounding Charity's body.

Amy stared. Was the shard an entity? Did it signify ill health? Or did it mean something bad was about to happen to Charity?

Gwen would know what it meant and exactly how to read it. Amy made a mental note to call her best friend later. Gwen was a Wiccan and a practicing witch—an old soul who knew something about everything. She'd definitely know how to interpret that shard.

Reed gave Amy a brotherly elbow to the arm. "Today's her first day on the job."

Charity smiled. "Well, you've got the best teacher you could possibly have in Reed." Her eyebrow shot up as if a thought just occurred to her. "Reed told me you were psychic."

Amy shrugged. Normally she would have given the woman a reading on the spot. Now, she had no confidence whatsoever in her *gift*.

Charity's gaze swept the high-ceilinged room. "I'd love to know if this house is haunted."

"I would *not*!" Reed interjected. "At least not until I'm through renovating it." He shot a you-owe-me-one look at Amy.

Charity laughed.

Reed shook his head vehemently. "Don't ask. Don't tell."

"Okay." Amy threw up her hands in mock surrender and then shot a conspiratorial glance at Charity. "I'll let you know all about the ghosties when Reed is finished." She secretly hoped Charity would forget about it before then.

The loud ring of a cell phone startled everyone. Charity laughed and fished in the stylish alligator purse slung over her shoulder. She peered at the caller ID. "Oh, it's Jackson. I was supposed to meet him downtown for lunch ten minutes ago. I'd better get going."

Reed saw her to the door and Amy breathed a sigh of relief. The last thing Amy wanted was to be put on the spot to give a reading about a bunch of lost souls, especially when she had no confidence in her ability.

Again, her attention shifted to the man seated atop the Bush Hog. But why?

Instinctively, she ran through a mental psychic checklist. Was something wrong with the Bush Hog? No. Was he trying to cheat Reed? No. Was he in danger?

Nothing.

Amy sucked in a breath. She couldn't pick up for Charity and she couldn't get anything about some stranger on a tractor. *You are not psychic anymore. Give up.*

But she had *known* about that wicker furniture—and the images from the bed still left her tingling all the way to her toes.



Distinct footsteps came from behind her and she whirled. Her gaze darted around the room. The hair on the back of her nape prickled and she inhaled sharply when she felt icy fingers trail down her neck. She recoiled. "Who's there?" she demanded, feeling the presence of a male.

She was met with chilling silence.

Ghosts had never frightened her before but for some reason she couldn't explain, this one gave her the creeps. Although she really did not want to see him, she willed her third eye to open.

Nothing.

Whoever he was, he didn't want her to see him.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried very hard to pick up something else. Anything.

But all she got was a sense of impending doom as the presence eased away.

She took a deep breath and then exhaled.

Not being able to rely on her psychic ability was difficult. After her abduction, stress and fear had kept extrasensory perceptions away—but that seemed to change the minute Reed pulled up in front of *Belle Ruisseau*. She should feel glad this old house was acting as some sort of psychic catalyst but instead, she felt vulnerable and scared all over again.

Realizing her fists were clenched, she took a cleansing breath and tried to be calm. But somehow, she felt as if she would never be calm again.

"Hey, Aim," Reed called from the porch. "Come with me. This is what I really wanted to get your psychic take on."

Grateful to get out of the spooky house, she rushed to join Reed, who stood on the porch brandishing the sledgehammer.

"Pull up your skirt and watch out for those copperheads."

Drawing up her voluminous skirt, she stepped high through the tall grass and nervously followed Reed around the corner of the house to where five concrete stairs led down to the open door of a cellar.

She looked at the cracked and peeling whitewashed door clinging stubbornly to one rusty hinge with dread—overwhelming dread.

*I don't want to go in there either.*

Reed stood halfway down the steps that disappeared into the darkness. "I've been down here a hundred times," he said and switched on a flashlight. "It's safe."

Her fingers gripped the weathered wooden hand railing. "It looks like a snake den."

"Aw, no snake's gonna bite you. Besides, I've got this sledgehammer." He bounced it in the air as if he were comforting a crying baby.

Amy cringed at the thought of him squishing a copperhead or some other side-winding snake with the mallet of the sledgehammer, but once more her feet betrayed her and she tucked up her flowing hippie skirt as she tagged along after her stepbrother into the dark abyss. "Out of the frying pan and into the fire," she muttered under her breath, feeling very much like Fortunato from Edgar Allan Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" as she descended the stairs. "The foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel..."

"What?" Reed asked.

"Nothing." He would never understand her obsession with Poe stories. Although they terrified her, she could quote them all on command—except for "Premature Burial".

*That one she had intentionally forgotten.*

The dirt floor of the cellar emitted a foul, decrepit stench. The visible floor joists loomed oppressively low. Amy's breaths became short and shallow.

*Hardwood overhead... Stench of mildew, of rot... A coffin! Can't get out... Jillian, please find me...*

"Slow, deep breaths," she whispered aloud, covering her chest with her hand. She willed her pulse to decelerate. *Don't let Reed see you panic.* She needed to make a good effort at whatever he wanted her to intuit—and she certainly couldn't stand losing her shit in front of him and then having him think she was some fragile little wounded thing.

When her heartbeat returned to normal, she ventured farther into the cellar, grateful that Reed hadn't noticed her near panic attack.

"Check this out." He pointed to a brick wall.

Amy stared at it. He'd dragged her down into this hell hole to look at some damned brick wall? A premonition of despair swept over her and she started to spin and flee from the cellar but Reed tapped on the wall with his flashlight. A strangely hollow sound echoed through the dank basement.

"There's nothing behind this."

Amy swallowed thickly.

*There is too something behind it.*

Something bad.

Terror surged and she fought to control it.

"Planters used to build secret rooms to hide their valuables." Reed was as excited and animated as a Boy Scout. "The Yankees were all over this place during the Civil War and before that, at the time this house was built, this was Indian territory." The way he held the flashlight cast an eerie glow on his face from below.

Amy had the sinking suspicion treasure was *not* what Reed would find behind the false wall. Her gaze swept the low ceiling once more. Close. Confined. *Can't breathe.* She

swallowed uncomfortably and covered her mouth and nose with her hand to shut out the foul smell.

Reed tapped the wall with the butt of the sledgehammer. "I've checked. It's not a load-bearing wall." He turned to Amy and a broad grin spread across his handsome face. "And you and I are the only two people who know about it."

"Reed, are you certain —"

But her protest caught in her throat when Reed hefted the sledgehammer and swung it hard at the wall.

Amy twisted her head against the spray of brick fragments and clay dust. Coughing, she waved her hand in front of her face to disperse the choking particles.

Reed struck the wall twice more. On the fourth blow, several of the bricks crumbled and exposed a dark, large gaping hole.

A low moaning sound emanated from the opening and a rush of acrid, musty air swept out. Amy watched, amazed, as a silvery red-tinged glow shot out of the hole, raced around the rafters and then hovered right in front of her face for a steep second before it burst out through the door.

*A spirit!*

Her mouth dropped open. "Did you see that?" But despite her excitement at finally seeing something supernatural, a gloomy pall descended, inundating her with a sense of utter hopelessness.

Panting, Reed's gaze found Amy's. "See what?"

"A spirit!" She released the breath she'd been holding. "I can't believe you didn't see it." Reed was about as psychic as a rock.

His gaze flying anxiously around the cellar, he ducked as if the spirit would come at him like a rabid bat.

Amy waved her hand. "It's gone, Mr. Man. You're safe."

"I know you talk to those things but I sure as hell don't want to see one." He shook his head. "Who was it?"

Amy assessed the feeling she'd gotten from it. "Someone sad. Someone who died tragically."

"You got all that psychically? Just now?" His eyebrows lifted enthusiastically.

Amy nodded uncertainly. "There's something about this place. I don't know what it is but I'm getting...impressions. Little bits and pieces. But at least it's something."

"Are you okay with it?"

"We'll see," she said honestly.

"What else are you getting?"

A tremor traversed her spine. "Bad stuff. Secrets." She shook her head as the feelings washed over her like waves. A sudden ache stabbed her hard in the gut and she staggered before she regained her balance.

"What?" Reed asked.

"Someone was murdered here."

Reed stared dubiously for a moment and then set the sledgehammer aside, took the flashlight and shined it in the hole. "I'd say you were right about that," he gasped.

"What is it?" Amy asked – but she *knew* what it was.

Reed swallowed visibly. His hands started shaking.

"What is it?" she repeated. This time, her voice raised an octave.

Reed paled as he backed away from the wall. The flashlight flickered like a strobe light in his trembling hand. "We gotta call 9-1-1."

Amy took an impatient breath. "It's a person isn't it? There's a body back there." Amy enunciated every word slowly. Her knees quaked.

When Reed didn't answer, she snatched the flashlight from his hand and started toward the wall.

*Don't look in there.*

"Don't look in there." Reed's voice echoed Amy's thoughts. It was charged with warning.

She glanced back at him and then steeled herself for what she might see behind the wall. She had to know. She had to see for herself if her hit was right. As she lifted the flashlight, the words of Poe rang like a clarion bell in her head. *I thrust a torch through the remaining aperture and let it fall within...*

*Don't look in there.*

Ignoring her intuition, she peered into the murky darkness.

There on the floor, illuminated by a shard of yellow light, was a human skeleton.

## Chapter Three

Amy waited in the truck until Reed and the authorities were finished removing most of the bricks to enable a forensics team to view the skeleton. She had come close to fainting after seeing it—knowing firsthand how the person had felt when the last brick had been slid into place.

*A male. It was a male.*

Her gaze swept the façade of the house. Something about this place was cracking her psychic shell wide open and it terrified the hell out of her.

She hugged her arms and rocked back and forth as ugly images from her own past reared in her thoughts. Had he screamed—as she had—until his throat burned raw? Had he clawed and kicked and struggled to get out?

She swallowed. Hard. A tear seeped out of the corner of her eye and stole down her cheek.

Terror.

Shock.

*Heartbreak...*

Her back slammed against the seat and she gasped for breath. This was too much. Why couldn't she have started with a lost cat or a misplaced set of keys? Why this? Why someone who had suffered so much like *she* had?

"Amy!" Reed's voice brought her out of her reverie. Trembling, she swiped the tear away and looked up to find him motioning for her to return to the cellar.

That damned cellar was the last place she wanted to go.

Climbing out of the truck, she walked back around the side of the house and joined Reed. His hand clamped down on her shoulder. "Are you sure you can handle this?"

"Yes, of course," she blurted, forcing eye contact.

The sun sinking behind him bathed the luminous backdrop of tress in an eerie rosy glow—not unlike the glow she'd seen hurtling out of the hole in the wall.

Reed's gaze searched hers. Apparently satisfied, he turned and started down the stairs.

Steeling herself, Amy followed. With ten other people in the cramped little cellar, she felt oddly *less* claustrophobic.

The opening had been cleared well enough to expose a closet-sized *tomb*.

"I reckon it was a slave." One of the policemen stood with his hands on his hips, staring down at the pile of bones on the floor of the makeshift mausoleum. He was heavier than the others, with a slick, shaved head.

*He's wrong.*

Amy held her hand to her nose against the sickeningly familiar stale smell of old air and dirt. Someone had died in that cold, awful place—and they'd died alone and scared.

Two rusted chains with manacles hung from iron clamps secured to the floor joists above. Amy's stomach flipped as she realized the person had been restrained. She blew out a sigh. The crumbling skeleton had long since slipped from the bonds and lay in a dusty pile.

Sorrow flooded her. He'd died young. Too young.

She hugged her arms tightly, remembering the feeling of being bound and gagged—and helpless.

*Shooting pain in her shoulder... Gasping for air... Digging her thumbnail into the duct tape around her wrists... There! Disappointment... Try again... Freedom! A surge of relief that only came crashing down around her when she discovered the hard, unyielding wooden lid of a closed coffin...*

She shook her head to dispel the gruesome images from her own ordeal. Pity for the person's spirit flooded her and she moved through the crowd and tucked her skirt behind her knees as she knelt near the bones. She squinted. In the loose dirt lay two scarlet cardinal feathers, amazingly intact and fresh despite the apparent age of the all-but decomposed skeleton.

She reached out to touch them but suddenly Charity's voice penetrated the confines of the cellar. "Well, I'll be!" She pushed her way through the throng of officers and didn't stop until the pointed toe of her shoe was within inches of one of the large thigh bones. "Who would have thought someone was buried right here in my own basement?"

She turned to a female forensics officer. "Any idea how long this guy has been here?"

"I'd say the skeleton has been here for at least a century and from the size of these bones, this was a male."

*Bingo.*

Everyone's attention honed in on the officer. She stood holding the skull in a gloved hand, turning it as if it were a prism that could catch the light. "From the shape of his teeth, I'd say he was Native American."

Chills broke out along Amy's bare arms which had nothing to do with the fact she'd correctly guessed the victim's sex. She looked away from the yellowed skull and her gaze riveted to the two red feathers once more.

She'd just told Reed about the Ouija board's odd prediction all those years ago.

*Red feather...*

*Return...*

She touched her tongue to her lips and tasted the tart green apple lip gloss once more.

"Well, I've heard of having a skeleton in the closet but this is ridiculous," Charity laughed. A few others chuckled but most remained solemnly quiet, as if they were attending a funeral.

Amy wanted desperately to touch the bones. She just knew she would be inundated with images, names, a life cut short...but she didn't dare. Not with a whole battalion of police officers who would arrest her on the spot. She cringed at the thought.

"What's all the ruckus about?" a man called from the stairwell.

"Hey, Eddie," Reed called. "Have a look at this."

Amy watched as the sweaty, balding Bush Hogger ambled into the cellar. He took one look at the skeleton and then scratched his head. "Well, there's a day-breaker."

He turned to Charity. "I got that land cleared off to the cemetery. Looks like some looters have been back in there, and some kids. There weren't nuthin' else but a bunch of sunken in old graves, some broken off tombstones and a passel of empty beer cans."

Charity beamed and turned to Amy. "Has Reed told you there was a rumor Uriah Winston's gold was buried with him?"

Amy shook her head.

"If it was," Eddie said, "it ain't there no more."

His wrinkled forehead furrowed and he looked from Charity to Reed and back again. "Looters done got it. The grave was already opened when I found it."

An expression of dismay crossed Charity's features. "That's too bad. I can't imagine why anyone would want to disturb a man's grave." She glanced warily at the skeleton and then at the forensics team. "I hate to ask this, but what are you going to do with this skeleton? I'm anxious for Reed to begin the renovation."

The lady forensics officer glanced up from the skull. "We'll box them and take them to the Lauderdale County Forensics Sciences office after we collect all the evidence we need." The woman had one of those authoritative, forceful voices only female cops, soldiers and P.E. teachers possessed. "Our work shouldn't interfere with your restoration."

"Let me know if there's anything I can do," Charity said but stopped on her way up the cellar stairs. "Could you make certain that homeless woman stays off my property? She's scaring people with that gun."

"We'll keep an eye out for her, Mrs. Clanton," the bald officer said.

*Red feathers...*

Amy jerked when a big hand fastened on her shoulder.

"You about ready to go home?" Reed asked.

She searched his eyes. He looked tired, shaken.

She couldn't wait to get out of this place. She nodded. "Why don't we get those jeans and work boots tomorrow."

"Great idea. How about a beer right now?"

\* \* \* \* \*

A chorus of, "Hello, Reed," resounded in the tiny local bar across the street from the old plantation house property. Reed pulled out a stool and plopped down on it.

Amy had to fold and draw up her skirt so she could climb up onto the high stool. She'd never been a barfly but Reed had looked so stunned by finding the skeleton, she would never have denied him a drink.

Her gaze scanned the bar crowd. A bearded man sat at the end of the bar. He practically leered at her. Amy gave him a brief smile and averted eye contact lest he try to start a conversation. The patrons were an odd mixture of business people and rednecks.

She coughed when the guy next to her lit up a cigarette and the acrid fumes reached her nostrils.

"What'll you have, sweetheart?" a gravelly voiced waitress asked from behind the bar. Her two white-blonde pigtailed were bizarrely inconsistent with her sixty-plus-year-old face.

Reed had not even ordered and yet the waitress popped the top of the same brand of beer Amy had seen him drink back at the A-frame. She slid it across the bar to him.

"Do...do you have any Chardonnay?"

Reed burst into laughter. "Chardonnay? Amy, this isn't the type of place you get *wine* or any of those other froufrou drinks. Here, you drink rotgut. Bring her one of those new girlie beers, the kind with the lime flavor in it." He turned to Amy. "And drink it out of the bottle. No glass for you." He wagged his finger at her in mock threat.

She laughed then quietly sipped her beer when the bartender placed it before her, her mind still dancing with images of those two strangely brilliant cardinal feathers sprawled in the dust next to that skeleton.

*A Native American?*

She wondered if the feathers had something to do with his totem animal. Many Native Americans believed a totem animal was a spiritual being assigned to assist them in daily life. Amy had learned about them at psychic fairs and she tried to remember exactly the significance of the cardinal. If only she hadn't tossed out those totem animal cards she'd used while giving readings...

All she could remember was something about red signifying life force. That would be another question for Gwen.

"Amy?" Reed nudged her shoulder, bringing her abruptly out of her daydream. "Do you mind if we get outta here?" he said under his breath.



"But we just got here."

He gestured with his head toward a pretty redheaded girl who'd just come in the front door.

Amy glanced in the girl's direction. She was blatantly staring at Reed, obviously intent on making an approach. "No, of course not."

So, her brother did have a history. Amy wondered about it. Reed had always had girlfriends but he'd been strangely quiet about them.

They were both silent on the way home. Reed had shut her down fast when curiosity had gotten the better of her and she'd finally brought up the redhead.

It was just as well. Amy's mind still processed the clamor of emotions she'd experienced at being in the dusty old house, and especially in that hell hole of a basement.

The headlights illuminated the glittering pavement on River Road and Amy found herself mesmerized by it. The one beer she'd drunk had left her sleepy and more fatigued than she'd first thought. She looked forward to crashing in the loft of the A-frame and forgetting all about the musty cellar and the skeletons in her own closet.

Reed finally spoke as he pulled into his driveway. "Man, that was just plain weird. Who'd want to chain some Indian dude up in a basement? Have you picked up anything else on it?"

She inhaled and then bit her bottom lip. She shook her head. "No." The truth was, she wasn't certain she wanted to tap in to her intuition right now. At the time when she'd needed it the most, her psychic ability had let her down and left her vulnerable to a psychotic killer.

She had worked on countless murder cases and had been instrumental in helping to locate a number of missing persons—but she hadn't been able to turn that insight on herself and in the process, she'd nearly gotten herself and her sister killed.

One thing was for certain. Whoever the Native American was, Amy knew he was a kindred spirit—someone whose trust had been betrayed. Just like her. But she didn't have to be psychic to know that much.

"I think I'm going to turn in early," she said, already relishing the thought of soaking in the hot tub on Reed's deck and then disappearing under the covers. She opened the truck door and stepped out into the night. Brilliant stars winked in the October sky. A nearly full moon cast a calming, midnight blue glow over the river.

"Sounds like a good idea." He started toward his house on the hill. "See you bright and early, though!"

As she watched him walk up the hill, an overwhelming sense of gratitude surged within her for everything he'd done for her. "Reed!" she called.

He turned.

"Hey—thanks for taking me in." A lump welled in her throat at the sudden gush of emotion.

His smile flashed white in the moonlight. He waved a hand at her in a gesture of dismissal. "Don't be silly. Good night, Sis."

Content, she turned and bounded down the wooden stairs—but stopped cold when she noticed her door standing slightly open.

Amy hesitated. Her stomach turned a somersault. Boo could never have opened that door—so who was in the A-frame? She glanced back up the driveway. Reed had already gone inside.

Should she go get him?

What if she just hadn't closed the door well? He'd think she was a simpering coward, and rightfully so.

She stared into the house. The whole A-frame was cast in dark shadows. "Boo?"

Her only answer was the water lapping rhythmically against the deck and pier pilings.

"Hello?" she called. She took a step toward the door then pushed it the rest of the way open.

She glanced nervously toward the ladder. "Hello?" Her voice was soft. Tremulous. When she didn't get an answer, she stepped inside and fumbled for the light switch. Where was that damn thing?

Something shifted in the shadows.

She froze with the realization she wasn't alone.

Amy's pulse rioted as she heard the sound of approaching footsteps. It wasn't Boo. It was *something* bigger. Much bigger.

She strained to see in the darkness. Terror rendered her immobile.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Her gaze riveted to the shadows as she backpedaled and accidentally tripped over the threshold, landing with a thud flat on her back.

A massive, three-legged brown Doberman pinscher loped into view and sniffed her face thoroughly.

*Tripod!* Relief flooded her—only to be replaced with a new, sickening wave of terror.

*God, this beast has eaten Boo!*

"Boo!" she called frantically as she scrambled off the ground. She tried to whistle but no sound would come out. "Boo!" Her heart pumped in frenzied bursts.

Her tension melted when she finally heard a whiny puppy voice. Boo ambled sleepily out of the shadows, stretching, her bubblegum tongue curled up as she yawned. Tripod nudged the tiny Chihuahua affectionately with his big brown snout.

"So," Amy said, her fears allayed. "You've found yourself a buddy."

She scooped Boo into her arms and patted Tripod's massive head. "Did you open my door, you big lummo?"

Tripod sniffed and snorted as if to say he had. He hopped a few awkward three-legged steps toward the open door and glanced over his shoulder to see if Boo was coming along. Boo squirmed in Amy's arms. "All right, all right. You can go too." She lowered the Chihuahua to the ground and closed the door behind them before blowing out an audible sigh.

When a sudden tremor rushed up her spine, she hugged her arms as her gaze scanned the sloped walls of the A-frame. Why did she still have the distinct impression she was not alone?

She shook it off. She was just spooked. That was all.

Over her shoulder, she eyed the hot tub situated on the corner of the deck. A hot Jacuzzi soak would be just the thing to relax her and lull her to sleep.

Seeing that skeleton walled up in that awful cellar had affected her more than she'd realized. It had brought back horrible, horrible memories. And knowing someone else had met that same fate, albeit over a century ago, left her depressed and scared all over again.

She shivered. No. The hot tub alone wouldn't relax her enough to sleep. She walked into the bathroom and reached for her bottle of sleeping pills.

\* \* \* \* \*

*So, the little trollop has come back. Despite the modern and strange looking clothing, her appearance was still the same. He'd felt a good stirring in his breeches when he'd seen her hair all loose and framing her innocent, frightened face – the way she'd looked when he fucked her that first time.*

*Innocent...*

*She was anything but that. He rubbed his burgeoning cock. To bury himself in that sweet, tight hole again...*

*They called her Amy now but she was still his Sarah.*

*His Sarah...*

*But this time he would be patient – and he would relish making her pay for her betrayal.*

## Chapter Four

"I've found you."

Amy shifted sleepily under the luxurious five-hundred-thread-count cotton sheets. She felt so free and unencumbered.

So...*naked?*

Vaguely, she wondered when she'd removed the T-shirt and panties she'd slipped on before crawling into bed.

"I thought I had lost you."

Amy moaned as her consciousness slowly seeped back in.

"Open your legs for me, my love," the ethereal voice insisted.

*I must be having that delicious dream again.*

Even as the thought entered her mind, she spread her legs wide, giving access to what felt like an inquisitive, warm tongue.

It felt *good*.

*So good...*

It had been so long since she'd been with a man she'd almost forgotten what it felt like. Even then, it hadn't been this good. She moaned aloud and lifted her hips toward the insistent mouth.

*Sucking, tasting, probing...*

Big hands pushed her thighs impossibly wider and the mouth began a more unrelenting assault. A hot tongue delved into her desire-drenched pussy.

Amy cried out.

The pressure was intense, almost painful, but she didn't want it to stop. Not now. Not ever.

A finger pushed up tight inside her. God she was wet. *So fucking wet...*

"Sarah..."

"Yes," she breathed. The name was not hers but, like the voice and the heady sensations, it was oddly familiar.

Hazy images fled through her head of a clandestine meeting in a stable, with voluminous skirts thrown up to expose her bare flesh underneath. A little thrill rushed through her tummy. Her heart warmed.

*Loved...*

*So in love...*

The expert finger prodded and explored her hole, rubbing just the right spot.

Amy writhed.

She felt heavy. *So sleepy...*

She vaguely wished she hadn't swallowed that second sleeping pill. More hazy images flooded her and with them came waves of emotions. Her forehead furrowed as she made a weak attempt at sorting it all out – but they didn't matter. All that mattered was this merciless tongue eating her pussy coupled with the long, inquisitive finger.

But this was different than the recurring dream she'd been having. This seemed eerily *real*.

The mouth sucked and tugged at her clit. Amy pushed herself toward it. "Oh yes." She breathed in through her teeth. Her hips rose off the bed as the mouth devoured her ruthlessly.

Amy dug her nails into the sheets, seizing handfuls of the soft cotton as she suddenly spiraled, coming and coming until she fell limp on the bed.

Surprised, she panted. In the past, she had rarely reached orgasm with a man. But she quickly realized this was not her dream lover – and yet it was not a flesh and blood man.

This was a spirit.

Panic threatened to gush but was quickly replaced by other – stronger – emotions.

*Love you...*

*My beautiful Sarah...*

Odd sentimentality flooded her and she realized the thoughts and words were coming directly from her phantom lover.

She would worry about who and what he was later. Right now, she only wanted this raw, carnal pleasure to continue. "Don't stop," she encouraged as she ran her own palms over her taut nipples and down over the sensitive skin of her belly.

Tears stung her eyes and flowed freely down her cheeks. This felt so, so good. She felt as if she had held all her emotions on the inside and suddenly they were bursting out of her in a wild torrent.

She gasped as the sheets flew miraculously off the bed in a whoosh and cool air rushed over her skin. Gooseflesh broke out along her arms and legs. She managed to crack open an eye but saw no one. Nothing.

Utterly consumed with beguiling familiarity, she spread her legs for him, emboldened by her previous climax and the white-hot desire still raging within her. This simply had to continue. "Fuck me," she whispered into the darkness.

And then while she still basked in the glow of a perfectly intense orgasm, something hard, something big, urged against her wet hole and she heard herself encouraging the ghost all over again in scandalous, brazen language.

Amy's fingers curled around the cold metal headboard. She wanted this. It had been so long since she'd had sex. Damn she wanted – *needed* this.

The spirit's cock thrust inside her, only to recede and plunge again with one hard, punishing drive after another. Amy opened her legs and reveled in the pleasure-pain. She had never been one for rough sex but for the first time in a year, this made her feel alive, vibrant.

"Make it hurt, dammit," she encouraged. She spread her thighs wider still, delighting in the wild energy bustling through her body. She was shocked at her own behavior—and her wanton words.

The ghost complied.

Hard pressure covered her mouth, prying her lips open. A tongue forced its way into the opening, plundering inside, demanding a response which she readily gave. *Don't stop... Please don't stop.* She could taste the tangy sweetness of her own pussy on his tongue.

Unseen fingertips tugged hard at one of her nipples. She cried out and arched her back, mentally inducing the ghost to pinch, pull, bite. The curious pain sent wave after wave of pleasure straight to her pussy and she had the mental image of her energy centers—her chakras—connecting in pulsating rainbow colors, exploding up to her scalp and then back down to the bright red root chakra.

She was coming again.

Amy's head thrashed from side to side. *You know me. You know what to do. You know what I want. You know me so damn well...*

Breathless, she lay still against the sheets, her naked body exposed to the cool night air. Heavy and sated, she basked in the pure pleasure that still vibrated through her veins.

But slowly, as her head cleared, she wondered how she could have allowed this to happen.

How could she have let the spirit of a virtual stranger become so intimate with her? And how could she have so boldly encouraged him?

*Stranger?*

No stranger would have been able to read her thoughts like that—to anticipate her most torrid and unspoken desires the way her spirit lover had.

She knew this soul. She'd known him before in another time and place. The realization shook her to the core.

Still, it wasn't like her. It wasn't like her at all. Her insides hollowed.

But just as she started to clamber off the bed to reach for the sheet, a phantom hand pinned her wrist to the mattress high above her head. She gasped. "Who are you?"

"You know me," a voice made of the shadowy dark whispered. Warm, adamant kisses rained down her neck, over her chest. One nipple tensed and she knew he was sucking it, teasing it, coercing her to arch toward him.

"Your lover," the voice purred.

Hot desire welled again. Her clit grew erect.

Amy's blood thrummed with renewed, intense hunger. She didn't want this to stop. She wanted to lose herself in every kiss, every flick of his tongue, every thrust of his hard, thick cock. Her head swam. The powerful sensations threatened to overwhelm her as his mouth moved downward. She trembled and spread her thighs.

He could do *anything* he wanted. She felt deliciously helpless – and on fire.

"Did you think anything or anyone could ever keep me from you?" The voice was raspy and distant.

A chill immobilized her. She knew that voice so well. But from where?

He pressed a kiss to her swollen clitoris and she jolted.

*More...*

*I want more.*

His hot tongue flicked around the distended bud and dipped lower to dart in and out of her hole. Amy's fingers found and curled around the cold metal of the headboard again. With this ghost, nothing was forbidden – and she knew she would deny him nothing.

Her breath caught. She arched, pressing her pussy toward the molten phantom tongue.

Hands locked around her thighs, holding them apart as his mouth burrowed into her, nuzzling, suckling, laving.

Amy opened her eyes and gazed down the length of her body. Indentations appeared on her thighs where her spirit lover's fingers pressed into her. A swirling mist of ethereal energy undulated between her legs. She made a sound as the hot mouth moved away.

"You want more?"

"Yes!" she cried. "Fuck me. I want your cock in me."

His spirit member entered her insidiously slowly, sliding in inch by satisfying inch until she felt the head of it nudging her womb and the tightness of his body as it shoved up hard against her pussy. She shuddered and writhed, clutching the headboard until her fingers ached.

He pumped and her body quickened and once again, liquid heat dissolved downward, gathering and cresting until she was weeping from the pure ecstasy of a perfect orgasm.

The sensations slowly eddied away and Amy lay breathless and sated and heavy – and ensconced in a spirit's embrace.

"Do not return to *Belle Ruisseau*," the voice whispered against her ear.

It was a warning but Amy was too intoxicated from the out-of-this-world sex to respond. Instead, she nuzzled closer in her shadow lover's arms and slipped once more into sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey, you gonna sleep all day?" Reed called from the ground floor. "Rise and shine, sleeping beauty!"

Amy groaned and opened her eyes. Momentary confusion ensued before she realized she was in the A-frame, still in the bed – and naked!

She propped up on one elbow and rubbed her eyes. Why was she naked? And why did she feel so groggy? Where were the covers?

The sheet lay crumpled in a snowy wad on the floor by the bed. Her polka-dotted panties lay along with her white cotton T-shirt on the floor. "What the –"

Realization seeped in. Memories of her torrid dreams with her phantom lover came flooding back in a torrent.

She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly as she tried to make sense of what happened.

"Amy?"

"I'm awake," she said drowsily and yawned. She didn't usually have trouble waking up but today, she was bone tired.

She glanced at the digital clock on the bedside table – 9:37. Her brain was clouded. She was never one to sleep late.

She shifted, noticing how deliciously sore between the legs she was. She felt as if she'd had sex. Lots of *really good* sex.

Instinctively, her hand flew to her crotch. It was drenched.

Her nipples were sore. The faint impression of teeth marks marred one of her breasts.

It had really happened.

Amy ran her hand through her thick hair.

Someone – or something – had *fucked* her last night.

She blushed when she recalled her encouraging words and wanton participation as her mind raced back over the previous night. Her body warmed and tightened – and then her breath caught. She hadn't had dream sex at all this time. She'd had sex with a ghost!

Amy trembled. After cautioning Jillian of the dangers of sex with spirits just last year, she, Amy, had done it herself – again and again!

Amy gnawed her bottom lip. This was different. She wasn't like her sister. Amy had felt a powerful connection to her spirit lover, as if they had somehow *known* one another before.

Fleeting images of corsets and long skirts passed through her befuddled thoughts along with the memory of a warning.

*Do not return to Belle Ruisseau.*



She flinched. Who was he? Why had he warned her not to go back to the mansion? Mystified, her gaze scanned the loft. A gasp caught in her throat when she noticed what lay on the white pillowslip next to her – a pair of bright red feathers.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy bit back a yawn and shifted uncomfortably in the seat of Reed's truck. The brand-new jeans she'd just bought and donned in the store rubbed her raw crotch like the devil. She tugged at the seam on the inner thigh and grimaced.

"Something wrong?"

Everything was wrong – but yet, felt strangely *right*.

A warm blush infused her cheeks at the memory of her ardent spirit lover. "No...it's just I'm not used to wearing jeans." Well, she wasn't exactly lying.

"How about those work boots? Those are a far cry from those stinky hemp sandals of yours."

Amy looked down at the pristine suede boots. They were stiff but not nearly as stiff as the aching muscles in her thighs. "I'm sure I'll have a blister on my foot by the end of the day."

She'd forgotten what a good sore could be had from great sex. Hell, the last man she'd had sex with had tried to kill her – and that had been over a year ago.

Throughout her career as a psychic, she'd encountered her share of spirits but she'd never had sex with one. Still, something about this spirit was different. Very different. And far too familiar.

Despite the ghost's warning, she knew she would have to go back to *Belle Ruisseau*.

Not only did he have a connection to the place – so did she.

"Here we are," Reed said and Amy found herself bounding, with a mixture of heartwrenching dread and eager anticipation, down the rutted driveway toward the plantation house once more. Although she had desperately wanted her psychic ability to return, part of her didn't want to know – to feel – the terror her spirit lover had felt at the point of his tragic death.

Reed droned on about what they were going to do to the house today but she hardly paid him any attention. Her thoughts rambled about the spirit and his dire warning.

Her stomach tightened and she inhaled sharply as a new rush of desire flooded her loins at the memory of last night. The sex had been so intense. She had actually felt the fingers, the tongue – and more. He'd seemed so...*real*. So demanding. So skilled.

A brilliant image of the scarlet feathers filled her brain.

Her lover was doubtless the man who'd been walled up over a century ago in that dank, dark cellar.

