

Poisoned Rose



Jem Richards

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Nikkita is a peasant that lives deep in the country. Both her parents were killed when she was only 16 by outlaws, now she is on her own. A traumatic event had left her with a child to care for, and she fights to survive during rough times doing anything she can to forge a life for her and her child. Nikkita does not trust men since her traumatic experience, she has found ways to protect herself and keep at a distance, but when she finds a man dying in the woods she knows she must help him.

Adrian is a prince passing through the country alone when he has a horrible accident. Nikkita finds him unconscious and badly injured; she takes him home and nurses him. She is determined to help him, but also to keep her distance out of mistrust of men. The Prince falls in love and has to work hard to charm and win her over.

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By Jem Richards

To my loving oldest daughter who I used as inspiration on the character of Shaunah, and the mother-daughter bond the main characters share. Thank you for all your help and support during the making of this book!

Map of locations for Poisoned Rose Characters
Europe



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Prologue

16 Years Ago:

Year of 1301 in Europe

Sixteen-year-old Nikkita stood in the spacious yard in front of her family cottage with her sword practicing lunges and swings on a wooden training post, her long golden hair swirling around her as she moved. The air is crisp and clean for fall. She was wearing black below-the-knee boots Papa fashioned for her, brown doeskin pants Mamma made, and a white blouse. She loved wearing this outfit because she thought she looked like a hero and it was comfortable to move and maneuver in. Nikkita could hear the thud of the ax and wood splitting as Papa continuously chopped firewood at the left side corner of the cottage.

Papa has been teaching her to use a sword since she was four years old. She loved sparring with her Papa and became determined to be as good as he was. She also loved archery practice with Papa; he says she has a natural talent because she can hit the bulls-eye every time.

"Time to wash up for dinner," Mamma called from the porch.

She turned to look at her mama. "Coming Mamma!" she answered immediately and began walking toward the cottage front door.

Nikkita had the same golden hair, full lips, and small ears as her Mamma. However, Mamma has green eyes and is average in height at 5'2. Nikkita has the same bright blue eyes and high cheek bones as Papa. Papa has sandy brown hair cut short, strong jaw-line, and stood at 6'1 in height.

She walked with boots thudding on the wooden boards as she walked up the stairs, across the porch, and entered through the front door and hung her sword on the hooks on the wall inside the door. She headed to the water basin on a chest in front of the kitchen window with a view overlooking the front yard with the sun nearing the horizon to set above the tree line. She set to work and washed her hands. The aroma of fresh rye grain bread and wild turkey cooked with potatoes, onions, and carrots filled the air in the cozy cottage.

Nikkita walked over to the table and began to help her Mamma set plates and utensils on the table for their meal. She lit two candles in the center of the table and moved to light two more in the family room on a small drawer chest sitting between two wooden chairs with seat cushions. They were finishing setting the table with dinner as Papa trudged up the stairs to the porch and entered the cottage.

"Smells great!" Papa said to Mamma as he entered and headed to wash his hands.

Papa sat at the head of the table in the chair nearest to the kitchen window, Nikkita sat next to him with her back to the family room, and Mamma sat across from Nikkita on the other side of Papa. Together they began piling their plates with dinner.

"Nikkita, my dear! I noticed how well your form was as you were practicing your swings and lunges. You're a natural with your movements like a pro!" Papa exclaimed.

Nikkita blushed with excitement. "Thank you Papa! I had the world's best teacher."

Papa let out a loud rumbling laugh and winked at her with a twinkle in his eye. Mamma smiled at them, enjoying their merriment. The room was growing dimmer as the sunset and the candlelight sent shadows dancing around the room giving Nikkita a sense of their safe haven.

Mamma looked at Papa and said, "Nikkita is doing well with her herbal studies, we finished our herbal journal last week and she is ready to try them on her own!"

"Well done Nikkita! You truly have learned so much, you seem capable of mastering everything your Mamma and I have taught you. Most peasants' cannot even read; my grandfather taught me, which he had learned when he worked in a Lord's house. We are very fortunate! Since too much violence happened around the city, and because Mamma's family lived in the country, we felt it important to live where we felt safe. That's why we moved out here to our own piece of heaven by the mountain and live off the land."

"I love it here Papa! Sure we are away from civilization, but I just love playing in the trees, horseback riding, exploring the area for our herbs, and practicing my archery and swordsmanship."

"Very good, my dear! We have everything we need right here to live comfortably. Tools for building and repairs, livestock, garden, and open country for us to hunt, a stream not far and creek running behind our property for fishing and water supply." Papa boasted. "I was thinking we should rise early to head out for a hunt trip, what do you think Nikkita?"

"Oh, yes. I wanted to get to bed early anyway. I worked in the garden most of the morning trying to pull up the remaining vegetables to store for winter and the remaining herbs so I can hang and dry them in the barn." Nikkita answered.

As the meal wore on, they shared stories of things they experienced and enjoyed. Finally, Nikkita picked up her plate and stood with a sleepy smile. "I am so sleepy I could fall asleep right here, I'm going to bed." She kissed Papa on the cheek, "love you Papa."

