

Cherokee Christmas

Sheri Whitefeather



Daniel Crow

Cherokee Christmas

AGE

34

VITALS

6'1", long, lean, and muscular, shoulder-length black hair, and dark features

OCCUPATION

Self-made millionaire

ASTROLOGICAL SIGN

Gemini

STORY

Hiding from the pain and sadness of his past, this reclusive Cherokee never expected to find peace at Christmastime. He moved into a haunted mansion so he could hide from the rest of the world, not be tempted by Traci Calhoun — a beautiful waitress and the single mother of a six-year-old boy infatuated with American Indians.



Traci Calhoun

Cherokee Christmas

AGE

26

VITALS

5'1", small-boned, tousled red hair, bright green eyes, and a scatter of freckles

OCCUPATION

Waitress in a small-town diner

ASTROLOGICAL SIGN

Scorpio

STORY

Traci, the bright-spirited daughter of a pastor, believes in extending goodwill. But when her son convinces her to visit the elusive Daniel Crow, she finds herself falling in love with a moody stranger — a man who needs to face his past and embrace the heritage he left behind.



Parker Calhoun

Cherokee Christmas

AGE

6

VITALS

Reddish blond hair, rosy cheeks, and a big smile

OCCUPATION

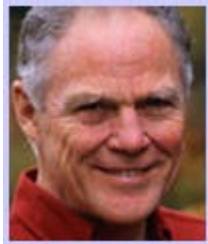
First-grader at Wileyville Elementary School

ASTROLOGICAL SIGN

Virgo

STORY

This happy, vibrant child wants to help Daniel Crow. Most people in town think Daniel is mean, but Parker thinks Daniel needs a friend. Maybe even a ready-made family.



Tom Calhoun

Cherokee Christmas

AGE

62

VITALS

5'10", stocky build, grayish brown hair

OCCUPATION

Retired brick mason

ASTROLOGICAL SIGN

Aries

STORY

Although Tom is Traci's former father-in-law, he is still family. A proud, sometimes gruff-sounding man, he routinely baby-sits his grandson and looks out for Traci's well-being.

Chapter 1

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Traci Calhoun asked her six-year-old son.

Parker bobbed his head, reddish blond hair peeking out from beneath a knit cap, a down jacket buttoned to his chin. The heater in Traci's old Camaro was on the blink again, the defroster blowing cool air. "It's Christmastime, Mom. And he's all alone."

"Of course, you're right. What was I thinking?" The daughter of a pastor, she had raised her son well. But today, she wished he wasn't inclined to extend his goodwill to the outskirts of town. To the elusive stranger who had moved into Orchid House.

The lone mansion sat on a hill, the woods looming behind it. As the house came into view, she told herself to relax. The ghost stories about Orchid House were legend in Wileyville, but what bothered her most was why Daniel Crow felt compelled to live there, secluded from the rest of the world and shrouded in mystery.

She parked in front of the mansion. It looked like a Southern plantation, completely out of place on the fringes of a small Pennsylvania town.

Parker reached for the cookies, the gesture rife with anticipation. "I heard he's a real-live Indian, Mom."

And that was a source of fascination to her son, Traci thought. One of the reasons he insisted on paying Daniel Crow a visit. "I know, but I think he might prefer to be called an American Indian, rather than a real-live one. Of course, there's always Native American. I get a little confused about what's politically correct these days."

"Huh?"

The boy made a curious face, and she realized she had spoken over his head.

Truthfully, she didn't know what Daniel Crow preferred. She didn't know anything about him, aside from the adjectives others had used to describe him.

Tall. Dark. Lean. Mean. Moody.

Unfortunately they weren't the kinds of words that welcomed a woman, a child, and a tin of gingerbread.

A brick walkway led to the front door, twin columns standing guard. An abundance of foliage fought to survive the winter, making the mansion look even more ominous. Supposedly the scent of orchids haunted the lonely halls, a perfume that lingered from the female ghosts who resided there.

Traci knocked, and her son shifted his feet in the brisk morning air.

Within minutes, Daniel Crow answered the summons. No one spoke, including Parker, who was known for being chatty. The man they had come to see was tall and intimidating. His hair, as sleek and black as a raven's wing, fell onto broad shoulders.

But it was his eyes that caught Traci's attention. As dark as his hair, they revealed not even the slightest flicker of emotion. Nothing, she thought, wondering what secrets they chose to hide.

"May I help you?" He said finally, his voice tinged with a husky Southern drawl. Clearly awed, Parker offered the decorative tin.

Hesitating for a moment, Daniel accepted the gift. Appearing confused, he held the container without opening it.

"Cookies," Traci explained.

Those black eyes met hers, drilling her with a hypnotic stare. Why hadn't anyone described him as captivating? Or striking? The kind of man who made a girl forget to breathe? Refined yet rugged, he exuded an odd blend of Southern grace and Native roots. His posture was long and almost lazy, yet his features were stern and proud.

"You must have me mixed up with someone else," he said.

"No way." This came from Parker, who inched forward, putting himself nearly toe to toe with the lord of Orchid House. "You're that Indian guy who never talks to anybody. My grandpa says that's okay, though. 'Course, he's grumpy sometimes, too."

Traci didn't apologize for her son. She couldn't bear to embarrass him in front of the man he hoped to befriend. And little Parker Calhoun was what he was. Honest to a fault.

"So you brought me cookies." There was a hint of amusement in Daniel's slow, sensual drawl, just enough to tilt one corner of his lips. "Chocolate chip, I'll bet." "Nope," the boy replied. "They're gingerbread. And they're shaped like angels, with white icing on their wings and gold candy on their halos. It was my idea to come here, but my mom thought of the cookies."

Daniel's smile disappeared as he shifted his gaze from Parker to Traci. Moving away from the child, he came toward her, and she resisted the urge to step back. He no longer seemed amused.

"Good God, woman," he whispered. "Why on earth did you bring me angels?"

Chapter 2:

Daniel knew he was standing too close. He towered over her by at least a foot — this pretty lady with the riot of auburn curls. The lady who had given him angels.

Was it a sign? he asked himself. Or was his imagination working overtime? Nothing in Orchid House was simple, least of all the haunting.

Unable to stop himself, he moved closer. She had eyes as green as an Irish countryside, a nose dusted with freckles. He imagined lifting his hand and caressing her face, her smooth, ivory skin. It was an odd time to feel an attraction. Up until this disturbing moment, he'd assumed his need for a woman had died with his wife. But here it was, unwelcome as sin, sliding through his blood, making him warm and wanting.

"Why did you bring me angels?" he repeated the question, his voice quiet, his gaze locked with hers.

"Because it's Christmastime." Her answer conjured a painful image. He retreated from the memory, and in doing so realized he had probably frightened Traci

with his question. And possibly the child, as well. The boy watched him much too closely. Daniel figured him to be about six, and that hurt most of all, considering six years had passed since the fire. "I'm sorry," he managed, taking a step back. "I don't get many visitors." And he didn't celebrate Christmas anymore.

"That's 'cause you're new in town," the boy piped in, his easy manner returning. "But that's okay. We can tell you anything you wanna know about Wileyville. We've lived here forever. We know everybody." Cocking his head, he grinned, flashing a gap between two slightly crooked front teeth.

The child had such an earnest smile, Daniel thought as he struggled with the urge to laugh and cry at the same time, feeling charmed yet saddened by a kid he had just met. Battling the jumble of emotion, he glanced at the woman, then slid right back into that warm, sultry place — the unexpected sexual pull that made him want to touch her.

He curled his fingers around the cookie tin, finding it a cool, impersonal substitute. He hoped she wasn't married. The idea of lusting after another man's wife didn't sit well.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

Nowhere in particular, he almost said, since he had been drifting more often than not. "North Carolina."

"Ah, your accent," she acknowledged, as if the sound of it pleased her. "Do you mind if I ask what tribe you're from? We don't get many Native Americans around here."

Daniel blinked. "Eastern Band Cherokee." A heritage he had abandoned a long time ago. Being Cherokee didn't mean anything. He couldn't return to the reservation any more than he could return to the genteel Southern society his wife had been born into.