*The skeleton.*

There was no denying it. Her ghost lover had to be him. Although she had certainly received psychic information about his death, it didn't explain the overwhelming sense of familiarity she felt when he touched her, kissed her. A little thrill tickled her tummy at the thought of a sexy, dark Native American spirit lover. A half smile tugged at one corner of her lips. Hopefully, he would hang around for a day or two before she'd have to have the inevitable talk with him to tell him to move on into the Light. Leaning her head back on the headrest and closing her eyes, she straightened her back and tugged at the jeans once more. Yes, she'd send her invisible friend into the Light—after one more night.

Her grin widened.

"What are the cops still doing here?" Reed's voice brought her abruptly out of her daydream.

Amy opened her eyes. Several police cars—and the city coroner's van—were parked near the freshly cleared spot Eddie had mowed the day before. Two officers stood near the old lady who'd brandished a pistol at Reed when they'd arrived yesterday. She gestured wildly while the cops interviewed her outside her faded old station wagon.

A wave of chills started at Amy's scalp and swept straight down to the stiff toes of her new boots. This was not good. Not at all good.

She exchanged a worried glance with Reed before they both climbed out of the truck and marched through the freshly cut grass to where a squadron of black-and-white police cars was parked near a crumbling, slave-built stone wall.

Worn tombstones peeped over the sharp crags. In other places, the wall had fallen completely down, exposing an overgrown cemetery amidst the weeds—the one spot Eddie hadn't cleared. The clouded haze of an impending storm cast a gray pall on the natural hues of wheat, vivid orange and earthy brown.

Charity stood near one of the officers, her hands folded across her chest. She glared at the old lady but glanced back when Reed approached. Charity hurried toward them, the high heels of her shoes sinking into the damp, red Alabama clay. "Reed, it's terrible."

"What happened?"

"That landscaper you hired was evidently up here trying to loot Uriah Winston's grave last night and that old lady killed him." She pointed a well-manicured finger at Lettie.

Lettie's hands found her hips. "He deserved to die! But I didn't do it. The ghosts did!"

A violent shudder swept up Amy's spine. Her insides hollowed with the realization that Lettie was right.

"Eddie's dead?" Reed gasped, craning his neck to see past Charity and through the throng of officers to where a body lay on the ground covered with a dark tarp. "I don't believe Lettie would kill him!"

Charity pointed toward the gate. "She's been lurking outside the gate for the past month pointing a gun at everybody who dares come up the driveway."

Amy watched Reed's expression. He looked stricken. Shocked. She reached to touch his arm but he darted around Charity and headed straight for Eddie's body.

Charity searched Amy's eyes. "That old lady is a nut."

Amy shuddered as her gaze found Reed, who was kneeling beside the body. He looked devastated.

She had not known Eddie. But she *did* know Reed, and Reed treated his workers like family.

"Excuse me," she muttered to Charity before joining Reed.

Amy put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "What do you think happened?"

He stared at the shiny black tarp with bright orange letters. *Lauderdale County Coroner*. "Eddie was a good old guy, but...I guess the temptation was just too much for him. We'd all heard those stories about Uriah Winston's gold."

He stood and turned to her. His blue eyes were rimmed with tears and Amy could tell he grasped at every ounce of iron control he had to keep from breaking down. "Can you talk to him, Amy?"

Uncomfortable, she shifted her weight from one leg to the other. Lack of sleep had left her tired. Even if she were at the top of her psychic game, it would be impossible for her to pick up anything psychically when she was so fatigued.

Reed swallowed, obviously struggling to maintain composure. He pointed at the body. "Can you ask him what happened?" He practically begged her with his eyes.

Amy closed her eyes for a second but nothing came to her. She took a deep breath and blew it out before trying again. Still nothing. "I'm not getting anything."

"Come on, Aim." Despite his encouraging tone, his fists were clenched at his sides. "I've seen you pull information right out of the air. Ask him what happened." He was on the verge of breaking down and Amy felt powerless to help him.

Her mind was totally absorbed with the ghost's warning. "I'm trying, Reed. It's just not coming to me." But there was something else—or rather, the *lack* of something that left Amy baffled. "It's as if he's not *here*." That was strange. Spirits often remained close to their earthly bodies just after death. He should be here.

A stocky policeman with a blond crew cut intervened. "I'm Officer Morrison. Are you Reed Severin?"

"Yeah. Why?" His tone was clipped.

"We think this was an accident."

"What about that woman?" Amy asked as she glanced at Lettie, who was piling into her station wagon.

"The victim's neck was broken. There's no way Miss Lettie could have done that to a grown man," Officer Morrison said. "Apparently, he fell into one of those open graves." He pointed.

Amy followed his finger to where a weathered gray obelisk listing to the right like the Leaning Tower of Pisa jutted above the other grave markers. She slipped away and walked toward it. Something wasn't right here. If Eddie had fallen into a grave then why wasn't he still in it? It wasn't as if he could crawl out with a broken neck.

Her heart froze in her chest when she noticed the gaping grave. The dirt had been shoveled out long ago by looters. Fallen leaves and yellowed grass clung to exposed roots as the hole descended into darkness.

The terrifyingly familiar pungent stench of wet earth assailed her nostrils. Her hand flew to her chest and she labored to take deep breaths. She took a quick step back.

*Breathe, Amy, she told herself. You're safe.* She counted slowly to four with each inhale, and then four again on each exhale. She couldn't panic. Not here. Not now.

*I told you not to return to this place!*

The voice in her head shook her to the core but she chose to ignore it. *Focus on Eddie. Focus on what happened. It's important to Reed.*

With a hard swallow, she forced her gaze to the name on the tombstone. Time had worn away the granite façade but she could make out the etching. Uriah Winston.

Just reading the man's name gave her a wicked chill.

She sucked in a deep breath as her gaze was pulled to a strange black circle which had been burned into the grass beside the grave. She knelt and brushed her fingertips along the blackened ground.

The breath wheezed out of her lungs and she jerked her hand back. A keen impression of evil swept over her. Someone had done something bad here.

Oddly there was no sign of a struggle, but Amy knew the policeman was wrong. Eddie had not fallen into a grave. Not this one.

Her gaze moved to the much smaller tombstone next to Uriah's.

Sarah Winston

Beloved and Faithful Wife

1822-1846

She'd died young. So many women did in those days.

*Sarah...*

A chill sank straight to her toes. The ghost had called her Sarah.

But before she could give it any thought, she blinked and a sudden image of Eddie cowering in the moonlight in the weeds, begging for his life, hit her square in the solar

plexus. Amy struggled to breathe. The vision was unrelenting. Eddie's neck snapped with a sickening crack. Amy jolted.

There was no assailant. *No assailant she could see.*

Amy's hand flew to her mouth, stifling a cry. Although she hadn't gotten the information from Eddie's spirit, she knew what happened. The old lady was right. Eddie had been murdered — by a ghost!

Her fast-food sausage and biscuit breakfast threatened to come up. She clutched her stomach and tried to force the grisly images from her mind. Why would a ghost want to murder Eddie?

Magnetically, her gaze slid back to the burned spot on the ground. Something about it reminded her of black magic circles she'd only seen in books — circles cast by witches.

This was bad. She swallowed thickly. This was worse than bad. This was *evil*.

Her insides hollowed. Was the ghost who'd been in her bed connected to Eddie's death?

*No.* If he had been, he wouldn't have warned her not to return. She refused to believe he was responsible. Still, her rational mind warred with her intuition.

She trembled.

Most ghosts were benign albeit confused souls looking for the Light. Hardly any of them had the strength of presence to murder a person — or to *fuck* a person, for that matter.

Amy spread her knees slightly in an attempt to wrest the thick seam of her jeans away from her still raw, still damp crotch.

Gooseflesh broke out down her arms and legs and although her mind screamed that it had to be the same spirit, every psychic sense she possessed told her differently.

But could she trust her senses?

"Amy?"

She swallowed the bile in her throat and looked up at Reed. "He was murdered. His neck was broken," she blurted.

Reed gaped. "The cop said it was an accident."

She shook her head as she stood. Doubt flooded her. What if she was wrong?

And why had she allowed a spirit — a stranger — to make torrid love to her the night before?

Her eyes blinked as she tried to keep them forcibly from closing. She didn't want to see that image of Eddie's death again.

*A ghost.* She trembled.

"This was no accident." She shook her head. "That old lady was right. Eddie *was* murdered."

But by whom? Her insides involuntarily clenched. Panic surged through her veins.

Reed's massive hands gripped her shoulders and he squeezed so hard she winced. "Are you picking something up psychically? What makes you think he was murdered?" he asked, his voice low.

Charity's sharp gasp suddenly cut through the quiet. "Murder! I told you! Lettie did it." Charity moved next to them. "The police are wrong about it being an accident." Her angry gaze collided with Amy's. "You're getting some sort of sixth sense thing about this aren't you?"

"No," Amy lied. "The police are right. This was an accident." Then to Reed, "I know you're upset right now. Let's talk later. Okay?"

Reed continued to stare, his blue eyes beseeching Amy's.

"Okay?" She mentally screamed at him to let this go for now.

He sucked in a breath and released her shoulders before taking the hint, turning and walking away.

"I knew that old lady was dangerous," Charity said, her eyes narrowing.

This was getting far too uncomfortable. "I'd better catch up to Reed." She turned and followed Reed back to the truck.

Her whole body tingled as she climbed into the truck. Was the ghost who'd been in her bed responsible for a man's death? *No, no, no!* She shuddered. Why would a spirit want to kill a man? It didn't make any sense.

*Sarah, you know me. Remember...*

Amy's breath caught. That voice in her head belonged to her spirit lover. *Remember? You know me?* And why did he insist on calling her Sarah?

Her gaze drifted to the crumbling mansion. Something about this place had unlocked her ability and it was crashing over her with overwhelming force.

But even when she had reached the pinnacle of her psychic talent, she had only received information in symbols and bits she had to assimilate and piece together like a jigsaw puzzle.

Discovering what was happening here was going to require more than flipping out a Celtic Cross spread of Tarot cards.

Amy knew it was imperative she figure it out—especially in light of what had happened the night before.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Florence library seemed like a good place to start. Amy wheeled the VW into a narrow parking place and hopped out.

Reed had gone to be with Eddie's family and Amy had seized the opportunity to change out of the binding jeans and back into one of her very flowing—very loose—broomstick skirts. The beaded trim at the hem tinkled like little bells as she hurried into the library.

As soon as she stepped into the lobby, the musty smell of books coupled with the warm, inviting aroma of coffee met her.

Coffee? Immediately, her gaze pivoted in the direction of the tantalizing scent that reminded her how exhausted she was. There was actually a coffee shop in the library! She yawned audibly and muttered a quick "excuse me" to a lady she nearly bumped into while she gaped at the trendy café sign which read Coffee-ology.

Even Nashville's library wasn't as nice as this.

As she tramped over the bright gold *fleur-de-lis* design inlaid in the floor, Amy made a mental note to return to the quaint little shop for a double shot of espresso after she found the information she needed. Right now, she had more important issues to tackle.

She approached the information desk, where she was met by an almost comically typical-looking librarian. The woman's black-rimmed glasses dangled from a dainty gold chain, silver hair that looked like spun silk curled on her head and, although it was unseasonably warm outside, a cream-colored sweater surrounded her narrow shoulders. "May I help you?" her little voice warbled.

"Yes. Do you have a local history section? I'm looking for information about a plantation house called *Belle Ruisseau*." Amy shifted her bulky hemp bag from one shoulder to the other.

"Upstairs, at the end of the south wing." She pointed upward.

"Thank you."

Amy winced when the soles of her leather sandals smacked loudly against her heels as she ascended the glittering black marble stairs.

Directions had never been her forte and she was relieved to discover an unmistakable sign above the door which alerted her to the location of the local history room. Sailing past a station of several computers, she walked to the south wing where she found yet another information desk.

Another librarian was just hanging up a phone. With his thick, graying hair he reminded Amy of a smaller, younger Stephen King but his nametag read "Lee".

He studied Amy, obviously not recognizing her as one of his regulars. "Can I help you?"

"Yes," she said and deposited her heavy bag on the nearest oak table. "I'm looking for information on a plantation house. *Belle Ruisseau*."

His brown eyes lit up. "*Belle Ruisseau*. You know that's recently been bought."

"Yes. My brother is doing the restoration on the house."

"Did you see the article in the *Times Daily* this morning?" He dug through a massive pile of papers and notebooks on his desk and produced a copy of a local newspaper. The front page headline read "Skeleton Found in Cellar of Historic Home".

Amy scanned the article. There was nothing in it she didn't already know about the skeleton. However, there was a brief history of the house. "Do you mind if I read this?"

"Not at all," Lee said. "I have a file in the back on the plantation with more stuff. I'll get it for you."

She hadn't expected this kind of reception. Elated, she pulled up a chair and spread the newspaper out in front of her. Her stomach fluttered. It'd been almost a year since she'd used her senses to work on a murder case. Fervently hoping some semblance of psychic insight would arise in her mind, she wrung her hands in her lap as she perused the article.

"A historic gem hides behind the thick woods just off Florence Boulevard. This gem is the *Belle Ruisseau* plantation house and it was home to a former planter and politician, and the centerpiece of a plantation that once encompassed thirty-eight hundred acres.

"The slaves, belonging to plantation owner Jeddah Ryan, dug into a hill near the spring that gave *Belle Ruisseau* its name. (*Belle Ruisseau* is French for 'beautiful stream'.) The Alabama red clay that was excavated from the site was then used to form the bricks that were used in the construction of the home. However, Jeddah Ryan, who'd begun building the house in 1825, never saw the completion.

"*Belle Ruisseau* came into the hands of Uriah Winston, who completed the construction.

"Recently purchased by Florence natives Jackson and Charity Clanton, *Belle Ruisseau* is now being painstakingly restored by Reed Severin, a local historic site reclamation expert. Yesterday, while Severin was working in the cellar of the house, he discovered a hollow wall. Behind it lay a skeleton."

Amy shuddered at the memory of the anguished moan coupled with the reddish vapor that emanated from the opening when Reed finally punctured the wall. *Her phantom lover*. Moist heat dampened her panties when she recalled how willingly she'd participated in pure, carnal sex with a stranger.

Somehow, she knew *stranger* was not a fitting description for the spirit who'd shared her bed the night before.

Why did she feel as if she knew him?

She'd always been sexually adventurous but she'd never engaged in what could be termed as licentious sex. Even during the most intimate Tantric sex in which she'd participated, she'd never felt the connection, the unmistakable bond she'd felt with the ghost from *Belle Ruisseau*.

*Remember, Sarah...*

Her breath froze at the sound of his voice in her head. She shifted in the hard wooden chair and forced her attention back to the article.

"Lauderdale County Forensics Officer Kristine McDonald told *Times Daily* more studies would have to be done on the bones in Montgomery to determine their actual age. However, she feels certain the skeleton belonged to a male in his late twenties or early thirties, of Native American descent."



"Ma'am?" Lee asked as he placed a large folder on the table. "There are some scanned images in this file. They're not too good but the originals are over in Pope's Tavern if you want to go check them out."

"Pope's Tavern?"

"You must not be from around here."

Amy shook her head.

"It's a museum one block over on the corner of Seminary and Hermitage. They're open until four."

"Cool. Thanks."

Lee started to walk away but then he stopped and turned. "Is your brother the one who found the skeleton?"

Amy nodded. "I was there." She leaned forward slightly. "Do you have any idea who it could have been?" Could Lee give a name to the spirit who'd been in her bed the night before? Heat settled in her neck. She crossed her legs and squeezed her thighs together to dispel the surge of desire between them.

Lee glanced at a gentleman in a white shirt and black suit who was listening closely as he was worked on a laptop across the small room. "We've been talking about it and we think it might have been Jeddah Ryan's son. He was a half-breed Cherokee Uriah Winston had hired to paint portraits of his family."

Adrenaline coursed through Amy's veins. She was onto something. This was the story.

"Legend has it Ryan murdered Winston's wife and ran away."

Murder?

Amy swallowed. She didn't get the telltale tingle up her spine that usually signified affirmation. "But if that was Ryan in the...in the wall...then that doesn't make a lot of sense." She inhaled. Just uttering the name *Ryan* sent a shiver of confirmation up her spine. "Unless Uriah Winston caught him and killed him and then walled him up to hide the body."

Lee scratched his jaw. "That's just what I was thinking. No one would have much cared if Winston had killed the man who'd murdered his wife, especially a half-breed, but since Winston was a politician, I think he would have tried to cover it up."

Amy nodded. It made sense. But what about the red feathers? Why were they so intact and fresh looking despite the century and a half they'd been walled up in a damp cellar? Didn't feathers decompose?

*A half-breed.* A delicious flutter spiraled downward and warmed her clit. Was this Native American killer her phantom lover? She trembled.

Lee opened the folder and flipped through some of the papers before he pushed a bad black-and-white copy of a portrait toward her. "This is one of the portraits he painted. It's of Uriah Winston."

Amy could barely discern a stiff man with a shock of light-colored curly hair. When she touched the paper, a shudder ripped through her body. There was something about this cold-faced man that unnerved her. An image of him spreading mortar onto a brick assailed her.

Her suspicions were correct. He *was* responsible for walling her Native American ghost up in the cellar.

In retaliation for killing his wife?

"This was his wife, Sarah." Lee inadvertently broke her trance as he pushed another paper toward her.

Amy stared. Her lips parted. Even though the copy was terrible, Amy instantly recognized the face staring back at her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy checked her watch. It was 3:30. The museum would close in half an hour. She'd had to forgo that much needed double espresso in order to make it to the Tavern in time. Still trembling, she parked the van, wrenched up the parking brake and flew through the wrought iron gate, up the uneven flagstone path and into the entrance of the Pope's Tavern Museum.

Adrenaline pumped through her veins in energizing bursts that dispelled the need for that espresso. She clenched her fists so hard her nails dug into her palms. But once she'd entered the shadowy central hall of the museum, time seemed to stand still.

The slightly sweet smell of old things and even older wood filled her nostrils. Amy's heart thumped audibly in her ears, along with the sonorous ticking of a clock in a distant room.

A shiny hotel bell sat on a table in the center of the small hall along with a handwritten note that read "ring for tour guide". Amy popped her palm down on the button and the bell chimed.

"Hello, hello!" a friendly female voice called from the other end of the tavern. The sound of heels echoing on the wood floor hastily came closer and closer.

Amy paced, willing the guide to hurry. She had to see that portrait. She had to know if it was true. And she had to see it now. She shook with nervous tension.

A petite, red-haired woman floated into the hallway. She smiled as she caught her breath. "Hello. Are you here for a tour?" Her nametag read "Jo".

Amy, who stood nearly a head taller than Jo, forced a smile. She was in no mood to be cordial but this woman had no sense of her urgency – and would hardly understand if Amy made an attempt at an explanation. *Excuse me, ma'am but I'm in a hurry because a ghost who made me come time after time last night may have killed my stepbrother's Bush Hog operator.* No. That wouldn't work at all. "Not really," Amy replied. "I'm Reed Severin's sister," she added bluntly.

Thankfully, that was all the explanation she needed because Jo's friendly smile faded into a look of utter surprise. Her red lips parted. "I read that article in the paper this morning. You're here about the skeleton." She motioned for Amy to follow her back the way she'd come. "I think I know who it is."

Amy's hemp sandals echoed in unison with Jo's burnt orange pumps as she followed her across the polished wood floor into a large room dominated by a massive oak table.

A musket hung over the mantle of a fireplace in one side of the room. Several multisized portraits in various antique frames lined each wall. Amy's pulse sped up and her gaze raced frantically. Where was the painting of Sarah Winston?

But Jo didn't stop. She led her through the left wing of the tavern and into a smaller room which featured a rope bed. A cracked gilt frame held a portrait that dangled from a black ribbon on the equally cracked plaster wall.

Amy's gaze immediately flew to the man depicted in the dark, dark oils.

His black hair was swept back off his face, revealing a perfectly straight hairline. Equally black eyebrows arched like raven's wings above even blacker eyes. The expression was intense. Severe. Dark olive skin, a firm jawline and a slightly crooked nose revealed his unmistakable Indian heritage.

He was timeless in appearance – and absolutely gorgeous.

Amy flushed.

She tried to swallow but her mouth was suddenly bone dry. Her insides tightened, sending a rush of wetness into her panties.

This was the man who'd been chained behind the wall at *Belle Ruisseau*.

This was the man whose spirit she'd seen soaring through the cellar when Reed had knocked a hole in the wall.

She couldn't believe he was the man who killed Eddie.

But one thing was certain. He was *definitely* the man who'd been in her bed last night.

The clock seemed to tick louder and louder. Amy's knees shook, setting the tinkling beads on the hem of her skirt in motion. She wanted to collapse but didn't think Jo would appreciate her plopping down on the rickety-looking rope bed.

"He was a renowned artist Uriah Winston brought to *Belle Ruisseau* to paint portraits of his family and his slaves. It was a fairly common practice in those days." Jo folded her arms over her chest. "This was a self-portrait." Her gaze never left the painting. "He was half Native American. His mother was a Cherokee princess. She was related to Sam Houston's second wife, Tiana Rogers."

Amy's mind raced back over high-school American history. *Sam Houston. Wasn't he associated with the Alamo?*

Jo continued. "His father was Jeddah Ryan, who was Scotch-Irish. Ryan was the builder of *Belle Ruisseau* but legend has it he lost the plantation gambling with Uriah Winston."

"Hmm." Realization seeped in. There was already bad blood between the Ryans and the Winstons.

Amy paled because although she listened to Jo, all she could think was *this man made me come over and over again last night*. She was shocked that the idea of it didn't repulse her in any way. Instead, she was intrigued. Captivated.

The man was beautiful.

Mysterious.

*Dangerous.*

She'd forgotten all about the portrait of Sarah Winston.

"W-what was his name?"

"William Ryan." Even as Jo uttered the name, the words resounded in Amy's head. It wasn't Jo's Alabama drawl, however, but rather a quiet, raspy male voice.

Amy tensed. A sweltering wave of heat traversed her spine, followed by a violent shudder of recognition.

*I know him. I've always known him.*

But how?

Jo continued. "But he went by his Indian name – William Red Feather."

Amy froze. *Red Feather?* An image of the two red feathers on her pillowslip rose in her mind. Her cheeks heated with a heady combination of realization and memory. She gaped at the portrait. Why had that house awakened her senses and why had this man – this soul – chosen her?

She suddenly felt as if she were in a tunnel, spiraling, falling, her thoughts drawn to one single moment from her past where she sat cross-legged on the carpeted floor with her hands on a Ouija board planchette. *Change your fate or the red feather cannot return.*

The Ouija had spelled *B – E – N* for Jillian and just last year, she'd married a man named Benton.

Red Feather.

But what did it mean? *Change your fate or the red feather cannot return...*

She gnawed her bottom lip.

Jo guided her by the elbow back into the main room of the tavern. Amy twisted her head to steal one more look at William Red Feather's portrait before she rounded the corner.

"Uriah Winston claimed Red Feather killed his wife, Sarah."

Amy whirled to face Jo but instead her gaze found the portrait she'd come here to see.

Stunned, she sucked in a breath.

Now it was obvious why he called her Sarah—and why he'd urged her to remember.

This was the portrait Amy had seen rendered in grainy black-and-white photocopy at the library but this time, it was in full, lifelike color—and it was like looking in a mirror.

Although the oil had cracked with time, bright blue eyes stared boldly at the artist. The hint of a secret smile curled one corner of the blushed pink lips. A rose-colored sash draped so loosely around the woman's shoulders the portrait was almost indecent. Blossoming cleavage and the hint of a taut nipple showed through the fabric. The complexion had been portrayed the color of cream. One perfect, pale strawberry blonde curl had escaped its chignon and wound seductively around an alabaster neck.

Amy was in shock. Although the skin was paler and the breasts were larger, those were her blue eyes. Her lips.

Jo took a step back. Her gaze darted to Amy and then back to the portrait. "Well, I declare! I thought you looked familiar. You are the spitting image of Sarah Winston!"

Amy shrank. A false-sounding laugh erupted from her chest. She couldn't wrest her gaze from the portrait but she knew she couldn't stand here and gawk. A knowing sort of quickening wriggled into her consciousness and she dragged her gaze down to the signature flourished in small red letters at the bottom.

*Wm. Red Feather.*

He'd painted this. She'd known that, of course, but seeing his signature slammed her with a sense of recognition she couldn't explain.

Her intuition hadn't lied. She *had* known him. But as Sarah Winston?

As if drawn by some unseen force, her hand lifted, her fingers outstretched toward the portrait. She couldn't *not* touch it. She couldn't *not* know.

And before Jo could stop her, her fingers made contact and once more, Amy was swirling into an abyss...

## Chapter Five

Dust motes glimmered in the sunlight which shone brightly through the wavered glass window panes. It felt warm on Sarah's bare shoulders. Her breaths were shallow and short. She'd never been this exposed – this naked – in front of a man before.

She loved it.

She loved *him*.

Unable to meet William Red Feather's gaze, she sat rigidly still as he posed her. Long, olive-skinned fingers arranged the rosy gossamer fabric around her bosom. The back of his hand brushed her distended nipple, sending a wave of white-hot heat spiraling downward. An iron-hard thigh pressed indecently against her knee. Sarah swallowed...

"You really shouldn't touch the artifacts." Jo's voice brought Amy rudely back to the present.

"I'm sorry," she muttered innocently as she snatched back her hand. She glanced at Jo, who hadn't seemed to notice she'd slipped into a momentary trance.

"And this is Uriah Winston. He was a roughneck," Jo said as she admired the portrait.

Amy tore her gaze from Sarah's portrait and looked at Uriah's. Whereas Sarah's had been soft, delicate, Uriah's was hard with deeply lined pale features and a careless shock of white, curly hair wildly framing his face.

This portrait had been painted with angry, stabbing brush strokes. Cold and deep-set whiskey-colored eyes peered knowingly. The mouth twisted into a cruel line.

Amy didn't have to be psychic to know William Red Feather had loathed this man. She shivered. Enough to kill his wife?

She couldn't imagine a soft, innocent, young woman like Sarah married to him.

The realization that Sarah and William Red Feather had had an affair left her shaken and confused. It was obvious Uriah Winston had discovered them and plainly apparent that was the reason William's skeleton had been entombed in the bowels of *Belle Ruisseau*. It didn't explain why Sarah was murdered.

"There are still hoofprints on the hallway floor in the front of the tavern where Uriah Winston rode his horse into this building."

Amy could easily picture it in her head. Too easily.

"He rode in and claimed William Red Feather had raped and killed his wife."

A violent shudder swept up Amy's spine. *Raped?*

No, he hadn't raped her. Amy knew firsthand just how willing Sarah Winston had been.

The memory of his ethereal hands on her body caused heat to settle in the back of her neck. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other and swept her thick mane off her nape.

Jo gestured toward two much smaller portraits of African-American women. One was smiling widely and wearing a bright red dress. The other was clad in a somber deep indigo. She was not smiling. Jo pointed to the one in red. "These two women were *Belle Ruisseau* slaves. This is Dot. It was rumored she was the daughter of Uriah Winston." Jo's fingertips grazed the gilt frame of the other portrait. "And this is her mother, Rita."

Amy glanced at the two slaves and then her gaze drifted back to Sarah's portrait. The resemblance was eerie. Uncanny. Had she been Sarah Winston in a former life? Her stomach drew into a hard, painful knot. Although she knew without doubt William Red Feather had not raped Sarah, had he somehow been her murderer?

She blew out a sigh. Psychic information came to her much the way remembering some bit of forgotten information filtered into her brain. But which memories were hers and which could she attribute to psychic divination? Coupled with her past trauma, her nightly dose of sleeping pills and antidepressants contributed to robbing her of the ability to discern one from the other.

"Do you know anything about the murder?" She heard her own voice as if it belonged to someone else.

Jo wet her red lips with the tip of her tongue. "I'm not sure anyone knows the whole story. I do know Sam Houston sent William Red Feather to bring the one Anglo survivor of the Alamo and her infant daughter back from the Mexican army. The city historian would be the best source but unfortunately he's in the nursing home with Alzheimer's."

A wave of disappointment fluttered through Amy.

Still, this was important. She felt certain Reed's friend and employee had been murdered by a ghost.

She had to find out what happened. Especially since she had wantonly allowed William Red Feather's ghost to have sex with her.

She drew in a slow, deep breath. Heat flooded her abdomen. Her clit throbbed. It'd been good sex. Very good sex.

She wanted him to come back.

She wanted to feel his energy, thick and palpable, filling her, consuming her, dominating her — making her feel alive.

Disappointment flooded her. The one living person who might be able to help her couldn't. "Thank you for your help."

Jo touched Amy's bare arm. "If you find out any more about the skeleton, will you let me know?"

"Of course."

\* \* \* \* \*

The brightly colored fallen leaves rustled as Tripod and Boo skittered along the riverbank. Amy stood on the deck and leaned on the railing, staring out across the slate gray water of the Tennessee River. A chilled breeze pregnant with the biting scent of fall foliage and river silt rushed over her bare arms and she shuddered. The muted orange and pink hues of the sun setting behind the trees on the other side of the river mesmerized her, leaving her feeling heavy and hypnotically lost in wild theories.

She breathed a deep sigh and tried to focus her thoughts on Reed and how hurt he must be at the loss of his friend. The previous night had sapped her energy and thinking coherently about anything proved difficult. She found herself staring mindlessly into the water.

Reed still hadn't returned from his visit with Eddie's family.

Poor Eddie.

And poor Reed. The image of Eddie's murder had come upon her so hard and fast, she'd simply blurted out what she felt had happened. She was accustomed to divulging her psychic visions, but the way she'd done it with Reed was callous. Unforgivable. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

But Eddie's death was not foremost in her thoughts.

*Change your fate or the red feather cannot return.*

She'd never imagined the *red feather* would be a person. "William Red Feather," she whispered aloud. Uttering the name made the fine hairs at her nape prickle.

Had he murdered Eddie the way he'd allegedly murdered a woman who lived well over a century ago—a woman whose eerie resemblance to Amy was uncanny?

*You know me better than that, Sarah...*

Amy gasped at the clarity of William's voice but the rumble of Reed's truck engine and the crunch of tires on the pea gravel diverted her attention. She watched as Reed stepped out and slowly descended the hill to the deck of the A-frame.

Her pulse accelerated.

"Accident," Reed said before opening the side door and stalking inside. In a moment, he pushed open the sliding glass door and strode onto the deck, turning up a beer as he walked. He looked her hard in the eye. "The police still insist it was a fucking accident."

Amy swallowed. He was angry.

"I've been thinking about what you said and I don't believe it was a damned accident either," he bit out.



"I did some research on the house today."

"Research?" Reed slammed his fist against the metal railing. The sound of it reverberated around the entire deck. In the near distance, Tripod must have heard it because he let out one resounding bark. "What has researching the house got to do with Eddie?"

Her eyes met his. "Everything."

Reed stared for a moment before he plopped down on a sage metal patio chair. "I think you're right. I think he was killed. But I can't believe Miss Lettie did it."

"Eddie *was* murdered." Of that much, at least, she was certain.

Reed swallowed hard and averted his gaze.

Amy's heart ached for him.

His gaze swiveled back to hers. "You're certain?"

She nodded.

"And what do you think that old house has to do with it?"

"The skeleton you found...his name was William Red Feather." Heat settled in the back of Amy's neck.

She pulled her mass of blonde hair over her shoulder. "Everyone said he killed the woman who lived in the house." She couldn't bring herself to say the name "Sarah". "And...and when you knocked that wall down yesterday, somehow you released his spirit. It was trapped and —"

Reed's blue eyes turned to ice. "*I* let that spook out? It's *my* fault Eddie is dead?"

"No." Amy suddenly felt stupid. She'd spoken too hastily. She knew she should have waited until she'd had a decent night's sleep.

"What are you saying? Did that *skeleton* kill Eddie?"

"No, Reed. I don't know. That's what I'm trying to tell you. I don't know why Eddie was killed." *But I don't think William Red Feather did it.*

"I can't accept that. I can't accept some fucking dead Indian killed Eddie."

"That's just it, Reed. I don't think he did."

Reed stared. "Well, who else could have?"

"I'm not sure," Amy said. "What have you heard that old lady say?"

"Lettie? She's crazy as a Betsy bug."

"She knew a spirit killed Eddie."

Reed dismissed the whole conversation with a wave of his hand. "She's always talked about ghosts haunting that old mansion."

*Ghosts.*

Plural.

She had felt another spirit at *Belle Ruisseau* the first time she'd set foot in the place. William Red Feather's warning was beginning to make sense. The sinking feeling she'd exposed herself to a killer *again* infiltrated her thoughts.

But this time, it was one she couldn't see.

If a spirit had indeed murdered Eddie, he could certainly harm *her*.

Every fiber of her being, every ounce of intuition, told her to get as far away from the Shoals and *Belle Ruisseau* as she could, but she knew she wouldn't heed her own warning.

Not while her body hummed with the hope that William Red Feather's ghost would return.

\* \* \* \* \*

Already feeling the effects of two stout sleeping pills, Amy switched off the lights and wearily climbed the ladder to the loft. There was no way she would get to sleep without them tonight. Her bed remained unmade, the sheet still in a crumpled wad where she'd found it that morning.

The red feathers lay in the same position in glaring contrast against the white pillowslip.

Amy pursed her lips. *Is he here now?*

*Watching?*

*Waiting to fuck me again?* Her tummy tightened at the prospect.

*To kill me?* A chill ran through her blood.

With trembling fingers, she untied the drawstring at the top of her hippie skirt and let it fall to the floor. She slipped off her tan tank, reached behind to unhook her bra and shucked it off and into the same pile as her skirt. With her toes, she cinched her T-shirt off the floor and brought it up to her hand. Turning it right side out, she prepared to slip it over her head.

*Sarah...*

Startled, Amy gasped and clutched the T-shirt to her chest. Her gaze searched the loft. Nothing. No one.

She was shaking. It was only her imagination.

*Wasn't it?*

She crawled onto the bed, drew the sheet over her and lay down. In the murky darkness, she stared at the red feathers on the pillow next to her.

Why hadn't she moved them? Thrown them away?

She swallowed and hesitantly picked one up, half expecting a deluge of psychic images.

Nothing.

Her eyes fluttered closed and soon she slept, her clouded mind filled with dreams of plantations – and murder.

Anxious, Sarah stood next to her mare, twisting the reins in her hand as she waited in the inky darkness by the bank of the swollen creek. Where was he? He'd told her to meet him here at midnight.

