

*CHAPTER ONE*

The forest was alive tonight. The crickets' non-stop song spun around Natasha as she walked into the familiar woods she grew up in. As soon as she stepped in to the treed thickets, joy seeped through her body, just as the insects thrummed their contentment out into the night, a tranquility descended over her. She'd walked through these woods hundreds of times in the past, yet tonight was . . . different.

Natasha threw her head back to stare up into the heavens and focused on the full moon as it glowed in the starless sky. She'd always been enchanted with the moon, for as long as she could remember. Her parents had told her so many stories about the moon when she younger, she'd thought *Luna* was a part of their family across the ocean, back in Romania. The fascination with the moon had been passed down to her through the array of lullabies her parents had sung to her about *Luna*. The hazy white orb usually comforted her, but not tonight. It wasn't smiling down at her now.

No. Tonight it warned her.

Something wasn't right. The ease she'd felt minutes earlier, seeped away and she pulled her jean jacket tighter around her frame. She jammed her fists into the pockets. Instinctively she knew she needed to get home.

And fast.

Her nape under her long, curly hair prickled in warning and she groaned to herself. It was reckless to walk through the park this late at night, yet she was doing it anyway. She shook her head and chastised herself while she jogged down the path she knew by heart.

As usual, her friends were having such a good time with their boyfriends; she didn't want to upset them by having to drive her home. She'd grown up here and walked this route a zillion

times before and thought it would be safe. So Natasha had offered to walk home, since her house was only a few blocks away.

“Serves me right to be scared stiff right now,” she muttered to herself, rolling her eyes. Sure, she could’ve walked the long way which was well-lit, but it would’ve added thirty minutes to her trip home. And of course, that was a half of an hour that she could do something important in her boring life, right? Like watch some television or paint her toenails or clean the kitchen. Tilting her chin up once again, she eyed the glowing orb in the dark sky and snorted.

Yeah, like that extra time was so important. Recognizing the bend in the path, she sighed. *Almost home.* Just had to go through the darkest part where the trees were the densest—and then she’d be on a much better lighted path.

Stepping into a cluster of trees that towered all around her, it suddenly seemed even darker since she could no longer see her beloved *Luna* and again groaned inwardly at her foolishness of walking alone this late at night. This part was the most nerve racking, only because of the loss of natural light.

*I can do this.*

Abruptly, the crickets suddenly ceased their night songs, making it unnaturally quiet in the forest. Her head buzzed and she swallowed over the lump forming in her throat.

An owl hooted off to the right and without the steady background of the crickets’ chirping, she swore she could hear a leaf being lifted by the lazy night air and finally drop on the spongy loam path.

Yes, she should have insisted on one of them driving her home, but as usual she didn’t want to make waves and ask for a favor. That was the theme that streaked through her life; being the perfect child and friend. Not saying much. Always easygoing.

*I'm tired of being so darn nice!*

Anger reared up inside of her and she grabbed hold. Fuming now, she stalked through the woods. When her bangs momentarily covered her face, she blew out a breath to move her hair out of the way so she could see in front of her. She narrowed her eyes and huffed out a few more breaths when her bangs threatened to cover her eyes, again. At that moment, her frustration at herself for being too accommodating pressed in on her. Hunching her shoulders she clenched her fists together in her pockets. At least as she stomped through the path she felt like a tough mama.

*Yeah! No one or nobody better mess with me.*

Clenching her jaw together, she mentally screamed out to the universe. *I know martial arts, people! So, just try it! That's right . . .*

A hysterical giggle burst out of her throat. It's funny what pops into your mind when you're spooked. She'd totally forgotten she'd taken Tae-kwon-do classes when she was younger. And she remembered some self-defense moves, right?

Of course, she sneered into the darkness of the park just to let everyone else know what a bad-ass she was. Hey, she may be a mild-mannered computer consultant during the day, but at night she was—she stopped on the path and assumed a karate chop pose—*A Ninja*.

Yeah, that's right! So come on you creeps . . . take me on! You'll be sorry! Natasha snickered to herself.