Daniel blinkte. " Östliches Band Cherokee. " Ein Erbe er hatte vor langer Zeit aufgegeben. Cherokee seiend, bedeutete nichts. Er konnte nicht zum Vorbehalt nicht mehr zurückkehren als er konnte zur vornehmen Südlichen Gesellschaft zurückkehren seine Frau war darin geboren gewesen.

"And your name is Daniel Crow?"

"That's right."

"Well, It's nice to meet you. I'm Traci Calhoun, and this is my son, Parker."

Daniel tensed as if he'd been sucker-punched, gulping the air that rushed out of his lungs.

Parker.

The infant he'd buried had been named Parker. A twist of fate? Or a painful coincidence? Suddenly he couldn't move. He stood like a statue, the winter chill slicing into his bones with the force of a razor-edged knife.

"Are you all right?"

He heard Traci's voice, but he couldn't form the words to respond. Instead he nodded. Or thought he did. The haunting was pulling him under. He had bought

Orchid House so he could brood with the ghosts, not be summoned by a pretty redhead and a kid with a crooked smile who answered to his son's name.

"I guess we better go," she told him. "You're out here without a coat, and you seem to have caught a shiver. Maybe you should go inside. The flu is going around." She nudged Parker ahead, who said something about chicken soup as they walked away.

Daniel snapped out of his trance and noticed her car didn't start right away. It coughed several times before the engine came to life. As she traveled down the hill, he opened the cookie tin. And when he saw sugarcoated wings and gilded halos, he wondered what in heaven's name he was supposed to do.

Chapter 3

"Damn it!" Traci kicked her car, slamming her foot into the front tire. Of all times for the beast to quit on her. Here she stood, exhausted from working a double shift, freezing her butt off in an old coat and the pink-and-white uniform she detested, the parking lot emptier than her bank account.

"That bad, is it?"

The deep voice came out of the dark, putting her feminine instincts on full alert. She spun around and prayed he was someone she knew.

Could a hitchhiker be passing through Main Street on his way to the turnpike? Not likely, she told herself. Besides, this was her hometown. The biggest crime ever committed in Wileyville was a speeding violation.

The man was a filmy image, tall and shrouded by a chilly mist, coming toward her with the thud of heavy boots. She waited while he moved closer, into the buttery glow of a streetlamp.

Instantly, she recognized Daniel Crow, who looked as big and rangy as a wildcat, his shoulder-length hair whipping in the wind.

Where had he come from? There wasn't another car in sight. Had he walked all the way into town, like a predator roaming the night?

"My car won't start." It was all she could think to say.

"Let me see if I can get it running."

She stepped back while he helped himself to her road-weary vehicle. After playing with the ignition switch, he ducked his head under the hood, using a flashlight she'd provided from the trunk.

"I think it's your starter." He removed a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his hands.

"Great. Are those expensive?"

"I can get you one. I can install it, too."

Dumbfounded, she only stared. "Why would you do that?"

An icy breeze blew his hair away from his face, exposing the planes and angles that formed his raw-boned features. "Because I'm good with cars. And because I

never thanked you properly for welcoming me to the neighborhood."

"So this would be your way of saying thanks?"

"Yes, ma'am." His lips tilted into that half smile, the one as smooth and slow as his voice.

Warding off the cold, she crossed her arms, feeling self-conscious and uncomfortable. Her nipples were as hard as bullets. Not that he'd notice, considering the layers of clothing she wore. But that wasn't the point. He didn't know that she'd had an erotic dream about him, that the memory still tormented her. She had awakened warm and slick, clinging to a fantasy she couldn't forget.

"You're not married, are you?" he asked, making the image of her guilty dream sequence seem even more forbidden.

"I'm divorced." And that, Traci decided, gave her every right to fantasize. Especially since Bradley Calhoun had left nearly five years before without bothering to look back.

"Good. I mean, I didn't think so, but I figured I should ask. Men tend to get a little territorial about their wives."

Not men like Bradley, she thought, as silence stretched between them.

Daniel shoved his hands in his coat pockets, and Traci glanced down at her ugly white shoes. He looked as dashing as a desperado in his duster and black boots, and she looked like exactly what she was — a small-town waitress, a young, struggling divorcée.

A woman having sensual dreams about a stranger...

Chapter 4

"So you're good with cars?" Traci heard herself say, desperate to end the awkward silence.

"I used to manufacture after-market auto parts for vintage Chevys." Scraping his boots on the asphalt, Daniel frowned. "But I don't own the business anymore." Gauging his expression, she asked, "Did you lose it?"

"No. I sold it to a national corporation." He paused, his eyebrows still furrowed. "They paid me a substantial amount."

She studied his frown, realizing the rumors were true. She'd heard Daniel was an eccentric millionaire, worth more money than he had time to count. "And that's a bad thing?"

He shrugged. "I've learned being rich isn't the key to happiness."

He was certainly an enigma, she thought. A Cherokee from North Carolina burdened by his wealth. No one could describe him as an American Indian stereotype, especially since he had purchased a Southern-style mansion in a small Pennsylvania town.

What had drawn him to Orchid House? The isolation? The supposed ghosts? Another gust of wind snapped out of the sky, rattling branches on a nearby tree. Traci's untamed curls blew wildly. She pushed the annoying locks of hair away

from her face and noticed Daniel appeared to be assessing her in the same manner in which she'd assessed him.

"What in the hell were you doing out here alone?"

Startled by his sharp tone, she looked up and met his gaze head on. "This is where I work." She motioned to the diner behind them. "And I had to close tonight."

"By yourself?"

"The cook was sick, so I sent him home a little early."

Daniel shook his head. "What if it wasn't me who happened by? What if it was some lunatic?"

People think you're dangerous, she wanted to say. And crazy, too. Only a madman would lurk behind the walls of a haunted mansion.

She motioned to the diner again, indicating the string of holiday lights decorating the roof. She loved this season, broken-down car or not. "For goodness' sake, it's Christmastime. Ease up, okay? I'm fine. All I have to do is call a tow truck."

He scanned the twinkling lights, his expression grim. Whipping out a cell phone, he handed it to her. "If you think nothing tragic happens at this time of year, then let me tell you, you're sorely mistaken."

She took the phone, wondering what had turned Daniel Crow into a hard and lonely man. Nothing shone in his eyes, least of all the sparkle of holiday cheer.

"Where did you come from?" she asked, gesturing to the empty parking lot.

"What do you mean?"

"It's like you appeared out of thin air."

He was still frowning. "I parked in front of the diner."

She held the phone, but had yet to dial the information operator. "What compelled you to walk around back?"

"You," he said, moving closer. "I can't explain it, but I sensed you would be here. It was as though someone whispered your name in my head."

A chill raced up Traci's spine, and a moment later, she detected the faint aroma of flowers drifting through the winter air.

Orchids? she wondered, as Daniel lifted his hand and brushed it gently across her cheek. Her skin tingled where his touch landed, just as it had in her dream.

But this wasn't a dream — was it?

Chapter 5

It felt like an out-of-body experience, Traci thought. One of those surreal moments in life when you drift on the edge of something dangerous.

Beautifully dangerous.

Daniel's hand was strong yet gentle, warm against her skin. Her hair blew in a mass of tumbled curls. He captured a strand between his fingers, and she slipped deeper into the moment.

Their eyes met and held. The glow from the streetlamp cast an amber hue as shadows danced in the night. The scent of orchids still swirled in the air. She imagined them showering her body — hundreds of white petals floating down from the heavens.

He lowered his head, and she knew he was going to kiss her. He cupped her face, and when his lips touched hers, she made a breathy sound. He tasted fresh and clean and seductive, his tongue mating eagerly with hers.

His coat was open, billowing and snapping in the breeze. Traci needed to free her hands so she could encircle his waist. Still clutching the phone, she pressed it into the front pocket of his jeans. Unconsciously she brushed his fly.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

He fought back a groan. "It's all right."

Was it? she asked herself. She was dizzy, drowning in desire. "What are we doing, Daniel?"

"I don't know." And he sounded as if he didn't care if it was right or wrong, if it bordered on insanity. "Unbutton your coat."

She blinked, nearly staggered. "What?"