Thunder rumbled. Her mare jerked her head. Sarah wound her gloved hand in the reins and rubbed the animal's nose to keep it quiet. "Hush," she cooed to the frightened animal. She could feel the tension in the creature's muscular body, her eyes wide and wild.

Sarah's gaze darted around her. Something was wrong. He wasn't coming. She felt the premonition uncoiling like a snake in her belly. Something was terribly wrong.

The first cool drops of rain fell on her cheeks. Her heart rate quickened. Terror surged.

The mare suddenly jerked and whirled, yanking the reins from Sarah's hand.

Sarah stilled. Someone was coming through the woods. Footsteps approached, crunching ominously in the brush and leaves.

"Who's there?" Her pulse pounded. Her stays pinched so tightly she could hardly breathe.

"Sarah..."

She gasped.

Amy stirred.

It was happening again.

Her whole body hummed with recognition.

"Oh yes," Amy heard herself say aloud as she felt the ghost's warm, expert kisses move down her back, lower still to the base of her spine. Fingertips traced the cleft of her buttocks, slipping between, teasing, probing the sensitive rim of her anus.

Heat rushed through her limbs and settled between her legs. Her pussy pulsed. She drew one knee up as another finger found here she was already wet and so, so ready for more.

*William...*

She grasped handfuls of sheet as the skilled mouth tasted and sucked and nibbled the sensitive flesh of her backside while the fingers continued to explore, delving, caressing, pleasing.

On her stomach, she was completely and utterly at the mercy of this spirit – this phantom lover.

A muted protest formed on her lips—but she wondered what he would do if she refused him. Would he take her anyway? The idea made her wild with desire. She felt wanton and reckless.

She didn't want to refuse him. She would never refuse him.

A delicious shiver fluttered through her body.

"I want to please you..."

Amy arched her back, lifting her buttocks higher, giving him greater access. His finger pushed deeper into her anus. She moaned and slid her hand between her legs, her fingers finding her wet pussy. She coated her fingertips with her cream and then rubbed her clitoris with furious intent as he delved into her sensitive orifice.

*So good...*

Was that her thought or his?

And then it was confirmed for her when a breathy, otherworldly voice whispered, "I've found you, my love. I've finally found you."

Amy tensed but the heady combination of their fingers sent slow, pulsating spasms to her pussy, which built and crested until she was crying out, spiraling over the edge.

A rush of hedonistic pleasure pulsed through her body. With one finger up her own pussy, she could feel herself spasming. "I'm coming, William," she mewled breathlessly into the goose down pillow, spreading her legs until her thighs burned and pushing her weight into his hand so his finger burrowed farther into her ass.

As soon as the intense waves subsided, she became vaguely aware of the receding finger. She moaned in protest only to gasp when two big hands drew her upward until she was on her knees with her face buried in the pillow. She cried out. Anticipation thrummed through her veins, throbbing in her traitorous pussy. More. She wanted more.

She felt as if they had both breached some vast gulf that had separated them for an eternity. Everything felt right when she was in his presence. So, so right.

Her voice was muffled by the pillow but she could hear herself—not asking him to cease, but rather encouraging him with wild abandon in careless, shameless speech.

His fingers splayed across her hip and held her while she felt the thick, hard head of his cock ride her crevice until it found the opening and pushed inside. She sucked in a breath through her teeth and when she raised her shoulders off the mattress, a hand seized a hank of hair at the nape of her neck, his fingers entwining, pulling hard and using her body as leverage for an onslaught of forceful, deep thrusts.

Amy cried out, arching her back, opening her legs as widely as possible. Her knees ground into the mattress. She braced herself with her elbows. She had wanted this all day—this compelling lover who offered her no choice, who stripped away her inhibitions and granted her permission to fully take pleasure in all her body had to offer.

She grabbed the headboard and pushed back, gritting her teeth. *Fuck me. Fuck me, hard, William!*

As if he could read her innermost desires, he complied. She reveled in the hard, rhythmic slapping of his groin against her buttocks, the rough tug of her hair and the feel of his fingers digging into the soft flesh of her hip.

*He felt real. So real... So alive...*

And so did she.

All coherent thought fled. It no longer mattered to Amy he'd been long dead or might have been a murderer. All that mattered was the tumult of emotions and this crazy, inexplicable sense of recognition she felt at his touch.

Overwhelming feelings of love and lust rampaged through her body and she knew they were coming from him.

"I want to see you. Let me see you." Panic surged at her own words. She didn't know why she'd uttered them but she was suddenly on her back without quite knowing how she'd gotten there, her eyes focusing on a dark figure looming above her. Her heart ran wild at the sight of him.

Although she'd seen his portrait at the museum, the likeness hardly did the man justice. William Red Feather was the personification of masculine perfection.

He stared at her as if surprised she could see him. The intense passion in his midnight eyes was unnerving — passion for her.

Amy's breath caught.

Black hair hung carelessly down to his shoulders, partially obscuring his face in shadow. The straight starkness of the silky locks accentuated his extraordinarily high cheekbones and slightly crooked nose. His mouth was set in a hard, brutal line. Moonlight glanced off his broad, bronzed, muscular shoulders. His chest was powerfully built, taut, tapering slightly at his waist.

He was perched on his knees, his thickly corded thighs spread wide as he poised to enter her again. Amy's mouth went dry as she allowed her gaze to drop to where his thick, slick cock jutted upward from a nest of sparse black curls.

She wet her lips with her tongue, becoming acutely aware of her pounding heart. Her pulse reverberated in her ears.

*He's real.*

She realized she was gawking at him but she'd never seen a spirit manifest with such solidity, such strength.

Her nipples grew painfully taut under his dark gaze. Perspiration misted her skin as his gaze dropped lower still to the trimmed thatch of brown hair between her legs. Her ivory thighs sprawled wantonly wide around his legs struck a sharp contrast to his deep olive skin. A searing blush washed up her neck and settled in her cheeks.

Amy lay perfectly still. She didn't dare breathe. She simply stared as heady desire thrummed through her veins.

He appeared as if he were waiting for her to speak, to act. His gaze found and searched hers—penetrated her as if he could see through her very soul. “You stare as if you do not remember me.”

She bit her bottom lip. The sound of his voice tugged at something inside her, threatening to take her back to another time and place.

“Why...why are you here? With me?” she asked.

His eyes softened. “Because I never want to be apart from you again.”

The things she’d learned earlier intruded into her thoughts. Had he really killed Sarah Winston? Was he so filled with remorse he was unable to cross to the Other Side?

Perhaps their fates were once again intertwined so she could release his soul from the earth plane.

Still, she couldn’t imagine this man taking a woman’s life.

Her gaze flicked down his body and then back to his eyes. There would be time to help him find the Light later. Right now, she could scarcely think. Sex with him was addictive and she wanted him. All of him. She wanted that thick cock filling her to capacity. Boldly, she reached for him and it was all the impetus he needed to push between her open thighs and drive into her pussy once again.

She moaned and seized his shoulders to pull him down on top of her, relishing the delicious weight of his ethereal body, the feel of his heavy breathing and the sound of his sensuous sighs against her skin. His mouth found her ear, where he kissed and nibbled.

Amy was delirious.

She had no doubt about his ability to sexually please her, but being able to run her hands down his muscled back, to grasp his hard buttocks and to feel the muscles contracting with each thrust, sparked that wild sense of familiarity that fulfilled her—satisfied her—in a way she’d never before known.

She didn’t want to close her eyes. She wanted to remember every detail, every nuance, every time the muscle clenched in his jaw, every time his black eyes clouded with passion. The involuntary muscles tugging at the corner of his mouth when he thrust himself all the way inside her pussy so that his body rode up hard against her clit...it was perfection. It was everything she’d ever wanted, dreamed of, desired.

It was dangerous.

There was no mistaking his power. The pleasure was too sinister. It made her completely surrender her sanity. She was thoroughly at this ghost’s mercy and there was nothing she could or would do to prevent it.

His hair smelled like clean linen, crisp and inviting. The scent of his skin was heady and spicy. Thoroughly male and deliciously warm.

He filled her so completely, stretching her, allowing her to feel utterly whole in a way she’d never imagined.

His gaze found hers and sizzled. The tiniest smile tugged at the corner of his mouth before he dipped his head and kissed her with such tenderness her heart twisted inside her chest. How could such a rugged, powerful man have such lovingly soft lips?

His eyes searched hers once more. "I thought I was in hell – until you found me."

The effect his actions and words had on her soared hard and fast to her clit. Instinctively, her body tightened and she became aware of every inch of his bone-hard cock rubbing her oh-so sensitive little pleasure spot within. *Right there. Yes...right there.* She moaned. *Just about to come...*

Amy cried out but her voice was stifled by his mouth. His tongue pushed through her lips to plunder inside. This time, his kiss was demanding, commanding her to come. His hand slipped behind her neck to lift and hold her head to his as he claimed her mouth. A crazy sense of *connection* flooded her, racing back and forth between her pulsating channel and her mouth.

Perspiration broke out along the length of his spine. A groan tore from his throat. His motions became slow, determined and sinfully deep. She clung. He was coming with her. Amy grasped a handful of his silky black hair and dragged her mouth from his lips to his ear. "Come for me, William. Come inside my pussy."

"My sweet Sarah," he breathed. "Can you ever forgive me?"

Amy froze.

He raised himself high enough for her to see the unreserved remorse in his black eyes and then – he was gone.

## Chapter Six

"You're up early."

Early? She'd been up all night. Amy glanced over her shoulder and wondered if Reed could see the irony in her eyes.

He strolled onto the deck where she sat on a chaise lounge, her knees drawn up to her chin. Although she was exhausted, she had been unable to go back to sleep after the ghost's jolting confession.

Despite her intuitive beliefs to the contrary, was it true?

Had William Red Feather really killed Sarah?

Amy flinched. She'd been foolish to allow him into her bed again but still, her insides quivered when she thought about what she'd done with him last night.

Reed sat on the end of the chaise next to her. "I couldn't sleep either." Apparently he'd noticed her red-rimmed eyes.

She glanced in his direction and then back out over the mesmerizing ripples of the dark water lapping against the pier pilings. A bass boat's motor whined as it raced by on the other side of the river.

Her dragonfly toe ring winked in the bright morning sunlight that warmed her scalp and her legs through her thin, pale blue skirt.

"Charity called and told me the police said it would be all right if we got back to work right away."

Amy's gaze found Reed's. "Do you think you can go back there after what happened?" In reality, she just wanted to crawl back under the covers and catch another hour or two of sleep. She didn't want to face any ghosts today. She didn't want to think any more. About William or Eddie or anything else.

Reed raked his hand through his wavy hair. "I don't pretend to know what happened there. All I know is that I have a job to do."

"Reed—" Amy was about to protest but he shot to his feet.

He shifted his feet restlessly and avoided looking into her eyes. "Don't feel you have to go with me. After what happened to you last year, that's the last place you need to be."

Did he have second thoughts about asking her to come here? A twinge of terror flashed through her that he might regret his invitation.

She hadn't exactly been forthcoming. He had no idea the ghost who'd probably murdered Eddie had been fucking the hell out of her every night.



She realized she must have been staring because he said, "You can stay here as long as you like. I'm not asking you to go back to *Belle Ruisseau*. But hell, Aim, this is what I do. I've gotta go. If I sit around here wondering what happened to Eddie, I'll go crazy."

Amy blinked. The bright morning sun glanced off his dark hair and suntanned skin. She was just about to take him up on his offer when an image slammed her solar plexus. Hard.

*Reed on the floor in the foyer of the old house... A fallen beam... Blood...*

Chills started at her scalp and skittered down her arms and legs.

"Sometimes you just gotta get up, shake off the bad stuff that's happened to you and move on. Believe me, I know."

When Amy could do nothing but gape, he shrugged, then turned and started toward the truck.

Panic bubbled to the surface. Despite her fatigue and the interference of medication, this was definitely a psychic hit she couldn't ignore and the image of Reed injured had undeniably been a warning. She couldn't let him go without her. What if something happened to him? If she wasn't there to prevent it or to warn him, she'd never forgive herself. She scrambled off the chaise lounge. "Wait, Reed. Let me change."

Amy fled through the sliding glass door into the A-frame and up the ladder to the loft. Her fingers trembled as she slipped into her jeans and a white cotton tank. Guiltily, her gaze skimmed the disarray of snowy covers on the bed.

*William Red Feather.*

The thought of his chiseled face and sculpted body sent a flood of warm desire downward. Just when she was searching for peace, her life had become impossibly complicated.

*Change your fate or the red feather cannot return.*

What did it mean?

Would he come back tonight? Amy's pulse raced at the prospect.

"How can you be so stupid?" she asked herself aloud.

This could not continue. Absolutely not. He was a ghost. An earthbound ghost. More importantly, he had practically confessed to committing murder. *Her murder.*

And then, there was her stepbrother. She'd foreseen something bad about to happen to Reed.

She had to somehow prevent it. She had to find out what happened to Eddie and it was imperative she figure out what William Red Feather's part in all this was.

Sinking to the edge of the bed, she rubbed her aching temples. Her body trembled. She needed sleep. She needed to rest. Dammit, she couldn't think. Frustration riddled her.

"Come on if you're coming!"

Through the window, she could see Reed heading for the truck. Tripod and Boo scampered along behind him.

Amy pulled on yesterday's socks and the pair of stiff, fawn-colored work boots. She scuttled down the ladder and was breathless by the time she joined Reed in the truck.

It would take every ounce of ability she possessed but she knew she would have to use her intuition to find out what all this meant.

\* \* \* \* \*

Both Reed and Amy were silent until he pulled up to the already open gate to *Belle Ruisseau*. Miss Lettie's station wagon hurtled past at breakneck speed and Reed had to swerve to keep from hitting her head-on. "Jeez!" he exclaimed as he twisted his head to watch Lettie disappear around the convenience store. He turned to Amy and exchanged a worried glance with her. "I wonder what the hell that was all about."

A sense of unease filled Amy as the truck drew closer and closer to the house. She trembled visibly and sat on her hands to keep them still. Her stomach turned somersaults.

*Something bad is about to happen.*

*Something very, very bad.*

Charity's white Cadillac sat sideways in the driveway.

"Shit," Reed muttered under his breath.

He clambered out and Amy followed him through the tall grass. Her heart rate accelerated as she climbed the crumbling steps and then straddled the decaying oak. Tingles skittered up and down her spine as she followed Reed through the front door into the shadowy, cavernous house.

Amy's sense of dread only increased once she crossed the threshold. The wooden floor felt off kilter. Her stomach seized into a knot. She paused beside Reed.

Just as she started to reach for Reed's arm to tell him they needed to get out of this place, a pitiful sob echoed through the high ceiling of the main hall.

The blonde hairs on Amy's arms stood on end. Her gaze clashed with Reed's as her breath froze in her lungs. That was no ghost. That was a living, breathing person.

"Charity," Reed called. His resonant voice reverberated in the empty house.

Another sob drifted from behind the winding staircase.

Adrenaline rushed through Amy's limbs. Her heart pumped frantically. She'd known. She'd *known*. Why hadn't she warned Reed? Why hadn't she said anything?

Before she could stop him, Reed rushed through the foyer and past the staircase. Amy fled after him. Her mind raced, searching, probing for some insight to keep him safe, but grisly images of Reed lying unconscious on the foyer floor weaved insidiously through her thoughts.

They both came to a dead stop when they found Charity curled into a fetal ball against the faded, peeling wallpaper. She stared at them with wide, frightened eyes rimmed with smeared mascara. Her salt and pepper hair hung in tangled strands around her face. A lacy, fuchsia bra peeped from underneath her torn navy blouse. Her charcoal skirt was rucked up to her thighs. One navy heel lay on the dusty floor next to a pair of panties that matched the bra.

She was trembling.

"Did Lettie do this?" Reed knelt next to her. "Are you hurt?" His voice was soothing, compassionate.

Amy's gaze darted around the house. There was no way that little old lady had done this to Charity. Amy hugged herself to dispel the chill that washed over her body.

Charity shook her head.

Reed reached out to touch her but she jerked backward as if the mere brush of his fingertips would scorch her. "I'm fine!"

Reed glanced back at Amy and then turned back to Charity. "Are you sure?"

Charity nodded her head vehemently.

"Someone attacked you." Reed slipped his cell phone out of the leather holster on his belt. He started to hand it to Amy. "Call 9-1-1."

With lightning reflexes, Charity lunged and seized the phone, clutching it to her bosom. "No, you can't! You can't. Don't tell anyone about this."

"Okay," Reed said soothingly. "Just calm down and tell me what happened."

Charity shook her head again. She struggled to compose herself and pull her clothes together.

"Who did this to you?" Reed's voice was cool and tranquil.

But Amy already felt sick. Her knees turned to gelatin. The whole house suddenly felt as if it was spinning. She braced one hand against the timeworn wall to keep from falling. Her other hand clasped her lurching stomach. Although she was bone tired, she *knew* what Charity was going to say next.

"There was no one here." Her eyes locked fiercely with Reed's.

"But what happened?"

Her eyes searched Reed's and then locked with Amy's. The woman was clearly terrified. "A ghost...a ghost attacked me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy had been silent during the short drive to Charity's house and equally taciturn as Reed helped Charity out of his truck and into her bedroom.

Had William attacked Charity?

Amy realized she was clenching her fists as she stood in Charity's bedroom watching Reed fuss over her.

An image of Charity's discarded panties reared repulsively in Amy's thoughts. Had William had sex with her too? The idea of his ruggedly handsome body naked and hovering over a wailing Charity made Amy's stomach turn a double somersault.

It also sparked an ugly shard of jealousy that she knew, coupled with fatigue, would prevent her from being able to engage her psychic senses at all.

And yet, Amy had also felt another spirit at *Belle Ruisseau*. An angry spirit. Uriah Winston?

He, of all people, would have reason to hold a grudge against a man who'd had an affair with his wife and then...

Amy couldn't even bring herself to think the words "killed her".

Reed sat on the side of Charity's bed, patiently dabbing her face with a monogrammed white washcloth. "How do you know it was a ghost?"

Charity sniffled. Her hands trembled. Dark circles under her eyes made her look tired, drained. Her gaze darted between Amy's and Reed's. "Because I couldn't see him."

Amy felt a tiny bit of tension melt out of her. At least Charity hadn't described a drop-dead gorgeous Native American hottie.

"You were hurt by someone you couldn't see?" Reed asked, as if he were trying to grasp the idea of it.

Charity nodded.

Reed turned to Amy. "Is that possible?"

"It's possible," Amy said blandly.

Amy wouldn't know for certain until she'd had a stern talk with William Red Feather. Somehow, as powerfully masculine as he was, Amy couldn't imagine him *attacking* anyone—but did he know about the other ghost?

An icy chill skittered down her spine. Was the other ghost the reason he didn't want her at *Belle Ruisseau* or was it because he was afraid the house would somehow stir up the memory that she'd been murdered in her past life?

There was only one way to find out—and she needed to be in a place where her psychic connection was the strongest.

That place was *Belle Ruisseau*.

Mentally, she tallied the items she'd need in order to call up a spirit. Sage for protection. Did she still have a bundle in her purse? Maybe a loose crystal? A piece of rose quartz would do. Oh, and some blessed salt water.

As a rule, she only spoke to spirits who approached her first but in this case she was prepared to implement a technique she'd learned from her witch friend, Gwen, and just flat conjure one up.

Amy shuddered. Gwen was no stranger to conjuring. Her grandmother had been a witch who practiced the dark arts and claimed to have once, at the request of a grieving widow, implemented the craft of necromancy to bring a corpse back from the dead.

Unbidden, Amy's mind filled with creepy images of a bluish cadaver inside a coffin. She jolted when she imagined the eyes snapping open, the lips parting stiffly to suck in a breath.

Gwen, who'd been present when her grandmother had performed the spell, told her the man was never quite right afterward, as if the body miraculously lived but the spirit did not reside within. He had died again only three short years later.

Amy shook off the spine-chilling memory of Gwen's story. She didn't need to go to that extreme and reanimate a body. She only needed to have a serious conversation with the spirit of William Red Feather in order to find out what she wanted to know.

Her stomach tensed at the memory of his hands planted on either side of her head, of the muscles in his stomach contracting and releasing as he pumped his huge, slick cock into her pussy.

Amy wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. She'd never encountered a spirit like him before.

"Sweetie, could you please get me a drink of water." Charity's voice was soft and uncertain. "There's bottled water in the fridge."

Amy nodded before she trudged toward the kitchen, which was exactly what she would have expected. All the appliances were matching stainless. The countertops, which went on for miles, were made of charcoal granite. Honey-colored wood cabinets lined the walls, reaching upward to the high ceilings.

Amy's kitchen in Nashville had consisted of a secondhand fridge, a microwave on which the bell didn't work and a broken stove she'd used to store dishes. It wasn't as if she had ever cooked an actual meal. Cooking for one had seemed pointless.

She pulled open the door to the industrial-sized fridge. "Everything in its place," she muttered aloud. Nothing inside touched its neighbor. The milk had its own corner. Short cans of diet soda were neatly aligned on the left. Expensive cheese lay in the cheese drawer instead of crammed into a sandwich bag. Everything had a name brand. No generics for Charity Clanton. Amy reached for a high-dollar bottle of water.

"Do you really think a ghost did that to her?" Although Reed's voice was whisper soft, it startled her.

Amy breathed a sigh which did little to dispel the tension in her body. The bottled water chilled her hand. "I don't know, Reed." She sat it on the counter and rubbed her palm on her hip.

"I mean, is that kind of thing really *possible*? Can a ghost *touch* a person?"

Amy shrugged. An image of William Red Feather, dark and beautiful, his cock protruding arrogantly from its nest of black, black curls, slick with her wetness, assailed

her. Heat settled in the back of her neck. She averted her gaze and then glanced back at Reed uncomfortably. "Yes. It's possible." *It was very possible.*

Reed looked pale. He raked his fingers through his hair. "First Eddie and now this. I never should have knocked down that wall."

"No, Reed. It's not your fault. It's not your fault at all." Amy searched his eyes. She couldn't bear to see him feeling responsible when it was she, Amy, who should have done whatever she could have to figure out what was going on at *Belle Ruisseau*. And she should have immediately sent William into the Light. An awful sense of guilt nagged her.

He stared and Amy could see the questions in his blue eyes.

She lifted the water bottle once more and brushed her thumb over a cold, wet drop of condensation on the counter. She shuddered. Tears welled in the corners of her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. "Sometimes, I just...I just want to be normal."

Sympathy filled Reed's blue eyes and he drew her into a hug. "I know, Aim. But you're not normal." He held her back far enough to look into her eyes. "You're special. And you can do something about all this."

A protest formed on her lips but she couldn't utter the words. He was right. At one time, she'd *had* a gift. Now, she felt helpless and hopeless. But a man had died. A woman had been attacked—all because she'd been allowing some horny ghost to keep her company at night. This was her fault. She was responsible. She had spent her life trusting Reed and now he needed to depend on her. Amy swallowed and nodded. There was no use putting it off any longer. She knew what she had to do.

"Can I borrow the truck?"

Reed's forehead furrowed. "What are you going to do? I want to go with you."

"No, this is something I need to do by myself."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. Her veins buzzed with excitement. Finding answers where there were none was what she did. She could do this. She was good at this. The idea of going to that house and opening up her psychic senses filled her with a sense of purpose even though the thought of failing terrified her to the core. "Is there a metaphysical shop in town?"

"A what?"

"A place that sells crystals and New Age books, that kind of thing."

Reed shook his head. "Shit, if they don't sell beer or building supplies, I don't go there." He reached for a phone book that lay on the counter. "But we can find out."

Steeling herself, Amy prepared to confront William Red Feather.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy's pulse raced as she mentally surrounded herself with White Light in preparation to communicate with the spirit. Hopefully, he would be amenable to *talking* with her. Still, the idea of it horrified her – and not because he was dead.

She'd been as intimate as a person could be with him and yet, they'd never had a real conversation.

Not in this lifetime, anyway.

Standing in the open doorway to *Belle Ruisseau*, she fished around in her purse. Her fingers first wrapped around a half-eaten chocolate bar and then Reed's truck keys before she found the paper sack filled with the items she'd bought at a local health food store. "There it is," she said, withdrawing the small bag. They hadn't had a complete stock of metaphysical paraphernalia but what they did have would work for her purposes.

She hoped.

She'd called Gwen repeatedly but she hadn't answered her phone and Amy was a medium – not a horticulturist.

The brown paper sack crackled as she unrolled the top and then reached inside to retrieve a chunk of rose quartz crystal, a bundle of sage and a lighter.

With trembling fingers, she tucked the crystal securely into the edge of her cotton bra and patted it for good measure. It would enhance the spirit's vibrations. The sage would offer her an extra bump of protection. The theory behind it maintained the smoke would attach to any residual negative energy, which would dissipate with the fumes and leave the area cleansed and purified. When she'd been a practicing psychic, she'd never left home without it – another tip she'd learned from Gwen.

Tied with a hemp string, the chubby bunch of sage felt at home in her palm but even given her expertise with it, her hands shook so badly she had to flick the lighter three times before it produced a flame. She held the sage to the yellow flame until it caught.

The tip sparked and immediately, pungent-smelling green smoke curled upward. Amy breathed in the familiar fragrance and waved the bundle to distribute its fumes around her.

Her heart thudded wildly against her rib cage as an image of William Red Feather reared in her mind. Her body clenched in response. Heat settled between her thighs. Never had preparing to speak with a spirit caused such a flagrant reaction in her before.

She just hoped he would be the one who answered her call.

"William Red Feather," she called, the tremor in her voice betraying her anxiety.

A pigeon fluttered somewhere upstairs. The big old house creaked. She paced through the central hallway, her gaze scanning the worn walls, the eroded ceiling, the dusty stairs and the yawning empty rooms. The four-poster bed loomed in the room to the right. Amy felt magnetically drawn to it.

Holding the sage high to disperse the pungent smoke, she followed her instincts and moved into the bedroom. "William?" This time her voice was but a whisper. "Are you here?"

She turned to smudge the doorway, continuing to breathe in the protective smoke.

The temperature in the room seemed to drop and then an overwhelming chill shook her to the core. A presence slithered up behind her and she stiffened. This wasn't William's energy.

She whirled as a scarlet-tinged effervescent shadow began to sparkle near the bed. Amy froze. The apparition took shape, glittering and growing until she could make out the transparent form of her spirit lover in the murky darkness of the room.

Adrenaline thrummed through her veins. Her hand found the support of the doorjamb because her knees were shaking violently. She felt blindsided even though she'd expected this.

Then he materialized into a very solid, very real, *very dangerous*-looking man.

Amy's mouth went cotton dry. She opened her lips to speak but no sound would come out. Instead, she gaped at William, surprised once again by his strikingly overt masculinity.

He looked to be in his thirties although from his slightly faded appearance, she couldn't be certain. He was tall. So much taller than she would have guessed when he was in her bed. His shoulder-length midnight hair was drawn back loosely with a leather tie. Two scarlet feathers hung over his shoulder in brilliant contrast to his voluminous white shirt.

He looked every bit the Native American with the exception of his distinctly Caucasian-looking nineteenth-century clothing. His posture was cautious, accentuating the hard, flat planes of his chest and abdomen visible through the open shirt. His black trousers creased and pulled in all the right places. Amy found him devastatingly attractive.

Something hot and liquid unfurled inside her. This absolutely gorgeous, powerful man had made love to *her*. Mesmerized, she could only stare. A hint of stubble shadowed his strong jaw. Thick black lashes framed his even blacker eyes.

A tightly reined sense of power and control lurked under the polished veneer of a man perfectly suited to his era. She knew there was more to him than met the eye. So much more.

She couldn't stop thinking, *This is the man who'd fucked me last night.*

A hot blush crept up her neck and stole into her cheeks. She knew she was red.

And then the thought slammed her that he'd all but admitted to killing Sarah Winston. Amy sucked in a breath.

Had he also killed Eddie?

And attacked Charity Clanton?

*No! No!*



Her intuition warred with her brain.

William stepped toward her. "Sarah..." His tone was feathersoft. "I told you not to come back here."

With a sharp gasp, she backed away. "My name isn't Sarah. It's Amy." She was shaking.

His brooding black eyebrows sank even lower. His gaze swept her from head to toe. Amy felt exposed. Naked. "Your appearance, your clothes are different." He gestured toward her jeans. His gaze collided with hers once more. It was unsettling in its intensity. "But your kisses are as passionate as I remember." His black eyes smoldered.

God, he was sexy. Amy wished the floor would swallow her up. A ripple of heat shooting up her spine threatened to make her swoon. She had come here to call him out, to demand an explanation, but instead all she could think about was crawling into that dusty old bed with him.

He took another step toward her.

Her intuition railed at her that he was a man who could be trusted but the hungry look in his eyes told her something altogether different.

Coming to her senses, Amy pointed the sage smudge stick at him as if it were a weapon. "Stop."

He ignored it and stalked her. His warm gaze dropped to where the crotch of her jeans outlined her body, leaving little to the imagination. A leering but devastatingly seductive smile curled at one corner of his sensuous mouth and then he lifted his unmistakably seductive gaze to hers.

Amy realized she was breathless. Her back found the other side of the doorjamb. She felt trapped. "Did...did you kill Eddie?"

He continued toward her. He was so much bigger than she'd thought. So tall. So broad.

"Sarah, you know me." He seemed hurt and confused. His gaze cooled. He studied her, his features hard and set.

"I told you, I'm *not* Sarah." Her heart hammered.

He took the final step, closing the distance between them and wresting the burnt out smudge stick from her hand. He was so close she could feel the savage energy emanating from his spirit. So close...

He no longer looked like a ghost. He looked like a man. A real, flesh and blood breathing man, solid and unyielding and incomparably capable of doing anything he wanted with her. He certainly felt like a real live man.

Amy's gaze darted to his. She desperately searched his eyes. How could she have been so foolish? The crystal and the sage were useless against him. Had she really been stupid enough to think she had the power to prevent him from doing whatever he willed? She felt as if she were shrinking in his presence.

She gasped as one big arm encircled her waist. The fingers of the other hand threaded through her tumult of honey blonde curls in a caress as soft as spun silk. Her knees went weak as he lifted a lock of it to his face and breathed in the scent. "Your scent is different." His voice was slightly raspy, masculine and very, very seductive. "But it is pleasing just the same."

Amy resisted the urge to melt into his arms. She wanted nothing more than to succumb to his blatant sexual advances again but she fought to remain focused. She forced an image of Charity Clanton behind the staircase to rise in her thoughts. "What happened to Charity?" she demanded, finally wresting herself free of his potent spell and finding her voice. "Did you do that?"

One of his eyebrows arched angrily. A muscle in his jaw twitched angrily as his eyes pinned hers. His look was murderous.

"She said a ghost attacked her."

"Why did you not heed my warning?" His calloused hand cupped her face and tilted it up to his.

Amy's pulse stampeded through her veins. "I have to know what happened to Eddie and Charity." She trembled. "I have to know you didn't do anything to either of them."

"All I know is that I've waited for you," he purred. "I thought you were dead and now I've found you again." His warm breath feathered her cheeks. "And this time, my dear Sarah, I will never let you go."

Her back flattened against the doorjamb. His hand pressed hard against her spine. She had to escape. She couldn't think clearly. Not with him here, this close...

She made an attempt to dart free of him but his arms enclosed around her and, pinning her wrists at the small of her back, he hauled her body up against his. He shook with tension as his gaze searched hers. He seemed to be at war with himself. "You should not be here. We should not be doing this here – but I cannot keep my hands off you."

His words fell on deaf ears. Amy was already mindless. Her breasts were crushed against the hard plane of his chest. His knee pressed between her legs until her wanton pussy rode hard against his steel thigh, riding it upward and higher still. Her clit ripened and throbbed traitorously against him. She realized she was shaking and willingly surrendering to him once more but it was as if she had no choice. She felt utterly consumed by his size, by his power.

And then his mouth sought hers.

She opened her lips to his intruding tongue. The voice in the back of her mind yelled at her to stop this at once, to demand an explanation, but her body had a mind all its own. She realized she was shamelessly riding him, rocking her hips on his hard thigh to assuage the swollen yearning between her own legs.

His kiss was like no other she had ever experienced. It commanded response. His warm lips tugged and nipped. One hand slid up to cup one of her breasts possessively.

The grip on her wrists loosened and Amy's arms flew around his shoulders. She held on, kissing him, grinding her clit against his thigh and hoping for more.

In one sudden motion that made her gasp, he lifted her off her feet and carried her toward the bed.

Alarm bells sounded but Amy did not want to heed their warning. Some deep-seated part of her felt as if she too had waited a hundred years to find him. *Change your fate or the red feather cannot return...*

She shook the nagging thought from her head as he laid her on the mattress. This was no time to think. Her desire was far too intoxicating, too mesmerizing.

The old bed groaned.

Amy's gaze never left William's as she untied her work boots and kicked them off. Each one landed on the floor with a thud. She wanted him. She wanted him now. She peeled off her white cotton tank and shucked off her bra. The rose crystal tumbled to the bed. Her fingers furiously worked the button and zipper of her jeans and she wriggled out of them, along with her panties.

William's gaze heated as it unabashedly roamed over her body. "My God, you are beautiful."

He knew just what to say. Amy's heart swelled.

Climbing up on her knees, she reached for him, pushing the shirt off his broad shoulders. Pulling him to her by the waistband of his trousers, she teased open the row of tiny buttons and pushed his pants down, gasping when his arousal sprang forth.

Amy faltered. *What am I doing? Why does this handsome, sexy man want me?* Her mind warred with her body. *What if someone walks in? What if Reed sees this?*

Her hesitation melted. His hands found her heavy breasts. Each thumb and forefinger tugged at her diamond-hard nipples. Her clit pulsed. Her heartbeat slowed until she could feel its deep, heavy thumping in her chest. She knew she was wet. Ready. But she couldn't shake the thought the man doing this to her was a ghost.

A ghost who very possibly could have murdered her past incarnation.

She shuddered. Her gaze found his. "William, I can't..."

But her protest was short lived. She knew better. Intuitively, she knew she had known him before. She had loved him before – when she was Sarah.

His fingers entwined in her hair. It was a caress that threatened to undo her. "Why do you fear me?"

Amy swallowed.

"Kiss me," he murmured. His head slanted down to hers. "Kiss me. Just once..." His voice had a hypnotic effect on her. "Remember me, Sarah." His mouth found hers again. His fingers found her wetness and then one burrowed inside as Amy yielded to his body moving over hers, pushing her down into the soft and musty feather mattress.