"Love you too my sweet" he offered back.

She walked over to the kitchen counter and set her plate down, then turned and walked up to Mamma still sitting at the table and kissed her cheek. "Love you Mamma."

"Love you too sweetie." She replied. "Sweet dreams!"

Nikkita straightened up, walked to the stand in the family room to pick up one of the candles, and headed down the hall to her room to get ready for bed. There were three doors near the end of the hall. The one straight ahead was the linen and supplies pantry, her parents' room is the door to the left, and her room is the door to the right. If she were to look out her window, she would see the garden running by the house and the barn set back on the other side of the garden. Her window was a large bay window with a cushioned sitting area that was centered in room's

wall that she loved to sit and watch the sunrise and sometimes to read. Her bed that was on the far wall was a straw mattress with her buffalo fur covering the straw to keep her warm and the straw away from her delicate skin. She also had an additional blanket rolled along the foot of her bed. She had a large chest at the foot of her bed with her daily wear clothing. There was also a smaller chest along the nearest wall across the room from the bed that held her hunting and travel clothes and gear. Above the chest, hooks were hung where she hung her heavy coats. By the small chest, she kept all her shoes and boots in two neat rows. Right inside her door sat a wooden chair that she sat down in to remove her black below-the-knee boots and set them next to the chair.

She closed her bedroom door behind her, walked to the hooks, plucked her nightgown off a hook, and set the candle on top of the chest. She turned and headed toward the bed to pull her white blouse up over her head, folded it neatly, and picked up her nightgown to pull over her head. She unlaced her leather pants at her waist, slid them off, folded them neatly, and picked up the blouse to cross the room to set the folded blouse and pants on the chair.

She could hear Mamma and Papa talking in the other room in hushed tones. They usually stayed up a little longer than her to visit and discuss matters to relax after a long day's work. She was used to it. She climbed into bed, unrolled the blanket from the foot of her bed to cover herself, and laid down savoring the buffalo fur's softness. Closing her eyes, she allowed the rhythm of her parents voices as they talked lull her as she began to drift off to sleep.

The sound of the barn door banging open and the horses' neighing loudly in fear awoke Nikkita from her sleep. She heard a kitchen chair scrape across the wood floor as Papa got up, followed by his booted footsteps as he walked to the door and pulled it open to run out and investigate. Nikkita quickly jumped out of bed as she heard her Mamma get up and walk to the doorway and called out for him to be careful. Nikkita walked quietly over to look out the bay window.

It was a clear fall night with a ☐ moon offering its light from high up in the sky, providing enough light for her to watch her Papa approach the barn. The barn's door was wide open and she watched as Papa stopped in the barn doorway and yelled, "Who is in there? Get out and off my property!" Then he entered the barn and disappeared from view. Nikkita's heart seemed to stop as she held her breath and waited for Papa to come back out. Several minutes passed as she anxiously waited, but instead of Papa coming out three rough looking men with old dusty clothing exited the barn with three of their horses' being led out. One of the men mounted a brown horse of theirs as the other two led a white with brown patch horse and a tan horse toward their house.

She tried to scream, but her throat felt so dry she couldn't make a sound. She mindlessly chanted in her mind, "Please just leave. Just leave. Just leave." When they rounded the corner of the house, she lost sight of them, but heard her Mamma from the doorway yell, "Where is my husband? What do you want?" Frightened, Nikkita scrambled across the room and crouched in the corner near the large chest that sat at the foot of her bed hoping and begging silently that they would leave.

She heard Mamma scream out in agony and tears filled her eyes in despair. Screams filled the night for what seemed like eternity and she sat there crouched and crying silently in the corner. She began trembling in fear so much that she feared those men would hear.

Finally, the screams ceased and for a moment she thought they would leave, but then she heard three sets of booted footsteps as they climbed the porch stairs, crossed the porch, and entered the house.

"Look for something to eat before we move on." The first man to speak said as Nikkita heard them moving about the kitchen.

"Here's some turkey cooked recently." A second man went on excitedly. "And here is some bread we can take on the road with us."

She heard chairs scrape as they sat at the kitchen table eating the leftover's from their dinner. The third man spoke up, "We've been traveling on foot for days, it's a good thing we came across this place out here in the middle of no-where. Now we got horses' and food to take on the road. Let's pack as much as we can carry when we're done eating."

"Heck yeah!" the second man piped in. "We won't have to scrounge for food for at least a few more days."

The first man gruffly announced, "Look for blankets too, it's damn cold out at night. With the damn hard ground and cold, it causes me to stiffen up in the morning making it difficult to move around."

Nikkita cowered in her corner, numb and trembling in fear as tears streamed down her face. "Mamma, Papa, what happened?" she thought, confused and disoriented. "Help me! Mamma, Papa, where are you. I am so scared!"

It didn't take the men long to finish their meal and start raiding the pantry and cupboards. She heard them rummaging about.

The third man whooped from the pantry and exclaimed, "Here are some leather bags we can fill, they have vegetables in them but we can dump them and take what we want. There is also some dried meat here we can take along too."