*God, I'm so goofy. Sure, I put on a big, brave front, because I feel eyes on me right now. Wait a minute—how do I know that?*

A twig snapped behind her and she swiveled to peer into the blackness. Her senses sharpened to the point of absurdity. Her vision and hearing were unbelievably clear.

*Holy Crap, was I right?*

Natasha reasoned with herself. *Oh, it could've been anything.*

But . . . still . . . She stopped in her tracks. Had to either be an animal or a person. And why did she have this eerie sensation creeping up behind her neck? Natasha rubbed her hand against her nape and looked around. She knew she should be running away from . . .

From what?

Something evil wanted to hurt her and she could feel it in her bones. But something . . . Something kept her rooted in place. She'd sensed a predator. Her thoughts turned down a different avenue now and she was riled up.

She wanted a fight; to draw blood. No longer scared, was clenched her teeth together. Instead of being the pursued, and the vulnerable one, she wanted to pursue and dominate. The overwhelming rush to hunt crashed in on her. Her mouth salivated and she ran her tongue over her front teeth. And then suddenly, her head was on fire and her heart hammered painfully in her chest. Bringing her palms up to her chest, she took in a few deep breaths. Awareness blossomed inside her body. It was as if a volt of electricity coursed through her body and that was when she realized that something actually moved *inside* of her. When her hands trembled uncontrollably, she turned both her wrists up and she studied her palms. From underneath her shirt sleeves a blue line appeared and flowed down on the underside of her forearms, slowly going down to her fingers. And it was hot. Natasha's whole body turned feverish.

Burning up. Unbuttoning her jacket she pulled down the neck of the shirt she had on. Natasha hooked her index finger on the neckline of her shirt and tugged.

It was too hot. Suffocating. Natasha breathed frantically as she pulled on her shirt until something sharp poked her on her collarbone.

*What in the heck is happening to me?*

Tugging on her shirt until a muted *Zzzzzziitpppppppppp* ripped through the silence of the woods she gazed down at the noise. She'd ripped her blouse in two.

*Oh crap*, she actually shredded the front on her shirt. The white lacy bra she'd put on earlier was front and center since her top draped at her sides. Grabbing onto the sides of her jean jacket, she clumsily fastened two buttons together before her senses caught wind of a tinny smell.

Her teeth throbbed and her head spun. Feeling like she was drowning in a whirlpool of sensations, she crouched on the ground so she wouldn't fall over. That acidic, rusty odor filled her nostrils and she inhaled deeply. Closing her eyes, she savored the metallic scent while her mouth watered from the aroma.

*Snap*. Exhaling, she tilted her head. What was that?

*Crunch*. She froze in place, hunkered down on her knees. Waiting.

*Crunch*. She listened. Ready to pounce.

The sound came from behind her, someone else prowled through the woods. Opening her eyes, she looked blindly into the dark forest.

*That smell*. Intoxicating. Addicting.

What was it? Was that blue line still on her arms? Frantically she held both hands up in front of her. She gasped. Surely, these weren't hers—they couldn't possibly be. Bigger, hairier limbs appeared with long, sharp nails. And there was blood dripping from the thicker, hairier index finger.

*No!*

Bringing her chin down to her chest, she made the mistake of looking down again at her chest. Red paint was smeared all over her neckline. Was that blood? It couldn't be her blood, could it?

A desolate howl from miles away drifted through the air. Touching her throat, Natasha tilted her head and a wave of understanding filtered through her taking her attention away from her bloody neck.

She looked off in the distance where the mournful howl came from. Someone was in pain.

Standing back up, she stumbled to the nearest tree and reached her hands out until the roughened tree bark scraped her fingertips. Her vision had sharpened to the point that she could pick out a green praying mantis walking up the dogwood tree. The mantis' large eyes on the side of its head and its awkward gait were as clear as day to her as it made its way up to the tree's bark to the white flower.

Why could she suddenly see with this clarity?

Her gut roiled in fear at the things she could discern now that she'd never sensed before. The murky darkness gave way to a precision that stunned her so violently, she stopped in her tracks and took a step back.