The memories flooded her in flashing bits and pieces. *Long ago kisses, stolen in moments of heated passion. Clandestine glances. Inadvertent caresses.* She'd been naked on this bed with him before—*when she was Sarah.*

She'd put her trust in him then.

*And she had died because of it.*

He rose, kneeling over her, his knees parting her thighs wide as his black gaze dropped to where his finger probed her.

Amy's pussy clenched at just the sight of him intently watching.

Wild images from the past inundated her.

Sarah's heart raced as she stole unnoticed from the house. Lifting her voluminous skirts, she half ran past the barn and down the path toward the creek—to meet *him*.

This was wrong. Besides the fact she was married, William Red Feather was not of her race. Although he had been educated by white men, he preferred his life amongst the Indians.

His mother had been a Cherokee princess and his white father had built *Belle Ruisseau* and even though he was accepted in white society, Sarah knew no respectable white woman could admittedly enter into marriage with him.

Then again, she could hardly deem herself respectable anymore.

She was married.

But William had made promises.

Wonderful promises of taking her to France and making her his wife.

Thus far, fear of her husband's wrath had caused her to resist William's entreaties but today she was thrilled because she had made a decision.

Sarah's blood heated as she neared their meeting place.

He would be waiting for her, to make plans to take her away from here—and to bring her to ecstasy over and over.

Sarah's pulse raced at the thought of him between her legs and she quickened her pace. She was breathless by the time she rushed out of the copse of trees by the creek bank.

Her breath froze at the sight of William. Dressed in a black suit and blousing white shirt, he would have looked every bit the highly regarded gentleman but for his long black hair, aquiline Indian features and the two red feathers dangling from a thin braid over his shoulder.

He rushed into her arms and covered her face with kisses. Her forehead, eyelids, cheeks and finally her lips.

Sarah opened eagerly for him, clinging to his broad shoulders as her body melted against his. He was already hard for her. His phallus nudged her abdomen in a promise of fulfillment all its own.

"I feared you weren't coming," he whispered as he walked her backward until her shoulders found the hard trunk of a tree.

"I had to wait until Rita left. She watches me like a hawk."

His gaze swept her face. "It's not safe for you here as long as you continue to meet me." Something dark flashed in his eyes. "We should stop, Sarah. I've already compromised you."

Sarah's heart ran wild. "No!" She lowered her lashes. "William, I...I want to go away with you."

Sarah knew he stared and she couldn't take a breath until he spoke.

"Are you certain?"

Her gaze found his. "Yes," she said boldly. Now that she'd told him, she felt resolved in a way she never had. Resolved – and free.

She would never have to go back to Uriah's bed. She shuddered at the thought of the things he forced her to do in the dark – things she enjoyed doing with William.

His finger lifted her chin so that she couldn't look away from his eyes. "You are prepared to face the consequences?"

The consequences meant never having contact with anyone she knew in Florence and being labeled a pariah for divorcing her husband and marrying a half-breed. But no man had ever made her feel the way William made her feel.

His love was worth the risk.

"Yes," she breathed. Her heart hammered against her rib cage. "I...I love you."

William's gaze searched hers as if he were searching for veracity there. His usually stern expression softened. "Then I will take you away from here, Sarah Winston. I will take you to France and I will make you my wife."

Sarah's heart soared.

His mouth found hers and he kissed her with a passion she'd never felt from him before. His tongue prodded her lips and when she opened for him, it plundered inside her mouth, as if he could possess her with his kiss.

Desire rushed downward and Sarah rocked her tightly corseted abdomen against his arousal. She whimpered when he dragged his mouth from hers and sank, kissing his way down over her robin's egg blue bodice, past the black velvet belt that cinched her waist.

His hands delved under her skirts and wrapped around her ankles, spreading them wider so that she had to lean against the tree for support. "Lift your dress, Sarah."

Anticipation thrummed through her veins as she drew her skirt up to her knees.

"Higher." It was an order.

She inched the skirt up to mid-thigh, quivering when the warm Alabama breeze blew across the thin cotton of her pantalets.

"Higher."

A furious blush rose to her cheeks. How could she bare her most private parts out of doors? But she did. Brazenly, she bunched the front of her skirt and petticoat up around her waist, knowing he could see her, smell her, through the slit in her drawers.

She thought she would die from desire when he leaned in close and breathed in the scent of her. She wanted to close her legs, to drop her skirts but his big hands on her thighs prevented it. And when he kissed her *there*, she cried out.

"Hush, sweet," he cooed against the nest of curls there.

Sarah leaned her head back against the tree, heedless of the tresses escaping her chignon as the tip of his tongue searched for and then found the sensitive, swollen pleasure bud between her legs. She stifled a moan.

How could anything so sinful feel so extraordinarily good? How had she come this? She turned into a wanton hussy, ready to leave her life and husband for a half-breed whose touch could make her throw all caution to the wind.

A gasp tore from her throat when she felt his fingers working their way between her slick folds and teasing against her opening.

"Do you want my finger inside you, Sarah?"

Her heart fluttered. *Oh yes!* She sobbed and thrust her hips toward him.

"Do you want my finger deep up inside your cunny?" His voice was ruthlessly seductive and Sarah was powerless to resist either him or her own desires.

"Yes," she hissed. This was maddening. She felt intoxicated and wild.

Savage.

He breached her and she felt him sliding inside. Her knees went weak as she stood there in broad daylight, braced against the tree, clutching her skirt high around her waist and listening to the song of the rippling creek and the sound of his hand pounding her sopping cunny.

"I want your cock in me," she heard herself say and she was surprised at her audacious speech.

But then he was standing and undoing his breeches, hiking up her skirts and twirling her around to bend her over.

"Oh!" Sarah breathed the word as with one hard thrust, his phallus pierced her.

His fingers burrowed into the soft flesh of her hips and he pulled her back as he pushed forward. In. Out. In again.

With nothing to cling to, she clutched her skirts, feeling totally at his mercy as his knees nudged her legs further apart and his cock pounded into her.

Coupling with Uriah was always rough but it could not compare to this relentless, exquisite assault.

A chorus of outdoor sounds mingled with her passion-laced gasps and his heavy breathing but Sarah could hardly concentrate on anything but this inward spiral, drawing her rapidly toward the promise of that feeling only William had given her.

Shooting stars flashed behind her eyelids. Her knees buckled and she would have fallen but for William's strong hands bracing her hips. She moaned wantonly, melting around him as he pulsed, swelled and pulsed again.

After he'd joined in her moment of utter bliss, he folded his arms around her and withered with her to the leaf strewn creek bank. "Sarah..."

Drunk with the past-life images, Amy lustfully rocked her hips upward. Waiting for him to claim her was the most intense moment of desire she'd ever known in her life.

A determined thrust propelled his massive cock all the way into eager channel. Amy gasped. Her mind went numb. Her body awakened. Instantly, she felt whole and wonderful and cherished and so, so loved.

This time, he was gentle. He hovered above her, his gaze locked with hers as he slid slowly in and out only to repeat the motion again and again in a maddeningly deliberate rhythm. The muscles in his chest and abdomen rippled, tensing and releasing with every determined thrust.

Her gaze moved down to where they were connected and she reveled in the sight of his long, thick cock sliding out and slipping back between her quivering labial lips. Her pussy tightened instinctively around him.

He pushed himself up until he was practically kneeling between her sprawled thighs. One hand firmly planted itself on the bed beside her head and the other gently caressed her cheek. Amy turned her face more fully into his hand, relishing the warmth, the sheer size of it. When his thumb raked across her lips, she drew it between her teeth. He tasted salty. He tasted like her sweet pussy.

She entwined her legs around his, silk against steel, holding him tightly within her, tugging at his shoulders until he lowered his body over hers and she felt his delicious weight pinning her to the bed.

"You are not as timid as you once were," he whispered against her ear. "I like you this way."

Amy knew when she was Sarah, she'd been different, even hesitant, but she didn't want to think about the past. She only wanted to lie here and experience everything this man, this soul, was doing to her. If she didn't think, she could forget he was a ghost. She could forget about Eddie and Charity. And she could pretend she was loved and treasured spiritually, emotionally and physically.

She could pretend this would continue forever.

His lips nipped her ear. "Touch yourself while I'm inside you the way you did before," he murmured.

A wave of desire uncoiled and struck lightning fast straight to her painfully aroused clit.

His hand found hers and he guided it between their bodies. Once more, he lifted his chest off hers. His hair fell forward as he gazed down to where they were joined. A muscle in his jaw constricted.

Amy's breaths were short and shallow as her fingertips found her wet, hard bud. It swelled and throbbed at her touch. She knew her own touch coupled with his hard thrusting would make her come fast. As soon as she circled her fingertips over her sensitive clit, she gasped and threw her head back on the bed. Spangling spasms of pleasure racked her body, fused by the combination of his cock and her fingers.

William's thrusts became demanding. Slapping. Hard. Her hand fell away and she clung to his shoulders as he pulsed inside her.

*Still coming...*

*Still fucking coming...*

His delightfully heavy body pressed into hers. His quick breaths feathered her face and when he gasped and his cock throbbed violently, Amy tightened around him. As the waves slowly trailed off, his hand slipped under her head and turned it so that his hot mouth grazed her ear. "I meant it when I said I would never let you go."



## Chapter Seven

Amy suddenly snapped back to reality. The ghost still lay on top of her, languidly undulating inside her. Her eyes drifted open and she stared past William's bronzed shoulder at the gathered lime green fabric lining the canopy. Insistent kisses pressed along the curve of her neck, flooding her once more with white-hot desire.

*I'll never let you go.*

His words rang like a promising threat in her head. He meant it.

Even as she allowed her palms to glide down the length of his tapered back, she wondered how she could have let this happen here. It was crazy. It was stupid. She had come here to find out what had happened to Eddie and who had hurt Charity Clanton and then...*this* happened. Already her body was becoming heavy. She felt as if she were sinking through the mattress. The rock-hard muscles in his buttocks tightened and released under her exploring hands.

A silky moan emanated from his chest and Amy rocked her hips against him. She drew one calf up the back of his long leg. Why, when her mind screamed at her to doubt everything about this spirit, did her treacherous body betray her so shamelessly?

She had to stop this from going any further. She had to put an end to it right now. She pushed at his shoulders. "Stop this!"

William propped up on his elbows. "You do not *act* as if you want me to stop." His voice was but a muted breath. His intent gaze met hers as his hips rolled. White teeth flashed when he grinned.

Amy couldn't think. Not with him buried inside her hot, tight pussy. Not with his sweltering, muscled body gliding over and into hers.

She lifted her hips to meet him. *Yes...*

Desperate panic surged. What was this power he had over her? "I'm not Sarah. I may have *been* Sarah in another time and place but now my name is Amy."

She lolled when his head dipped and he blazed a trail of kisses across her collarbone and up her neck to nuzzle her ear. "All I know is that I've found you. After all this time, I've found you."

*I've found you too...*

She turned her head to give him greater access to her neck. *God, it feels so good...*

No! This was maddening. She couldn't do this. She had to put some sort of physical distance between them. "William, please," she beseeched and tried to wriggle out from under him. *When had a ghost ever been so solid?*

"You don't have to beg, my love." Damn, his voice was like velvet, so sexy. Had he just called her *love*? Have mercy.

Amy groaned her frustration. She struggled to maintain some semblance of composure. "Please stop. I need to talk to you."

He blew out an impatient breath and hovered over her once more. The muscles in his olive-skinned arm bulged with his weight. His silky hair fell forward over one sculpted shoulder. The cardinal feathers dangled, tickling the sensitive curve of her neck. One raven eyebrow arched.

Now she had his attention and she was at a total loss for words. Her gaze swept his chiseled face with its achingly high cheekbones and stern, slightly crooked nose. His lips glistened from the warm, wet kisses he'd bestowed on her even as his cock swelled inside her. Amy swallowed. "Why did you ask for my forgiveness?"

Something dark and painful flashed in his coal eyes. "Why did you betray me?" His sharp voice cut through her like a cold blade.

Amy shook her head. Panic pitched inside her. *Betray*? Even if it had happened in another lifetime, how could she ever have betrayed him? "I don't remember. I don't know." Her voice rose hysterically. "I'm not even certain I *was* Sarah." But she knew better than that.

He lifted himself off her and sat on the edge of the bed. Amy shuddered at the sudden chill the absence of his body caused in her.

His gaze darted around the room. "I cannot pretend to know what has happened to me. I know I am dead." He turned to her. "I saw you dead. How can it be that you are alive?" He stood, gloriously beautiful and rakishly comfortable with his own nudity.

Amy's gaze roamed with salacious lust over his long, lean body. If he was trying to tempt her again, it was working.

He didn't give her time to answer. "What is this place?" he asked. "It appears to be *Belle Ruisseau*." His hand brushed the bedpost. "This appears to be the bed where we made love so many times and yet...yet, it is different. Older. Explain to me what has happened."

Amy's heart flooded with compassion but the reality he was a lost, earthbound spirit made it sink like a stone.

She'd guided countless spirits into the Light. But she'd never before encountered one with whom she'd shared a past life.

William Red Feather was different. The usual logic did not apply. "This is the twenty-first century," she began with difficulty. "It's been nearly one hundred seventy years since you died. Apparently, your spirit had been trapped in the wall all that time."

He stood there, staring, absorbing what she said. His fingertips trailed down the faded walnut bedposts. She could tell the memory haunted him—the way being buried

alive and left to die in a coffin haunted her. He drew in a breath and glared at her. "You are Sarah."

Chill bumps broke out along her naked flesh. "How can you be so sure?" Intuitively she knew it was true, but she wanted to hear it from his lips.

His black gaze warmed her as it moved down her body and back up to her eyes. She resisted the urge to cover herself. "I know you are Sarah because of the way you respond to my touch." His fingertips dropped and brushed her foot.

Amy bit her bottom lip.

His gaze fell to her toenails which were painted a pale shade of blue. He fingered the sparkling toe ring and then his gaze found her eyes once more. The black depths glittered. A little dimple appeared at the corner of his mouth. "And because as gentle as you are, you read the most heinous things. That Poe character, for one." His accent was old world. The way he enunciated his words, choosing each one carefully in his slow, deliberate drawl sent delicious ripples through Amy's body.

Poe? She stared. How did he know all these things? And how could she *not know* those things about a woman whose life she lived?

He reached forward and his fingertips brushed her cheek. "I know you are my Sarah because you have the same fear in your eyes."

Her whole body froze. *Nothing has changed.* This was becoming way too personal, way too uncomfortable. She trembled. Her gaze searched the bed for something, anything to pull over her naked body. Nothing was within reach. The words sprang to her lips to ask him what he thought she feared but she didn't utter them. Instead, she blurted, "Did you kill Eddie? Did you hurt Charity?"

A muscle in his jaw clenched. He struck the bedpost with such force it shook the whole bed. Amy gasped as particles of dust rained down on her. He inhaled sharply. "How is it I know you so well and yet, you do not know me?"

Their gazes clashed. Amy had no answer.

"Amy!" Reed's voice called from the front doorway.

Her heart skipped a beat. "Shit, it's Reed," she whispered and scrambled off the bed, her body passing through William's quickly fading spirit as she lunged for her clothes.

"Don't come in here," she yelled as she wriggled into the tight jeans. How had he gotten here? She had his truck.

"Are you okay?" he called from the hallway.

"I'm fine. I'm just...just...performing a spirit ceremony which requires..." *Requires what? Me to be naked? Dammit. What rotten timing.* "Which requires me to be alone," she finished.

She was sitting on the dusty floor pulling on a boot when an impatient Reed appeared in the doorway to the bedroom. He started to speak but then stopped. His

gaze searched the room. Was there a telltale sunken spot on the bed? Or God forbid, a wet spot? A sweltering blush settled in Amy's cheeks.

"Does this...ceremony...require you to take off all your clothes?" He stooped to pick up the sage bundle. He sniffed it and grimaced. "And smoke pot?"

She pulled the laces tight on her boot and stood. "Trade secret," she said and brushed herself off. *Change the subject. Change the subject now. Has he noticed you have that fresh-fucked look?*

She cleared her throat and then swiped at her hair in an attempt to smooth the wild tangles. "How is Charity?"

He brushed a dust bunny from her curls. "Once she took a tranquilizer, she was fine." His gaze dropped, his eyes widened and then he groaned and averted them quickly. "Shit, Aim. X-Y-Z."

With a gasp, she realized her fly was unzipped. She spun away from him and tried to nonchalantly zip it up as she walked to retrieve her purse. She could practically feel Reed's eyes on her back. Her pulse rioted.

And where was William Red Feather?

"Amy?" Reed's voice was dead serious. "What do you think is going on here?"

She inhaled. William's words echoed in her head. *How is it I know you so well and yet, you do not know me?*

Did that mean he hadn't killed Eddie and hurt Charity? Or did it mean he had?

She'd come here looking for answers and all she had now were more questions.

*Your intuition can tell you the answers. Just listen.*

No. No! She couldn't trust her inner voice anymore.

But this house—and William's spirit—had torn open the veil that had been preventing her from *knowing*.

She hoisted her rainbow bag off the floor and then turned. Reed's hands were on his hips. He shifted his weight from one leg to the other, clearly waiting for an answer.

Amy averted his eyes but her gaze fell on the bed and a wave of guilt assailed her. She had come to *Belle Ruisseau* to ask William about his involvement in Eddie's murder and about what happened to Charity.

She had ended up in bed.

She felt stupid. Selfish. Naïve.

But then the ghost hadn't exactly given her a choice. She wet her lips with her tongue. They tasted of his kisses. Her stomach tightened with mouthwatering memory.

"Amy, tell me. Explain how a...a ghost...can kill a man."

She shrugged. If he had one ounce of psychic ability, he would surely know what she'd been doing moments earlier, on that very bed—with that very ghost.

He would be so disappointed in her if he knew. Tears burned her eyes. She swallowed hard and blinked.

"How is that possible?" Reed asked again. His gaze grazed hers. "First you tell me a ghost murdered Eddie." He pointed in the direction of the cemetery. "And now Charity claims she was attacked by a ghost." He raked his hand through the dark waves at his temple. "What in the hell is going on here?"

"I don't—"

He cut her off. "Don't lie to me, Amy! I know *you know* more than you're telling me."

The truth was Amy *didn't* know. Not this time—and not the time she'd been abducted and buried beneath the earth in a coffin. She shuddered. Why, when it mattered, did her psychic ability hopelessly spiral down the toilet?

"Eddie's family is down at the funeral home getting ready for the visitation and you're dancing around naked in the dark like Stevie Nicks."

Anger flared. Not anger at Reed, but anger at herself. She had tried to have a conversation with William but he'd put a quick halt to that. Amy clenched her fists. "I came down here for a new life. If I'd been able to keep reading palms and tipping tables I would have stayed in Nashville."

"You said you were coming here to talk to that spirit. Did you or didn't you?"

Amy blew out a sigh. "I did. I saw him." She pointed at the floor near the bed. "William Red Feather stood right here and..." *And then he fucked me.*

"And what?" Reed's gaze scoped the room as if something sinister was about to jump out at him.

She shook her head to dispel the image of William Red Feather's incredibly sexy body from her thoughts. "He's an earthbound spirit. He's confused. He thinks I'm Uriah Winston's wife, Sarah."

Reed stared, incredulous. He crossed his arms over his chest. Amy could tell he was on guard, poised to bolt at the first sight of a spirit. "Did he kill Eddie?" His voice was softer, more uncertain.

Her shoulders slumped. "I don't know."

*No! You know William didn't do it!*

"Can you find out?" When she remained silent, he turned to walk out the door but then he stopped and spun around. "I walked over here from Charity's to make sure you were all right. Give me the truck keys and let's get outta here."

Amy plunged her hand into the bag and maneuvered around her stuff until her index finger hooked the key ring. "Here," she said and tossed them to him.

He caught them with ease. "Get in the truck." With that, he turned and strode into the hall. She heard his footsteps stomping down the porch stairs.

Amy stared at the spot where he'd been. Outside, she could hear the rumble of the truck's powerful engine firing up. With trembling hands, she hugged herself.

*Dammit.* Why couldn't she figure this out? Utterly frustrated, she seized a handful of hair at the top of her head and squeezed her eyes shut. She wanted to stomp her feet and scream but she somehow kept her temper in check.

"Who was that?"

Amy whirled at the sound of William's voice. He sat on the side of the bed. The heel of one black boot rested on the thick walnut bedrail. God, he was gorgeous—and she'd just fucked him.

Her heart literally skipped a beat. "My brother." She was shaking from head to toe. How could William look so...so damned calm and so damned real? "I'll discuss this with you later and you better be prepared to give me some answers." She stalked toward the door but suddenly the ghost was standing in her path.

Amy gasped.

William leaned against one side of the doorjamb and blocked the other with his outstretched arm.

Her gaze crashed into his. "Move."

Savage energy pulsed from his spirit. *God, he looked so real. If only...*

His hand dropped and found hers. She tensed but her gaze never wavered from his.

"This house," his gaze swept the ceiling and then found her eyes once more, "has far too many ghosts. Don't come back here."

Amy swallowed. "What do you mean, William?"

"It is too dangerous for you here."

"Are you threatening me?"

"I'm warning you." He inhaled. Something dark flashed in his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak again but instead, he slanted his head down toward hers.

She trembled, disbelieving—but she dared not move. He was going to kiss her again.

Despite everything, he was going to kiss her.

And then he did.

William's mouth sought hers possessively. Amy's knees went weak. Mindless, she moaned into his mouth, once more completely at his mercy, at his beck and call.

This time, it wasn't only desire that made her weak in the knees. Sarah's memories of loving him floated into her head and seeped into her heart.

Some new bond was beginning. She felt it and knew it was dangerous.

Outside, the horn honked long and loud.

Amy's consciousness rudely snapped back. She reluctantly dragged her mouth away. "I have to go." Her voice was raw.

His fingers closed around her hand, inserting a warm, hard object into her palm and then he dissolved into nothingness.

Her lips still burning from his kiss, she stared at the spot where he'd been for a moment before she opened her palm. The rose quartz crystal she'd brought for protection gleamed up at her.

His words rang in her head.

*Warning you...*

*Do not return to Belle Ruisseau...*

She spun and her gaze darted around the cavernous house. She shivered with ghostly energy.

Energy that wasn't William's.

"Who's here? Show yourself!" she demanded.

The old house creaked in response but no apparition materialized out of the shadowy ethers.

Still, she knew he was there, lurking in the darkness. Her pulse pounded. "Who are you? What do you want?"

Reed laid on the horn again and Amy gratefully fled the house and climbed into the truck.

The tires spun rocks and dirt clods as he wheeled down the gravel drive.

Amy's gaze was drawn toward the Winston family plot.

Her skin tingled and it had nothing to do with the kiss she'd just shared with William Red Feather.

There was another spirit at *Belle Ruisseau* and Amy didn't have to use her psychic ability to guess who it was.

The top of the obelisk marking Uriah Winton's grave glinted in the sunlight.

If Uriah Winston killed Eddie, Amy needed to find out why.

She'd once been in the business of helping spirits finish their earthly dealings in order to cross over to the Other Side.

Although she wasn't certain what part she and William played in this drama, she did know she was here for a reason.

It was obvious Uriah had walled William up alive in the cellar. That was a crime of passion.

But was it because he found out his wife was planning to leave him for a hot-ass half-breed or because William had killed her?

Her insides tightened into a hard, unrelenting knot.

She, just like her past incarnation of Sarah, had overstepped her boundaries with William and now she realized she was falling head over heels for him.

This was dangerous and stupid and yet, she felt powerless to prevent it. Every fiber of her being felt an unrelenting, heartwrenching pull to his soul.

Amy knew Sarah's thoughts and emotions had merged with hers until she couldn't discern the two any longer.

She rubbed her palms briskly on her thighs. How many past-life readings had she done for others who were convinced they'd met their soul mates only to discover the person had wronged them in one way or another in past incarnations?

It was no doubt due to her past-life experiences here but this place had given her worn out psychic ability a much needed jumpstart. A talk with Eddie's spirit would explain a lot about Uriah's motives. And Amy knew there was only one way she could find out what happened to Eddie.

She inhaled sharply. She would have to come back to the place where he died. The Winston family cemetery – despite William Red Feather's warning.

\* \* \* \* \*

*He watched her run from the house through a chink in the plywood covering the window.*

*Sarah was every bit as dull-witted and gullible as she had been before. A wicked grin pulled at his lips. One thing had changed. She was more responsive than he'd ever known her to be.*

*Now that she knew Charity had been attacked, she would be riddled with doubt. She would know what he felt. And when he was certain she had suffered enough, he would kill her – just as he had before.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The VW's engine purred as Amy sat behind the wheel. A shiver crawled up her spine and she shook her shoulders to dispel it. Her headlights illuminated the weathered tombstones of the Winston family cemetery.

She'd had to wait until dusk to come back. Reed's workers had thwarted her plans to come earlier when they piled in to deliver lumber and other supplies to the house.

A sliver of yellow police tape flapped in the crisp October breeze.

Amy took a deep breath and then blew it out slowly. It had been a year since she'd made an attempt like this but conjuring Eddie's spirit should be easy enough. He hadn't been dead long and the freshly deceased were still close to the earth plane, thus easy to contact.

And yet, a disturbing sense of quiet settled over her as she stared at the tombstones, as if Eddie weren't here at all. It was the same feeling she'd had the day after his death.

That was odd. When she was at the top of her psychic game, the recently deceased had sought her out if she was within a twenty-mile radius of them. Eddie hadn't made one attempt to contact her.

Resolved, she snatched the twin peanut butter cups she'd bought at the corner gas station off the passenger seat, devoured them and then licked the chocolate from her fingers. After chasing it all down with a highly charged energy drink, she smacked and



worked her tongue behind a back tooth to dislodge some sticky peanut butter. It never hurt to have an extra bump of caffeinated, sugary energy before tackling a psychic task.

Leaving the headlights on, she shifted into gear and then switched off the ignition. The parking brake rasped loudly as she firmly wrenched it up.

With the crystal William had returned to her tucked securely in her bra, she pulled up the door handle and slid off the wooden beaded seat cover to the ground.

She shuddered as the dew-laden grass chilled her sandaled feet. An owl hooted solemnly from the woods, shattering the pervading silence. Amy jumped, startled. The quietness unnerved her.

She took a quick glance behind her. In the distance, a single utility light shined down eerily on the decrepit mansion, bathing it in an unnatural yellow glow. William Red Feather's words echoed in her head. *This house has far too many ghosts...*

Amy inhaled. This was stupid. William was right—she shouldn't be here. Eddie had been *murdered* here. What made her think she would be safe? Reed would scold her for being here after dark. And yet despite her inner warnings, her feet carried her reluctantly toward the crumbling stone wall that partially surrounded the cemetery.

She had to know what happened to Eddie—for Reed, for William, but most of all, for herself.

As she neared the wall, her pulse accelerated. Clutching the ring of her pewter Pisces keychain, she rattled her keys to break the silence. Her gaze darted around the cemetery. No wispy shapes lurked behind the tombstones. No pale apparitions appeared.

She swallowed.

Was William here now? She couldn't feel him.

Her mind attempted to analyze what happened. The police had declared it an accident. A part of her hoped beyond hope it had been. But she knew better.

A tingle rattled her spine, signifying a spirit presence.

Someone was here. However, her senses were not strong enough to determine if it was a *living someone* or a *dead someone*.

"Hello?" she called but no one answered. She peered into the darkness. An image of that old lady with the .38 reared in her head. This was dangerous. She should leave right now.

And yet, for her own sake, she knew she had to determine William's innocence—or guilt.

Unable to shake the feeling someone—or something—was behind her, she glanced over her shoulder again. Clouds partially obscured the moon.

She tried to quiet her mind and her racing heart, to feel her surroundings.

Nothing.

*Nothing...yet.*

If she could just sit in the place where Eddie had died, she might be able to psychically intuit what happened to him.

She blew out a breath. The stone wall reached her knees and she placed her fingertips on it to balance herself as she clutched her keys and hiked up her skirt with the other hand and stepped over the enclosure. Her foot promptly came down in a hole. Her ankle twisted and she suddenly found herself sprawled across a grave with the breath knocked out of her lungs. She grimaced. Sharp pain shot through her elbow and she realized she'd struck the edge of a tombstone during her fall.

Taking a moment to mentally inventory her body, she gratefully realized nothing was broken. "Klutz," she muttered as she struggled to sit. A gaping rip marred her blue broomstick skirt. "Damn," she said as she examined the torn fabric. There was no way to repair it and it'd been one of her favorites.

"Sarah..."

Her head jerked toward the looming tombstones. Her breath froze. She'd heard a voice. She was certain of it. "Who's there?"

The only reply was wind crackling through the brittle leaves in the towering oak at the back of the cemetery. An ancient cedar that jutted up next to the oak shivered silver in the glare of the headlights. Amy swallowed and clambered to her feet. "Who's there?" she called again. "William?"

Her heart hammered against her rib cage. She should leave now. She should have heeded William's advice and stayed the hell away from this place.

Something moved in the woods beyond the cemetery. An animal? Miss Lettie and her .38? A ghost?

She peered into the darkness, suddenly very afraid. Her mouth was dry. "William?" This time, her voice was but a whisper.

This was stupid. *Stupid!* There was no way she would be able to pick up any psychic information when she was in fear for her life. She, of all people, should have known better than to come to a desolate, deserted graveyard at night. Why had she been so damned determined to do this?

"Sarah..." The voice seemed to whisper ominously through the trees. It wasn't William's voice.

A violent shudder of spirit energy shook her to the core. "That's it," she said under her breath. "I'm outta here." She took a step toward the van but sudden panic struck. She'd dropped her keys when she fell.

Frantic, she raked her long hair out of her face as her gaze scoured the dark ground. Why hadn't she thought to bring a flashlight? She dropped to the grass in an attempt to see the keys, looking, searching for anything that glimmered in the moonlight. The dew-soaked ground was cold and strewn with musty-smelling fallen leaves. Damn, why was it so dark? Where were her keys?

"Sarah..."

Amy froze, suddenly still as a rabbit, staring into the blackness beyond the reach of the headlights. The voice was closer. She strained to hear but no other sounds crept out of the dark night. Again, her spine tingled with the ghostly energy.

She wasn't alone.

Her terror escalated as her hands swept blindly through the leaves in a frenzied search for her keys. A cold blast of air whipped past her with such force her hair and clothes blustered wildly. She didn't have to open psychically to realize it was a spirit—a hostile spirit.

At any moment she expected to be assaulted by it, touched by icy fingers, suffocated, her neck broken—*just like Eddie's*.

"Where are they?" she muttered, crawling on her hands and knees on the cold, soggy ground.

Finally, her fingers brushed cold metal. Her heart leapt—only to come crashing back down around her.

An ominous dark shadow wavered wildly only a few feet in front of her. She stared.

"Leave this place!" It wasn't a request.

It was a command.

Amy gulped.

And this time, she recognized the voice distinctly as William Red Feather's.

Heart thundering, she seized the keys and ran, stumbling on the uneven ground. She careened into the grass and weeds. Pain shot through her knees and wrists but she managed to hold on tightly to the keys as she scrambled to her feet and then raced toward the van.

She yanked the door open and climbed inside. Her first instinct was to pound down the lock with her fist. Her hands shook so badly she could hardly jam the key into the ignition and crank it. The van lurched forward and stalled.

"Come on," Amy said through gritted teeth. She shoved the clutch to the floorboard and twisted the key once more. The van sputtered but when she gassed it, it finally came to life. She wrenched the stick shift into reverse, spun backward and wheeled the van around before grinding the gear into first and hauling ass down the deeply rutted driveway.

As she raced through the front gate, she noticed Lettie's station wagon parked behind the gas station. So the old lady *had* been there! She didn't blow out the breath she'd been holding until she was finally back into the thick of traffic and city lights.

Trembling, she drove the van slowly down the well lit streets. Her mind ran rampant with what had just happened. She had no doubt someone had tried to frighten her—or kill her.

*William?*

She'd heard his voice. Earlier that afternoon he had seemed so tender. Why would he hurt her?

Miss Lettie?

Or Uriah Winston?

Reed had never been convinced Lettie had anything to do with Eddie's murder. He thought she was a harmless, disgruntled little old lady. But Amy had seen that pistol the woman packed. Lettie hadn't seemed harmless to her at all.

And Uriah Winston was a wild card.

Amy took another deep breath and then exhaled. There was more to this. There had to be. Why would William want her away from *Belle Ruisseau* so badly he would make her feel as if her life were threatened?

Again, she had discovered nothing to find answers for Reed—or for herself. Nothing.

She struck the steering wheel in frustration.

There had to be some other way to find out what happened to Eddie.

## Chapter Eight

"Please," Amy beseeched as she planted the toe of her foot in the doorway of the Florence Funeral Home. "I've driven all the way from Nashville." She poked out her bottom lip, batted her eyelashes until her eyes teared and flashed her best sad puppy look – the one that always worked on her when Boo did it.

The meek-looking employee blew out a sigh. He ran his fingers nervously through his short gray hair. "Well, I'm really not supposed to let anyone in after hours but if you keep your visit brief..." His voice had the hushed timbre of a librarian's.

"Oh I'll keep it brief. I promise." She tried not to appear too thrilled. After all, she was here to view the corpse of her *favorite uncle*. It wouldn't do to seem happy about it.

He swung the wide door open and allowed her to come inside. The only lights in the place were the security night lights which cast a dim, dismal glow over the stately funeral home furnishings and scarlet carpet patterned with the same gold *fleur-de-lis* designs she'd seen all over Florence. The sweet and unmistakable fragrance of carnations permeated the chilly air. If she couldn't pick up a spirit presence here, she might as well forget ever being psychic again.

Amy shivered deliciously.

*Spirits!* The place was full of them and the best part – she could actually *feel* them.

But why could she sense them and not Eddie?

She half expected the employee to say "walk this way" before striding off with a limp but he merely motioned for her to follow him. Her gaze swept the other darkened hallways and shadowed alcoves as she followed the khaki-clad fellow down a long corridor.

When he'd opened the door, the timid little man had looked at her askance, taking in her disheveled appearance. Amy knew, besides being irreparably ripped, the front of her skirt was stained with Alabama red clay and bits and pieces of fallen leaves. She'd tried her best to brush the dirt off her hands but they too evidenced the crimson-colored clay.