"Those will be perfect for our trip on the road, fill them up boys!" The first man stated.

"I'll check the back rooms for blankets to take on the road," the second man announced as the other two remained in the kitchen filling the leather bags with food.

Nikkita's mouth and throat were dry and started aching. She was still crouched in the corner and her muscles were cramping and hurting, but she was scared to move even a little. With the exception of her trembling, she remained motionless as she listened to the footsteps coming down the hall. She felt panicked and began having difficulty breathing as the steps got closer and closer; but as they neared, they turned into her parents room and she heard the man rummage around the room. It was only moments later that the footsteps came back into the hall. Instead of continuing down the hall, they paused outside her bedroom door as the door creaked open as candlelight illuminated the room.

The man entered the room holding the candle in his left hand while he had her parents fur blankets draped over his right arm. His pants were very dusty brown and made of cloth, his black boots were scuffed and worn, and he wore a dark brown top shirt also covered in dust. He wasn't as tall as Papa, but he had shoulder length dirty blonde hair. His attention was on the bed and buffalo skin as he started to walk across the room. However, suddenly he paused and

looked directly at her. At first, it was shock that registered on his face, but then he gave a toothy cruel grin and yelled to the others, "Hey boys! We got us a surprise in here!"

Nikkita's eyes widened and she began trembling so hard she was afraid she would bite her tongue. She guessed it was her white gown that caught his attention. She was so scared she felt weak and sick to her stomach.

She heard two more sets of booted foot steps walk down the hall and enter the room. One of the men was on the slightly pudgy side in weight with dark brown shoulder length hair and wearing a hunter green top shirt, black cloth pants, and worn brown boots, while the other man had sandy haircut short and wore dark brown top shirt, tan pants, and worn black boots.

Nikkita started to scream in fear hysterically as the other two caught sight of her and grinned. "Looks like we are going to have a little fun before we continue on our way!" It was the one wearing dark brown top shirt, tan pants, and worn black boots. He was the man she thought of as the first man by the sound of his voice as he spoke.

He strolled across the room and bent down to grab her wrists and dragged her over to the bed and tossed her onto it. He let out a cruel roaring laugh as the other two joined in with the laughter.

Nikkita couldn't stop herself and began screaming hysterically again. The first man hit her hard across the face. He put a knee on the bed, but she tried to back away. He roughly grabbed her left arm, so she kicked him back with all her might hitting his chest. In his surprise, he released her arm and stumbled back a few feet. He looked back at her with a vicious glint showing in his eyes as he leapt onto the bed and dragged her down as he lowered himself until he was straddling her. Nikkita's instincts kicked in and she began thrashing and screaming as loud as she could, trying to beat his chest and buck him off. However, his body weight over-powered her and he grabbed her by the shoulders before he slammed her back fully causing her to hit her head on the wall and bring tears to her eyes. Her vision started to dim, but she swung her right arm around and slapped him hard on the cheek. Growing angry, the man punched her hard in the face and everything went black. As she lost all consciousness, she welcomed the darkness, thankful she didn't have to be aware of what was happening.

Chapter One

Present Day:

Year of 1317 in Europe

Nikkita looked at her little cottage in reflection. The wood floors creaked under her weight as she crossed the room to sit at the worn table. The kitchenette had many cupboards and a spacious pantry for storing food for the long winters. The wood stove helped with both cooking and heating. Papa built a quaint 2-bedroom cottage for Mamma when they were married.

Nikkita looked at her home with tears in her eyes. She glanced at the matching chairs in the living room Papa made for him and Mamma. Mamma made seat cushions that were placed on the chairs. Oh how she missed them so. When she was 16 years old, some outlaws killed her parents barbarically, leaving her alone to survive beaten, weak, and pregnant.

Nikkita was now 32 with a daughter resulting from the outlaws' brutal attack on her after they killed her parents. She had felt so lost and alone in the months that followed her parents' death; she had been barely able to function. When she had discovered she was pregnant, life held a new meaning and purpose for her. She raised her daughter with love and care, teaching her as best she could. Thank God, that Papa had taught her to do repairs, hunt, and archery, amongst other things. He insisted it was important to know how to take care of one's self.

Nikkita looked up when her daughter entered the room, coming out of her bedroom. Her dirty blonde hair reached halfway down her back, glistening in the morning sunlight that was shining through the dusty windows.

"Mamma, are you ok?" she asked when she saw the tears in her eyes. Her bright blue eyes darkened with worry and her full lips tightened with concern. She had the face of an angel and a sweet and caring personality.

Nikkita answered, "Yes Shaunah. I was just missing Grandmamma and Grandpapa." Shaunah walked over to Nikkita and embraced her in a gentle hug, stroking her waist length golden blonde hair. Shaunah leaned back and looked into Nikkita's bright blue eyes that were swollen from crying.

"I wish I could have known them, you have told me so much about them that I feel close to them." She said softly before asking, "Do you want me to make some breakfast for us?"

"Why don't we make it together," Nikkita suggested. "Then we can go out for a horseback ride after breakfast to hunt!" she replied feeling a bit closed in and wanted to feel the wind on her face.