"I want to feel you, all of you, next to me."

Her hands shook, but she reached for the buttons on her coat, opening the bulky garment. He watched her, his eyes dark and passionate. They were strangers, but it didn't matter. Something was happening between them, something too powerful to name.

He leaned against the car and opened his legs. Traci slid between them. But the moment he drew her against his chest, the mood shifted. Suddenly they weren't kissing or caressing. They were just holding each other, heartbeats melding.

His body was strong and solid, big and powerful. He reminded her of a warrior, a man who would cherish and protect what belonged to him. She closed her eyes and put her head on his shoulder.

"Traci?"

"Hmm?"

"Thank you."

She lifted her head and admired his face, the strength and masculine beauty in it.

"For what?"

"For this," he said, his eyes seeking hers. "It's been a long time since I've been with someone. And I'm not just talking about sex. I mean intimacy. Real intimacy."

And that, she decided, was the feeling too powerful, too erotic to name, the something that was happening between them. "I like you, Daniel."

"You barely know me."

"That doesn't mean I can't like you."

He brushed her lips in a near-kiss, then drew back abruptly. "It's nice that we're becoming friends, but I don't think we should be doing this anymore. I'm still, ah...you know."

Aroused, she thought, suddenly aware of the hardness beneath his zipper. Their bodies were still pressed together. She felt her face flush and realized how strange this whole experience was. "Maybe I should call the tow truck now."
"Yeah. Good idea."

Which meant, of course, moving away from him and pretending they hadn't been on the verge of becoming lovers. If he had asked her to go home with him, she would have gone. And for Traci, that would have been inexcusable. She didn't sleep with strangers.

He removed the phone from his pocket, and she stepped back and buttoned her coat.

She made the call, and they waited in silence. But 10 minutes later, when a white vehicle turned into the parking lot, its tires squealing, Traci's pulse quickened. She recognized the driver instantly.

Chapter 6

"Oh, no." Traci made a face. "With everything that happened, I forgot to call Tom."

Daniel watched the SUV jerk to a halt, realizing the driver had shoved it into park. "Tom?"

"My father-in-law."

A stocky man stepped out of the vehicle, slamming the door behind him. "What the hell is going on, Traci? I've been worried sick. You should have been home hours ago."

"I know. I'm sorry. My car wouldn't start, and I've been waiting for the tow truck. Where's Parker?"

"Asleep. I asked Mavis to watch him."

Still irritated, the man eyed Daniel. "Who's he?"

Traci voiced a polite introduction. "His name is Daniel Crow, and he offered to fix my car. He thinks the starter is bad. He's going to put a new one in for me."

"I see," Tom said to Daniel, his posture relaxing a little. "I guess I owe you a thank-you, then."

"Don't worry about it." He was grateful the older man had decided he wasn't a threat. He wasn't up for a sparring match, and Traci's father-in-law would have made a formidable opponent. He wasn't nearly as tall as Daniel, but he was solid, with the blue-collar stance of a steel worker or a brick mason.

"Aren't you that fellow who bought Orchid House?" Tom asked.

"Yes, I am." The one who had been keeping Traci out in the cold, kissing her. Suddenly he didn't feel like the gentleman she had made him out to be.

Daniel frowned, thinking about the condoms he'd purchased. He hadn't bought them with Traci in mind, but his attraction to her had triggered the idea. The urge to become sexually active again meant he needed protection.

Yeah, but now that he had kissed Traci, it was her he wanted. And damn it, he knew anything beyond friendship wouldn't be wise. She didn't seem like the type who would engage in uncommitted sex. Then again, that wasn't his usual style, either. The last woman who had warmed Daniel's bed had been his wife.

"You made quite an impression on my grandson."

Jarred from his thoughts, Daniel dragged a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry. What?"

"Parker," the other man clarified. "You're all he's been talking about for days. You're the first Indian he's ever met. He thinks you're pretty cool."

"Oh." Daniel didn't know what to say, so he glanced at Traci, who sent him a shy smile. She hadn't told him that her son had developed a case of misguided hero worship of him.

"I watch a lot of cowboy movies on TV," Tom explained. "So I suppose it was only natural for Parker to take an interest in the Old West. But since he always rooted for the Indians, who never seemed to triumph in those old films, I rented him that kids' movie, the one where the little Indian figure comes to life in the magic cupboard. That clinched it. After that, he was hooked."

Daniel had never seen the movie Tom described, but he supposed the Indian in it was the noble, proud-of-his-heritage sort — a depiction that certainly didn't mirror his own actions.

Feeling a twinge of guilt, he squinted at the string of holiday lights decorating the diner. He'd left the reservation, the Qualla Boundary, 16 years ago and hadn't returned since. Not even for Christmas. Of course, he sent money to his father, but the checks were always refused, uncashed and unwelcome.

Damn it. Why was he blaming himself? His father was the stubborn one. He hadn't understood Daniel's need to break free, his need to prove himself in the white world.

He looked at Traci and wondered what to do about her son. How was he supposed to live up to the boy's expectations? Parker was infatuated with Indians, but Daniel Crow wasn't Cherokee anymore.

Chapter 7

Daniel stood in Traci's garage, dressed in threadbare jeans and an old sweatshirt, a wrench stuffed into his back pocket. While replacing the starter in her car, he'd discovered an oil leak. Maybe he should loan her one of his Camaros. He owned several, along with a couple of Novas and a fleet of Corvettes parked in the remodeled carriage house at the mansion.

Parker bounced into the garage, his tennis shoes squeaking on the cement floor.

"Hi, Daniel. I didn't know you were here. I just got back from my friend's house. His name's Benjamin."

Overwhelmed by the burst of youthful energy, Daniel managed a befuddled, "Oh, yeah?" He wasn't experienced with children. His son, his Parker, had died

at three months old. He could still recall the baby's soft, powdery skin, the little cooing sounds he made, the way his eyelids fluttered before he drifted off to sleep.

"My mom's making soup for lunch, but I'm not having any 'cause I ate macaroni and cheese at Ben's house." Rubbing the end of his nose, the boy pursed his lips. His skin was pink and slightly chapped. "Did you fix our car?"

"Yes, but there are other things wrong with it." He couldn't help but wonder how his son would have looked at six, if he would have been the same size as Traci's boy.

"Are you gonna fix those things, too?"

"If your mom doesn't mind. I'll probably have to take the car to my house."

Keeping his hands busy, Daniel put away his tools. A strand of Parker's hair was sticking straight up, and he had the fatherly notion to smooth it.

"Hey, Daniel?"

"Yes?"

"Can you talk Cherokee?"

He tried not to frown. "I used to speak the Kituwah dialect when I was younger."

"Koala?"

"No. Kit-u-wah."

"Do you remember enough to teach me?"

He did, of course. He hadn't forgotten his native tongue. He had just stopped using it. Meeting Parker's hopeful gaze, he wiped his hands. Daniel didn't want to be anyone's hero, but it appeared he had little choice. Shattering Parker's illusions didn't seem like an option.

"If you get a piece of paper and a pencil, I'll show you the Cherokee syllables."

The kid flew out of the garage, the tails of his shirt hanging below his waist-length jacket.

He returned in record time, handing over the writing implements. Daniel sat on the floor next to Parker and penned the syllables. "A man named Sequoyah invented the Cherokee alphabet. It took him 12 years to perfect it, but he didn't give up. At first people thought he was crazy, but later they respected him for teaching the tribe how to communicate with a written language."

He went on to explain the sounds and how they compared to English. Parker listened with rapt attention. Unable to resist, Daniel smoothed the boy's cowlick. On another sheet of paper, Parker attempted to copy the syllables. As the boy set his face in a determined expression, the cowlick popped up again. Daniel found himself smiling.

Parker beamed, displaying his handiwork. "I'm gonna show my mom. And my grandpa, too."

"Sure. Go ahead."

Once Daniel was alone, he decided the Cherokee lesson hadn't cost him anything. Surprisingly, it hadn't made him guilty or moody. Nor had it made him feel as if his heritage was a source of pity, the way the tourist seasons in North

Carolina used to affect him. But he supposed it was the way the boy had looked at him, the innocence and admiration in his eyes.