She shuddered, trying to shake off the memory of the dark spirit in the cemetery. She couldn't believe William would hurt her but he'd definitely scared her.

There was no mistaking the voice and the warning behind it.

She lifted her gaze from the carpet and gasped when she suddenly saw a gray-haired woman wearing a navy blue dress lurking near the partially open doorway to one of the viewing rooms. The name on the plaque outside read "C. Johnson" and Amy didn't doubt the woman's physical body lay in a casket on the other side of the door.

The funeral home employee strolled blissfully right past the lady without paying her any notice.

"Hey," the woman called when she noticed Amy could obviously see her.

Amy ignored her and kept walking, training her eyes on the back of the funeral director's staid blue cotton button-down. She shook off the willies and resisted the temptation to glance back at the ghost.

A wave of guilt welled but she didn't have time to bother playing secretary to a dead woman. Every one of them, it seemed, had a message for this or that living person and Amy was way past being Miss Nice Psychic for strange spooks or relaying their messages to the disbelieving and often unreceptive living.

She had to keep her focus on Eddie. Somehow, she knew his fate was linked to William's – and hers.

"Hey, girl," the woman called again.

Deliberately not looking back, Amy followed the employee through a set of wide double doors. He led her to where a shiny gray casket was perched on an ornate pedestal, surrounded by elaborate floral wreaths mounted to green wire stands. He switched on a floor lamp and then looked at her over his shoulder. "Would you like me to open it?"

Amy glanced around the room. Eddie's spirit was nowhere in sight. Her stomach sank. Spirits usually hovered close to their bodies for a few days after death while they absorbed whatever residual energy remained in the corpse. It didn't make psychic sense. If he was nowhere else, Eddie should be here. She stared at the coffin and gave a nod.

Ms. Johnson's shade appeared in the doorway. "He's not in there." Her ghostly voice seemed to echo in the empty funeral parlor.

Amy shot her an annoyed look.

The casket lid creaked when the man pushed it up and locked it into position.

That old spook was crazy. Eddie most certainly was *in there*.

Wasn't he?

Amy took a hesitant step toward the casket. Eddie's corpse lay inside clad in a second-rate suit, his hands folded stiffly over his paunch. His skin was waxen and his mouth stretched tautly across his swollen face in an artificial, macabre grin.

Although she'd spoken to her share of spirits, Amy had never quite come to terms with the sight of dead bodies. Something about them seemed so unnatural. So unpleasant. And just plain weird.

The employee stood there, waiting to drop the lid.

Amy tried to look demure without reducing herself to batting her eyelashes again. Somehow flirting lost its affect when she was standing in front of a corpse looking like a Summer of Love refugee in her tattered hippy skirt and covered with dirt from head to toe. "Might I...have a moment alone with Uncle Eddie?"

"Of course," he said and quietly slipped from the room.

Amy approached the casket.

"I told you, he's not there." Ms. Johnson was suddenly beside her. The light glanced off her oversized, out-modish glasses. Amy wondered why people wanted their deceased relatives to wear glasses for a viewing. It wasn't as if they needed them any longer.

"What do you mean, he's not there?" Amy asked.

Ms. Johnson smirked, obviously thrilled with the prospect of getting a bit of revenge on Amy for ignoring her earlier. "Why don't you ask Geronimo?"

Amy raised an eyebrow.

"The Indian you brought with you."

A shiver dashed up Amy's spine. She glanced right and left but saw no trace of William Red Feather. Sometimes the dead could pick up psychic thoughts. Perhaps that was the case with Ms. Johnson.

Disregarding her, she turned back to Eddie's corpse. "Eddie?"

"Not there," Ms. Johnson chimed. And even as she spoke, Amy knew she was right.

Amy glared at her, annoyed she was right and annoyed at her haughty attitude. "Get a grave, lady."

Ms. Johnson crossed her arms over her chest. Her eyes narrowed into vicious slits. "You think they can't hurt you because you're living. Well, you're wrong. Dead wrong."

Amy's heart turned to ice. Chills broke out along her arms and legs.

The spirit inclined her head toward Eddie's corpse. "And your Indian lover is going to end up just like this one if you keep on prying." She smiled wickedly. "Soul-less." Her voice hissed with the last word.

"Ma'am?" The director's voice startled Amy.

She spun to face him.

"Are you finished? I really need to lock up."

Amy nodded. "Yes. Thank you." She looked back but Ms. Johnson had vanished. Still, her words echoed in Amy's head. *Soul-less*. What had she meant by that?

Had Eddie's soul been somehow snatched away by the ghost who'd killed him?

More importantly, was William's soul at risk? Terror welled up hard inside her at the thought of something happening to him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy watched Boo run into the darkness behind Tripod before she closed the door and twisted the lock. She was tired but she knew she'd never get to sleep—not with William Red Feather's spirit lingering for his nightly visit.

She'd felt the telltale chills ever since she'd left the funeral home. Ms. Johnson had been right. William had been at the funeral home with her.

She padded into the bathroom and twisted the cap off her bottle of sleeping pills. After dumping two into her palm, she hesitated, staring at them.

She needed to be alert. But ever since the sleep aid had been prescribed, she'd never gone without taking it. Panic brimmed at the thought of going to bed without her crutch but she managed to tamp it down. She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly in an attempt to dispel her anxiety. No. Not tonight.

Tonight she needed – no, wanted – to be *all there*.

Resolved, she popped the pills back into the bottle and screwed the childproof lid on tightly.

She brushed her teeth, undressed and then took a long, steamy shower, relishing the heat of the water as it washed away the red dirt from her hands and knees. After pulling on a thick white terry robe, she climbed the ladder to the loft and then crawled atop the unmade bed. Sitting with her back propped against the pillows, she reached over and switched off the bedside light. "Don't waste time waiting until I'm asleep, William," she said, her voice echoing in the silence.

She stared.

The A-frame was deathly quiet. As her eyes adjusted to the dark, the shimmer of rippling water reflected silver on the sloping walls. "William?" she called. Her mind raced over the events of the evening – the scare in the cemetery and that caustic spirit in the funeral home. What frightened her even more than the dark shadow in the graveyard was the *nothingness* she'd felt from Eddie.

*Soul-less.*

Jillian had told her about the soul collectors, hellacious beings made of fear and envy and all the other evil in the world that snatched the souls out of earthbound spirits, leaving only a revenant, *soul-less* ghost behind.

What if William's soul was snatched away? Suddenly, the idea of being without him induced terror in her heart because although she couldn't remember the details of her life as Sarah, she realized her own spirit had moved heaven and earth to put her in this place so she would find him.

An iridescent gathering of glitter amassed at the foot of the bed. Amy's heart went wild only to skip a beat when she saw that his apparition was transparent. Ghostly.

He sat on the side of the bed and stared straight ahead with his elbows resting on his thighs, his hands pressed together under his chin.

Amy had never seen him so transparent. His energy wavered. "William?"

He turned and glowered at her. She shuddered. Even in his translucent state, she detected the savage intensity in his black eyes. His clothes were disheveled. The two cardinal feathers hung tenaciously to a long lock of hair.



Trembling, Amy drew her knees up under her chin and wrapped her arms around her legs.

"What did you hope to find in the graveyard?" His voice was low and didn't quite match the movement of his lips.

Amy squinted to see him better. She wanted to turn on the light but feared his apparition would vanish if she did. He looked tired, worried. She inhaled. "I was looking for Eddie."

"I told you not to return to *Belle Ruisseau* and yet you have done so on two occasions."

Amy's heart skipped a beat. Her psychic senses told her he was deliberately hiding something from her.

His black eyebrows formed a sinister line over his eyes. He lunged toward her, his translucent face inches from her own. "At one time, you vowed your love for me. You put your trust in me." His eyes blazed with warning.

Amy shrank back against the headboard. She pulled her knees in tighter to dispel the shaking in her limbs. Although she feared him, fury welled that he had the audacity to intimidate her. "You see where that got me?" she wailed. "Killed!"

She gasped at her hasty words. Why had she said such a thing?

He sucked in a breath and closed his eyes briefly. His whole body stiffened. A muscle in his jaw clenched. Slowly, deliberately, he blew out the breath through clenched teeth. "Only because you betrayed me to your husband."

*Had she? And what had he done to warrant it?*

Amy couldn't remember that part of Sarah Winston's life and worse, she had no explanation as to why a ghost had killed Eddie and had accosted Charity.

And why did she cling to the hope that time could somehow change the fact William had killed *her*?

"Why did you betray me, Sarah?" he reiterated. His voice was like ice.

Amy stared. "Betray you? William, I don't have many memories of that lifetime."

His gaze swept her face. The corner of his mouth twisted in a mocking smile. It was chilling. "Your actions certainly do not mirror your words—Amy. You remember what suits you well enough." He pushed away from her and paced.

When he was in her bed, he was stunning. Angry, he was magnificent. Tall, long and lithe, with his shoulder-length jet hair and wearing a blousing white shirt, he looked like the hero from a romantic movie instead of a surly spirit.

Amy felt the room spin. She was in the middle of a nightmare fighting to maintain some semblance of reality. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He spun to face her. His leering gaze raked her body. "Do you not recall how quickly you peeled off your clothes just this afternoon? Or have you forgotten that as well?"

She sucked in a breath as an image of the afternoon she'd spent in bed with him at *Belle Ruisseau*—instead of questioning him—blossomed in her brain.

William's apparition vacillated in the darkness.

Amy squinted. Why was he so transparent? She wanted so badly to understand. Even with *Belle Ruisseau* acting as a catalyst for her psychic senses, she found herself grasping desperately at memories that seemed just out of her reach. Why did her ability always let her down when she needed it the most? Why couldn't she *read* herself?

Huddling in the voluminous robe, she squeezed her ankles in frustration. And *why* was she so desperately attracted to a man she should, for all practical purposes, fear?

He was making her feel guilty for not remembering a past life she'd never known she had. Anger roiled inside her. "Why won't you answer my questions?"

He stalked toward her. "What is it you want to know?"

She swallowed hard but she'd be damned if she'd show him she was afraid of him. She lifted her chin. "I want to know if you killed my brother's employee." She looked hard into his eyes.

His nostrils flared. His look was lethal.

Every muscle in her body was taut. "Tell me!"

"Do you really think that little of me?"

Amy slammed her fist into the pillow. "See? There you go again. Answer my fucking question!"

William's lips parted. He seemed genuinely stunned by her outburst—and by her language. "You have asked this of me before." Anguish smoldered in his eyes. "How could you think I murdered him?"

She trembled under his fuming gaze. She wanted terribly to believe him but all her instincts screamed a ghost had killed Eddie. "Did Uriah Winston kill him?"

William flinched. "What makes you think that?"

"I felt another spirit in the house."

He stared as if she had just unearthed some carefully guarded secret. "You must not go back there."

"If I make you that promise, will you tell me the truth?"

"I have told you the truth."

Yet he still hadn't resolved the question about Eddie. "Was it Uriah Winston?" she asked again.

William's head bowed. "Yes."

Amy's insides hollowed. "I don't understand. Why?"

"I do not know why."

She mulled it over. Why would Uriah be concerned with Eddie—or Charity, for that matter? Perhaps Reed was right. Eddie had tried to loot Uriah's grave and

Charity...well, she was renovating what he considered to be his house. "And Charity? Did he do that as well?"

He leaned over her once more, planting his hands on the bed on either side of her hips. His face was only inches from hers. "You thought I did that." He stared for a steep second. "Didn't you?"

Amy bit her bottom lip. She shook her head. "I don't believe what everyone says about you."

"You didn't when you were Sarah either." His expression warmed.

She searched his eyes. Something sparked in his lurid gaze. Lust. And Amy somehow knew she could never refuse him. Not tonight. Not ever.

His lips eased into a sexy smile. "That's why I loved you."

Amy froze. She gaped. Tears threatened to flood her eyes. He watched her intently as if waiting, searching for a response. A reply formed on her lips but somehow she bit it back. Her heart soared only to come crashing down, hard. He'd loved her when she was Sarah—but could he love her, Amy, just as much?

Part of her wanted badly to believe a man as handsome and alluring as William Red Feather could love a frumpy, eccentric scatterbrain like her. Another part of her *knew*—no, *feared*—he, like others before him, was lying to her.

She pushed the thought to the back of her mind and let her gaze fall to his mouth... His mouth was soft and expressive. The bottom lip was slightly fuller than the top, giving him a captivating pout that made Amy want to lean in and kiss him.

His white shirt was open, revealing the alluring curve of his collarbone. She longed to trace its length with the tip of her tongue, to push the shirt open wide and explore the hardness she knew was hidden in the shadowy depths.

What was this overpowering attraction to him?

His handsome looks made him a god among men but there was something more—something *inside* him that infatuated Amy beyond obsession.

If only she could unlock all her past life memories. "Can you...would you tell me about your life before?"

His gaze softened but he couldn't mask the hurt look that crossed his features.

"Please?" Amy asked. "I want to remember."

"My life was nothing until I met you." He stared.

Amy's heart twisted. She suddenly wanted to launch herself into his arms and kiss away the hurt. No man had ever looked at her the way William was looking at her now. She wanted desperately to remember. "I read that your father built *Belle Ruisseau*."

William nodded. "The land belonged to my mother."

"What was she like?"

"She died when I was very young but I remember her being very beautiful. Tall, dark," he said wistfully. "My father kept a portrait of her in the house and I would stare at it for hours, wishing she hadn't died."

Amy inched a little closer to him. "My mother died when I was a child too."

His gaze connected with hers and Amy sensed some new intimacy forming between them. This was what she had wanted, but this sudden closeness terrified her to the core in a way doubting him never had.

"Did your father raise you?" she asked.

William nodded. "Rather, his slaves and the tutors he hired raised me—until his death. Then, I went to live with the Cherokee."

"Who taught you to paint?"

A slight smile claimed his lips. "I learned to paint in France."

So, he'd been a world traveler. These new facets of his personality struck a chord of sentimentality in Amy. She'd never been involved with anyone like William. If a guy had asked her on a second date, it had been because he didn't have a *Star Trek* convention to attend or his Dungeons & Dragons game had been called off for the evening.

Amy felt as if she were out of her league with William. He was wickedly handsome and talented and a skilled lover. Now that Amy was discovering his past and personality, she was attracted to him even more.

She fought to keep her libido in check. She needed to keep her thoughts clear so she could find out what was going on and why she was in the midst of it. Clearing her throat, she forced herself to look into his eyes. "You said you loved me...loved Sarah," she said, knowing she was blushing furiously. "Was Sarah the first woman you loved?"

"You were the only woman I loved."

Amy's heart rioted. "But I...Sarah...was married."

William gave a solemn nod.

"It must have been strange going back to *Belle Ruisseau* when Sarah's husband had taken it from your father in a card game."

His features grew dark. "My father never recovered from my mother's death. He lost the plantation when I was in my teens and then he took to the bottle."

"The lady at the museum told me you were related to Sam Houston's wife."

"She was my mother's second cousin."

Amy stared, amazed. "Was Houston at the Alamo?"

William shook his head. "No, he was on his way to Gonzales when the Alamo fell."

"But I thought—"

"I was there," he interjected.

"You were...there?" she asked. "At the Alamo?"

"No, in Gonzales."

"How old were you?"

He rubbed his chin. "That was in 1836, so I must have been twenty-one or so."

"Were you in the army?"

"No, but I was a scout for Sam Houston," he said. "When we got word there was an Anglo survivor who Santa Anna released, Sam dispatched me to go find her."

"Her?"

"Susannah Dickinson and her two-year-old daughter."

Although the guide at Pope's Tavern had mentioned William's involvement, Amy had never been able to picture it until now. Her lips parted as she envisioned William trekking bravely across the war-torn Texas wilderness to find and bring back a woman and her child.

A man who had murdered a person wasn't capable of such altruism. Was he?

"We feared she and the child had been turned out alone but I discovered her with two of Sam's other scouts, who led them on to Gonzales."

"I bet that woman was terrified."

William shrugged. "She was a frontier woman."

"But she'd seen all those people killed."

He inhaled deeply and reached to caress her cheek. "You have changed little." His gaze drifted over her face in blatant appraisal. "Your innocence astounds me."

Amy's cheeks warmed. Her gaze veered downward as she assimilated this fresh connection between them.

Perhaps there was another way to unlock her past life memories. She looked into his eyes. "Can you tell me about Sarah Winston? I want to remember, William."

A genuine smile pulled at William's lips. As handsome as he was when he was serious, Amy found him even more so smiling. It seemed as if something in his demeanor softened, as if he'd let his guard down. His apparition colored, becoming more solid. "You were—*are*—beautiful." His gaze moved over the thick robe and then back to her eyes. "Your body is different. Sarah's was...coltish. Yours is softer. More voluptuous."

Voluptuous? Her self-description was *fluffy*. She tensed as his gaze roved over the wet, blonde turmoil that was her hair.

"Your curls are lighter. Then, they had the slightest hint of fire simmering beneath the gold."

Warmth swept up Amy's spine. No man had ever described her that way.

"The color matched you so well."

"How do you mean?"

A muscle in his jaw twitched. His eyes warmed with a distant memory. "You were every bit the proper lady on the outside but underneath your porcelain veneer was a *harlot* just waiting to be had."

The warmth heated to a blaze, unfurling through her cheeks and seeping down her neck. She raised an eyebrow, suddenly feeling emboldened and provocatively alluring. "So we were lovers."

"More." He stood beside the bed and turned to stare out the window of the A-frame.

Amy's heart tightened. She couldn't recall ever having really been in love with anyone in this lifetime. How could she have known passion so deeply in another and not remember it? A strange sense of melancholy encircled the wonder she felt at William's words. She climbed off the bed and brushed her fingertips along the sleeve of his shirt. "More?"

She knew she was deliberately projecting an invitation but she couldn't make herself stop. She wanted him. She wanted him badly.

His shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath. He was completely solid now. Vibrant. Real. He turned to her. "You were my other half. The dawn to my night."

A rush of delicious desire uncurled in her limbs. Every fiber of her body grew taut, expectant. Had she felt that way about him as well? *She knew she had.* Her heart swelled.

*Could she love him again?*

She caught herself. Falling in love with a ghost! It was ludicrous. Although he was earthbound, he was not of this world. He would eventually—most assuredly—have to go into the Light. She shuddered when she recalled her sister's devastation at knowing her spirit lover would have to leave her for the Light. Besides, Amy thought, she hardly knew William Red Feather.

He studied her eyes. "You don't remember much about *us*, do you?"

"I do remember some things. When I was at the museum I saw the painting you did of Sarah—of me. I remembered sitting in a room wearing a rose-colored sash."

He grew stiff. His eyes darkened.

Averting her eyes in remembrance, she went on with her description. "You were adjusting the sash and I was thinking...*I am so in love with him...*"

Her gaze found his.

Suddenly, he was the one who looked guilty. "You loved me...*then*? That early?"

"It was just a fleeting memory." She was still blushing. She found it difficult to maintain eye contact with him.

His expression softened. He swallowed thickly and then he had her by the shoulders, hauling her body against him and folding her in his arms. She gasped at the suddenness of his motions. Cradling her face in his hands, he claimed her mouth with an intensity that surprised her.

Her astonishment quickly faded as his greedy kiss deepened. Her arms encircled his shoulders, her fingers burrowing into the thick black hair at his nape. What had sparked this sudden desire in him? Her admission of having one fleeting memory of her love for him?

He tore his mouth from hers and held her head back only far enough to look into her eyes. "I never would have hurt you had I known. *Never.*"

The taste of his kiss lingered on her lips. Her body thrummed with need.

*Would never have hurt you...* Her heart suddenly turned to ice.

Before she could comment, he dragged her against him once more, holding her, kissing her hair, rocking her. Stunned, Amy breathed in the crisp scent of his linen shirt, the masculine warmth of his skin. *Hurt her?*

Not wanting to think about Sarah Winston's death, she squeezed her eyes shut.

Not now. Not when she wanted only to bask in the pleasure his body offered. Not when she finally felt *seen* by a man for the first time in her entire life.

*My other half...*

Her heart turned over hard.

His hands slid down her back, drawing her even closer. His chest expanded with a deep breath. His long, slow exhale warmed her hair and tickled her ear. "I would give my soul for another chance at life with you," he murmured against her temple. He kissed her there, softly. Chastely.

Happiness rose only to quickly drain back down through her shaking legs and pool in her feet. She swallowed the hard lump in her throat. Just when she'd vowed to play it safe, just when she thought she was done with all things metaphysical, just when she thought she was through putting undeserved trust in others, William Red Feather's presence had dragged her spiraling back into the world of the mysterious and unknown.

Her brain told her to doubt him, to doubt everything about him. Her intuition told her a different story. He'd practically admitted to killing her previous incarnation and yet, she was willing to offer him her heart and body in exchange for the comfort of his embrace and the words of love he uttered. *It was happening all over again...*

An involuntary sob choked in her throat.

He pushed her back and searched her eyes. She would have swiped the telltale tear off her cheek but his hands firmly grasped her arms, preventing movement.

How could he be so kind one minute and so furtive the next? Why did –

*Stop!* This was no time to think. Not with him here, holding her. Not when she'd waited the course of three lifetimes to find him again.

Right now, she knew what she wanted – or rather, what the part of her that still harbored Sarah Winston wanted. She wanted William. She wanted him kissing her, making love to her.

Boldly holding his gaze, she took a step backward as she unbelted her robe.

William's eyes blazed. His gaze trailed down her body as she opened the robe and shrugged out of it. The soft white terry cloth pooled around her ankles.

Amy realized her breaths were coming fast and shallow. She'd never before felt confident enough to disrobe in front of a man this intrepidly but William's gaze raked her in heated, blatant appraisal.

His hand slid to his rigid erection, which strained against the fabric of his trousers. He gripped it.

The idea she'd caused that reaction in him sent a wave of hot desire unfurling through her body. A need arose in her the likes of which she had never known. She wanted him to know, to see, to feel ecstasy in her arms. She wanted to prove to him she held the promise of being the best lover he would ever know or had ever known.

She took one step toward him and sank to her knees. Her gaze collided with his as she worked the buttons of his trousers. He watched with one side of his bottom lip caught between his teeth. When she freed his fully erect cock and took him in her hand, she heard the breath catch in his lungs.

Here, now, he felt as real as if he were a flesh and blood man. Amy swallowed. She knew better. She knew his solidity was a direct result of desire—and of the past-life bond they shared.

She knew it was only temporary.

Pushing the dark thought away, she allowed her gaze to drop to the swollen plum head of his cock. The thick shaft of it filled her hand. She squeezed. It throbbed. Voicing her delight, she pressed a kiss to the engorged tip and then caught his gaze to gage his reaction.

William's breath was ragged. He shook.

Amy relished his ethereal body's response. Electricity leaped between them as she wet her lips with the tip of her tongue and then sucked the head of his cock into her mouth. His taste was heady and sexual. He shook with need as his phallus rose higher and harder.

Amy's own reaction was far more powerful than she had expected. She grew rigid with desire. Her aching pussy flooded with her own juices. She wanted him inside her so badly it actually hurt but she didn't want to stop sucking him.

Her hand and mouth worked in tandem, gliding down to the mass of black curls at the base of his cock so that she could feel him pressing against the back of her throat. She withdrew completely back over the head once more only to repeat the motion again and again in pulsing rhythm. The pre-cum seeping from the head of his arousal tasted sweet. He was so ready for her, so ready to fuck her.

His fingers slid into her hair and she could feel his hands trembling as he held her head.

Her clit throbbed. Spreading her knees farther apart, she opened her thighs wide and with the fingers of her other hand, she rubbed herself in time with her mouth's rhythm.



The combination of masturbating herself and taking his cock as deeply into her mouth as she could sparked a rising, swirling maelstrom of pleasure in her. She was on the verge of coming when he suddenly tore himself away from her mouth, lifted her off her knees and heaved her onto the bed.

Stunned, Amy stared up at him, knowing her lips were wet and swollen from sucking him. Her own juices seeped down her thighs.

"Spread your legs." It was a command she readily obeyed.

Her legs flew open as he came to her. His trousers puddled around his ankles. She reached for him, lifting the long tail of his shirt up, pulling him toward her, her breath catching at the sight of his jutting cock.

When his big hands encircled her hips and dragged her to the edge of the bed, she gasped. He lifted her upward until her ass was in the air and her shoulders were planted on the bed. Amy tensed. He held her easily with one arm as he guided himself into her with the other. A groan tore from his throat when he pushed himself all the way inside her channel. She cried out, not from pain but from unadulterated pleasure.

She was at his mercy. Only her shoulders and head touched the mattress. No man had ever had the strength or stamina to lift her and fuck her this way. She writhed, exultant. He held her hips with his long fingers splayed underneath her ass as he pumped himself furiously into her cunt while she hooked her calves securely around his waist.

The muscles in his face contorted with strain and passion as one bluish vein popped out down the length of his neck. In his concave position, the muscles in his abdomen contracted and creased. Perspiration glistened on his chest.

He was gloriously beautiful and all Amy could do was watch—and *feel*—as he held her there and urged himself into her. His body slapped against hers harder and faster and harder and faster until she was clutching the covers in her hands, her head thrashing from side to side. Energy churned inside her, cresting and then gushing, drawing every part of her to where they were connected. "I'm coming, William! Fuck me, I'm coming!" she cried as she threw her head back and pushed herself into an arch with her hands.

She spiraled out of her body, soaring, floating in perfect ecstasy and when she drifted back down, she heard him giving voice to a sound more animalistic than human and she knew he, too, had found release.

Panting, he lowered her to the bed, his gaze locked with hers. He leaned over her, his jet hair falling forward to curtain her face as his mouth found hers. He kissed her thoroughly and more thorough still.

Amy clung to his shoulders and wept, filled to capacity with emotions she could not comprehend or hold inside any longer. And when he had sated himself of her mouth, he raised his head and looked into her eyes again. "I love you still—and will for eternity."

She searched his gaze. His eyes were dark. Deep. His mouth was wet with her kiss. He was waiting for her to speak.

And then she gave voice to crazy feelings which gushed forth, surprising her with their intensity, stemming from the fervent sex they'd shared, flowing from her lips before she could stop them in a strange but hauntingly familiar voice that was not her own. "I never doubted you, William. I have always loved you. I have always waited for you."

Shocked and feeling as if her consciousness was deep inside her looking out through a tunnel, she watched herself hold his head in her hands and pull him back down to her. "Promise me you'll never leave me again," the voice said.

Amy knew it was Sarah's voice.

"I would have never left you..." His words trailed off. He squeezed his eyes shut as if some awful memory haunted him. He swallowed so hard she could see the rise and fall of his Adam's apple. He blew out a sigh and then looked hard into her eyes. "I need you to trust me...Amy."

She froze. He'd called her *Amy*. She was suddenly soaring fully into her body, into herself. Although they were one and the same, the personality of Sarah receded and Amy burst forth. The sound of her name coming from his lips was so sweet and so pure it elicited tears from her eyes.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes. Yes." Once more, hastily spoken words were spilling from her lips without thought or heed.

Relief sparkled in his black, black eyes.

Doubt flared but she forced it back down. Hard.

Lifting her head to his, she kissed him greedily. It didn't matter. All that mattered was mollifying this wild need that reared in her once again.

She suddenly found herself sliding back on the bed, drawing him with her, raising her hips and telling him in frank, coarse words what she wanted him to do. "Eat me. Taste my pussy!"

One raven eyebrow arched. The corner of his mouth curled into a rakish smile. "Sarah could never have requested such a thing from me."

Amy felt a surge of intrepid confidence. "I'm Amy now."

She watched, barely breathing as his tongue darted out to moisten his lips and then with his gaze locked boldly with hers, he lowered his face between her legs. Heat pitched and swelled through her limbs as his hot breath feathered her inner thighs, her pussy. Her clit throbbed so hard it actually ached. She trembled.

"Spread your legs for me, Amy." His voice was but a seductive murmur.

She propped herself on her elbows, watching, waiting. Once more his gaze flickered to hers and then trained intently on the soft brown dusting of curls between her thighs. Tentatively, slowly, she opened her legs wider.

His hair fell forward, tickling the sensitive flesh there. And then he pressed the softest kiss to the hard little bud – the center of her desire.

Amy groaned and shuddered.

William's gaze grazed hers before he kissed her there again, this time gently sucking her clit into his mouth. He released it with a little smack. "Is that what makes my kitten purr?"

"Yes..." She felt as if she were going to faint. Her head and shoulders dropped to the bed and she wept with pleasure.

His finger prodded and probed and then slipped through the folds of her labia and inside her. She shuddered and groaned as his mouth joined in the pleasurable assault. Raising her knees to give him even greater access, she dragged her fingers through his silky hair. "Oh, William..."

His tongue swept over her clit while his finger mimicked the motion, finding the swollen little pleasure bud within. Amy rocked her hips hard against him, grinding her pussy against his mouth. His knuckles grazed her flesh, adding to Amy's torment.

His fingertip burrowed frantically inside her and that, coupled with his flicking tongue, sent Amy reeling into the stars once more.

When coherent thought returned, William was lying next to her on his side. Her gaze swiveled to his and she smiled lazily. No man had ever had this effect on her. She knew she would never be able to get enough of him. Never.

When he tugged gently at one of her nipples, a fresh surge of desire made her clit swell. How could this be happening? How could he bring her to ecstasy over and over again and make her still beg for more.

Without words, he lifted her hand off her abdomen and pushed it down between their bodies to where his cock was hard and ready for her again. Amy inhaled sharply and wound her fingers around it.

She wanted to feel it inside her.

Consumed with lust, she lithely sat up and straddled him. His cock reared toward her and she sank, groaning when it filled her pussy full. William's moans filled the loft in harmony with her own as she began to ride his determined thrusts. Would she ever be sated with him? Somehow she knew as long as she was with him it would be this way.

His gaze found hers and she found warm appraisal in his eyes. Her stomach tightened. Did he really love her?

His hands slithered up her thighs and he held her hips, guiding her. Amy planted her hands on the hard plane of his chest. Her hair swept forward, brushing his shoulders as his hands moved farther up her back and then urged her to come down to him. Her pussy clenched hard when her nipples raked his chest.

A shiver coursed through his ethereal body. He'd felt it.

"Kiss me, Amy," he murmured.

Her breath caught in her throat as she lowered her mouth to his, plunging her tongue inside with passion that overwhelmed her. Emotions surged and reeled within her.

She sated herself of his mouth and then rode him, intent on finding release yet again. Burying her face in the curve of his neck, she allowed him to guide her hips again, furiously riding his thrusts until the sensations swelled inside and then crashed over her in slow, pulsating waves. She heard her own moans, stifled by his shoulder, and as another surge of pleasure rolled through her, she twisted her head and bit his arm.

His arms tightened around her. A groan tore from his throat before he seized a lock of her hair and pulled hard. Amy cried out, the savage pleasure-pain causing her to come all over again. His other hand pressed down at the base of her spine and he drove himself into her pussy until she could feel him pulsing hard inside her.

After he came, his grip on her hair loosened into a tender caress. With both hands, he guided her mouth back to his and kissed her thoroughly, passionately.

Amy's heart soared.

Although they'd both been rough, almost brutal, she knew this was no longer mindless, carnal sex for pleasure. This was something else—something she had never known in this lifetime.

This was love.

Any other time she would have been rejoicing and filled with bliss and hopes for the future but this was hardly any ordinary love.

It was love tainted with a very real, very serious problem.

William Red Feather was a ghost.

## Chapter Nine

"Amy!"

She shifted under the soft cotton sheets. Her body still thrummed heavily with pleasure.

"Amy, are you up there?" Reed banged on the ladder. His voice was urgent.

Full awareness surged. Her eyes popped open and she blinked against the bright morning sun streaming through the A-shaped window. "Yes," she said drowsily. "What is it?"

"Something I want you to see," he called. "Come up to the house."

She heard the door slam followed by the sound of his footsteps on the decking outside. What in the hell could he want this early? She propped herself on her elbows and squinted to read the digital clock. 10:52. "Damn," she muttered. She'd never been one to sleep past eight or so.

Remembrance flooded her. William had stayed with her until the first rays of the sun were peeping through the window.

A warm blush infused her cheeks at the memory of him making tender love to her, whispering avowals and promises in her ear while he did so. Her stomach tightened with exhilaration. Although she knew the emotions sprang from residual feelings of her past life as Sarah, she was in love.

Despite the odds, despite the fact he was a ghost, despite the fact he'd been accused of killing her in a former life and despite the craziness at *Belle Ruisseau*, she was in love.

She didn't want to analyze it. She wanted to feel it. To enjoy it...because she knew, without a doubt, it would have to come to an end soon. Very soon.

*Change your fate or the red feather cannot return...*

Ignoring the dark thought, she crawled out of bed, dragged on a sweatshirt and her trusty pair of jeans, slipped on some clogs and then climbed the steep hill to Reed's house.

He was sitting at his computer. Papers, bills and a mélange of receipts cluttered his desk. Amy noticed a photograph which was turned facedown. *The redhead from the bar?*

There was another time-yellowed photo in a little wooden frame on the corner of the desk. Her heart warmed. It was of Reed and her. Both of them stood triumphant and dripping wet on the pier. In the photo, she was as skinny as a person could be and still be living. Amy snorted. That had certainly changed.

Her insides clenched when she recalled William's description of her less-than-perfect body. *Voluptuous.*

In the snapshot, Reed was all wet hair, nose and teeth. A nostalgic smile claimed her lips. He was two heads taller but he had his arm around her shoulders and she was grinning from ear to ear. The photo had been taken the day he'd taught her to swim.

"Check this out," he said before taking a sip of coffee. He set the cup down and the hinges of his chair groaned in protest when he leaned back and crossed his arms behind his head.

Amy's gaze moved from the old photo to the computer, where several images of early nineteenth-century men, women and children were thumbnailed across the flat screen. She gasped. She recognized the style immediately. It was the same style she'd seen in the Pope's Tavern Museum.

The thumbnails were none other than a multitude of portraits painted by William Red Feather.

Amy gaped. Her knees felt weak. "Let me sit," she said as she practically scooted Reed out of the wooden office chair with her intruding bottom.

She clicked on one of the sketches and watched, stunned, as the small thumbnail blinked into a full screen charcoal drawing of thick, curly hair, bare shoulders, ripe cleavage and a coy smile.

Amy swallowed. She clicked on thumbnail after thumbnail.

All the sketches were of Sarah Winston.

Sarah smiling.