Her papa always said she had a bit of a wild side. Nikkita could see so much of herself in her daughter, and she was thankful because she saw her as a blessing giving her what she needed to survive after her parents' were brutally taken away.

Together, Nikkita and Shaunah scrambled eggs and boiled grits over the wood stove. They worked together well after years of shared duties. Shaunah was not only her daughter, but also her best friend and companion. 'Mamma and Papa would be so proud of you', Nikkita thought as they worked together making their morning meal. Shaunah set the table with two plates and spoons as Nikkita brought the eggs and grits to the table. They sat down together and shared their morning meal over light conversation.

Nikkita looked at the worn walls and leaking roof of her old barn as she entered to saddle up their two horses for their country ride. She stored hay and oats they grew in a small field across the front yard up in the loft above. She paused inside the entryway as she observed the interior. Saddles, blankets, tools, a stash of hay and oats, and other items were stored to the left in an open section. Beyond that, six stalls lined the remaining distance along the wall where they stored the horses. On the right wall was a work area with a bench and shelves lining the wall

inside the entrance followed by six more stalls. The stalls near the back of the barn were where they stored the cows. In addition, pigs were stored in the stalls near the front

The horses neighed in greeting as she walked over to the first stall on the left where Midnight was looking over the railing and let out a soft snort to get her attention. Nikkita walked up to Midnight and began rubbing her black soft forehead, crooning softly to her.

She could hear the trickle of water coming from a short distance behind the barn where a small creek of water came out of the mountain like a water spring and ran a short distance behind the barn and across a clearing that they used for fresh water. She could feel the excitement build up in her as she led Midnight out of her stall and continued to saddle up the horses for their ride as Shaunah brought more wood into the cottage from the stacked wood pile outside for the wood stove before they left.

"Spring is finally here," she thought. "We can finally fix the leaks in the roof this afternoon as long as the sun stays with us."

In the barn, they had six horses (1 that was pregnant), three cows, six pigs, and a chicken coupe outside the barn along the Eastern side that had two dozen hens and three cocks. On the Western side of the barn, they had bee farms they used for honey and candle making. Papa knew what they needed to get by, he and Mamma had worked hard together to create a reliable life-style that supported all their needs and had taught Nikkita well. Nikkita kept everything up, and with Shaunah's help, they were able to keep up the maintenance as well.

She quickly saddled their horses and led them to the front of the cottage. Both horses are female. Nikkita's horse is black as night with black mane and tail, which is why Nikkita named her Midnight. Midnight has a sweet personality and temperament, and loves running as much as Nikkita. Shaunah's horse is tan with white mane and tail that she named Daffodil. Daffodil is also sweet in personality and temperament.

Nikkita went inside the cottage to grab their bows and arrows they used for hunting. Papa had taught her well and she could hit her prey dead on every time. Papa had also taught her how to use a sword, which she practiced often with Shaunah. Together they made quite a team.

"Ready?" Shaunah asked as she entered the front door with her arms full of wood. She walked over to the wood stove and placed the wood in the pile that she had already brought in and placed along the wall.

"Yes, I was just grabbing our bows and arrows for our hunt," she replied.

Both women wore buffalo leather pants and shirts decorated with fringe they had made for their hunt trips. Nikkita wore her buffalo hat she made that looked like it had ears with sections she had folded and sewn one on each side. Draw strings hung down that had fur balls sewn on the ends. They carried their arrows in leather shoulder bags, which they swung over their heads and across their shoulder where the arrows rested on their back, allowing easy carry and access ability.

Since they had to provide for themselves, they used everything they could at their disposal. Living in the country close to the mountains, they were far from civilization and rarely came across anyone. However, Nikkita was persistent in practice to ensure that they could protect themselves since the tragedy that took her parents' from her. Nikkita's Papa had always

teased her she was strong-willed and wild, but also loving and tender. Nikkita never killed any living creature unless she used every part possible. She uses bone for sewing needles and jewelry her Mamma had taught her to make, the hide for clothing, curtains, and blankets, and the meat for food providing everything they needed to survive. Mamma's garden grew tomatoes, potatoes, lettuce, carrots, bell peppers, cucumbers, onions, garlic and various herbs that they used for cooking.

Nikkita and Shaunah mounted their horses and turned towards the base of the mountain; going around the base of the mountain would allow them for an open ride along the tree line and led to an ideal place to hunt. Nikkita turned her face up to the sun and closed her eyes for a moment savoring the feel of the sun's warmth on her skin as she breathed in the fresh air into her lungs in deep refreshing breathes. When she opened her eyes, she looked over to Shaunah with a grin and a twinkle in her eye, "Shall we race?"

Shaunah laughed with a melodious tone and replied, "You're on!"

Together they kicked their horses into a gallop racing along the tree line laughing and enjoying the sun on their skin and the breeze in their hair. Nikkita was in the lead with Shaunah coming up on her left flank as they allowed themselves the joy of their ride and companionship. Nikkita watched the trees blur by and breathed in the trees scent leaving her feeling exhilarated. She loved riding Midnight at fast speed, feeling she had a sense of freedom and temporarily taking her pain and worries away.