Daniel finished packing his tools and carried them out to his truck. Lifting them onto the bed, he wondered about Parker's father. The paternal grandpa lived next door, but where was the boy's dad?

Curious enough to ask Traci about her ex-husband, he entered her duplex through the garage and followed the aroma of tomatoes, onions, and spices floating through the air. The kitchen, he decided, with its butcher-block countertops and built-in booth, had been designed for home-cooked meals and conversation.

Traci stood at the stove, stirring soup in a big copper pot. Her hair had been gathered into a topknot, but curls sprang rebelliously from the ladylike confinement.

Hesitating in the doorway, Daniel watched her, suddenly wanting more than conversation. He imagined pressing his lips to the delicate column of her neck. He could almost taste her skin — the sweet, womanly flavor.

She turned, and their eyes met. But a second later, her gaze shifted to the decorated doorframe.

Curious, Daniel glanced up, then realized he had trapped himself in one of those awkward moments.

A sprig of mistletoe, garnished with a shiny gold ribbon, dangled above his head.

Chapter 8

Daniel stood below the mistletoe, and all Traci could think about was kissing him. He looked rough and masculine, with his hair banded into a ponytail, his jeans frayed, his sweatshirt old and faded.

"Would you like some lunch?" she asked instead.

"Sure. Okay." Tall and broad-shouldered, he stepped farther into the room, dwarfing her cluttered kitchen.

"Just have a seat. It'll be ready in a minute."

"I need to wash up first."

"Oh. Of course." She slipped past him, offering the sink.

While Daniel scrubbed the grease from his hands, Traci moved around, gathering plates and silverware, setting the table. She hadn't forgotten how strong and solid his body was, or how it felt pressed against hers.

She removed rolls from the oven, and he turned away from the sink. She'd dreamed about him again — bronzed and naked, sliding between her thighs, his stomach muscles —

"Can I help with anything?"

The pan teetered, nearly burning her wrist. "What? No. I'm fine." Just warm and aroused and envisioning wicked sex.

He scooted into her cramped built-in dining booth, and Traci served their lunch. Taking a deep breath, she joined him.

They sat across from each other in silence. Great. Now she would be self-conscious about eating, about lifting food to her mouth, chewing, swallowing. He smiled, and she realized he was trying to break the ice, the strange heat between them. Grateful, she smiled back.

He tasted his meal. "This is really good."

"Thanks. My mom used to make vegetable soup on long winter days. It's tradition, I guess."

"Really?" Daniel poured dressing over his salad. "Does she live close by?"

"No. She and my dad are missionaries, so they travel a lot."

He cocked his head. "I thought you grew up around here."

"I did. My dad was the pastor of a local parish. He and Mom didn't start doing missionary work until I was older." She missed her parents, but she respected their need to make a difference in the world. "They call as often as they can. They adore Parker."

Daniel smiled again. "He sure is a nice kid."

"I'm pleased you think so." Pride swelled her heart. Like any mother, she wanted her child to make a good impression, but for some reason, Daniel's opinion mattered more than most. "He went next door to show Tom what you taught him. It was nice of you to spend some time with him. I know you were busy with the car and all."

"Like I said, he's a great kid." Lifting his water, he took a drink. "He's really close to Tom, isn't he?"

She nodded. "Tom's a good grandpa. I don't know what I'd do without him, especially since my parents don't live around here anymore."

"What about Parker's dad?"

Her stomach tensed. "What about him?"

"Are he and Parker close?"

"No." She set her spoon on the table. "Bradley Calhoun left town when Parker was about a year old."

Daniel's jaw nearly dropped. "You mean he just walked away?"

"Yes," Traci said, wishing she didn't have to tell him the truth about her marriage.

Chapter 9

Traci picked up her fork and toyed with her salad, moving lettuce around on the plate. "We dated for several years," she said, recalling her relationship with Brad. "But we were young, and we never talked about a future. So when I got pregnant, he was really upset. He only married me because Tom insisted he do the right thing."

"Have you heard from him at all?" Daniel asked.

"Just once, when he served me with the divorce papers."

"I'm sorry, Traci."

She frowned into her food. "I didn't love him the way I should have, but I wanted it to work. I wanted it to be something special."

Daniel sent her a sympathetic look. "Plenty of people get married for the sake of a child, but it doesn't always work out."

"I thought it was going to be different for me." She had tried to convince herself that Brad was the love of her life, but her heart had betrayed her. Traci could still recall her girlish fantasies, her hope that a child would bring them closer. But life had become more stressful after their baby was born, and Brad couldn't cope with a clinging wife and a rambunctious toddler.

"The marriage was doomed from the beginning, but I still wish things could have turned out differently for Parker. Brad had no right to leave him."

Daniel stopped eating. "Does Parker ever ask about his dad?"

"He used to, but he doesn't anymore. And he was only a year old, so he doesn't have any memories to feel sad about. He might get angry when he's a teenager, but I'll deal with that when the time comes." Giving herself something to do, she sliced a roll and buttered the center.

"Tom's the one who's had the most trouble coping. He wanted his son to be more like him, to be satisfied with simple things. But Brad wasn't happy living in a small town, following in his father's footsteps. There was always anger and resentment between them. They argued something fierce the day Brad left."

"So they never got along?"

"No. Never. True, Tom was hard on Brad at times, but I think Brad was wrong for the way he treated his father. And of course, our forced marriage didn't help matters. It was a volatile situation all the way around."

Suddenly silence engulfed the room. Daniel shifted, and Traci felt his foot bump hers under the table. Avoiding her gaze, he drew back quickly, fingering the saltshaker with a tight expression.

"Did I say something to upset you?" she asked. Had she aired too much of her dirty laundry?

"I don't want you to think I'm like Brad."

Her heart lurched. "Why would I?"

"Because I didn't get along with my dad, either. And I haven't spoken to him in over 16 years."

"Oh, my." Startled, she leaned forward. "That's a long time." Much too long, Traci thought.

"Why did you turn away from your father?" she asked, unnerved by the sudden parallel between her ex-husband and Daniel Crow.

Daniel ran his thumb over the saltshaker, then looked up to see Traci watching him with a disturbed expression. "I was raised on a reservation," he said, wondering how to describe the primitive world he came from. "It's about 56,000 acres near the Great Smoky Mountains. The main part is called the Qualla Boundary."

"And you didn't like living there?"

He laughed — a hollow, humorless sound. "I hated it. My father is what's called a traditional Cherokee. I grew up in one of the remote townships. Everything was the old Cherokee way. There was nothing modern about our lifestyle."

Traci pushed her salad to the end of the table. "What about your mother? Have you been apart from her all these years, too?"

"She died of pneumonia when I was little. I remember my father mourning her, wearing ashes on his head and burning her belongings. It all seems so distant now. When we purified ourselves in the river, I cried." He released the saltshaker and sent it spinning. "I couldn't believe she was gone."

Her gaze locked onto his. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me, too." How many years had he longed for a maternal touch, a woman to hold and comfort him? "My aunts helped out, but it wasn't the same. They were older, matronly, I suppose. But at least they weren't as traditional as my father."

"So everyone on the reservation doesn't live the old way?"

"No. Some people have newer homes, and some have attended college. You can't lump everyone together." He lifted his water, took a drink. "My father and I barely eked out a living, relying on the tourist season for our income. But what bothered me the most was Dad's attitude.

"He was a damn fine craftsman, but he didn't mind selling his jewelry to the tacky gift shops in town. To me, it was degrading. I hated being a poor little Indian kid stringing beads and painting T-shirts for my next meal."

Traci tilted her head, her voice quiet. "I assume you argued about it."

He nodded. "The more I expressed an interest in leaving the rez, the more upset he got. 'This is your homeland,' he kept telling me. 'This is where you belong.' You see, the Eastern Band are descendants of the Cherokees who hid in the mountains rather than be forced to march along the Trail of Tears to Oklahoma."

"That's quite a legacy, Daniel."

"I know." A twist of guilt tightened his chest. "But I still had the right to find my own way in the world. I wanted my dad to understand, to support my decision, but he never did."

"So you left?"