Sarah reading.

Sarah—beautiful and in love.

She drew in a deep breath to dispel the chill which had suddenly permeated her body. Her gaze riveted to the screen. She took a long drink of Reed's coffee, relishing the feeling of the warm liquid unfurling down her throat and through her limbs.

Mentally, she connected herself to *the All*, to the Universe. She turned her palms upward and silently asked to receive vibrations of her life as Sarah Winston.

At once, her mind was inundated with psychic images of a laughing William rolling in the sheets of the four-poster bed at *Belle Ruisseau*—with her.

Amy realized she was trembling.

*Love you...*

A trance swept over her and she felt as if she were spinning down a long, dark tunnel...

"Come away with me, Sarah."

Fear surged in her heart. She stared past William's shoulder at the vivid green canopy lining. "He would kill me."

He slanted his head down and nipped her ear with his lips. "I'll keep you safe," he whispered. "Come away with me. I'll take you to France."

The idea he wanted her to leave with him flooded her entire being with joy. She swallowed, considering it. What would her family think? She would disgrace them if she divorced Uriah. And although she knew in her heart she loved William Red Feather, he was half Cherokee. While many white men had taken Indian women as wives, Anglo women simply did not marry outside their race.

Sarah had thought her whole life had been mapped out for her when she'd married Uriah Winston. He was wealthy. Even though he forced her to do unspeakable things with him, he was a good provider. She had not come from a family of means and because she had married Uriah, she was now a well-respected woman among the local gentry.

She knew he dallied with the slave, Rita. She knew he'd fathered Rita's child.

Her heart clenched into a hard knot. What would everyone think if they knew what she was doing at this very moment?

William rocked his hips and she felt the length of his shaft ride up tight inside her. Sarah's body shimmied in response.

"Look at me, Sarah."

His face was only inches from hers but her gaze shifted to his and the effect made her stomach tighten. Delicious quivers coursed through her veins.

"I want to make you *my* wife."

Her breath caught. "I belong to another," she said dismally.

"You love me."

A sob stuck in her throat. She did love him. She loved him more than her own self, more than her own life.

God in heaven, she hardly knew who she was anymore. "Yes, William. Yes, I love you."

His black eyes sparkled. "Then come with me. We'll leave tonight. I'll take you to France and you'll be free of him."

It was so tempting. She wanted only to scream *yes*. She searched his eyes.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "You do not have to tell me just yet. Meet me by the creek when Winston rides out to inspect the fields and then give me your decision."

When he saw she was debating, he seized her wrist in his hand and held it so she could see the fading bruises on her arm. His eyes narrowed. "I would never hurt you. I would never leave such marks on you."

Sarah gnawed her bottom lip.

William inhaled sharply and pulled out of her. The absence of his heated body left her chilled. He stood and began pulling on his trousers. "I will take care of you, Sarah. I promise." He pulled his voluminous white shirt over his head. "Trust me."

*Trust me...*

Amy reeled back to reality. She stared at the rows of thumbnails. "Where did you find these?"

"I Googled 'William Red Feather'," he said flatly. "I can see why he thinks you're the reincarnation of Sarah Winston."

Amy swallowed.

"Are you?" he asked pointedly.

She wet her dry lips with the tip of her tongue. "Yes. I am."

"Read the article." He leaned over her and clicked on a text file.

Amy squinted in order to read the text on the page.

"Alabama Native American artist, William Red Feather Ryan, has been hailed as one of the premier portrait painters of his time. Ryan, the son of a Cherokee princess and a Scotch-Irish planter, was born in 1815, in Florence, Alabama. Of his works, the great American author Charles Dudley Taylor wrote that the artist offered the considerably uncanny spectacle of talent which on the very threshold of its career was cut tragically short.

"After he was seriously wounded on a scouting mission for Sam Houston during the Texas War of Independence, Ryan studied in France and began painting and regularly exhibiting portraits throughout the grand salons of the south."

Wounded. Amy didn't recall him saying anything about being wounded. She scrolled down the page.

"Ryan's best portraits reveal the individuality, personality and overt sexuality of his sitters.

"His portrait of the voluptuous Creole beauty Julia Ardenne-Dubois is now considered one of his best works."

Amy's stomach wrenched into a hard knot as the photograph scrolled into view. Her hands were shaking so badly she pressed them between her knees to keep Reed from seeing.

Julia Ardenne-Dubois was beautiful.

No. Enchanting. That was the only word evocative enough to describe Julia Ardenne-Dubois.

Amy's heart ached. A lump welled in her throat, making it difficult to swallow. Had he fallen in love with every woman he'd painted?

*You were the only woman I loved.* His voice rang like a clarion bell in her head.

And yet, the woman in the portrait stared back at her with almond-shaped emerald eyes. Her black hair was swept into a severe chignon which only accentuated her high Spanish cheekbones, ruthlessly straight nose and lush Angelina Jolie lips.

However, there was only one portrait of the woman and a multitude of Sarah Winston. A flutter went through Amy's stomach.

She scrolled down to finish the article.



"William Red Feather Ryan mysteriously disappeared in late 1846, after allegedly murdering Sarah Winston, a Florence, Alabama, woman whose portrait he had recently completed. It is widely believed he murdered Sarah Winston in an attempt to exact revenge on her husband, Uriah Winston, who purportedly won Ryan's familial estate in a card game."

Chills washed up Amy's legs and settled in her neck. She focused on the word *allegedly* but she knew better than to hope. William had all but admitted he'd killed Sarah.

Had he seduced her and lured her to the creek to kill her for revenge?

*Trust me...*

William's words skewered her heart.

Reed slurped his coffee. "I think Uriah Winston caught that dude fucking his wife and killed him."

Amy inhaled sharply. She'd thought the same thing although she had yet to muster the courage to ask William about it directly.

"He say anything to you about it?"

She shook her head.

"Well what in the holy hell do you two talk about?"

A wild image of William's body, moonlight glinting off his sinewy muscles, rose torridly in Amy's mind.

"I asked him if he killed Eddie," she said softly.

"Did he?"

She swallowed. "No. He confirmed that Uriah Winston did, though."

A sardonic laugh burst from deep in Reed's chest. "Well, apparently Tonto killed Sarah Winston."

Amy squinted against burning tears. She refused to cry. Not in front of Reed. Not about a dead man. He'd think she was off her rocker. *He told me he loved me. He told me to trust him.*

"I don't believe that," Amy said adamantly. Although all the evidence pointed to the contrary, her intuition told her a different story.

She stared at the computer screen until it blurred. She opened her eyes wide in hopes of drying the moisture there and then she spun around to face her stepbrother. "But I think you're right that Uriah Winston walled him up in that cellar." *Because she, as Sarah, had betrayed him...*

It was time to do some serious psychic detective work. But she knew she couldn't do it alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Amy!" Gwen Wyse threw her arms around her best friend. "What are you doing here? I thought you'd moved to Alabama."

Amy breathed in the familiar floral fragrance of lavender accented by the pungent perfume of patchouli in Gwen's shop, *Gwyniad's Goddess Emporium*, on the main street of the quaint and stylish town of Franklin, Tennessee.

Amy had been one of Gwen's few regular customers. Gwen didn't exactly run a thriving business but she was married to a bazillionaire who didn't care what she did or how much money it took for her to do it as long as she stayed out of his hair.

It wasn't because Gwen wasn't beautiful. She was. With her jet hair and large brown eyes accentuated by her copious use of Egyptian kohl eyeliner, Gwen was an exotic beauty. She also liked to wear flowing, artsy clothes, but whereas Amy's came from the Goodwill, Gwen's wardrobe boasted tags inscribed with the names of high-end fashion designers.

She called herself a hereditary witch and she practiced and lived her art. Amy knew Gwen would have the objectivity to make sense of everything that had happened.

"You know me," Amy said with a tired smile. "I had to come get my witch fix."

Gwen crossed her arms over her chest and raised an expertly arched black eyebrow. Her dark brown gaze scanned the area around Amy's head. "Your aura is faded." She screwed her mouth over to one side, her pert nose wrinkling with unadulterated cuteness. "I mean, it's been dim since...that psycho tried to kill you. That hasn't changed—but there's something different about it." She squinted.

And then she and Amy both said in unison, "There's a spirit presence in it."

Gwen slipped behind the counter. Her chocolate brown skirt floated around her as she sat on a steel folding chair, pointing to another. Amy followed and lowered her hemp bag to the floor as she sat on the cold metal.

"This spirit is obviously all about your energy." Gwen smiled as she continued to peruse her aura. "I take it you already know that."

Amy nodded. William Red Feather had definitely left his mark on her aura—and on her. And Amy knew she'd been more than willing.

She took a deep breath and explained everything she knew thus far about William Red Feather. Blushing furiously, she even detailed their sexual encounters.

She described the second spirit presence she felt certain was Uriah, then filled in the details of Eddie's death and missing soul, Charity's attack, the experience in the graveyard and the horrible vision she'd had of Reed getting hurt.

She even told her about the childhood incident with the Ouija board. *Change your fate or the red feather cannot return.*

Gwen's eyes widened. She tucked a black-booted foot underneath her. "I'd heard you could have sex with spirits but it's just one of those things that have never happened to me."

Amy swallowed hard. "What worries me the most is I feel this spirit is my...my soul mate."

She didn't know if her friend would scold her or hug her. She smoothed the wrinkled flounces of her turquoise broomstick skirt.

Gwen continued to stare and pursed her lips. She inhaled and then let the breath out slowly. "Do you trust your intuition?"

"I don't know," Amy blurted.

Gwen's red lips drew into a sympathetic smile. "Your intuition is telling you everything you need to know. You're just not listening."

Amy furrowed her forehead. How could it be? She was so tired and confused and frightened.

She felt now as if not only *she* was in danger, but everyone around her as well.

William had told her to trust him. He had vowed his eternal love for her. And yet, all the evidence told her he had seduced her in order to murder her.

Her heart felt like a hard, cold stone in her chest. "My brain tells me not to trust him."

Gwen shook her head. "You of all people should know when your *self*, when your head, is intruding."

"I just don't understand why Uriah would steal Eddie's soul. Or why William is so adamant I stay away from the one place that has brought my intuition back."

"Did you stop to think he might have been protecting you?"

"Not when he could very well be guilty of killing my former incarnation."

Gwen looked impatient. She leaned forward in her chair. "Amy, William is not that psycho who tried to kill you last year."

Amy was stunned. She hadn't realized she'd been comparing William to her abductor.

Gwen's eyes narrowed slightly as she continued to study Amy's aura. "Has William ever threatened you?"

Amy's pulse accelerated. She shook her head. "No." She wanted so badly to believe he could really, truly love her. But was she fooling herself in order to believe it was possible?

Realization sank to her toes—finding out if William loved her was the real reason she had come to Gwen.

A hot blush infused her face. "I think you're right. I think William was trying to protect me."

But from whom? Uriah Winston?

Why would she be in danger from him? She hadn't looted his grave or done anything to his house. It made more sense she'd be in danger from William.

Her insides grew hollow.

*Change your fate or the red feather cannot return...*

Amy gasped. Her gaze riveted to Gwen's.

The Ouija board's prediction suddenly made perfect and starkly clear sense.

Her blood drained out of her face and seemed to pool in her feet. A wave of nausea flooded her and she swallowed hard against it.

"I know what it means, Gwen," she whispered. "I know what 'change your fate or the red feather cannot return' means." Amy was shaking.

"What does it mean?" Gwen asked, her voice rising an octave.

"It means *William* is the one in danger. It means if I don't change my fate, then William's soul will be lost like Eddie's. It means he won't ever be able to reincarnate again." Amy realized it also meant her own fate was at risk.

"Shit."

Amy's thoughts echoed Gwen's sentiments exactly. "William and I are both in danger."

It was happening again. Images of being kicked into an open grave intruded into her brain. The acrid stench of damp earth filled her nostrils. Clawing. *Begging*. Screaming.

Amy squeezed her eyes shut to stave off the threatening thoughts and hot, stinging tears. Her heart pounded so hard she thought she might be having a heart attack. She gripped the sides of the cold metal chair. Her breaths came in quick, shallow pants. Everything suddenly seemed as if it were closing in on her – overwhelming her.

Gwen rushed to her side and hugged Amy's head to her abdomen while she stroked her hair. "Calm down. Don't have a panic attack. We can think this through." She squeezed Amy even tighter.

Although Gwen's presence was comforting, Amy longed for her sister. Jillian would know what to say. What to do. Still, she clung to Gwen, breathing in the faint, calming fragrance of her exotic perfume.

"Listen, I know your senses haven't been what they should be since your ordeal," Gwen said soothingly. "Let's have a talk with your spirit friend. Maybe I can help you get some answers."

## Chapter Ten

Amy still felt numb all over from the panic attack she'd had earlier. Why had she stopped taking her antidepressants? She was foolish to think she could make it without them.

Her eyes felt puffy from crying. Her chest hurt from quickened breathing and her relentlessly pounding heart. She was trembling.

Gwen had locked the shop and drawn the heavy gold and chocolate drapes across the front window while the heady aroma of sage filled the air. Gwen circled the room chanting a phrase in a language Amy didn't know. It sounded like Gaelic.

Dozens of white candles flickered, casting dancing shadows in the darkened room. Tempestuous energy swirled and swelled, leaving Amy brimming with nervous tension and the odd feeling she was somehow *sinking* inside her own body.

Gwen placed the sage smudge stick on a teak wood incense burner in the middle of an old wooden-legged card table and then she sat across from Amy.

At one side of the table, a vacant chair waited. *For William?*

Gwen splayed her hands wide on the table top. Monstrous rubies, diamonds and a gigantic emerald solitaire sparkled on her fingers, the sight of them coupled with the fragrance of the sage inundating Amy with a strange hypnotic effect.

Amy forced her gaze away from Gwen's glimmering bling and followed her lead, laying her pinky fingers over Gwen's to connect their circle.

Gwen's wide gaze locked with Amy's. With her exotic eyes and clad in a shiny gold blouse, she sat stiffly erect, looking more like a regal Egyptian queen than a gal from a small town in Tennessee. "We are assembled here today to speak to the spirit of William Red Feather. We request the White Light of the Goddess for protection. None may enter our circle whom we have not requested and none shall do us harm."

Amy trusted Gwen's ability to cast a circle but still, her gaze swept the room in anticipation.

The table suddenly started to vibrate, drawing both their gazes to their hands. Gwen's gaze lifted. "He's coming." She wet her lips with her tongue.

Amy could tell Gwen was holding her breath. She was too.

When an ethereal hand materialized on Amy's shoulder, she inhaled sharply. She stiffened. He was behind her.

Gwen's dark brown eyes widened dramatically as her gaze moved up William Red Feather's body.

"Oh my Goddess," she muttered.

Amy could tell Gwen was impressed. A little surge of pride mingled with her sense of dread. "Gwen, this is William."

He moved to the side of the table. Amy's gaze found his and she was consumed with a combination of love and lust so strong it made her heart ache. He'd told her he loved her.

Dressed in his blousing white linen shirt and formfitting black trousers, he was stunning. His stare was wildly intense, reminding Amy of a black panther stalking its prey. But could a man like that really love *her*?

She tried to remind herself of that beautiful woman he'd painted. She'd been special. But he'd left behind numerous sketches of Sarah.

Amy had never thought she was anything extraordinary but William certainly made her feel that way.

Still, what if it was a ruse? What if he was lying to her? *Be strong*. Determined to protect her heart, she averted her eyes as Gwen began to question him.

"Did you kill Amy in her previous incarnation?"

William sank into the chair, dwarfing it with his sheer size. Although she wasn't looking at him directly, Amy's body reacted instantly to his very masculine presence. She shifted in her seat, the movement of her thighs causing her clit to swell and throb for him. She knew he was staring, exuding power and sexuality.

She trembled.

The two red cardinal feathers glinted in the candlelight. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched him tuck an errant strand of jet hair behind his ear. He inhaled. "It's true," he finally said, his voice low and soft.

Amy's gaze swiveled to his. His expression was stricken. "I came to *Belle Ruisseau* to kill your husband." A muscle in his jaw clenched. "And then, I saw what a prize he had in you." His dark gaze dropped down her body and then lifted to hers once more.

Amy's heart beat wildly. She felt sick.

"I knew then I had to take you from him."

She swallowed. Hard.

"I knew I had to...kill you."

Her world suddenly came crashing down around her. She removed her trembling hands from the table and slid them under her thighs to keep them from shaking.

"Did you?" Gwen asked.

William glanced at Gwen but only for a second before his piercing gaze turned once more on Amy.

"I seduced you."

Her head swam. She closed her eyes and gripped the sides of the chair to keep from falling. Violent psychic energy prickled up her spine. She felt so dizzy she thought she might faint as a rapid deluge of memories flooded her mind's eye...

Sarah Winston tried not to smile as she stared at William Ryan. She knew she failed miserably.

He removed a paintbrush from between his teeth. "Mrs. Winston, I daresay if you keep smiling, I will not be able to finish your portrait on time."

He was so handsome—and not just because of his piercing black eyes, his longer than fashionable jet hair, the slightly aquiline nose and high cheekbones. It was because under an unmistakably savage veneer, he had the mannerisms and attributes of a white man. Something about him seemed forbidden.

Dangerous.

He'd seemed especially dangerous when he'd ordered Rita to leave the room. Sarah hated to admit it to herself but she'd been thrilled at the look of shock on Rita's face. No doubt Uriah would hear about Sarah's unladylike behavior and scold her later, but she was too caught up in the moment to think about propriety.

Unable to hold his steady gaze, she cast her eyes downward to the floral pattern on the hooked rug.

Out of the periphery of her gaze, she noticed a frown crossing his striking, dark features. "Now look what you've done." The low timbre of his voice was teasing—seductive. Setting his palette and brush aside, he stood, wiped the rose-colored paint from his hands and strode toward her.

Sarah's pulse raced wildly. Did he know? Could he tell how infatuated she was with him? A sweltering blush crept up her bare bosom and flamed in her cheeks.

Clad in nothing but a skirt and gossamer sash, she felt nude, as if not only her body was bare but her innermost secrets were laid out openly to him as well. Her breath caught in her lungs when the heat radiating from his body warmed hers. When he arranged the sash around her shoulders, her gaze fixed on his hands. With the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up, she could see the fine black hairs, the thick bones of his wrists and his well-shaped hands. His forearm brushed one of her distended nipples.

Sarah stifled a gasp.

William tensed but continued to position the gossamer fabric. Sarah thought she would die. She wanted more than a brush and a glance. She wanted him to tear the fabric away and take her in his arms.

Instead, his fingertips tilted her chin back into position. A flutter of disappointment welled within her. It would be heaven to melt against him, to feel his arms around her, to feel his lips pressed against hers.

Sarah was shocked at herself.

How had this man—this half-breed—caused such indecent, sinful fantasies in her? She was a married woman. She shouldn't even be having such thoughts about her husband, much less the painter he'd hired to render her portrait.

Boldly, she allowed her gaze to graze William Ryan's. His reputation was scandalous. If he hadn't possessed the standing as the most sought-after artist of his day, he would not have been received in polite society. His own father, Jeddah Ryan, had been a notorious gambler. In fact, Sarah's husband, Uriah, had bested him in a game of cards and won *Belle Ruisseau*. That had been long ago.

Gossipers always spoke of how William vowed to avenge his father because he thought Uriah Winston had cheated him. William, however, had not shown a hint of harboring hard feelings. He had been the consummate gentleman and had never once mentioned his father's previous ownership of *Belle Ruisseau*.

He painted portraits as a profession and his work was much desired by the socialites in this part of the south. Although he'd been raised by his white father, he still communed with the Cherokee people who, because of his ability to capture the perfect likeness of a person on canvas, called him *Shadowkeeper*.

When Sarah had requested to have their portraits painted, Uriah had summoned William at once. Although Uriah, too, had acted the gentleman, Sarah couldn't help but suspect he sadistically enjoyed lording the possession of *Belle Ruisseau* over William Ryan.

William's black gaze found hers and Sarah's insides tightened impossibly. She flexed the muscles in her legs. Her gaze dropped to his lips. One corner of his mouth curled into a smug grin and at once, the area between her thighs grew steamy. A rush of her own juices dampened her pantalets. All she could think about was kissing him.

Her husband had never inspired such licentious thoughts in her. How had she become such a little harlot?

Trying to keep her head very still so as not to alter the pose, she glanced out the open window. In the vast fields yards and yards away from the house, Uriah sat atop his stallion, a black speck against the backdrop of fluffy white cotton. Sarah knew it would be sunset before he was back.

She swallowed, tensely aware of the pressure of William's thumb against her throat. His hand was warm as his long, paint-stained fingers brushed the curve of her neck.

"Does your husband know what a beauty you are?" His voice was deep and filled with innuendo.

Sarah swallowed again. This time harder. She trembled. William's hand slid up her neck and then his thumb brushed across her full bottom lip. His dark eyes sparkled. "I am having a very difficult time finding just the perfect shade of red to paint your mouth—Sarah."

The sound of her given name on his lips made the breath leave her body in a rush. She was afraid to breathe, to move. Acutely aware of every inch of her own body, she could only stare into those black, black eyes.

He tucked an errant strand of long ebony hair behind his ear.

She knew she should declare her status as a lady—a *married* lady—but instead, she smiled. It was an invitation.



No man had ever shown her this brand of attention. Not even Uriah. To him, she was a possession. A trophy. He was twenty years her senior and treated her like a child instead of a wife. In bed, he was demanding and once his needs were satisfied, he snored himself to sleep.

William Ryan's actions left Sarah feeling as if she could somehow obtain pleasure from the act of coupling herself. His gaze warmed as it swept her face. A delicious thrill fluttered between her thighs. *Kiss me. Please kiss me.* The words were on her lips but she dared not utter them.

She didn't have to.

Sarah froze as he slanted his head down to hers, wetting his lips with the tip of his tongue. Her pulse throbbed in her ears. He was going to kiss her. Sarah's lashes fluttered closed and she leaned her head back as his mouth descended on hers, softly, nipping her lips, tempting her, waiting—waiting.

It was maddening.

Sarah wanted more. A little moan escaped her lips as she leaned forward, pressing her mouth against his. Heat coursed through her body. And then his hand was behind her head, tilting it back impossibly far. His tongue forced through the opening her lips had left. A groan tore from his throat and he was kissing her as she had never been kissed. Thoroughly. Passionately.

Sarah felt as if she were caught up in a violent maelstrom with no way out.

His hand cupped her breast and squeezed. She gasped into his mouth. A thumb and forefinger tugged at her nipple, sending wild desire spiraling straight to her pantalets. His thigh pushed between her legs until she could feel every hard, solid inch of him against her soft, half-nude body.

This was crazy.

This was wrong.

She was married to Uriah.

She tore her mouth from his. "I cannot," she panted. Her gaze grazed his face. Her cheeks burned.

He was even more handsome with his swarthy face flushed with passion. The black in his eyes glittered. His white teeth flashed with a rakish smile. "Why not?"

Sarah's gaze followed his hand as it moved down his body to where his need was glaringly obvious. He cupped himself.

She gasped but his smile broadened.

"I know how to please you. I know how to make you feel like a real woman." He gestured toward the window. "I know how you must feel in the arms of that pasty old man night after night. I know he forces you to do things. Unimaginable things," he said and then threaded his fingers into the thick hair at her nape. "I know you desire to be free of him. I see it in your eyes, Sarah."

How could he read her so easily? She whimpered.

"Let me set you free." His lips brushed hers again and then he took her hand in his to guide it down to feel the hardness between his legs.

Sarah gaped as panic rose within her—panic and overwhelming sexual need.

A rakish smile twisted William Red Feather's mouth as he hastily began to unbutton his trousers. "No one will ever know."

"Amy?" Gwen's voice sounded strange and faraway. "Amy? Are you okay?"

Amy's eyes snapped open. Full awareness struck and Amy glared at William Red Feather. Her hands balled into fists. She longed to pummel him. He had seduced her to get back at Uriah!

"You used me." She articulated every word.

William held her stare as his chest rose with a sharp breath. He gave a slight nod.

A lump welled in her throat. Tears burned her eyes. She shook.

"I was obsessed with revenge."

"How could you...tell me you loved me?" Her voice cracked. Desperately, she grasped at every ounce of control she had to keep from bursting into tears.

"Because it is the truth." He reached out to take her hand but Amy jumped back.

Anger exploded within her. She jumped to her feet and the metal chair careened backward and clattered into a shelf behind her.

Gwen stared.

William remained calm although something dark sparked in his eyes.

Common sense had told her not to trust him. She should have known better than to trust her random psychic hits all along. Why had she allowed him to come to her bed night after night? Why? Was she that stupid? That desperate?

Amy pointed a finger directly at William. "Don't you *dare* lie to me!"

He stood.

Amy noticed how terribly transparent he was. She sobered.

"Allow me to explain. Please."

Amy crossed her arms over her chest and stared, aware a single tear coursed unchecked down her cheek. Her insides felt hollow and raw.

"You were unlike any of the others. So ingenuous and so pure. I did set out to seduce you, to take you away from Uriah Winston—to ruin you." His gaze searched hers. "But when I told you I loved you, you wept."

Amy recalled the day at *Belle Ruisseau* where he had only recently confessed his love for her. She had wanted to cry then. Tears of joy had rushed to the surface but she had tamped them back down.

William took a step closer to her and continued. "You accepted me for who and what I was. You were the first woman who ever really loved me in return."

She trembled as the memories came flooding back...

Sarah's gaze darted to his crotch where his massive, purplish phallus sprang free. Her eyes widened. The thought of that beautiful cock inside her made her channel clench.

He gripped it with one hand and drew her toward him with the other. Heaven have mercy, she wanted it. She wanted *him*.

Her gaze flicked between his face and the pulsating promise in his fist. She swallowed thickly. Her heart fluttered like a caged bird inside her chest with love. *I love you, William*. The words were on her lips, in her mind, in her heart—but she couldn't dare utter them.

She'd never loved Uriah.

She'd never known love until now.

Her breath caught. How could she be certain this was truly love?

William had made no avowals to her and Sarah was no stranger to his wicked reputation.

Her gaze flitted to the open window. Uriah was in the fields.

Rita was probably right outside the door.

Sarah blinked and glanced down at William's stunningly large cock. Clear liquid beaded on the head as his thumb stroked over it languidly. She wanted it. Immoral, fallen woman that she was, she wanted him rooting between her legs to take her, make her. She might never have this opportunity again.

He came dangerously closer. She could smell the tempting male scent of him.

"Touch me," he drawled, taking her hand in his and guiding it to his shaft. "That's it, my love, touch me."

*Love...*

Could she do this if he didn't love her?

Sarah gasped and withdrew her hand. "I can't."

He stared, stunned. She had the feeling he'd never before been refused by a woman.

Tears stung her eyes and she swatted at them, not wanting them to fall, not wanting him to see her crying. "I can't," she repeated. Her garbled words squeaked from her throat.

For a steep second, he stood there.

Sarah trembled. A wave of heat settled in the back of her neck. She'd been foolish to allow this, to entertain indecent thoughts of him.

Finally, he tucked his phallus into his breeches and then his hands were cupping her face, tilting it up to his.

Ashamed, Sarah squeezed her eyes shut. Her cheeks flamed.

"Look at me," he whispered. His voice was as gentle and warm as a spring breeze. "Look at me."

When Sarah opened her eyes, her heart skipped a beat. Tenderness permeated the black gaze that swept her face. Although his forehead was furrowed with obvious need, his lips eased into the slightest smile. "I understand," he said. "I would never force you to do something you are not ready to do."

And then he pressed the gentlest of kisses to her parted lips.

Amy's heart softened as the memories faded – but then she recalled his request for forgiveness. "But...didn't you...kill me?"

Vague images from a dream she'd had flickered to the surface. There was an impending storm. She'd been standing by a creek bank. Waiting – waiting for him. Then she'd heard footsteps in the woods.

Another lightning bolt of clarity struck – a vivid, horrific memory from her past life as Sarah Winston. Cold chills washed over her skin from head to toe. Her knees went weak. She felt the blood drain out of her face and she trembled with disbelief. "You drowned me."

Amy's knees collapsed and she stumbled. William materialized fully and rushed to her side. His dark eyes were wide. "No, Amy! No. I did not!" He looked to Gwen who was now standing.

Amy knew she should wrest free of his grasp but the feel of his strong arms around her was far too comforting and far too reassuring. Why, when she knew now what happened? How could she allow him to hold her this way?

She started to struggle.

"He's right," Gwen said sharply.

Amy grew still.

"He's right," Gwen repeated. "He didn't drown you."

Amy searched William's gaze. His full lips were parted. His eyes were dark and round and sad. She knew it was impossible. Looking into his eyes told her everything she'd needed to know all along about William Red Feather.

When he'd been ready to take her, when he'd been capable of talking her into anything he wanted that day he'd painted her portrait, he'd stopped because she had been afraid.

Her gaze swiveled to Gwen's. "It was Uriah, wasn't it?"

Gwen nodded.

Amy felt the tension drain out of her body. Her gaze found William's as she clung to his ethereal body. "Then why did you ask me to forgive you?"

"I was responsible."

Amy flinched. She should have known. It seemed so simple. How could she have been so blindsided by this? She's been so consumed with what happened to Eddie and to Charity she hadn't considered Uriah could have killed Sarah—especially not with William's obvious remorse emanating from his spirit like beacon in the night.

"I begged you to run away with me but you were afraid of him. You said he would kill us both."

"And that's exactly what happened," Gwen said.

"Why did you tell him we were leaving together?" William asked.

Amy's forehead wrinkled with thought. Bits and pieces of her past life as Sarah sputtered in her head like a flailing candle flame.

She recalled the portraits in the museum. She recalled the tour guide's words. *There are still hoof prints on the hallway floor in the front of the tavern where Uriah Winston rode his horse into this building.*

"He'd gone to Pope's Tavern looking for you that night," Amy stated.

William's eyes glinted. "But I was already on my way to meet you at the fork of the creek." He swallowed thickly. "When you weren't there, I knew then he had killed you."

Amy's heart grew tight.

"I assumed you had become frightened and confessed our love to him."

Amy thought. In her mind's eye, she could see herself packing a leather valise...

Sarah felt a twinge of remorse that she would have to leave many of her fine things behind and yet excitement thrummed through her veins. She was meeting William Red Feather to run away with him.

Seizing the bag, she fastened it shut, rushed down the back stairs and crept out the back door.

"Where you goin', Miss Sarah?" Rita's stern, Haitian-accented voice startled her.

Sarah whirled and, heart hammering, she put her finger to her lips to shush the slave before she fled toward the barn where she'd asked their stable hand, Parson Dick, to have her horse ready...

"I never betrayed you, William," Amy said. "It was the slave. It was Rita." Lucid memories flooded back in a dizzying torrent. "She was sleeping with Uriah. She was in love with him and she hated me."

William's shoulders dropped with relief. He hauled Amy's body against him and held her there, kissing her hair and her forehead. "Forgive me. Forgive me. I should never have begged you to leave him. I should have known it would be too dangerous."

Amy was grateful for his strong arms around her—because yet another awful memory was reeling to the surface.

## Chapter Eleven

Sarah spun and peered into the darkness. "William?"

Her horse jerked.

And then her heart sank like a stone when Uriah stepped into view. His look was murderous. His mouth twisted into a sadistic snarl.

Without words, he stalked through the swift, swollen creek.

Sarah was too frightened to move, to run. She clutched her horse's reins so tightly her nails dug into the flesh of her palm.

Her mind screamed for William to rescue her but somehow, she knew he would not be coming. Not tonight. Not any night.

Was he dead?

Terror surged.

Uriah loomed out of the water and Sarah came to her senses. She seized the reins and tried to slip her foot in the stirrup but Uriah snatched her hair and flung her to her back on the muddy ground. She struggled to her knees, cowering and covering her head with her hands but he seized her wrist, his iron grip sending shooting pain through her arm. She blinked furiously as a sound slap landed on her cheek. A maddening sting radiated through her face and suddenly he was hauling her up, squeezing her by the shoulders. Her booted toes desperately sought the ground.

Her horse neighed and darted into the woods.

"You thought you would leave me for that half-breed?" he demanded through gritted teeth. He shook her so violently she couldn't answer.

He had hit her before. He had taken her against her will before. But this time, she knew it was different. This time, she knew he would not stop until she was dead.

"Have you been fucking him, *Mrs. Winston*?" he sneered.

Tears poured from her eyes. He knew, but Sarah hoped she could somehow save William. "No," she lied. She shook her head wildly. "No. I swear it."

"Lying whore!" He shoved her toward the creek.

The breath rushed out of her body when he sent her sprawling across the mucky creek bank. "Uriah, wait—"

"Goddamn you!" He lurched toward her again and this time, he dragged her screaming and struggling into the rushing creek.

Sarah gasped and clawed but he was too strong. She was no match for him as he thrust her head under the water...

A sob choked in Amy's throat. She felt as if she couldn't breathe. William's hands ran soothingly over her back. Finally, she gasped in a breath. "He killed me! He drowned me in the creek." Her gaze found William's. "And then...he killed you."

William nodded.

Amy's heart turned over when she thought of William chained and helpless in the cellar at *Belle Ruisseau*. Her hand crept up between them and rested on his chest. Her eyes sought his. "You fought his spirit in the cemetery. That's why you told me to leave."

"Yes." His voice was barely above a whisper.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I only wanted to protect you."

She sucked in a breath. "But why did he kill Eddie?"

"I know why," Gwen said.

Both Amy and William turned to see Gwen holding a thick, dusty book open across her arms. She had donned a pair of reading glasses, which added an authoritative and intelligent air to her dark beauty. "He's looking for a host body."

William's eyes narrowed. "A host body?"

Gwen looked at Amy over the top of her glasses. "It says here some spirits will attempt to kill a living person in order to take over their body. It's a form of necromancy but in reverse. The spirit will try to murder its victim, boot the victim's spirit out and then inhabit the body before it dies."

"That sounds as if it would take an enormous amount of energy."

"It does. It also takes the knowledge of someone well versed in the dark arts."

That would explain why Charity had been attacked. Uriah had done it. An icy chill slithered up Amy's spine. She shivered.

But why would he want a *woman's* body?

William's arms tightened around her, reminding her she'd wondered if he'd been guilty of Eddie's murder and what happened to Charity. Relief flooded her and for a brief moment, she closed her eyes and rested her forehead against the place where his shirt was open. She breathed in the scent of clean linen mingled with William's own heady fragrance. Her hand slid higher on his chest, her fingertips brushing the tips of the two scarlet feathers.