They rode several miles laughing and teasing as they raced along. Nikkita was in the lead and motioned to slow down as they neared a stream, as they slowed they looked at each other breathless.

Taking a moment to catch her breath, "I won this time!" Nikkita said breathlessly as she glanced at the stream enjoying the sweet smell and sound of the crystalline water that was beckoning to her. She looked back to Shaunah and said, "Shall we rest and water the horses' for a bit?"

"You read my mind!" Shaunah replied.

They both dismounted and led their horses' to the stream bank. They stopped here often when they came out to the area; they had a shack Nikkita had built nearby where they stored a cart, rope, and tools that they used when they hunted. They used the cart when they caught larger prey they needed to transport to the cottage.

Nikkita and Shaunah sat in the shade of a tree next to the stream listening to the running water and the birds chirping overhead.

"We need to start repairs to the barn roof this afternoon. Tomorrow we should start working in the garden. We are getting low on supplies we had stored for the winter, so we must get started as soon as we can." Nikkita informed Shaunah. "I brought some leather bags I made for collecting moss and mud for the repairs, we can collect after we rest and store them in the shack till we are done hunting."

They rested for a short while, refreshed themselves with a cool drink from the stream, and then began collecting mud and moss along the sides of the stream.

Once they filled the leather bags with as much moss and mud they could hold they tied them to their horse's saddles, mounted, and headed upstream toward their storage shack. The

shack stood a short distance away from the stream that Nikkita built shortly after her parents' had died to make it more convenient on her hunting trips. It was small and hidden in the trees, barely noticeable, but big enough to store the cart she made for her horse to pull her catch and rope hanging on the inside walls along with shelves that held her skinning blades. It had an area for hanging and drying hides on the back wall. She made straw baskets in the way her Mamma had taught her that she stored on the floor along the wall for the meat she cut up for easier storage and transport. She hung hooks along the rafters over head that were used for meat drying, which were empty now.

When they approached the shack, Nikkita listened with her trained ears and searched the area by sight and sound for any signs of disturbance. When she was satisfied they were alone, she and Shaunah dismounted and began untying the leather bags. They carried the bags and placed them inside the cart in the shack and left to hunt. Heading further into the woods, heading slightly up the base of the mountain, they kept their bows close and moving silently. Nikkita and Shaunah lived here all their lives and knew the area well; they were seasoned huntresses and knew the tree coverage would hide their presence.

As they approached a small clearing, they stopped and dismounted about a hundred feet away. Nikkita motioned Shaunah to move to the right along the clearing and that she would move to the left direction. With bows in hand, they headed in their assigned direction slowly and carefully so they could sneak up on any game in the area. Nikkita moved silently, after a hundred feet she paused and looked back to see Shaunah moving silently in her direction in a slight crouch pausing every now and then to listen. Nikkita was so proud how well her daughter had learned. Both of them were able to move through the woods and underbrush silently and climb the trees with expertise when needed. They had both learned to jump from limb to limb just as silently and race up in the trees branches; they sometimes even made a game of it. Nevertheless, there was no time for it now, the winter had been longer than usual and they were getting low on meat. Nikkita turned back and moved further in her assigned direction, she knew the woods got thicker up ahead and the best vantage point would be up in the tree branches.

She continued moving through the woods, pausing every now and then to listen and assess the area. When the trees grew thicker, she found a large tree with a thick trunk at the base that "U'd" out three feet up and began climbing it with her bow swung over her shoulder. When she reached about twenty feet up, she crouched on a thick branch then leapt to the next tree branch landing with ease. She paused to assess the area listening and heard a slight rustle in the brush near the clearings edge. She was only about fifteen feet from the clearing, so she focused on the area and listened quietly as she grabbed her bow and an arrow from her shoulder bag and waited for her opportunity.

The bushes were tall and thick in the area she heard the rustling, and she could see the clearing edge where the sun was shining above. She could tell it had to be around noon by the position of the sun above. She heard a louder rustling in the bushes and notched her arrow in the bow, drawing the arrow back and pointing it in the direction while waiting for her chance. Slowly a large, full-grown buck entered the area coming from the clearing facing her cautiously moving slowly through the bushes into the woods.

At first, she only saw his head and antlers, so she held her breath and waited for him to move exposing his chest. He carefully took three more steps twitching his ears as he listened

intently. As soon as his chest came into view, and before he could re-act, Nikkita let loose her arrow striking him straight in the chest, through his heart, and making a clean kill.

Nikkita let out a loud whistle signaling to Shaunah that she bagged her catch, and she heard a returning whistle. Nikkita jumped lightly to a branch below her and made a leap to the ground. She straightened up, walked over to the buck, and knelt beside it to pull the arrow free. She pulled her knife free from its sheath that was tied around her left boot and began skinning the buck.

Shaunah appeared from behind her with a rabbit dangling by the ears in her hand and said, "I'll take Daffodil to the shack to get a few baskets, but we can't transport it all home at once!"