"But not without a major fight. And not without denouncing my heritage."

Traci frowned, making the guilt worse. "Where did you go?"

"To South Carolina, to Charleston. I was 18 years old and determined to get rich someday. It became the focus of my life."

He glanced away, unable to tell Traci about the rest of his life, about the wife and child he had buried. Daniel didn't want to admit how lost he was or why he had been drawn to the haunted halls of Orchid House.

Chapter 11

The following afternoon, the wind blew with a cutting edge. Traci walked behind Daniel and Parker, the narrow path flanked by perennial shrubs.

"The original owner was a lumber baron," Daniel said. "And he built this estate for his Southern wife. But I suppose you already know all of that."

Traci moved along, warming her hands in her coat pockets. "I don't mind hearing about it again." And she still wondered why Daniel had chosen an isolated mansion for his home.

Were the rumors about him true? Did he really keep a room on the second floor of Orchid House locked, refusing the cleaning lady access? Supposedly he spent hours and hours alone in that room, shutting out the world around him.

They stopped at an ornate iron gate, and Parker looked up. "Who lives here, Daniel?"

"No one. This is a carriage house. In the old days, it's where the horses and buggies were kept."

"How come it has so many floors?"

"Because there used to be a hayloft and rooms for the stable boys. But I hired someone to remodel it, and now I use it for a garage and workshop."

And that was why they were here, Traci thought. Daniel had offered to loan her one of his Camaros. Although he'd sold his business, he still collected old Chevys. A hobby, he'd told her, that kept him busy tinkering beneath their hoods.

They entered through barn-style doors, and Parker gasped. "Wow. Look at all those cars, Mom."

Yes, she thought, practically stumbling over her feet. Look at them. Sleek and shiny, Daniel's vehicles were restored to perfection. Each classic model was parked on a black-and-white vinyl floor, making the expansive interior look like a showroom.

"You don't intend to loan me one of these, do you?" She couldn't imagine borrowing something so valuable, so extravagant.

"Sure do." He motioned to a racy red Camaro, its chrome polished to a reflective shine. "This one is the same year as yours."

"I can't drive that."

"Why not?"

"Yeah, Mom. Why not?"

Traci glanced at her son, who had just mimicked Daniel's question. "Because," she said to both of them, "it's too nice. What if I scratch the paint?"

"A pretty lady should drive a pretty car," Daniel countered. "Besides, it's only for a few days, just until I fix the oil leak in yours."

She shook her head. "I appreciate your generosity, but repairing my car is more than enough. I'll work out my own transportation."

"Let me do this, Traci." Daniel said quietly.

She met his gaze and realized he was offering more than a car. He wanted her to need him, even in a small, simple way.

"Okay," she said, accepting the loaner.

"Good." He smiled, sending her heart askew.

She knew she shouldn't be getting this close to him, that their attraction was dangerous, but she couldn't stay away. He was too magnetic, too hypnotic to ignore.

Traci closed her eyes. What was she doing? Hoping to heal him? A man who had walked away from his father and denounced his heritage? His problems were too big for her to tackle, but here she was, clinging to that foolish notion. He brushed her hand. "Let's head back to the house, and I'll show you around." They walked in silence, but she imagined voices whispering in the wind. What secrets did Orchid House keep hidden behind its massive walls? And why did Daniel spend hours alone, locked in a mysterious room?

Approaching the front door, Traci hesitated. Once she crossed the threshold, there would be no turning back. She would be entering Daniel's secluded world, rumors, ghosts, and all.

Chapter 12

The mansion was big and opulent — almost too beautiful. The entryway featured a double curved staircase and a marble floor. A parlor displayed heavy antique furnishings and a custom fireplace. Velvet drapes trimmed leaded windows.

Daniel didn't invite them upstairs. Instead he took them on a tour of the first floor, including a picturesque veranda. The house reflected Southern-style living on the East Coast — a strange concept in Traci's mind. But then, as Daniel had said, the mansion had been built for a Southern belle who missed her homeland. They stood on the veranda, overlooking the grounds. Beyond the lawn, the forest expanded into a maze of trees. She wondered if Daniel walked through the forest on moonlit nights, the way people claimed he did. There were so many rumors surrounding him, so many mysteries.

Feeling a sudden chill, Traci tightened her coat.

"Are you cold?" he asked. "We can go inside and make some hot chocolate."

"Sure, that sounds nice," she responded, knowing that Parker would enjoy the soothing treat.

Traci and her son followed their host into the kitchen, a room as massive and grand as the rest.

Daniel prepared three cups of instant hot chocolate, and Traci studied Parker's expression. He had taken in every detail of the first floor, every chandelier, every brocade sofa, every marbled alcove.

"Do you ever slide down the banisters?" he asked Daniel.

"No. I can't say that I have."

"What do you do here all by yourself?" the child pressed.

"Don't worry about me, partner. I keep busy."

Traci watched steam rising from the cups. "It's an incredible house," she said, trying not to think about that rumored locked door. Daniel wasn't being deliberately evasive, but he seemed different now that he was in his home. More elusive, she supposed, which gave credence to the cleaning woman's story. "The decor is exquisite."

He stirred the drinks and distributed them. "Thanks, but I bought it furnished. Everything was already here."

They sat at a large oak table, the wood scarred from centuries of wear. She supposed the servants of Orchid House used to dine in the kitchen. Of course it hadn't been called Orchid House then. That name had come later — with the perfumed ghosts.

But Traci wasn't sure if she believed the house was actually haunted. No one had ever seen the ghosts, and the scent of flowers could be conjured by one's imagination, couldn't it?

The ghosts were rumored to be the daughters of the Southern belle and the lumber baron. Supposedly they were two beautiful young women who had danced and dreamed and refused to marry the staid suitors who had been chosen for them. Both had grown old waiting for true love, believing in choices of the heart. Somehow, Traci didn't envision them floating through the mansion like dark, demented ghouls.

She turned to see Daniel watching her.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said, although orchids filled her mind. The sisters had grown a species called lady of the night, known for its exquisite evening perfume.

And Traci understood why they had waited a lifetime for the men of their dreams. She had married the wrong man, and he hadn't fulfilled her deepest fantasy. She wanted what the sisters had hoped for — the heated attraction, the ache, the intimacy that came with falling hopelessly in love.

But God help her, she knew who made her feel that way. And he was practically a stranger, a secretive man she barely knew.

Chapter 13

Daniel wished he could read Traci's mind. She looked pretty and sweet, like a fairy-tale maiden fantasizing about a prince. Auburn curls fell loose about her

shoulders, and a cream-colored sweater clung to petite curves. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips a pale shade of pink.

She met his gaze, and the kitchen turned as balmy as a Southern night. Did she know how badly he wanted her? That he awakened every morning naked and aroused?

She moistened her lips, and he leaned into the table. If he kissed her, would he break the trance? Or would they slip into a dream? A sleek, sensual fantasy?

"Hey, how come you two are staring at each other?"

Startled, Daniel and Traci nearly jumped out of their skins. Somehow, they had forgotten that her six-year-old son Parker was still in the room.

"We weren't," she said much too quickly, batting a curl from her eye.

"Yes, you were, Mom."

"Well, we didn't know we were. That happens to adults sometimes."

"Oh. I thought maybe you was playing that game, to see who blinked first."

Both Daniel and Traci managed a smile, and the awkward moment passed without further discussion.

He got to his feet. "How about a snack? I've got sandwich fixings."

"Sure." Parker popped up to explore the contents of the refrigerator.

They chose ham and Swiss cheese, with mustard, mayonnaise, and thick slices of tomato. The child appeared to be enjoying himself, and Daniel realized he was having fun, too. It actually felt good to have company, to see his orderly kitchen buzzing with life.

"Hey, Daniel?" Parker licked a dollop of mustard from his thumb, and received a quiet nudge and a napkin from his mother.

Daniel withheld a grin. "What is it, partner?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, go ahead."

The boy dumped a handful of potato chips onto his plate. "How come you don't have a Christmas tree?"

Daniel's knees nearly buckled. He gripped the counter and tried to school his emotions.

Christmas was still over two weeks away. What should he say? I intend to buy one soon? Cut one down myself? Haul in an evergreen as tall as the ceiling?