*Change your fate or the red feather cannot return...*

*Soul-less...*

"It says here the spirit will need the assistance of a *living* person," Gwen added as she glanced up from the book. "Do either of you have any idea who'd want to help a dead man back into a body?"

Amy shook her head. "Why would he be so determined to get back into a body?"

William inhaled sharply. "I know why."

Amy's gaze swept his face. His mouth was set in a strong line. His eyes were hard and dark and Amy could tell by his expression she did not want to know the answer.

"Revenge was not enough for him. He is determined to keep us apart."

"But why does he need a body to do that?"

"Because as long as he is a spirit, I can protect you from him. If he succeeds and takes control of a living body, he can kill you."

Amy's gaze fled from William to Gwen. She suddenly felt as if all the life was rushing out of her body. Another grisly image slammed her in the solar plexus with such force, she cried out.

*Reed!*

With sickening clarity, she recalled the psychic image she'd gotten of him the day after Eddie died.

*Reed on the floor of the old house... A fallen beam... Blood...*

The threat was imminent. A horrible sense of psychic dread surged in Amy. Her pulse accelerated wildly.

She tore away from William and snatched her purse. "We've got to go. Reed's in danger."

\* \* \* \* \*

Reed's red pickup was parked outside *Belle Ruisseau*. Apprehension gnawed at her insides. What if she was too late? What if Uriah had succeeded?

William's ghost appeared in the passenger seat of the VW. "Amy, leave this place."

"No!" she wailed as the VW lurched over the deeply rutted gravel drive. "Reed needs me."

"I cannot protect you if Uriah has entered his body."

Amy shot him a worried glance. Every fiber of her being screamed at her to turn the van around but she couldn't. She *knew* Reed was in danger. She had to stop it.

"Amy, this is exactly what Uriah has planned. Leave this place, now!"

She ignored him as the van's tires spun in the gravel and the vehicle slid to an abrupt stop. Leaving the keys in the ignition, she dove out of the van and rushed up the front stairs.

"Reed!"

She rushed into the central hall and then cried out.

Reed lay unconscious under a smoking pile of plaster and rotted boards.

A hole gaped in the floor above and through it Amy saw a dark silhouette flit away. Someone was upstairs.

That Lettie woman? Uriah's ghost?



A bird's wings fluttered wildly and a cardinal dashed out of the hole and flew out the open doorway.

She didn't have time to concern herself with that right now. Her gaze riveted to Reed. She knew she had to act but she was in shock.

She picked her way through the debris and then knelt next to him. Blood oozed from a wound on his forehead. It was the same image she'd seen in her vision. Horror surged. Had Uriah done this? Had he intentionally hurt Reed?

Tentatively, she touched Reed's wavy hair. "Oh God, Reed! Talk to me." He didn't move. Her stomach lurched. She inhaled raggedly and then coughed against the choking dust.

His cell phone was on his belt. With trembling fingers, she pushed the decayed lumber away and then stood to heft a heavy beam off his back. Groaning, she pulled and tugged, praying she wouldn't drop it on him. The splintered wood sliced into her palms. The muscles in her biceps burned with the strain. "Come on," she said through gritted teeth and, squeezing her eyes shut, she managed to hoist the beam high enough to push it to the side. Reed remained motionless. *Oh God, don't let him be dead.*

Panting and shaking uncontrollably, Amy dropped to her knees and reached underneath him to release his cell phone from the holster. She flipped it open and punched 9-1-1.

"Lauderdale County 9-1-1. What's your emergency?"

Shit. She didn't know the address. "Send an ambulance to *Belle Ruisseau*. My brother has been hurt!"

The lady on the other end of the phone continued asking questions but Amy was suddenly speechless. Standing in the doorway, with the setting sun glowing brilliantly behind his back, was the ghost of William Red Feather.

Amy stared. She was shaking uncontrollably.

William glared – not at her, but *past* her.

Amy's head twisted. A dark shadow shimmered ominously behind her. She gasped.

"Amy..."

*Reed!* Her attention riveted to her stepbrother. He hadn't moved. *How –*

And then her heart lodged in her throat as she watched Reed's spirit, bathed in an ethereal glow, float upward from his body. No. Amy shook her head. "No!" she screamed.

She shuddered violently. A deathly chill swept up her spine but not because of Reed. She could feel the hairs on her arms and nape prickle. Her intuition screamed that the dark shadow was coming closer – coming to take Reed!

She wouldn't let it. Not while she was alive. Amy lunged to her feet and whirled, ready to do battle with the dark spirit. Breathless, she mentally summoned the White

Light, to surround both Reed and herself. Without the proper tools — sage, crystals, holy water and the special stone she'd charged with protection — the Light was all she had.

The shadow spirit slithered closer and suddenly, the breath was knocked out of her lungs in an audible rush as another force rushed through her toward the dark spirit.

William Red Feather.

"Save your brother!" he commanded as he attacked the shadow.

Amy gaped. William had become a shadow himself and the only way she could discern him from the dark spirit was the scarlet tinge of his energy field. *Reed...*

Terror rendered her immobile but she knew she had to save Reed. She spun. Reed's spirit was fading.

Panic surged.

Amy dropped to her knees and with strength she didn't know she possessed, she flipped his big, heavy body over. Her hands trembled but she had to do this. She had to try.

*I don't know what I'm doing!*

It'd been years since she'd taken a CPR class. Still, she tilted his head back, pinched his nose shut, sucked in a deep breath and clamped her mouth down over his. It was hard, much harder than breathing into a dummy. And after two breaths, he still wasn't breathing.

"Don't leave me, Reed!"

*Belle Ruisseau* shook with the battle raging behind her. Plaster rained down from the ceiling. The walls groaned. But Amy focused her entire being on saving Reed.

Her hands trembled as she felt through his T-shirt for his breast bone. Bracing herself on her knees, she began compressions while counting aloud. By the time she reached thirty, her arms burned with the strain.

Somewhere in the distance, she could hear the faint sounds of a siren.

Two more breaths.

*Where is that goddamned ambulance?*

More compressions.

With a twist of her head, she flipped her long hair behind her shoulder and anxiously searched the hallway. The wild skirmish had ceased and the silence that ensued was far more terrifying than the battle had been. Dust particles fluttered down from the ceiling. The rush of bird wings fluttered somewhere overhead.

The sirens were coming closer.

Reed's face was pale. Bloodless. She could no longer see his spirit.

Tears gushed from Amy's eyes. "Reed Severin, don't you dare leave me!" She blew two more breaths into his lungs.

He suddenly gasped. His eyes flew open.

Amy was flooded with relief...

Then her heart skipped a beat when his mouth twisted into a malevolent grin.

Two big hands seized her throat and squeezed. Reed's eyes glazed over as he pulled her face down only inches from his own. "You were mine," he hissed the words. "You'll never be with your half-breed lover now. I'll see to that!"

Amy clawed his hands. She gasped for breath.

Uriah laughed triumphantly from inside Reed's body. He had succeeded and now he was killing her all over again.

*This isn't happening!* His hands were too strong. She couldn't free herself. Darkness loomed and Amy knew she had to do something. With all her might, she balled her fist and socked him in the nose, feeling the bone and cartilage crunch sickeningly under her knuckles.

He cried out and his grip loosened enough for her to pull free. Scrambling away, she stared in horror as the EMTs rushed in the door and ran to Reed.

"I've got a faint pulse," one of them said.

Amy pulled her knees up to her chest and rocked back and forth, sobbing uncontrollably as the EMTs began to work on the body that she hoped still contained her stepbrother's spirit.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy slumped in her chair in the hospital waiting room with her arms folded over her chest. She sniffed and didn't bother to brush away the tear which coursed down her cheek and splashed on her wrist.

Her mind was numb.

Closing her eyes, she leaned her head against the hard back of the chair. It had been three long hours since she'd arrived at the hospital. Reed's heart had stopped in the ambulance and the EMTs had managed to revive him once more.

The image of William Red Feather battling the shadow crept into her mind. She hadn't felt his presence since Uriah's leap into Reed's body. Was William okay? What if Reed's body still played host to Uriah Winston?

Just when she realized she was truly in love with William...

Everything seemed to be falling apart around her. She rubbed her throbbing temples.

"Amy!"

Her eyes snapped open. Relief flooded her. It was Jillian. Her husband Benton was close behind.

Amy fled into her sister's arms. Although Jillian was the younger of the two, Amy had always considered her the sensible one, the constant one. She sobbed against Jillian's shoulder, heedless of the very expensive plum cashmere.

Benton's big, comforting hand pulled her hair back off her face affectionately. "Amy!" Surprise was evident in his voice. "What happened to your neck?"

He'd seen the bruises.

Jillian pushed her back far enough to examine her neck. "What the hell?"

Amy's hands flew to her throat. "I'll explain later," she said, knowing if she recounted the story, she'd burst into tears again.

Jillian eyed her with suspicion and Amy was grateful when she changed the subject to their stepbrother. "How is Reed? Have you heard anything?"

"Ms. Drew?"

"Yes," both Amy and Jillian said in unison although Jillian's last name was now Smith.

Amy lifted her hands and wiped her tears away with balled fists.

Jillian stepped toward a female doctor who was wearing green scrubs and a white lab coat. With her short blonde ponytail and minimal makeup, the doctor hardly looked old enough to have graduated medical school.

Jillian extended her hand. "Jillian Smith," she said in her businesslike tone. "I'm Reed's stepsister. How is he?"

The doctor's gaze moved to Amy. "Are you the one who performed CPR until the EMTs arrived?"

Amy nodded.

"Reed's gonna owe you one," she said. "You saved his life."

Amy would have been relieved if she knew for certain it was *Reed's* life she'd saved. "Has he spoken?" Her voice was tremulous.

"Not yet. You can see him for a few minutes but keep it brief."

Jillian glanced over her shoulder at Benton.

"I'll wait out here," he said and nudged Amy toward her sister.

"He's not totally responsive yet but there's plenty of brain activity," the diminutive doctor said as they followed her through the double doors and down a hospital corridor. "It's not every day a man dies and comes back to tell about it."

Jillian's green eyes widened. "He *died*?"

"For several minutes."

Jillian shot a wild-eyed look at Amy.

An image of Reed's spirit hovering over his body as Uriah invaded it assailed Amy. She shuddered violently.

The doctor took them up an elevator and then down another hallway to the Intensive Care Unit, allowing them to enter Reed's room alone.

Despite his size and strength, Reed looked helpless in the hospital bed, hooked up to a multitude of plastic tubes. An oxygen mask concealed most of his face. A big white

bandage covered the wound on the side of his forehead, his dark brown hair curling wildly around the edges in stark contrast.

Jillian stopped at the edge of the bed and stared. She folded her arms over her chest. "Will he be all right?"

Amy's gaze flew to her sister. She was asking for her *psychic* opinion. Jillian hadn't bothered the doctor with much more than the particulars but the emotion in her voice now shook Amy to the core.

Jillian's gaze searched hers. "Amy, please."

How could Jillian have so much confidence in her when she was so uncertain of herself?

Amy swallowed. Her whole body trembled but she took the few steps closing the distance to Reed's bed. Her heart thudded wildly against her rib cage.

The oxygen purred and bubbled with Reed's ragged breaths. A female voice paged someone over the intercom.

If she had a pendulum, she could scan his body. She would certainly be able to tell if Uriah was in there. But she'd left her pendulum on the curb in Nashville.

With vivid detail, she recalled him choking her. Her hand flew to her throat.

As if Jillian had read her mind, she was already removing the amethyst pendant Benton had given her for her birthday. "Here, use this."

Amy's hand shook as she took the necklace from her sister and wrapped the chain around her index finger. Did she really want to know? And how in the hell could she explain what happened to her sister? She looked to Jillian for reassurance and received a nod.

She inhaled the sterile odor of the hospital and blew the breath out slowly as she suspended the pendant over Reed's chest. "Clockwise is good. Counterclockwise...not good."

A tingle slithered down her wrist as the energy moved into the necklace. It vibrated but did not spin. Amy shook her head. "I can't do it."

It wasn't that she *couldn't*. She didn't want to know if this was Reed—or Uriah.

"You can do this," Jillian said and stepped behind her.

Amy felt Jillian's fingers encircle her biceps. Through the glass window, Amy could see one of the nurses nudge another one to watch. Her pulse raced.

"Don't pay any attention to them. Focus on Reed," Jillian said calmly.

But Amy was focused on William. Was he now *soul-less*?

Had she already lost him?

Her heart ached but there was nothing she could do about that. Reed needed her. After another deep breath, she willed her pulse to return to normal. She cradled her elbow in her hand to steady her arm and once more, she suspended the sparkling amethyst over Reed's chest.

At once, it began to spin clockwise. Good. Amy moved it down Reed's legs. The sparkling purple stone continued to whirl. Good feelings inundated Amy. Reed was all right. Uriah's spirit was not present. She moved the pendant higher, past his chest, over his shoulders and then to his head. When she held it over the place where he'd been wounded, however, the pendant stopped spinning altogether and shook violently.

Reed moaned.

"What does it mean," Jillian asked urgently.

"I'm not sure." Amy handed the pendant to Jillian and then placed her hand gingerly over Reed's forehead. At once, images of William Red Feather soaring into the energy of the dark spirit filled her head. Reed had *seen* it—or rather, his spirit had seen it. Amy felt his horror at seeing his own lifeless body inhabited by Uriah amidst the debris on the floor. She shook her head, tousling her honey-colored curls in an attempt to dispel the vision.

"Amy, what is it?"

Amy's gaze collided with Jillian's. She bit her bottom lip. "We need to talk."

## Chapter Twelve

"This place has certainly changed since the last time I was here," Benton said as his gaze swept the rosy haze of the setting sun across the breadth of the Tennessee River.

Jillian joined him where he leaned on the railing of the A-frame deck and slid her hand up his back. His six-foot-one-inch frame dwarfed Jillian's smaller one. "How so?" She gazed up at him with such pure love in her green eyes, it made Amy's heart ache for William.

"That wasn't here the last time I came through here in 1864." Benton pointed down river at Wilson Dam. "But we sure could have used it."

For an instant, Amy was shocked when she realized he was talking about something that had happened one hundred forty years ago. Now that he was here in the flesh, she found it easy to forget he'd once been a spirit whose soul was trapped on the earth plane.

Jillian beamed and leaned against him, nuzzling her cheek against his arm.

Amy climbed onto one of the high deck chairs and toyed with the two red feathers William had left on her pillow the first morning after he'd been in her bed. As she watched Benton and Jillian, a sense of melancholy tugged at her heart. Where was William?

Benton kissed Jillian's ear, eliciting a girlish giggle from her.

Amy's gaze dropped to the soft feathers again. *Change your fate or the red feather cannot return...*

Was he already lost?

All those years ago, the Ouija had told Jillian she would marry a man named Ben. She'd removed her hand from the planchette prematurely or it would have spelled out "Benton", Amy was certain. And now, here he stood.

Amy swallowed thickly. A sense of pervading doom weighed heavily on her because her own fate – and the fate of the man she loved – had already been sealed.

"The house where Reed had the accident is haunted." Amy's tone was far more blunt than she'd intended.

Jillian whirled. Her eyes widened. "Haunted?"

Benton stared.

Amy tucked one foot underneath her. "Yep. Haunted. A ghost attacked Reed."

Jillian's face was growing paler by the second. "A ghost?"

Amy nodded. Warily, she explained about Eddie and Charity. She told them about finding the skeleton, the portrait of Sarah Winston and her suspicions that Uriah was looking for a body.

Jillian listened, her eyes narrowing as she assimilated the facts. The more Amy talked, the more comforted she felt at having Jillian here.

Jillian worked for the Nashville police as a criminal profiler. She was used to murders. Her dark ponytail bounced as she cocked her head to one side. Her green eyes grew sharp. "Aim, there's something you're not telling me."

Amy's gaze darted to Benton and then back to her sister. Although she loved her brother-in-law, she wasn't comfortable talking freely in front of him about William.

Taking the hint, Benton threw up his hands in mock surrender. "If you ladies will excuse me, I'll go up and bring our valise into the house."

Jillian flashed him a smile. "Suitcase. We call them suitcases nowadays."

Benton rolled his gray eyes in a gesture of feigned annoyance before he slanted his head down to peck her on the cheek. "Ladies." He nodded his head with the panache of a cavalier then strode up the hill to where Jillian's black Jaguar was parked.

"What's going on?" Jillian demanded once he was out of earshot.

Amy sighed. "The ghost who was trapped in the cellar... His name is William Red Feather." At the mere mention of his name, a furious blush flooded her cheeks. She could practically feel her sister's gaze penetrating her thin veneer. Amy knew that, although Jillian didn't like to admit it, she was psychic too.

"I take it you've spoken to this William Red Feather?"

Amy raised her eyebrows. *Spoken* was hardly the word. "He was my lover when I was Sarah. I was going to run away with him when Uriah found out and killed us both."

Jillian listened, eyes wide. "And now you think Uriah is out to murder you again?"

"That's what those marks are on my neck. He tried to strangle me." Fresh tears flooded her eyes. "He possessed Reed and tried to kill me."

Jillian slid an arm around her shoulders. "I don't know what to say."

"Do you remember the first time we used a Ouija board?" Amy asked.

Realization crossed Jillian's face. She shivered.

"It told you about him." Amy nodded her head toward Benton who was carrying a heavy suitcase across Reed's deck.

"And it told you to change your fate..."

In unison, both sisters said, "Or the red feather cannot return."

Jillian's gaze fixed on the pair of feathers in Amy's hand.

"Jill, I'm terrified for William." Her breaths were rapidly getting shorter. She was on the verge of panicking. Eternity was a long damn time. She couldn't even conceive of



it. She'd finally found her soul mate and now he was being ripped away from her and she felt powerless to stop it.

Jillian touched Amy's knee. "Calm down. Let's think."

Amy slid out of the chair and paced on the deck. She pushed the two feathers into her skirt pocket. "I can't think. I don't know what's happened to him and I'm in—" She stopped short. She'd always been the more adventurous of the two sisters and although she'd had her share of lovers, none of them had ever stayed around long enough to be called a relationship—except for the one who'd buried her alive.

A violent shudder swept up Amy's spine at the thought of the person who'd nearly killed her.

Jillian's lips parted. "Are you...sleeping with...William?"

Leave it to Jillian to put it like that. Amy shrugged uncomfortably. "Kind of," she muttered.

"Kind of. You either are or you're not."

"Yes. Yes! Okay."

Jillian flinched at Amy's frank admission.

"And I'm in love with him." Just uttering the words caused a surge of emotion to constrict her throat.

"Amy—" Jillian started.

Panic welled. "I'm terrified something bad has happened to him. Eddie lost his soul. What if that happens to...to William?"

"Amy, get a hold of yourself."

She was shaking and on the verge of breaking down. She'd come to Alabama thinking she was going to leave her psychic life behind until that house had thrust her headlong into a web of murder and deceit—and ghosts.

Her heart hammered so hard she thought it would burst from her chest. Her mind raced frantically.

Jillian was suddenly standing in front of her, grasping her hands in hers. "Amy, look at me."

In the whirlwind, Amy somehow managed to focus on her sister's deep green eyes. She slumped into her arms and clung. Jillian stroked her wild hair. "I know what it's like to be afraid for someone you love."

"There's something else you should know," Amy said. She swallowed. "There was someone else in the house when I got there. A living person."

Jillian took a step back and crossed her arms over her chest.

"I went to see Gwen today and she believes Uriah needs the assistance of a living person in order to possess a body."

"There's only one thing to do then," Jillian said. "We've got to go back there."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You were right, Amy. Somebody's been up here," Benton said, shining an industrial-strength flashlight around one of the upstairs bedrooms at *Belle Ruisseau*. "Take a look at this."

Amy held Jillian's arm as they both picked their way over the fallen chunks of plaster to join Benton in the doorway.

Amy froze when she saw what the light illuminated.

"What the hell is that?" Benton asked.

"It's a Judas Goat inverted pentacle, the *Sigl of Baphomet*." Amy stared at the ominous sign with dread. An upside down pentagram had been painted on the floor in what appeared to be blood, with the head of a goat depicted in the center—right next to the gaping hole where the boards had fallen and knocked Reed unconscious.

Someone had cast this circle to sacrifice Reed's body to Uriah. If she hadn't arrived when she did, they might have succeeded.

She recalled that burned spot on the ground at the cemetery. Apparently whoever had cast this circle had tried it with Eddie too—and had failed then as well.

An image of Lettie reared up in Amy's head. In addition to wagging around a .38, was that old lady practicing black magic?

Benton shuddered. "What's that dead bird got to do with it?" He shone the flashlight on a lifeless scarlet bird that lay just to the side of the pentagram. Its head lolled to the side, the blank black eyes staring. One wing was outstretched and the bird's feet were curled tightly.

Amy's knees went weak. The cardinal. William's Native American totem animal. Instinctively, she thrust her hand in her skirt pocket and brushed her fingertips against the feathers she'd put there earlier.

Her heart froze and she silently begged him to appear, to let her know he was all right. She momentarily closed her eyes and tried to feel him. Nothing.

*Change your fate...*

Had she already lost William's soul?

Her heart ached like hard, cold stone in her chest. How could it continue to beat if William was gone?

Even when she was left to die, buried alive, she hadn't felt so cold and alone—empty.

Jillian started to walk into the bedroom but Benton seized her arm and dragged her back. "Don't go in there."

"He's right," Amy said, forcing herself to think. "It's black magic."

Benton's gaze collided with hers. "Did you see who did this?"

Amy shook her head. "I saw *somebody* but I couldn't make out any more than that. There's an old lady who's angry because this house has been sold. Apparently, she was born here and is pissed because the house was sold out from under her."

Benton's hand slid down Jillian's arm and he interlaced his fingers with hers. One of his dark eyebrows arched. "Whoever did this is not going to stop until they find a host body for that spook to possess."

Jillian clung to Benton's arm. "Let's get out of here. This place gives me the willies."

Amy couldn't get down the stairs fast enough. Benton and Jillian were right on her heels. But she stopped short at the front door.

Her breath caught.

Lettie barred the way brandishing her pistol. Her wrinkled mouth twisted into a snarl. She peered out from under her cap and a mob of dirty white curls. "You people just can't leave well enough alone can you?"

Benton stepped in front of Amy. "We know what you're up to."

"I just want my home back."

"It looks like you've gotten what you want," Jillian said, peering over Benton's shoulder. "The owner has been attacked and now my brother."

Lettie waved the pistol. "I warned everybody not to come up here."

"We were just leaving," Benton said calmly as he inched forward. "We won't be back. I can promise you that. Just let us leave in peace."

Lettie stared for a lingering second and then she lowered the pistol and stepped aside. "I've got no quarrel with you folks."

Benton eyed Lettie warily as he moved toward the door, keeping both Jillian and Amy on the other side of him the whole time.

Amy had never been more grateful to pile into the cramped backseat of Jillian's Jag. All three of them were silent until Benton cranked the car and they were driving safely away.

Jillian's first reaction was to flip out her cell phone and punch 9-1-1 to report Miss Lettie to the police.

"There's your culprit," Benton said when Jillian closed her phone.

"I was thinking the same thing," Amy said, twisting in the seat to make sure Lettie's yellow station wagon wasn't following behind.

Common sense told her that little old lady was helping Uriah because she felt an attachment to the property.

And yet, it seemed as if one important detail was still missing.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I can walk down," Amy said, relieved to be home as she opened the back door of the Jag.

"I'll drive you down," Benton said, making eye contact through the rearview mirror.

"Thanks anyway," Amy said and stepped out. "Good night." She waved before she started down the steep slope to the A-frame. She gave a whistle for Boo and when the Chihuahua didn't immediately appear, Amy figured she was off with her new BFF, Tripod.

Every bone and muscle in Amy's body felt raw and sore as she descended the hill. Her throat hurt where Uriah had tried to choke her. Her heart ached miserably.

She blew out a sigh and rubbed her palm over the outline of the feathers in her skirt pocket. "William, please let me know you're safe." For an instant she closed her eyes and imagined him before her. Tall, brooding and dark. Ruggedly beautiful with his stark Native American features.

He'd warned her not to go to *Belle Ruisseau* but she'd had no choice. Reed had been in danger. Uriah would certainly have succeeded in possessing him if she hadn't arrived when she did.

But in the process of saving Reed, she'd lost William.

Her insides felt hollow except for her heart, which felt leaden in her chest.

Wearily, she opened the door to the A-frame and switched on the light.

A gasp tore from her throat.

The A-frame had been ransacked.

This time, Tripod was not the culprit.

Amy stared in disbelief. All the cabinets were open. The dishes lay shattered on the floor. Sofa cushions were upended. Lamps were overturned. The trash had been emptied on the carpet.

Someone had definitely been searching for something.

But what?

Pain suddenly radiated from the back of her head and then everything went black.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jillian stood in the bathroom drying her hair with a fluffy white towel. She heard the water shut off and watched as the shower door opened and Benton stepped out, dripping and naked, onto the beige bathmat.

His dark, wavy hair was tousled carelessly about his head. Rivulets of water beaded and ran down his corded neck and muscular chest. Jillian's breath froze when her gaze landed on the scar marring his left shoulder. He'd taken a bullet during the battle of Murfreesboro—where his brother had died. The wound had followed him even into death.

Her gaze dropped lower to where his semihard cock lay thickly against his thigh. Jillian gnawed her bottom lip and drank him in with her eyes.

Crazy desire spiraled to her pussy, followed by a surge of guilt.

Amy was in the A-frame, distraught and frightened, so why was it all Jillian could think about was sucking Benton's cock until he filled her mouth full of his cum?

He started to reach for a towel but then obviously caught her staring. He grabbed his cock instead and raked his hand sensuously up and down. His penis lengthened and hardened immediately.

She inhaled sharply. The sight of his gloriously naked body always sent shivers up her spine. The idea of taking him inside her made her grow wet.

Her pulse thumped heavily in her ears.

"Like what you see?" he asked. A deep dimple formed at the corner of his mouth.

Jillian nodded. She took another deep breath and forced her gaze to his gray eyes. "What about Amy?"

Benton's shoulders sagged with disappointment. "Amy's snoring by now."

"But you don't know everything."

He snorted. "I know she's in love with that Red Feather character."

Jillian's lips parted. "How —"

Still dripping, he stalked slowly toward her. Jillian felt as if she were shrinking. His body radiated heat. She searched his gaze as he took her towel and, without looking, placed it on the tiled vanity.

His fingers teased the sensitive skin under her chin. "Because I remember seeing that look before."

"What look?" Her heart beat wildly.

The heat in his eyes warmed to a simmer. "The look of utter hopelessness and desperation." He took another impossible step closer. "The look of love."

Jillian swallowed. Had that really been her only a year ago? She shuddered when she recalled the horror of thinking she would lose Benton but then his big, strong hands cupped her shoulders. Tear welled in her eyes. "What would I have done if I'd lost you?" Her voice cracked with emotion.

He suddenly swept her against him, his arms encircling her and holding her close as he pressed tender kisses to her wet head. "Hush, darlin'. I ain't going anywhere," he cooed. "You're safe now."

His words threatened to undo her because she knew she was safe. As long as he was alive, as long as he could hold her this way, she was safe from anything the world could possibly throw at her.

Her arms slithered around his neck and she gazed into his eyes. "I thank God every day for you."

His response was a very thorough, very provocative kiss.

Jillian opened to him, her body responding instantly to his touch, his kiss. She shimmied out of the towel wrapped around her body and melted against him. He

groaned into her mouth as his hands slid down her back, cupping her backside, his fingers teasing the cleft and the little puckered opening within.

But that wasn't where she wanted him.

She ended their kiss and flashed him a sexy smile as she sank to her knees on the shaggy bathroom rug. His turgid cock reared up at her and she engulfed the engorged, succulent tip into her mouth. She loved sucking him, loved the feel of his steel-hard ass clenching as she teased the underside of his cock head with her tongue.

His fingers threaded into her wet hair and she felt his whole body tense. "Damn, darlin', you're gonna make me come," he drawled.

She wanted to. She wanted to taste his thick cream in her mouth. Her grip on him tightened. She sucked harder, rolling her tongue around his thick cock.

He clutched her head and stopped her.

Jillian's forehead furrowed as she lifted her gaze to his. His face was flushed. A vein throbbed visibly in his throat. "What's wrong?"

Without explanation, he coerced her to her feet and turned her around. Jillian immediately saw why.

Heat flooded her at the sight of their bodies in the mirror.

"Bend over," he ordered. His voice was raw.

Jillian gripped the sides of the vanity and bent as she felt the swollen head of his cock slide between her labial lips and then push into her soaking wet hole. She gasped. Her knees turned to gelatin and she clung to the vanity to keep from falling.

Her gaze slid to the side wall where she could see the full length of their bodies reflected in the mirror. Benton seized her hips and arched as he drove himself into her. His gaze was riveted to where they were connected.

In the mirror, Jillian could see her heavy breasts swaying rhythmically with his thrusts. Her dark, shoulder-length hair clung to her head and the back of her neck dramatically, striking in contrast with her fair skin.

Benton glanced at the mirror and when his gaze caught hers, Jillian felt a surge of pure love mingled with pleasure skein downward.

He pulled her back farther toward him and pummeled her with his cock. Jillian watched the mirror now with half-closed eyes. Her head swam. She arched her back to give him easier access and then his hand slid around her thigh and his fingers pressed against her hard clit.

Jillian cried out as a violent orgasm took her by sudden surprise and while the delicious spasms still racked her body, she pulled away from him, whirled, dropped to her knees and engulfed him in her mouth just as he started to come.

A raw groan tore from his throat as his cock exploded into her mouth. Jillian sucked and swallowed and sucked some more, wanting every last drop and tasting her own pussy sweetness mingled with his thick, spicy cream. When she lapped him one last time with her tongue, he shook and his breath came out raggedly.

Her lips tingling, she gazed up at him and found his eyes clouded with passion and admiration. He staggered slightly, his hand catching the side of the vanity for support. "Damn, darlin'." He blew out another rough breath and his mouth drew into a tense smile.

Outside, the frantic, deep barking of a dog caught Jillian's attention.

Benton offered her a hand and helped her stand. His shoulders rose and fell with deep, heaving breaths. He was still wet, not from his shower but from perspiration. Jillian breathed in the heady scent of him.

She gasped when he suddenly hauled her against him and planted another thorough kiss on her mouth. Just when she felt his cock nudge her belly again, a higher pitched, shrill bark joined the deeper one.

*That sounds like Boo.*

And then realization struck. She tore her mouth from Benton's and her gaze slammed into his. "That's Boo! Something's wrong."

\* \* \* \* \*

Consciousness seeped slowly back and Amy became vaguely aware of the drone of a motor. The back of her head throbbed and stung. She winced. Her eyes fluttered open. Nausea rose and ebbed. Her head swam and she fought to focus. The chilly night was dark but she finally realized she was rocking and bouncing on the cold, hard bottom of a boat as it skipped the waves.

Her shoulders ached and when she tried to move, she realized why. Someone had bound her hands behind her back. Her feet were tied at the ankles. The feeling was far too familiar. It was terrifying. Suddenly alert, she tried to scream but a piece of tape had been placed over her mouth.

Her eyes grew wide and she struggled, writhing against the bonds until she could see her captor.

Shock flooded her. She squinted into the black night, staring.

Charity Clanton sat in the driver's seat of what appeared to be a small fishing boat. Amy sucked in a breath through her nose. Why? Why was Charity involved in this?

Charity's gaze was hard and fixed on the water ahead of her. Her chin-length hair whipped in the brisk breeze. She glanced down at Amy, her eyes widening when she realized Amy was conscious. A mirthless smile pulled her fuchsia lips into a taut line. "I guess you're wondering what you're doing here."

The shadow of a steep bank loomed darker than the black of the night up ahead.

"I've got a host for Uriah now. And I think you'll be surprised." A false-sounding laugh erupted from Charity's mouth. "Oh but I forgot. You're psychic. This won't be a surprise party for you at all, now, will it?"

Panic surged. Charity was crazy!

Amy's mind scrambled over the details. It wasn't Lettie at all. It was Charity!

Her stomach lurched as Amy struggled against the bonds to no avail.

"Lie still, sweetie," Charity said as she idled the engine into a desolate slough. She stood to get a better view and glanced at Amy again. "Put your little noodle to work and see if you can guess who the guest of honor will be." She peered into the darkness and steered from her standing position as the boat glided soundlessly through the lapping water.

Amy assessed the situation. She couldn't just let Charity kidnap her. What had she meant by "guest of honor"? Thoughts of Reed, Jillian or Benton lunged into her head. No. She didn't have the same psychic sense of panic about any of them the way she'd had about Reed earlier. But one thing was certain. She had to try *something* to escape.

Her gaze frantically scanned the small fishing boat. If she could somehow push Charity into the water, she might have a fighting chance.

With all her might, Amy gritted her teeth and kicked at Charity's legs, succeeding in knocking her off balance.

Charity reeled and stumbled but clutched at the steering wheel. Her knee slammed into the console. She cursed. The boat rocked wildly and for a moment, Amy visualized it capsizing. Horror of falling into the water, bound and gagged, flooded her.

Charity pulled herself up and once she righted the boat, glared at Amy. "Dammit, I said lie still." She looked down at her fingers then blew out a sigh. "You made me break a nail." Her eyes narrowed into vicious slits and then she kicked Amy hard in the stomach.

Amy grunted and doubled up. Tears rolled out of her eyes. It was happening again.

Her worst nightmares were coming true all over again.

She'd failed.

Looking very pissed, Charity steered the boat into a slip and roped it off. She opened her alligator purse and withdrew a pistol.

Amy's heart went wild. Charity could kill her right here and no one would ever know.

Charity aimed the pistol at her. "If you try that again, I'll kill you and feed you to the catfish."

Amy whimpered as Charity stooped to untie her ankles.

"If you ever want to see your half-breed lover again, you'll do as I say," Charity said. "Understand?"

Amy managed to nod. William was okay? Her heart soared.

Charity stood at the side of the boat. "Get up. Come with me."

Amy struggled and managed to clamber onto her knees. The rocking of the boat made it extremely difficult for her to get to her feet. She fell against the passenger seat



but Charity seized her by the arm and with surprising strength, manhandled her out of the boat and shoved her onto the pier face first.