Nikkita answered, "I'll come back tomorrow with the cart to finish it up, but we need to get back soon so we can start the repairs to the barn roof before it gets dark. While I make the trip, you can start in the garden. Sound good to you?"

"Sounds like a good plan to me!" Shaunah answered. Then she headed in the direction where they had left the horses.

Nikkita continued her work until she had the side of the buck skinned, and Shaunah returned with the baskets and horses. Together they worked to start carving meat and placed it in the baskets. The woods were too thick for the cart, so Shaunah tied the baskets to Daffodil's saddle, then helped Nikkita to get Midnight kneeling beside the buck and maneuver the buck over the horses back to get it to the shack. Nikkita walked to lead her horse through the woods toward the shack with Shaunah following on horseback behind her.

When they reached the shack, they pulled the cart out and lead Midnight in with the buck still on its back. Nikkita strolled to the wall, removed the rope, and began tying one end around the front legs of the buck, swung the other end over the rafter, and together Nikkita and Shaunah began pulling the rope tight to lift the buck from the horse's back. Once it was a foot up, Shaunah tied an end to a hook attached to the wall to secure it.

Once done, Shaunah took Midnight outside to attach the cart while Nikkita finished skinning the buck and draped the fur over a trunk to begin drying. 'I'll wait to tack it to the wall till tomorrow when I return' she thought. She then went to secure the door to ensure nothing could get in and turned to Shaunah who just finished hooking up and loading the cart. Together they mounted their horses and headed back toward their cottage.

Nikkita looked up toward the sky to find the sun's location. "It must be around two and it will take longer to get home. We should have enough time for a late lunch and get repairs done before dark by the time we get home."

"Sounds like a good plan to me" Shaunah answered.

When they finished eating their late lunch, they took the moss and mud and began spreading and molding it to the top of the barn roof, working as quickly and efficiently as they could. Shaunah patted and smoothed the last bit of moss and mud into place just half an hour before dusk.

Still kneeling, she ran her arm across her forehead and exclaimed "Whew that should do it Mamma! It looks real good if you don't mind my saying so."

"I agree! Looks great and should do the trick." Nikkita replied.

Together they climbed down from the barn roof and walked to the creek to wash up. Nikkita kneeled and leaned over the water and started scrubbing her hands and arms. Shaunah kneeled beside her and put her hands in the water rinsing her hands and arms off too, she glanced over at Nikkita who wasn't paying any attention to her and grinned.

She quickly rinsed off all the mud and moss and scooped water with cupped hands aimed directly over at Nikkita, splashing her right on. "OH!" she exclaimed surprised and looked up at Shaunah with a surprised expression.

Shaunah just broke out in laughter, "You should see that expression on your face, it's priceless!"

Nikkita grinned with a twinkle in her eye and scooped some water with cupped hands towards Shaunah causing her to laugh harder and in frenzy, they continued their water fight until they were sopping wet and laughing hard. Once they calmed down, they dusted the leaves from the creek bank off their clothing and headed into the house to begin their dinner meal.

Chapter Two

Nikkita enjoyed the early morning fresh air as she rode Midnight along the mountains base tree line, making her way to the storage shack. She loved the crisp clean smell that revived her senses and soothed her nerves. She wore brown doeskin pants, her favorite black below-the-knee boots, and her Mamma's red blouse that fit her nicely.

Since Midnight was pulling the cart, she had to maintain a slow pace. She didn't want to waste any time finishing her work on the buck. She left the cottage shortly after the sun came up, knowing she would be pulling the cart both ways. Shaunah was still asleep when she left the cottage, but she knew she would be getting up and getting to work on the garden as early as possible.

Nikkita allowed her thoughts to drift as she reflected back on her daughter. It amazed her how such a traumatic event produced her with her greatest gift. Her pregnancy provided her with a reason to live, to go on when she lost everything. She could vividly remember her horror of the night her parents' were brutally ripped out of her life, and when those horrible men discovered her hunched in her bedroom corner.

She shook her head to shake off the horrible memories and the foreboding sense of dread that settled over her. Instead, she thought of Shaunah as a toddler helping her in the garden and teaching her, while she cooked their meals, showing her how to collect eggs and how to milk the

cow. Taking her horseback riding and teaching her to ride on her own when she was only four. Then, when she was five she had her first archery lesson, even then she had talent with the bow and arrow. Once Shaunah adjusted to the bow and arrow, Nikkita began sword training with carved wooden training swords when Shaunah was six. Again, she had hidden talent with the sword as well. Just like her Mamma and Grandpapa before her.

As she approached the stream, Nikkita slowed Midnight down and stopped beside the stream so she could water Midnight and get a drink of water. She dismounted and allowed Midnight free reign. She kneeled beside the stream savoring the bright sunlight and gazed into the crystal clear water sparkling and the rocks at the bottom of the stream. Nikkita scooped up water in her hands and drank her fill of water, then moved to lean against a tree right by the stream to rest a few minutes.

'What beauty and extravagance nature has,' she thought. 'How can an area of such beauty know of such ugly acts and violence?'

She only knew her Papa as a good man; she had limited exposure to men with the exception of those who killed her parents. Because of it all, she avoided people on the rare occasion when they happen to cross through her beloved homeland. She trusted no one, except her sweet Shaunah.