Yeah, right. He looked at Parker. How could he lie to a six-year-old? A kid with innocent eyes and a misbehaving cowlick? Parker hadn't meant to knock him for a loop.

"I live alone," he said. "I don't need a tree."

"That don't matter. Grandpa lives by himself, and he has one."

But your grandpa didn't lose a wife and child five days before Christmas, Daniel thought. He didn't come home from a business trip to find his house a skeleton of charred remains.

"Me and my mom can go with you to pick out a tree," Parker persisted. "And we can help decorate it, too. That'd be okay, wouldn't it, Mom?"

"Yes," she said, her voice softer and more aware than her son's. "As long as Daniel doesn't mind."

"That's a real nice offer, but I think I'll pass." He let out the breath he'd been holding, struggling for an excuse to satisfy Parker. "Santa Claus isn't going to come to my house."

"Why? Have you been bad?"

Yes, he thought, knowing he couldn't explain. "I didn't ask Santa for any presents."

"Christmas isn't only about presents. It's about family and friends, too. Just get a tree, Daniel. Then you'll know what I mean."

"You think so?" he asked, wondering if the vibrant little boy who answered to his son's name was right — if finding peace at Christmas would be that easy.

Chapter 14

Four days later, Traci returned Daniel's car. She pulled up to his house and saw her own Camaro parked on the street.

"Oh, my," she said to herself. Her weary, old vehicle actually sparkled. What in the world had he done to it? Certainly more than plug an oil leak.

Daniel came onto the porch and met her on the street. He smiled, and her knees went weak. His hair, damp from a recent shower, was combed away from his face, intensifying his raw-boned features and penetrating eyes.

He stuffed his hands in the side pockets of his denim jacket, his jeans riding low and sexy on his hips. Traci wanted to touch him. Everywhere.

"My car looks awesome," she said.

He moved closer. "I detailed it. It's amazing what a good wax job will do for the paint."

"How did you get the bumpers so shiny?" She noticed they were no longer mottled with rust.

"Replaced them."

Traci tilted her head, scolding him with a friendly scowl. "You didn't have to do that."

"I wanted to. Besides I've got plenty of extra parts around here. It was no big deal."

"It is to me. Thank you so much." She wanted to hug him, but his hands were still jammed in his pockets.

"I fixed the heater, too," he said, glancing back at the car. "Damn, Traci. It's been freezing lately. You should have told me it wasn't working."

"I didn't think of it."

True, the December air was cold and misty, but Traci barely noticed. She had something more important on her mind. She knew she was falling in love with Daniel Crow, losing her heart to this elusive man.

There was no point in denying her feelings or pretending they didn't exist. Hadn't she dreamed about him that first night? Experienced an ache so deep that her heart actually hurt? And what about every night since? He continued to slip into her subconscious, becoming part of her.

But why him? she asked herself. Why this troubled, complicated man?

He shifted his feet, scraping his boots on the road. "I got a Christmas tree."

Startled, she met his gaze. "You did?"

"Yeah. It's a living one, and it was already decorated, so I didn't have to fuss with lights and all that. I guess I'll plant it after the holidays."

"Can I see it?" she asked, wishing she had the courage to tell him how she felt.

"Sure. It's pretty small, though."

"That's okay."

They entered his home, and he led her to the parlor, a room filled with rich brocades and warm, engraved woods.

The tree graced a mahogany table, tiny ornaments shimmering on silvery-blue branches. A fresh, clean scent rose in the air, and she decided it was the most perfect evergreen on earth, especially since her son, Parker, had inspired Daniel to buy it.

Yes, she thought. The tree complemented this grand old mansion. Someday the blue spruce would grow tall and powerful, its foliage magnificent against the sky.

"I can't believe people think Orchid House is haunted." She glanced around the parlor, feeling the beauty of Christmas. "It's too beautiful for ghosts."

She could actually imagine living here with Daniel, cuddling beside him on long winter nights, going for walks on bright, sunny days. She envisioned them raising Parker — loving and laughing and being a family.

But when she turned to look at Daniel, her heart sank. He was frowning, his eyes dark and distant.

"Traci," he said, his voice painfully quiet. "I think it's time I told you about my wife and son."

Chapter 15

"You're married?" Traci stared at Daniel, her eyes wide with shock. "And you have a child?"

"No." He shook his head, wishing he could shake away the memories haunting him. "I'm a —" Widower, he thought, hating the word. "My wife and son died, six years ago, near Christmas."

"Oh, my God. I'm so sorry."

She reached out to take his hand, but Daniel stepped back. He hadn't let anyone console him then, and he wouldn't let Traci comfort him now. If she got too close, he would fall into her arms. Kiss her. Stroke her skin and pull her tight against him.

Slow, sultry lovemaking. That's what he needed from Traci, and she deserved more than just sex.

"My wife's name was Clarissa," he said. "She was from Charleston. A young, beautiful debutante, a Southern socialite through and through. We had nothing in common."

He removed his jacket and tossed it on a chair. "Nothing. Except this wild, almost unbelievable, attraction." And he had wanted Clarissa the moment he'd laid eyes on her. "Some people thought I didn't belong in her world. Granted, I was a millionaire, but I didn't come from old money."

Traci let out an audible breath and sat on a Louis XVI-style settee. It struck him how pretty she looked in his 17th-century mansion with her tousled auburn hair and simple, small-town clothes. He felt the same wild, almost unbelievable, attraction toward her, the same instant want — a feeling that confused him.

Traci was so different from his wife.

"Did it really matter that you weren't born rich?" she asked.

"Not to Clarissa, but it became an issue with her parents. I wasn't the husband they had envisioned for their daughter. To them, I was still a reservation Indian." And he had tried so damn hard to shed that image, the stigma that had shamed him since his youth. "But Clarissa married me anyway, and we bought an estate in the historical district." He glanced around the room. "It looked a lot like this one."

"I see," she whispered, acknowledging why Orchid House had appealed to him. "It wasn't enough." Daniel frowned at the Christmas tree. "I needed to prove to her parents that pedigree wasn't important. But the only way I knew how to do that was to exceed their net worth. If I had more money than they did, then they would have to respect me."

He snorted. "You should have seen me. Short hair, stylish clothes, rubbing elbows with the *crème de la crème* of Charleston. I loved my wife. Loved her more than you can imagine, but fitting into her society became an obsession."

"Did Clarissa love you?"

"Yeah." He swallowed the pain, the lump rising in his throat. "But she didn't understand why I was so driven to prove myself."

Traci fingered a tapestry pillow. "Did her parents ever accept you?"

"No. Not even when our baby was born. They loved him because he was their grandson, but they didn't like the idea that he was a mixed-blood. It didn't matter that I had no intention of teaching him about his Cherokee side. He was still part Indian." Daniel resisted the urge to pace, to unleash the pain and guilt. "His name was Parker. My son's name was Parker."

"Oh, my. Oh." She placed a hand against her blouse. "I don't know what to say. It almost seems like more than a coincidence. But it can't be."

Traci looked up at him, and he wanted to touch her, lose himself in all that sweet, girlish beauty. She was so pure and good, so unlike him. Daniel had tainted himself with the sin of greed.

"Parker was only three months old." He closed his eyes, and then opened them, his heart hurting. "It shouldn't have happened. My wife and child shouldn't have burned in that house."

Meeting Traci's gaze, he took a deep breath, determined to tell her the truth, to admit what had been haunting him all these years.

"It was my fault," he said. "Clarissa and Parker died because of me."

Chapter 16

"You don't mean that." Traci didn't believe Daniel was responsible for the death of his family.

"Yes, I do." He glanced at the tree. "Clarissa asked me not to go away. It was so close to Christmas, and she didn't understand why that business deal was so important." He dragged a hand through his hair. "But I didn't stay home because closing the deal meant a lot of money. With me, it was always about the money."

"You were trying to find acceptance," she said, defending him. "Maybe you went about it the wrong way, but you were confused and hurting."

She couldn't imagine living her entire life ashamed of who she was or where she had come from. And she couldn't imagine being shunned by her in-laws. "You weren't there when your wife and child died. You didn't set the fire."