*Wow.*

No longer frightened, but astounded with her new vision, Natasha relished her surroundings. The forest was amazingly beautiful at night. Although she'd traipsed through these woods for years while growing up, it was only during the bright sunlit days that she frequented the forest before. Now everything looked new.

The trees stood stoically in place; with their branches reaching for the heavens and their roots clawing in the soil for sustenance. How could this have ever frightened her? Another bubble of laughter erupted from her. This time it was in pure joy since she was no longer alarmed.

The pines and the white birch trees contentedly threaded up through the loamy soil next to the massive oaks and maples. While tiny new buds spotted their branches, many already had been graced with tiny white flowers. Taking a step closer to what Natasha thought was a dogwood tree, she reached her fingers out gently to the beautiful white blossoms. Carefully placing her fingertips underneath the delicate flowers, she leaned forward to smell the lightly aromatic snowy flower and glanced down at her hand. Relief swept over her when she saw her hand and not the creepy hairy one with the long nails. But riding right along with consolation, was terror because she no longer felt empowered. Now vulnerability engulfed her.

*My mind was just playing tricks on me.*

She rubbed her thumb over the flower with the small white petals.

“Legend has it that these used to grow taller—” A low baritone voice began until he was cut off.

Natasha jumped back, out of surprise. “Oh!” Her brain squealed at her to run and run fast. But for some unknown reason she couldn’t move. Her feet were rooted in place. “I didn’t know anyone else was out here.” Her brow wrinkled as she searched behind the tree she was just at for the owner of the deep voice, but she couldn’t see anyone. “Where are you?”

“As I was saying,” the low baritone began, “The dogwood tree used to grow as tall as an oak—”

“Where are you?” Turning, she looked all around. “I’d like to see you.”

“No, you don’t.” A low growl permeated the air.

“Why?” For some bizarre reason, Natasha felt empowered. “Are you scared of me?”

Another growl filled the air around her. The hairs on her arm stood up.

“Do you want to hear the rest of the story?” His speech, although still deep was more garbled now and she almost couldn’t decipher what he’d said.

Nodding, her pulse throbbed wildly in her throat. “Yes,” she whispered.

His voice began gravelly, then almost sang in its purity as he recited then verse.

*In Jesus' time, the dogwood grew*

*To a stately size and a lovely hue.*

*'Twas strong and firm, its branches interwoven.*

*For the cross of Christ its timbers were chosen.*

*Seeing the distress at this use of their wood*

*Christ made a promise which still holds good:*

*"Never again shall the dogwood grow*

*Large enough to be used so.*

*Slender and twisted, it shall be*

*With blossoms like the cross for all to see.*

*As blood stains the petals marked in brown,*

*The blossom's center wears a thorny crown.*

*All who see it will remember Me*

*Crucified on a cross from the dogwood tree.*

*Cherished and protected, this tree shall be*

*A reminder to all of My agony."*

“It’s beautiful.” Her pulse beat in triplicate. “It sounds as if you were there.”

“I was.”

“How is that possible?” she whispered into the black night.

“It was said that the cross Jesus was nailed to, was made of this wood.” A heavy thump resounded through the woods at what sounded like a hand hitting the tree. “And the dogwood tree was so sorrowful of its damning fate in history that it stunted its own growth as punishment.” The unseen man’s voice grew more and more garbled as he spoke. His voice no longer sounded human.

Natasha’s head buzzed with absolute terror and she looked at how far she still had to go to reach the street; to light. Too far. And if this man was fast, she wouldn’t stand a chance. But maybe if she kept him talking . . .

She eased her way closer to the lit road.

“That sir,” she said softly, “was a fascinating story.” She slid her shoe through the soft path and edged closer to other side of the copse that wasn’t so dark. “I’d love to hear some more tales.” *Keep him talking.* “You must have some more. Don’t you?” *Must keep him talking.*

“How about Little Red Riding Hood?” The deep tone was so distorted she had to strain to hear the words. It took a few seconds before she realized what he said.

“Sure. I love that one.”

“No. you wouldn’t.” A low growl rumbled too close to her. “Run.”