She roused herself and stood to collect Midnight's reigns, leaves crunching under her booted feet as she walked over and mounted to ride to her storage shack. As she approached its hidden area in the woods, she automatically began listening and scanning the area for any kind of telltale disturbance. When she was satisfied, she closed the remaining distance and dismounted. Automatically, she began unhooking the cart from Midnight and let the horse graze as she completed her task with the buck.

She went into the shack, grabbed the straw baskets from the floor along the wall, and moved them closer to her work area where she finished carving the buck meat. When she was finished, she had two more baskets of meat full and meat drying on the hooks hanging from the ceiling. She then grabbed her tools and went to work on hanging the buck's hide on the back wall, stretching it taut as she went. She laid the bone on the ground along the wall to dry, then began loading the baskets in the cart. As she was loading the second basket, she heard a horse's panicked whine coming from past the area where they hunted yesterday. Right away she heard some loud 'CRACK' and sounds of something crashing through trees and brush.

Thankful that the cart wasn't hooked up to Midnight, she mounted and kicked her into motion riding at a fast pace into the direction she heard the sound. She slowed her horse's pace when she entered the clearing and began to pay more attention to the surroundings in fear of whom she may find. She took into account the area of the clearing, it was large enough to build a large cottage, barn, garden, and still have extra room. She looked at the tree line surrounding the clearing and recognized the section of steep cliff set back behind the tree line that was probably about thirty feet high and about 100 feet back from the clearing. She knew it well because it was one of her favorite lookout points, but when she looked more attentively, she noticed a large chunk from the edge was missing and what appeared to be a rockslide.

With a bad feeling in her gut, Nikkita urged Midnight forward dreading what she might find. Steering on horseback through the tree line and heading straight toward the collapsed

section of the cliff, Nikkita continuously scanned the area with her eyes. She could feel Midnight's uneasiness under her and could feel her muscles tighten in anticipation. Her surroundings were silent, with the exception of Midnight's hooves touching the ground with every step and the crunch of leaves and twigs as they cracked under-foot.

When Nikkita reached about 50 feet from the cliff, she cautiously started moving closer to the area. Scared and uncertain of what she would find and of the unknown, she figured it best to investigate looking down from up in the trees. Nikkita drew her legs up to crouch in the saddle, leapt up to grab hold of a branch, and pulled herself up. She was now over fifteen feet up, scanning her surroundings as she jumped from branch to branch, and pausing to check below and ahead. She didn't want to take any chances if there were any possibilities it was someone dangerous.

Painstakingly moving carefully and silently so her position wouldn't be given away, Nikkita's heart beat like a drum in her chest, so loud she could hear it pounding in her ears. She felt an overwhelming panic and urge to run, she closed her eyes and took calming breathes to get her emotions under control. Once she felt she was under control again, she opened her eyes and jumped to the next branch continuing to scan the ground below.

Once she reached around twenty feet from the cliff, she noticed an unmoving human figure laying face down on the ground wearing black pants, tan vest, and she could see white sleeves. She couldn't tell if the figure was male or female. She could barely breathe from fear and began to feel light-headed. In her panic, she began to scan the area between her and the cliff searching for any others that may be a threat. All she could see was a horse laying motionless over fifteen feet away from the figure laying face down. She branch hopped and positioned herself above the horse and scanned the area again for anything that looked or sounded close by□ nothing!

Examining the cliff, she thought it appeared the person was traveling around the mountain and tried to get down to the clearing. However, the horse and rider probably got too close to the edge that crumbled out from under them. The section of the cliff looked weak and ready to give away before the incident, she recalled.

Satisfied that no one else was around, she jumped down from her branch close to the horse. Upon examining him, she noticed he died from breaking his neck in the fall. It was not in her nature to let any living creature suffer, so she knew she would have to check on the figure laying face down. She silently allowed herself to weep for the horse and was thankful he died instantly. With her heart pounding in fear, she half crouched as she silently and slowly moved closer to the figure. As she neared, she continued to scan her surroundings and watched the figure for any motion. She was scared stiff that the person was faking and would attack her when she got close enough.

As she neared the figure, she noticed broad shoulders signifying that it was a man and that he was taller than her. Upon closer inspection, she could see the right side of his head had a large and swollen cut on his head of black short hair and he was bleeding badly. She very carefully kneeled down on one knee, and leaned in to take a closer look. He still showed no signs of movement, so she carefully and cautiously began to turn him over being careful not to touch his wound or jolt his head. She noticed his right arm was broken as well, bone jutting out awkwardly in his forearm. Once she had him laying flat on his back, she saw his finely chiseled

face with high cheekbones and a strong jutting chin. He had short jet-black hair coated with dirt and leaves from his fall. He looked to be somewhere around her own age.

Stunned, she realized he was badly hurt. She got up, went to his horse, and worked to remove the saddle, blanket, side bags, bridle, and reins. Then she searched the surrounding area for a straight branch short enough to use as a splint. It took her a bit of time to find one and return to the man to set the bone and splint his arm securing the branch using the horse reins.