Amy grunted against the tape as she struggled to get to her feet again. Her heart raced madly and the only thing that kept her from launching into a full blown panic attack was the thought of seeing William's spirit once more.

*Please let him be safe. Please...*

Charity leapt onto the pier behind her and then pulled her roughly toward her white Cadillac, which was parked at the end of the dock. She opened the passenger door and shoved Amy into the car. "Don't try anything funny."

Amy's gaze swept the interior of the car. Tied as she was, there was nothing she *could* try. She was completely at this mad woman's mercy.

Charity slid into the driver's seat and started the car. "Get on the floor."

Whimpering, Amy slithered to the floorboard. She stared up at Charity's face as the streetlights swept past. Charity had not told her where they were going but Amy knew.

They were on their way to *Belle Ruisseau*.

## Chapter Thirteen

Was Charity a witch? She must be well versed in the dark arts to have known how to cast a Judas Goat pentacle.

Amy twisted her neck as the car came to a stop in the gravel outside *Belle Ruisseau*. The house loomed eerily against the night sky.

Charity switched off the ignition and climbed out. Amy could hear her footsteps crunch in the gravel as she hurried to the passenger side. She yanked open the door. "Get out."

Amy had no choice because Charity had the pistol trained on her. Still, Amy wondered if it would be better to be shot than to face Uriah Winston's spirit. Already her whole body bristled with spirit energy — *evil* spirit energy.

Amy wriggled out of the car. One knee hit the ground and sharp pain shot through her leg. She gave a cry that was muffled by the tape.

"Get up," Charity said impatiently. "They're waiting for you." She hauled Amy up by the arm and shoved her with the gun.

Amy half thought the pistol might go off and she expected a bullet in the back any minute.

"Move!" Charity ordered when Amy hesitated.

But they weren't going inside the house. Charity was leading her toward the cellar.

Amy's entire being filled with dread. Her knees shook. Her breaths were coming in short pants. She felt as if she would faint from lack of air. The night breeze swept her long hair wildly across her face, preventing her from seeing where she was going as her feet picked clumsily across the uneven ground and then down the narrow steps into the dank cellar.

The cellar was awash with the flickering yellow lights of ceremonial candles. Amy could already smell the heavy scent of wax. Charity forced her farther into the cellar.

Panic flooded her. Another Judas Goat inverted pentacle had been rendered on the dirt floor. In the candle light, she could see it had been drawn in blood. The metallic scent of it, mingled with the acrid stench of decrepit earth, reached her nostrils and she tensed. She knew that odor all too well.

In the space where the forensics team had removed the bricks from the wall lay a neatly arranged skeleton.

*William's skeleton?*

The forensics team had taken it. How had it gotten here?

Charity noticed Amy staring at it. Leering, she snatched the tape off Amy's mouth.

Amy cried out.

"No one can hear you. It won't do any good to scream."

A dark shadow wavered near the pentacle. Amy trembled as Uriah Winston's ghost formed in the candlelight and loomed into view.

He looked just as she'd seen him in her psychic visions—and exactly as she had seen him in the portrait William painted. He was tall but not as tall as William, although he was stockier. With his curly white hair and dressed in black boots, dove gray trousers and a ruffled white shirt, he would have looked every bit the old world gentleman with the exception of a deliberate wickedness dancing in his amber eyes. His mirthless smile was chilling.

Amy realized she was trembling uncontrollably.

"I see you remember me, Sarah." He glanced at the skeleton. "You certainly remembered *him* well enough."

She'd been stunned by Uriah's appearance. At the mention of William's skeleton, panic surged. Her heart pounded against her rib cage. "Where is William? What have you done with him?"

Uriah looked smug. "Shall we say that little tussle we had while you were so interested in saving your stepbrother took a little more of his energy than he anticipated?"

Amy swallowed. Nervously, she eyed the skeleton and then her gaze pivoted to Charity's. "Where did you get that? I was here when the forensics team took it."

Her stomach tightened into a knot. Adrenaline pumped through her veins—because she suddenly knew what Charity and Uriah had planned.

"A liduhl black magic can fix mos' dings, Miss Sarah."

Amy gaped at Charity. The voice that had come out of her mouth was not her own. She'd heard that thick Haitian accent before in another time...

It was Rita's!

"And so can a bribe," Charity added in her own voice.

Amy's knees went weak. Psychic images inundated her.

*A slave woman on her knees, cutting out the heart of a cardinal to bind William's soul while Uriah smoothed over his masonry handiwork...*

*A corpse...*

*Sarah's corpse!*

Rita had reincarnated into Charity.

Amy's breath caught and she stared. That's why Charity had bought *Belle Ruisseau*. She had intended to bring Uriah back all along but since his grave had been ransacked and his bones scattered, there wasn't enough of him left to create a new body for him.

A wave of nausea rose in Amy's throat. She swallowed it back down.

Charity placed the gun on the floor. Amy eyed it. Perhaps she could kick it out of the way but with her hands tied, she wouldn't be able to get as far as the stairs before Charity caught up to her.

Charity stooped to lift the cover off a cage. Amy gasped when she saw what was within. A trapped scarlet cardinal flapped wildly as Charity reached inside and clutched it in her fist.

Amy gnawed her bottom lip. Her knees threatened to give way any minute. Her gaze darted between Charity and Uriah. "Why are you doing this? It's been almost two hundred years! Why?"

"You released him," Charity said as she gently brushed the terrified bird against her cheek. She appeared as if she might be trying to soothe the cardinal but Amy knew better. "I trapped his soul in that wall years ago and you and your meddling brother let him out! I told Reed to stay clear of the cellar. This is all *his* fault because he didn't listen!"

"But why are you doing this to William?"

"Because killing him wasn't enough," Uriah said.

Amy's eyes widened as he slowly approached her. Her heart hammered violently. "W-what about Sarah? Why didn't you trap her...*my* soul?"

Uriah's ghostly finger grazed her cheek. Amy stiffened and squeezed her eyes shut until the bristling energy receded.

"I murdered you in a fit of passion, my dear Mrs. Winston," he said, his voice low and menacing. "Your soul escaped before Rita could work her magic to entrap it."

Amy shook.

"But it won't this time, Sarah." An evil grin twisted his thin lips. "I intend to make certain you and your half-breed are separated for eternity."

Anger flared. "Haven't you done enough? You let William take the blame for Sarah's murder. Wasn't vilifying him enough for you?" Her whole body ached to lunge at him and pummel him with her fists but she knew it would be useless. "You're a sick, twisted bastard!"

Charity laughed wildly. "You should have seen your face when you found me in the house." She glanced at Uriah and then her gaze clashed with Amy's again. Another bout of hysterical laughter echoed in the cellar. "You and Reed happened in on an intimate moment, honey. And when Uriah suggested I tell you I was attacked to make you think the Indian fucked me —"

Uriah cut in. "It kept your psychic senses thrown off long enough for me to work up enough energy to inhabit a body."

Amy's chest heaved with short, shallow breaths.

The bird screeched and Amy spun in Charity's direction. Her breath froze in her lungs. The cardinal's blood dripped onto the dirt floor from one of Charity's hands and in the other, she held a bloodstained silver dagger.

*This isn't happening.*

*This can't be happening!*

Charity flashed a wide smile before she stealthily approached William's skeleton.

"Charity – Rita," Amy called, trying to reason with the woman. "Don't do this."

But Charity paid her no heed. Instead, she mumbled spells in a language Amy didn't understand as she held the bird over the bones. She wrung the blood out of its body the way a cook would squeeze a lemon over a piece of fish.

Amy lunged at her but suddenly, Uriah was behind her, holding her to prevent her from stopping Charity who was intent on bringing William back to life. "No!" Amy wailed. She struggled but even as a ghost, Uriah was too strong.

He drew her so hard against him she could feel his erection against her buttocks. His mouth sidled up to her ear. "What do you think, Mrs. Winston? One more time before your soul is no more?" He rocked menacingly against her.

Charity turned. Her gaze clashed with Amy's as she slowly crossed the dirt floor toward her. Amy stiffened, her body trembling with the combined hostile energy as Charity came toe-to-toe with her.

Charity leaned in so close that, for a heart-stopping moment, Amy thought the woman might kiss her. Instead, her bloodstained hand moved down Amy's side and slid into her skirt pocket. A lurid grin curved her lips as she withdrew two scarlet feathers and tickled the tip of Amy's nose with them.

Amy winced.

"I searched your house for these." The playful lilt in her voice didn't match the evil intent in her ice blue eyes. "And you had them in your pocket all along. Shame on you."

Amy resisted the urge to spit in the woman's face. "Charity, listen to me. You don't want to have to repeat these life lessons. Don't do this," she beseeched. Her voice was filled with pleading.

Charity laughed. "Honey, I'm about to have everything I want. My life has been perfect." She turned and started toward the skeleton once more, stopping only to glance back over her shoulder at Amy. "That's more than I can say for yours."

She whirled and approached the skeleton. Waving a feather in each hand, she chanted in the strange language. The candles started to flicker. Uriah tensed.

Amy eyed the pistol but with her hands tied, how could she ever stop Charity? And Uriah was already dead.

She was filled with hopelessness.

*Change your fate or the red feather cannot return...*

Change her fate? How? She'd walked right into their trap. There was no way out.

"Bring her here," Charity ordered as she produced the silver dagger once more.

Amy's heart hammered relentlessly against her rib cage. They were going to kill her, sacrifice her!

She struggled as Uriah pushed her toward Charity and the skeleton. Again, Charity stood far too close for Amy's comfort, so close Amy picked up the faded scent of her perfume and the odor of tea on her breath. She twisted her head and shut her eyes tightly as Charity reached around her and sawed through the ropes binding her wrists.

Uriah seized one hand and Charity snatched the other. Eyes now open, Amy watched in horror as Charity dragged the pointed, bloody blade along her palm. Charity flashed a wide smile and then dug the point of the knife into Amy's flesh.

Amy screamed as white-hot pain shot through her hand. Blood oozed from the wound and Charity twisted Amy's wrist so the precious liquid dripped onto the bones.

Tears streamed down Amy's cheeks as a swirling wind circulated through the dank cellar, stirring up the earthen floor. Dust flew. Charity's voice rose above the din in that strange Haitian accent.

Amy shut her eyes and coughed against the debris but when she heard Charity gasp, her eyes snapped open.

The skeleton was gone and in its place was William's body.

His olive face was pale and striking in contrast to his ink black hair. Amy fought furiously against Uriah's iron grip and cried out as an ash gray shard of energy dove into the body. "No!" Now William would be at their mercy. "No, William!"

William gasped and sputtered as life rushed back into his body. Like a panther, he sprang to his feet as Charity scrambled for the pistol. His black gaze darted between them and stopped on Amy. His eyes locked with hers and she read the unspoken remorse – and love – there.

Love surged inside her. He was magnificent. Her heart swelled only to tighten into a hard knot when she realized what was at stake – William's soul.

She sucked in a breath.

And then Uriah's hands slid around her throat. "I'll kill her, Ryan."

Amy gasped as she clutched unsuccessfully at his hands. He was a spirit. He could manifest solidly to hold her but she couldn't fight against him. "He'll kill me anyway, William! Run!"

Charity aimed the pistol at William.

"She won't shoot you. Uriah wants to possess your body!" Amy's voice was shrill and hysterical. Uriah's hands tightened. She cried out.

William stared, his shoulders rising and falling with deep breaths. His gaze locked with Uriah's. "Let her go and I'll give you the body. That is what you want, is it not?"

"No!" Amy thrashed but Uriah held her tighter.

The pressure on her throat eased but Uriah hauled her hard against his ethereal body. "Isn't this quaint? She'd give her life – and her soul – to save yours," he hissed. "What a bargain! To think, all you wanted was revenge on me."

William's gaze slid to Amy's. "That's not the truth."

"Isn't it?" Uriah gave her a hard shake.

Amy stared.

"I fell in love with you," William said, his gaze never wavering from hers.

Amy swallowed. Hard. Her intuition corresponded with his words. Psychic images of walking arm in arm with him along the edges of the cotton fields cascaded through her thoughts. He'd rested his head in her lap as she'd read to him on the bank of the creek. He'd come to her as soon as Uriah had ridden out to survey the plantation and they'd made love in the four poster bed upstairs—all when she had lived as Sarah Winston.

Emotions overwhelmed her. She knew he loved her. She knew she was the only woman he'd ever loved—and he was the only man she would ever love.

Tears poured unchecked down her cheeks. His soul was in his body. He was alive—and they would never be together. Not now. Not ever.

Because she knew without a doubt, Uriah planned to kill her as soon as he was in William's body.

"Let her go, Winston."

"I have plans for *her* once I'm in *your* body." Uriah gave voice to a maniacal laugh and shot a glance at Charity. "Time to work your magic, my sweet." He pushed Amy hard into William's arms.

William pulled her protectively behind him.

Amy's mind raced. Her gaze darted frantically around the close confines of the cellar. There had to be some way to prevent this from happening. Now that William was in a body, he couldn't fight Uriah's ghost. Charity had a weapon but if they both tried to overtake her, Uriah could intervene.

Charity moved to the inverted pentacle which was just behind Uriah. Shoving the pistol in her pocket, she replaced it with the dagger and knelt on the floor at the head of the crudely drawn goat.

Lifting her hands, she chanted in the foreign language. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she rocked wildly back and forth.

Once more the dust swirled. A cruel grin spread across Uriah's pale face as he became more and more transparent.

Amy seized William's hand. Now was the time to run! She tugged but he didn't budge. Instead, his body trembled violently.

"No!" Amy screamed above the clamor of Charity's chants and the howling of the wind.

A groan emanated from William's body and Amy watched in horror as his spirit was sucked out through his mouth and nostrils.

"No!" She tugged frantically on his body. "William!"

A jolt surged through him and his eyes glazed and then cleared. He pulled her hard against him.

Amy stared.

And then his mouth descended on hers in a brutal, cruel kiss.

Amy struggled and pushed uselessly against his unyielding shoulders. He was no longer her William. He was Uriah.

Her heart twisted hard. Her stomach lurched.

Uriah and Charity had succeeded. She, Amy, had failed.

William's soul was gone.

*Red Feather cannot return...*



## Chapter Fourteen

Even as the body thief's hands pushed up her skirt, Amy refused to surrender.

Charity was still moaning and chanting. The spirit could not be well seated in the body if she was still casting her evil spell. Not yet.

Besides, she'd seen Uriah in Reed and knew his spirit could be dislodged.

Willing powerful White Light to encircle the cellar, she tore her mouth from his and held his face in her hands, staring hard into his eyes. "William, look at me!"

The eyes glazed and then once more the hard fierceness returned. "I'm not William." The voice had a gravelly timbre as it made a weird attempt to work the vocal chords.

A strange throttled sound came from Charity and he started to turn his head.

"William!" Amy called again, drawing his attention away from where Charity's body slumped lifelessly forward on the floor. Was she dead? Amy couldn't risk losing her intensity. She kept her gaze trained on the man in front of her. "Look at me."

His gaze locked with hers. A strange sense of calm washed over her as she stared into his eyes and projected the pure Light of Love to William's soul. Her whole body thrummed and tingled. "Kiss me," she whispered and stood on tiptoes to lock her lips with his.

As he opened his mouth to hers, she continued to project the Light and *willed* William's soul to return. The body in her arms quaked violently but she held on.

*Come back, William. Come back to me.*

Suddenly, he ripped his mouth from hers and stumbled two steps backward. His eyes widened and then an animalistic groan ripped from his chest.

Amy stared in horror.

Could William re-enter the body? Would it force Uriah's spirit away?

He dropped to his knees on the earthen floor and reached toward her. "Amy..."

Realization flooded her.

William had come back!

Uriah was gone.

Amy scraped her knees on the floor as she fled to his side. Joy flooded her. She wept as she kissed his mouth, holding his face in her hands...

An explosion reverberated through the cellar.

William's body tensed.

Amy drew back just far enough to see that his eyes had grown wide. His gaze dropped to where his hand covered a bleeding wound on his abdomen and then his dark eyes lifted to hers.

Charity had shot him.

He was dying!

How could he be dying when she only just found him?

She gently lowered his head to the floor. "William," she sobbed. "Don't leave me. Please..."

Charity's laugh resounded in the confines of the cellar.

William's wide gaze was locked to hers. "Amy...forgive me."

*No! He can't be dying. Not now.*

Amy wound the fingers of one hand into the fabric of his shirt as if she could hold onto him that way. "William..." She made an attempt to unbutton his shirt but he caught her hands in his.

"Kiss me." His voice was but a hoarse whisper. "I want to feel your lips. Just once before I—"

"Yes, give your whore one last kiss," Charity taunted.

Amy ignored her and as she leaned over him, her long blonde curls formed a curtain around his face as she pressed a sweet kiss to his lips.

His hand came up to cup her cheek. "I will come back to find you. I promise you that!" He stared for a moment before the spark in his eyes faded to nothingness and then his hand fell limply to his chest.

Amy's heart felt like a stone in her chest. Hard. Painful.

She buried her face in her hands and sobbed. He was gone. *Gone*. But she had saved his soul. She could at least take small comfort in that.

She sniffed and swiped at her tears and when her vision cleared, a haggard Charity was standing over her with the pistol aimed directly at her face.

Amy gasped.

Gone was the taunting witch. Charity was pissed and now she meant serious business. "It looks as if you'll get to be with your lover after all," she hissed.

She aimed the pistol at Amy's chest with both hands, curling her index finger around the trigger.

Amy sat on her knees, stunned, awaiting the bullet—awaiting death.

The shot rang out in an ear-splitting echo in the cellar.

Amy screamed but curiously, she felt nothing. She ran her hands over her blouse. No blood.

Her gaze darted to Charity who stared, her blue eyes wide with shock.

She dropped to her knees—behind her stood Lettie with her revolver still aimed at her back.

"I knew that woman was up to no good," Lettie said as she lowered her pistol.

"Down here!" Amy heard Benton's voice just outside.

Footsteps thundered down the stone steps and Jillian rushed around Lettie and toward Amy. "Are you okay? Did she hurt you?"

Amy stood and fell into her sister's arms, sobbing. "How did you know?"

Sirens wailed in the distance.

"Boo was howling at the door and that three-legged dog of Reed's practically dragged Benton down to the A-frame," Jillian said into her hair.

"What happened here?" Benton asked.

Amy's gaze moved from Benton to Jillian's. "William. They tried to bring back his body and take his soul..."

Jillian's gaze locked to where William lay motionless on the floor. She dropped to her knees and pressed her fingers against his jugular. "He's still alive! Benton, get the paramedics down here. Now!"

Amy's heart soared but the worried look in Jillian's eyes shook her to the core. She'd always had a mental connection with her sister and she picked up Jillian's message loud and clear. *This man is about to die.*

Her blood had brought William back—and now he was dying.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy was numb as she sat at the hospital with her head on Jillian's shoulder.

Benton paced. Periodically, he peered into the tiny square window of the door to the surgery wing. "Here comes somebody," he said.

The door opened and a tall, young doctor stepped out. He looked tired. His mask hung loose on his chest.

Amy searched his face. Fear had once again shut down her psychic senses and she couldn't tell what he was going to say. Her stomach knotted.

The doctor's gaze met hers. "Are you Amy?"

She sat up straight. "Yes."

Jillian squeezed her hand.

"He's asking for you."

Amy's breath caught. "Is he...is he going to be all right?"

"It was touch and go there for a little while but we've got him stabilized."

Joy surged. Amy shot to her feet. She exchanged glances with Jillian and Benton before she followed the doctor into a recovery room.

William lay with his eyes closed in a narrow bed, hooked up to a multitude of tubes. His face was deathly pale and his long hair stretched wildly across the white pillowslip – but he was alive. *Alive!*

Amy squeezed her eyes shut momentarily and said a silent prayer of gratitude. She swallowed the lump in her throat and rushed to his side. Every instinct told her to throw herself into his arms but she was afraid to touch him, to hurt him.

“I’m here, William.” Her voice was tremulous.

His eyes fluttered open. Relief swept his stern features. “Amy.” He tried to sit up but winced as pain kept him flat on his back.

Shaking all over, she sat gingerly on the edge of the bed and reached out to touch his face. Her palm brushed the stubble on his jaw, his skin, the hard bone underneath. *He’s real! He’s alive and he’s real!*

Amy was exultant. Her gaze found his and she cautiously leaned forward to press a soft kiss to his lips.

He managed a slight smile. “You saved my soul.”

Amy’s breath choked in her throat. “I –”

“You saved me,” he interjected roughly.

“I thought you were gone.”

“I told you I would never let you go.”

Tears stung her eyes. Love for him permeated her and coursed through her veins. Once more, she slanted her mouth over his but this time her kiss was deep, hot and wet. Her body – no, her *soul* – remembered him and she took all he had to offer and more.

The thought there would be a tomorrow for them flittered through her head and she deepened the kiss, loving him body and spirit.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy stared out the A-frame window at the pink and purple sky as the sun settled on the Tennessee River. She touched her fingertips to the cold glass and then flexed her hand against the bandage.

Despite the horrors she’d endured, she felt stronger than ever. In fact, she’d flushed the antidepressants along with all her sleeping pills down the toilet. She’d been sleeping well at night—even if it had been in a narrow hospital recliner. Her intuition was returning full force and she was even considering hanging out her shingle and giving psychic readings again.

For the first time in her life, she felt truly at peace with herself. In trusting her intuition about William, she had learned it was all right to trust herself and now that she could do that, she felt more comfortable trusting others.

A stout November breeze blew bright gold leaves along the pier and into the choppy water. Amy smiled, her thoughts drifting to that long ago day when she sat on that same pier next to Reed and shared an Orange Crush.

She heard a deep yawn behind her and turned to find William opening his eyes from where he'd been sleeping on the sofa. Jillian had somehow finagled an identity for him from one of her cop friends in Nashville and William had been released from the hospital just this morning.

Every time Amy looked at him, she was flooded once more with love.

*This was fate.*

Bathed in the sunset glow, he was even more handsome than she remembered. His black hair was thick and the antiquated, long style accentuated his sculpted cheekbones, brooding eyebrows and onyx eyes.

Her heart leapt wildly. It was all she could do to keep from launching herself into his arms. A broad smile claimed her lips. "William?"

When he smiled, her pulse raced crazily.

"Come here," he said, his gaze never wavering from hers.

Her lips parted. Adrenaline tingled in her veins as she approached him.

A blush flooded her cheeks.

He winced as he pushed himself up. The blanket she'd draped over him fell away to expose his bare chest and the small bandage that covered the place where he'd been shot.

Amy wet her lips with her tongue as her gaze moved over those deliciously gorgeous parts of his body.

She couldn't resist him any longer. He'd been in no shape in the hospital to make love and with the nurses in and out of his room constantly, they'd hardly had an opportunity to kiss properly.

When she got within distance of him, he reached out and took her hand, drawing her down on the sofa next to him. She laughed and threw her arms around his neck before she kissed him.

At once, his arms wound around her body. A groan tore from his throat and his tongue pushed through her lips, probing, teasing. His lips drew hers in as one big hand came up to cup her face. The other pressed into the small of her back drawing her impossibly closer.

Her heart went wild and her body ached desperately for him. She dragged her mouth from his. "Are you sure you can...?"

For a split second his eyes searched hers and then she gasped when he suddenly pulled her down on top of him.

Amy was overjoyed. She couldn't tear her gaze from his chiseled face. "I want you. Now," she breathed.

Those sexy dimples appeared at the corners of his mouth again as he untied the drawstring of the pajama bottoms he'd borrowed from Reed. Amy's gaze fell to where his noticeably aroused cock strained against the thin cotton. She slid down on the sofa, straddling his legs and freeing his penis at the same time.

It was as big and beautiful as she remembered and she could not wait to taste it. He gasped when she took him in her mouth, using her hand to compensate for the length she couldn't swallow. His fingers threaded through her hair and he gently guided her head as she made love to him with her mouth. He tasted spicy and male. He smelled of leather and soap and a fragrance belonging only to him.

Amy ran her tongue along the underside of the engorged head, all the way down the shaft where she laved his balls, eliciting a groan from his lips. She wanted more. Her insides clenched when she imagined taking him inside her pussy. Pushing herself up, she ripped her layered shirts over her head and shucked off her bra.

William's black eyes blazed as his gaze raked her breasts and fell lower still as Amy stood briefly and furiously wriggled out of her skirt and panties.

She was naked and already so wet, so ready for him. Her pulse slowed to a heavy throb as she straddled him once more.

"God, I've dreamed of this," he murmured. "I've dreamed of *this*." One big hand trailed down her body, stopping to tease her nipple, gliding lower to where she ached for his touch.

Amy arched her hips upward and his fingers slid between the soft folds to probe the slick lips and seek out her hole. She moaned and squeezed one hard biceps as his index finger pushed inside her.

"You're wet for me," he said raggedly.

Impatient for more, Amy positioned herself over him. Her hair fell forward, her curls floating around his face. He drew her to him and his mouth nipped hers. His forehead furrowed and his whole body tensed. "I want to take my time," he said. "But I cannot wait to be inside you."

Her gaze found his and she opened her thighs as wide as possible. It was all the encouragement he needed. The head of his cock rode her crevice until it found the perfect spot and then with one determined thrust, he plunged all the way inside her cunt.

Amy gasped. She thought she would come if he moved so much as an inch but he remained still. Something akin to shock flashed through his eyes.

His hands gripped her ass and he began to slowly guide her up and down on his shaft.

Amy's whole being, it seemed, spiraled to the point of her pleasure and centered there, and when his mouth found the sensitive curve of her neck she cried out. Bright rainbow colors flashed behind her eyelids and she mentally surrounded them both with wild, sexual, soulful energy as her chakras connected in a powerful Tantra-induced orgasm.

When she finally floated back to earth, he was alternately kissing her face and whispering promises in her ear she knew had only come from the connection of their previous incarnations. Her body felt heavy. Thoroughly sated.

"I thought I'd lost you," she whispered against his ear.

"No one and nothing could ever keep us apart."

Tears welled in the corners of Amy's eyes. Had she ever known anything so wonderfully encompassing as this love she felt for and from this man? It was nothing short of miraculous.

He brushed his mouth across hers and then guided her hand between them to where his cock was still rock hard. Amy tightened with fresh desire.

He rolled her onto her back, moved over her and made love to her again, taking his time to relearn every curve, every hollow, every crevice, everything that made her body quiver with lust and with the love that connected their souls through time.

Amy knew she could trust this man, this soul, with all her heart.

His gaze locked with hers as he moved languidly inside her and she felt the energy in her chakras connecting and rushing to and through him. This was far more than sex. She could see it in his eyes. He felt it too. This was a fusion of mind, body and spirit that healed her from the inside out.

His forehead furrowed and he gnawed his bottom lip. Amy could tell he was resisting the urge to come again. But there would be plenty of times ahead for them. This she *did* know.

She slipped her hands around his steely buttocks and then lifted her hips only slightly so the head of his cock brushed her G-spot.

That was all it took.

William moaned against her ear and Amy heard her own breathless panting as they came in unison.

This time, when she lay in his arms, breathless and misted with perspiration from their lovemaking, he kissed her ear and whispered, "Marry me, Amy."

Chills washed over her body.

Chills that had nothing to do with William's proposal.

"How quaint!" A booming voice startled them both.

Amy gasped and snatched the blanket over her naked body. She had assumed without Charity, Uriah's spirit had simply passed over to the Other Side.

Uriah Winston's ghost loomed eerily in the middle of the room.

"You have no power here." William instinctively protected Amy by blocking her body with his own.

Uriah laughed without mirth.

The A-frame began to shake. Dishes fell from the cupboard. Pictures dropped from the walls. The speakers overturned and the television crashed to the floor.

Wrapped in the blanket, Amy scrambled to her feet. This time, she knew what to do. Her ability was strong again and no ghost would be a match for her.

Determined, she squeezed her eyes shut and drew in all the White Light she could muster. "I command you to leave our presence!" she shouted.

Uriah's energy wavered but then came back full strength.

"We are surrounded with and protected by the White Light!" she chanted over and over.

Her voice rose with hysteria as, horrified, she watched Uriah's spirit shoot toward William.

William rolled on the sofa and groaned in agony.

"No!" Fury welled within her and Amy's insides clenched as she screamed and mentally balled the protective Light into a missile. With every ounce of psychic force she possessed, she projected it at William.

Dark shadows with glowing red eyes hissed into view. Amy had never seen them before but Jillian had described them to her in lurid detail.

Soul collectors.

Uriah's faded spirit rose a few feet above William's body. Uriah let out an unearthly wail when the soul collectors dove on him. He fought them helplessly and Amy shielded her ears against his pitiful screams.

"Help me, Sarah!" he grasped at her but Amy darted out of his reach. "Don't let them take me!"

Terrified, Amy gaped as a yawning vortex ripped the dimensions open and the soul collectors dragged Uriah, who clawed fruitlessly at the air, toward it. His amber eyes grew wide with terror. Strangled, incomprehensible pleas erupted from him and Amy knew the cause of his fear.

He wasn't going to the Light. He was going to hell.

For a brief moment Amy pitied him—but images of her life as Sarah roiled in her brain.

He'd abused her.

He'd raped her.

He'd treated her as a possession instead of a cherished wife.

He'd murdered her in cold blood—and then he had left William to die an unimaginable death.

Amy knew he had warranted his fate.

Still covering her ears, she turned her back and squeezed her eyes shut.

"Sarah...!" His garbled voice fizzled and Amy felt the house quake then go silent. She turned around slowly.

Uriah and the soul collectors were gone, leaving behind the acrid stench of sulfur.



Relief flooded her trembling body and she fled into William's arms. "Are you all right?" she asked, incredulous but thankful that the soul collectors had taken Uriah.

Now there was no way he would – or could – return.

"Yes," William said against her hair. He held her tighter. "Is he gone?"

Amy nodded. "Yes, we're safe now."

After what seemed like an hour of just holding one another, she felt the tension in his body melt away. His fingers slid under her chin and he tilted her face up to his. "Will you?"

Amy searched his eyes. Her forehead furrowed.

"Marry me?" he continued.

Joy surged. Amy blew out the breath she'd been holding – the breath it seemed she'd been holding all her life.

Blissful tears filled her eyes and ran freely down her cheeks as if William's love had somehow absolved all the hurt, all the fear, all the sorrow she had ever known.

She managed to nod.

William's lips drew into a broad smile and he hauled her against him and covered her mouth with his.

Outside the vaulted window of the A-frame, a cardinal swooped past and a solitary scarlet feather fluttered downward.

Amy had changed her fate and William Red Feather had returned.

## Epilogue

The unseasonably warm December day was picture perfect and Amy made a beautiful winter bride dressed in a flattering white dress set off by a bright scarlet sash.

She married William Ryan on the deck of the A-frame only six short weeks after he'd been released from the hospital. Reed had acted as best man and Jillian and Gwen had stood in as matrons of honor.

Benton had taken William under his wing and had taught him the ins and outs of modern life from the perspective of a nineteenth-century man, much to the amusement of both Jillian and Amy. Benton had even patiently taught William to drive a car and both had reminisced aloud about missing the dependability of a good horse.

William had already started painting. His first portrait was of Amy and it had been his wedding gift to her.

He didn't know it yet, but Amy did—he would soon be a much sought after artist with his own gallery and exclusive clientele.

Reed had recovered quickly but ever since his near-death experience, he'd been inundated with psychic information. Amy was helping him learn to work with it but so far, he'd been very resistant and even frightened by it. He hadn't asked too many questions about how William had become embodied but Amy noticed Reed seemed awed by it nonetheless.

The only thing not perfect about the day was Gwen. A dark halo lurked in her aura and more than once, Amy had picked up that something bad was about to happen to her husband. It was an unspoken rule among psychics never to tell when death was foreseen but even so, Amy had taken her friend aside and told her to tell her husband to be careful, especially around water.

Amy was studying Gwen's aura from across the deck when she felt William's arms encircle her waist.

All her fears and concerns melted away at once as she leaned back against the hard, broad plane of his chest. He was her other half, her soul mate—her husband.

Her heart soared.

William's mouth brushed her ear. "Happy wedding day, Mrs. Ryan."

She giggled at the sound of it. "Back atcha, Mr. Ryan."

He glanced at his wristwatch. "If we leave now, we've got just enough time to catch our plane."

"You still haven't told me where we're going." She arched an eyebrow in his direction.

"I gave you a hint." His sexy dimples deepened.

Amy laughed. "Yeah. You told me I wouldn't need many clothes."

"Many? I meant *any*." He waggled his black eyebrows at her. "Oh, and did I forget the part about your needing to know a few words of French?"

Amy's smile broadened. She'd known all along Jillian had helped him with the plans to fly her to Paris but she hadn't wanted to spoil his surprise. "How's this? *Je t'aime*," she whispered as she gazed boldly into his eyes and then added the only other words of French she knew. "*Voulez-vous coucher avec moi*."

Although William had never heard "Lady Marmalade", he certainly didn't need a translator to interpret Amy's words. His gaze swept the deck. Everyone was talking and enjoying the hors d'oeuvres. His black eyes clouded with desire. "I would very much love to lie down with you, Mrs. Ryan." He intertwined his fingers with hers. "Come with me."

Amy flashed him a conspiratorial glance as she too checked to make certain no one was looking and then she followed him into the A-frame's bathroom.

He fingered the pewter band around her finger and as she stared into his dark eyes, she *heard* his thoughts.

*I love you with all my soul.*

A joyous tear tickled the corner of her eye. "I love you too." Her voice cracked with emotion.

Dimples appeared at the corners of his mouth. "Do you know what I'm thinking now?"

Amy's body tightened at the promise of his thoughts. She didn't have to be psychic to know he intended to consummate their marriage right here, right now.

"We're going to miss our flight," she said in innocent, mock protest.

"I'll drive fast," he said before he slid his big hand up the skirt of her wedding dress.

"I'm counting on it." Amy licked her lips coquettishly and as she unzipped his black trousers, William's black eyebrow arched wickedly.

## About the Author

Debra Glass' previous experience as a medium inspired her interest in writing Alabama ghost stories, although she's also got a passion for spine-tingling paranormal romance. Since 2002, Debra has written several books on regional folklore and has had numerous articles published in Fate Magazine and various Civil War magazines.

Now she's writing steamy erotic romance and dabbling in the paranormal with her Phantom Lovers series which features passionate and sexy ghosts who are guaranteed to keep you up at night!

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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