"Maybe if I'd been there, I could have saved them."

"And maybe you would have died, too."

"At least they wouldn't have been alone." He released a shallow breath. "Clarissa used to burn these tall, scented candles, but she must have forgotten to extinguish them that night. They said she probably knocked one over without realizing it, maybe when she got up to feed the baby."

He fingered a branch on the tree, and Traci could see the ache in his heart, the loss and the loneliness. With his distant eyes and rough denim clothes, he looked like what he was — a man hiding from the rest of the world.

"It's time to heal, Daniel. To stop blaming yourself."

"I don't know how."

She noticed the gentle way he touched the tree, the reverence and respect he gave the tiny ornaments. "You're healing now."

He met her gaze, and she wanted to go to him, put her arms around his waist, lean her head against his shoulder. He was so big and broad, yet so vulnerable.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You bought a living tree, something that would grow in the sun or the snow, something you could nourish forever."

"I bought it because of you and your son."

"Then we're part of your healing," she told him, feeling emotional and misty-eyed. She wanted to be part of Daniel, to be his friend, his lover, his mate. But now wasn't the time to tell him, not when he was still mourning the loss of his

wife and child. "But the tree is for Clarissa and Parker, too. You can plant it for them."

"Thank you," he said, his voice quiet.

They both fell silent, the tiny blue spruce shimmering between them. Once again, Traci imagined it growing strong and tall, its silvery branches reaching for the heavens.

Daniel had surrounded himself with trees, she realized. A thick, dense forest wove an earthly pattern behind his house. Did the gray birches and the shadowy willows beckon him? Call out to him when he couldn't sleep?

"Are the rumors about you true?" she asked. "Do you really go for walks in the moonlight?"

"Sometimes. The forest seems enchanted at night."

Yes, she thought, picturing him shrouded in mist, moonlight glinting off his raven-colored hair. "What about this house, Daniel? Do you think it's haunted?"

"Not the way people say it is." He held out his hand. "Come with me, Traci. There's something I want to show you."

She stood and accepted his hand, knowing he was taking her to the second floor, to the mysterious room he kept locked.

They climbed the double-curved staircase and walked down the hall. He was still holding her hand, and she felt warm from his touch.

The second floor of Orchid House was decorated with turn-of-the-century antiques. They passed bedrooms with armoires and carved mahogany beds.

They stopped in front of the only door that remained closed. Daniel removed a key from his pocket, and Traci's heartbeat quickened.

When they entered the expansive room, she noticed a workstation laden with art supplies and a tall easel draped with a large white cloth.

She turned to Daniel. "Do you paint?"

He nodded. "I used to when I was younger, but I didn't start up again until I came here."

"Orchid House inspired you?"

He nodded again, his eyes intense. "And now I want you to see the ghosts."

Daniel unveiled the painting, and Traci gasped.

Chapter 17

Traci stared at the canvas. Angels.

Daniel had painted two breathtaking angels, their feathery wings gilded and glorious, their arms filled with white orchids.

"They're beautiful." So lifelike, so soft and ethereal. Both had long, flowing hair and eyes as blue as the sky.

"I bought this mansion because it reminded me of the house I owned with Clarissa. But I also wanted to brood with the ghosts. I wanted to be locked inside with them."

"But the ghosts turned out to be angels." Which meant he had been living with two heavenly creatures.

"I've never actually seen them," he said. "But I feel them — their presence, their aura. I painted them the way I imagine they look."

"I smelled orchids on the night we kissed," she said. "The flowers called lady of the night. Is that what they're holding?"

"Yes."

Daniel covered the painting and reached for Traci's hand. Without speaking, he led her into the hall, and then stopped to look at her.

She knew what this moment meant, how vital it was to the rest of her life. Either she and Daniel would part ways or they would become lovers. Their attraction was too strong to settle for something in between.

Moving closer, she skimmed his cheek, his warm, bronzed skin.

"I want you," she said.

He searched her gaze, his voice rough. "If we do this, Traci, I can't make any promises. I'm not ready to make a commitment."

But soon he would be, she thought. The angels would heal his spirit. Daniel would be all right.

She unbuttoned her blouse, offering herself to the man she loved. He watched, his eyes dark and mesmerizing. And the instant she unhooked her bra, he sent her a slow, Southern smile.

"Will you come to my room, sweet Traci?"

"Yes." Please, yes.

His four-poster bed was draped with an emerald-green comforter, and the balcony door invited a gust of the cool December air.

Daniel opened a dresser drawer and fished a foil packet. "I bought these the day after I met you. It seemed wrong at the time, but you made me want again. I knew then that I couldn't stay celibate forever. It was my way of telling myself that I needed to make love again."

"I understand," she said, pleased by his honesty. "I'm so glad it's me you're going to be with."

They stood beside the mahogany bed and caressed each other. He stroked her back and lowered his head to taste her nipples. She delved into his hair and let the silky length spill over her.

She knew he was her destiny. The man she had been waiting for all of her life. She whispered his name as he finished undressing her.

When he dropped to his knees, she gripped the bedpost, stunned and aroused. Traci knew what he was going to do. Eagerly, she waited for his intimate kiss. He licked and suckled and drove her to near madness. Desperate for more, she fell deeper into the moment, into the hot, wicked climax. It flooded her body with an urgent need, filling her until she staggered and swayed and fell bonelessly into his waiting arms.

He placed her on the bed and shed his clothes. She blinked and focused, drinking in the sight of him, the pure masculine beauty. Raw, ropery sinew and strong, firm muscles. She had to touch him — his chest, his belly, his sex. She stroked his erection, and he dragged air into his lungs. "I need you," he said. "So damn much."

He braced himself above her, and she knew he couldn't wait. Grasping the foil packet from the dresser, he tore it open.

As Traci lifted her hips, he entered her, fast and hard and deep.

So incredibly deep.

Sensation slid over sensation, flesh over flesh. They moved in the same wondrous rhythm, kissing and touching, hands and mouths questing.

He thrust full tilt, and she rose to meet him.

The wind swirled around the room, and they locked hands and held tight. They were immersed, steeped in the feel of each other.

Lost in the moment, Traci closed her eyes. Had this joining, this beautiful mating, this mind-spinning climax made them one?

Chapter 18

Traci smiled. Being naked in the middle of the afternoon felt wonderful. She trailed a finger down Daniel's chest and evoked a smile from him. He looked dark and sexy and sated.

"How did you end up in Pennsylvania?" she asked. In her tiny hometown. It seemed too good to be true.

"I was just passing through, and I saw this house. I never really intended to settle in the east, but then, I hadn't intended to settle anywhere. I was drifting, going from state to state."

He stretched, his body long and fluid. The sheet was draped just below his navel. Traci wanted him again, but she decided to behave herself. "You're an incredible artist." And an incredible lover, she thought.

"Thanks." He shifted his weight, stirring the mattress. "My mom used to paint. I guess it's in the blood."

"Do you ever think about the reservation, Daniel? There must have been something you liked about it."

He glanced at the balcony. The door was closed now, the room still. "It's beautiful there, especially in October. It's the most colorful time of year. And the most cultural, I suppose. There's a festival every fall."

She detected a sense of longing in his voice. "Do you miss your dad at all?"

"I —" Daniel paused to push his hair away from his face, frowning a little.

"Yeah, I do." The frown tilted into a small, reminiscent smile. "He used to call me Gv-he. Wildcat. I was such a restless kid. And then I grew up to be so big. Even as a teenager, I was taller and broader than my dad."

"You should visit him. Sixteen years is a long time to stay away. Just think about going home," she said, hoping to persuade him. "Family is important." "I know. And it isn't as if I haven't tried to contact him. I've been sending him money, but he returns the checks."

Traci skimmed Daniel's cheek. "Maybe it's you he wants and not your money." "And maybe he's just stubborn."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Like his wildcat son?"

"All right, smart aleck, I'll think about it."

She smiled. "Good."

After a moment of silence, he caught her hand and moved it down his body, his eyes filled with sudden mischief. "So, sweet Traci, are we done talking now?" She laughed and closed her fingers around him. Yes, she thought. Being naked in the middle of the afternoon felt wonderful.