Unsure of what to do next, she figured it best to take Midnight back to the shack and re-connect the cart and bring it back to load him onto. Therefore, she ran back to Midnight and mounted, turned her in the right direction, and kicked into a gallop back to the shack.

"Oh dear, I hope I know what I'm doing!" Nikkita said to herself frightened that she might be making the wrong choice in taking him to her home with her sweet daughter there.

She made sure the shack door was secure and immediately began hooking up the cart. Once she had it hooked up, she hurried with Midnight and cart back to the man by the cliff. She moved the baskets by the sidewall of the cart and put the man's horse saddle at the head of the cart to rest his head on. It took several tries for her to drag the man up into the cart and get him settled, and carefully covered him with his horse's blanket. As soon as she assured herself all was in order, she mounted Midnight and headed for home. She looked up at the sky and figured she would be home some time around noon.

Nikkita rode Midnight with the cart to the front of the cottage and yelled to Shaunah who was working in the garden along the far side of the house, "Come help me, we have an injured man here!"

Nikkita dismounted and walked around to the back of the cart as Shaunah ran over to look in the cart. Shaunah was dressed in soft moccasin slipper shoes and a deerskin dress with her dirty blonde hair pulled back into a braid.

"Oh, my goodness!" Shaunah exclaimed. "What happened to him? Where did you find him?"

Nikkita answered, "He was on horseback on the cliff that over-looks the clearing were we hunt when the cliff edge gave out. Both he and his horse fell. The horse broke his neck in the fall, while this person broke his right arm and hit his head hard in the fall. I don't know how bad it is yet, but he has been unconscious this whole time. Come on, help me make a straw bed in the family room and then carry him in to it!"

Together they went into the barn and started collecting straw and carrying it into the cottage making a straw mattress, then they covered it with a large buffalo blanket. Once they finished the bed, they carried him in from the cart as gently as they could and laid him on the straw bed.

"Thank you for your help Shaunah, can you take Midnight to the barn, disconnect the cart, and brush her down while I boil water and prepare to care for our visitor?" Nikkita asked appreciatively.

Nikkita walked over to the wood oven and opened the door; she grabbed the poker lying nearby and stirred the coals, put in a few logs and re-closed the door. Standing up, she turned and walked to the kitchen counter to pick up the water bucket and pour water into a pot and placed it on the wood stove to heat. She then went into the hall, opened the linen closet door to pull out rags for cleaning, and bandages to dress the wounds.

Carrying her supplies, she walked over to the straw bed with the wounded man and placed them on the chair closest. She went to the kitchen and started collecting the herbs (chamomile for tea for pain, coltsfoot for healing wounds, henbane as a pain killer, john's wart to prevent infection, marigold for wounds), and leaves she would put on his wounds and two bowls. She placed the bowls, herbs, and leaves next to the rags and bandages on the chair.

While Nikkita waited for the water to heat, she went back into the kitchen grabbed bread, butter, and some leftover stew she ladled into a bowl from the kitchen counter and walked to the table and sat down for a quick lunch while she waited for the water to heat. She cut a slice of bread and lathered butter on thick and took a small bite as she sat there looking out the window.

'I hope I made the right decision bringing him here. What will he do when wakes up! Oh, no! What am I going to do?' Nikkita thought fearfully as she finished her meal and her stomach churned in fear.

Nikkita stood up, collected her herb grinder from the kitchen cupboard, and crossed the room to lay the grinder on the chair and pick up the large bowl and towels. With the bowl and towels, she walked over to the stove and placed the bowl next to the pot of heated water. Using the towels, she lifted the pot to carefully pour the heated water into the bowl. She replaced the pot to the stove, picked up the bowl of heated water with towels still in hand, and went to kneel next to the man who was still unconscious on the straw mattress. She dipped one of the towels in the heated water and rung the excess water out, then very gently started cleaning the mans wound on the right side of his head. He had a large bump and a deep cut, she had no doubt he would have a terrible headache when he woke up. There was so much blood coating the entire right side of his head that had clumped thickly in his hair. Nikkita allowed her mind to go blank as she focused on the task at hand and to prevent thinking of her worries and fears.

Shaunah opened the front door and entered saying, "Cart is taken care of and Midnight has been brushed down and put in her stall with hay and water."

"Great, thank you!" Nikkita turned and looked at her daughter fondly and worried for her safety. "Can you help me here by grinding the herbs coltsfoot, henbane, john's wart to prevent infection, and marigold? Save the chamomile for tea for after we finish cleaning and treating his wounds."

"I'm on it!" Shaunah responded, collected the herb grinder and the herbs, and set to work humming a sweet tune with her beautiful voice.

"He has so much blood, dirt, and leaves in his hair that I think it would be best to completely wash his hair once I get the worst of the leaves and blood clumps removed." Nikkita said in a concerned voice.

Nikkita's Mamma had taught her all sorts of herbal healing remedies, but her Mamma had cautioned her to be careful not to let anyone know of her skills. When she asked her how doing good and having such knowledge should be kept quiet, she had just simply stated, "Most