* * *

Three days later, Daniel stopped by Traci's house. She answered the door, wishing she looked prettier. She was dressed for the diner, wearing the pink-and-white uniform that conflicted with the color of her hair.

"Hi. I wasn't expecting you. I have to work today." She felt for the curls falling out of her hastily twisted bun. It was foolish, she knew, to be self-conscious around him. In the past few days, they had seen and touched every inch of each other. They had even showered together, kissing and caressing through the soap-scented steam.

"Do you have a minute? I'd like to talk."

"Sure." His expression seemed a little too serious. Concerned, she invited him in.

They sat beside each other on the printed sofa. "Is everything okay?" she asked.

"I've been thinking a lot about what you said. About the importance of family." He tunneled all 10 fingers through his hair. "I'm going back to North Carolina, Traci. I'm going to see my dad."

Now she understood why he looked so serious. "So you're going home for Christmas?" Traci wanted Daniel to spend the holidays with her, but she was glad he had decided to make peace with his father. It was, she thought, the last phase of his emotional healing. "How long will you be gone?"

"I'm not sure. If my dad wants me to stay, I might end up moving back there." Suddenly she couldn't breathe.

He took her hand, and she willed herself not to cry. She couldn't fault Daniel for trying to do the right thing, but she couldn't stop her heart from breaking, either. She still hadn't told him that she loved him, and now she knew she couldn't.

"You've done so much for me," he said. "Made me feel whole and alive again. But you can't make things better between my dad and me. Only I can do that."

Traci clung to his hand. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too. You and Parker are like family to me."

But they weren't, she thought. They had only been a part of Daniel's life for a few short weeks. And that wasn't nearly long enough to keep him.

Chapter 19

Daniel and his father sat across from each other in a steak house located in the Cherokee Pavilion. The pavilion was new, and so was Harrah's — a casino featuring 60,000 square feet of gaming space. Vegas-style entertainment, Daniel thought, on his homeland.

He gazed at the man he had abandoned 16 years ago. George Crow had aged, but the lines around his eyes and the gray in his hair managed to strengthen his appeal.

"So what do you think of all this?" Daniel asked, gesturing to their surroundings. George looked up from his meal. "It's good for the Real People," he said, using a traditional term for the Cherokee. "They share in the gaming profits."

Daniel smiled. His father was still an old-fashioned man, but apparently he had accepted the growth of his people and their plunge into the modern world. He seemed wise to Daniel now, a proud Cherokee warrior.

"You've changed, Dad."

"So have you, Gv-he. But you've lost so much."

Daniel's smile faded. In spite of his monetary success, he couldn't deny the years of turmoil and pain that had come with it. He'd told his father about Clarissa and the baby, praying they were at peace in the Nightland.

Reaching for his coffee, he glanced out the window. Frost fogged the glass, a reminder that Christmas was just days away.

Christmas. Now the holiday season made him think of Traci and Parker, of their smiles and laughter. He missed them terribly. He'd sent Parker a passel of books and toys from one of the reservation gift shops, but he couldn't find an appropriate gift for Traci.

There was nothing he could give her that would express how he felt. She had changed his life, encouraging him to face his past.

"Did I make you sad?" George asked.

Daniel turned away from the window and met his father's gaze. He shook his head, hoping he didn't look as lonely as he felt. "No. I'm fine."

"You don't seem fine."

"No, really, I am. It just feels strange to be back here."

"It's good to have you home."

They stared at each other, man to man. Daniel felt a lump forming in his throat.

"I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too."

Before he embarrassed himself with watery eyes, Daniel cut into his steak. His emotions teetered, tipping his heart. He could feel it tumbling in his chest, struggling for balance.

He couldn't remember the last time he had dined in a restaurant with his dad. But then, money had been tight years ago. Frowning, he sipped his coffee. George

Crow still lived in the same modest home, the same tiny, hilltop dwelling. "Why did you return the checks?"

"What would I do with all that money? I have everything I need. The tourists come in the summer, and the winters are quiet and serene. That's enough for me."

"Do you want me to stay, Dad? To move back?"

"Is that what you want?"

"I want to be part of your life, and I want to be Cherokee again."

"You can be one of the Real People without living here. I didn't used to think so, but I know better now." He set his fork down. "You and I, we're from different generations, but we're both still Cherokee. Still father and son."

Feeling shamed, Daniel leaned against the table, his voice quiet. "How can you say that after I denounced my heritage?"

"Because you struggled with it. You knew it was wrong, and it affected everything you did."

"It's been a long, hard road." And it amazed him that his dad could forgive him so easily.

"I shouldn't have been so tough on you. I should have encouraged you to spread your wings."

"Thank you. That means a lot to me."

"And you coming back means a lot to me." Although George smiled, it faded quickly. "But I can tell you're confused. Who is she, son? Who walks in your soul?"

Daniel caught his breath. "You think I'm in love?"

His father looked him square in the eye. "It can happen more than once. Your wife and child have been gone a long time, and now your heart is beating for someone new. Isn't it?"

Chapter 20

Daniel's heart was beating, thumping wildly in his chest. He stood at Traci's door, his father beside him.

Traci stared at both of them. "Oh, my."

She wore a burgundy dress, and her hair was fixed in a loose topknot, red curls framing her face. Daniel wanted to draw her into his arms and never let go.

"Hi," he said instead. "Merry Christmas."

"Hi." She blinked, and Daniel introduced his father.

George smiled and took her hand. "You're pretty," he told her.

Her eyes misted. "Thank you. Come in, please."

The mouthwatering aroma of holiday food filled the house. A turkey was roasting in the oven, and a pumpkin pie cooled on the counter.

They entered the living room where lights twinkled on a tall evergreen. Wads of colorful paper and strings of shiny ribbon were strewn all over the floor. Parker and Tom sat on the sofa, inspecting one of Parker's new toys.

Tom smiled, and Parker leaped up and ran toward Daniel. He lifted the boy and held tight, smoothing the child's cowlick. This is what Christmas is about, he thought. Family, friends, and a warm feeling inside.

Tom and George took to each other immediately, chatting like old army buddies. Or possibly newfound relatives — two wise old men who appreciated the simple things life had to offer.

Traci slipped into the kitchen to check on dinner, and Daniel followed her. She leaned against the counter and released a shaky breath.

"I'm so surprised you're here," she said. "And with your father."

"He wanted to meet you."

"Really? Why?"

"Because I told him about you and Parker and how much you helped me."

Daniel realized he was nervous. Traci seemed a little wary, and he prayed she would accept the gift he brought her.

"Are you moving to North Carolina after the holidays?" she asked.

"No. My dad is going back, but I'm staying here."

She twisted a strand of her unruly hair. "You are?"

"Yes." He moved closer. "And I —" He paused and reached into the suit jacket he wore. Handing her a tiny wrapped package, he waited for her to open it, too anxious to finish his speech.

She fumbled with the paper, and when she uncovered the gift, she met his gaze, her bright green eyes searching his.

* * *

Hours later, Traci and Daniel sat on the porch swing. Snow had begun to fall, but Traci wasn't cold. The man she loved had proposed, and the ring on her finger glittered like a falling star.

Wishes, she thought, do come true.

"When did you know?" she asked.

"That I loved you?" His hair blew in the breeze, like silk against midnight. "I'm not sure. It might have happened the moment I saw you. Of course I was in denial. I didn't think I was capable of loving again."

She leaned her head on his shoulder and watched snowflakes flutter to the ground. "Where are we going to live?"

"In Orchid House, if that's okay with you. There's plenty of room there, and I was hoping that —" He turned to nuzzle her neck. "That you would give me lots of babies."

Traci pictured Parker with a houseful of brothers and sisters. The image made her dizzy with happiness. She clung to Daniel's arm, knowing he would make a strong, caring father. "Cherokee babies," she said.

"Yeah." He smiled at her, pride shining in his eyes.

She touched his cheek, and when their lips met in a tender kiss, the scent of orchids swirled in the crisp, winter air.

Traci closed her eyes and thanked Daniel's angels, the winged ladies of the night, for blessing them with a Christmas love that would last forever.

The End