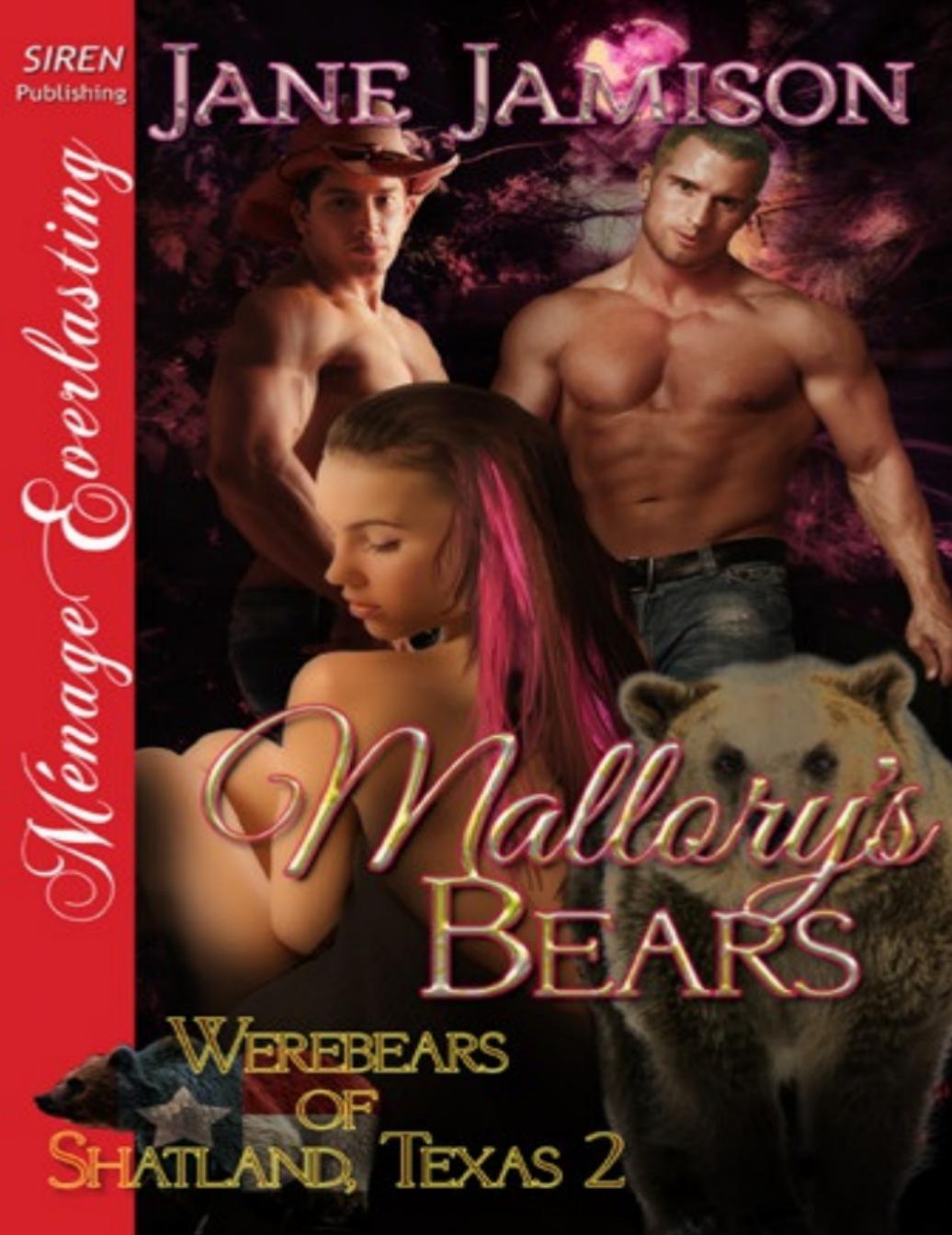


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Ménage Everlasting

JANE JAMISON



Mallory's
BEARS

WEREBEARS
OF
SHATLAND, TEXAS 2

Werebears of Shatland, Texas 2

Mallory's Bears

Mallory Quinn gets caught painting antiabuse slogans on cattle, then posting videos on the Internet denouncing the slaughter of cattle. Yet when she sees how sexy the accused ranchers are, she decides to do a more in-depth investigation. After all, a girl needs to be thorough, right?

Werebears, Gunner and Rick Northman, have their hands full convincing Mallory that they aren't mistreating their cattle. Truth is, they'd rather whip her than hurt a cow. She's the mate they've waited for, and no matter how irritating she is, they're going to claim her. In the meantime, there's a rogue werewolf killing livestock. Which should they do first? Track the werewolf or tame their mate?

When Mallory realizes that Gunner and Rick are innocent, she's ready to admit she was wrong. But she can't shake the feeling that they still haven't told her the whole truth. Will she run when they show her that the real animals are inside them?

Genre: Contemporary, Ménage a Trois/Quatre, Paranormal, Shape-shifter

Length: 56,042 words

MALLORY'S BEARS

***Werebears of Shatland,
Texas 2***

Jane Jamison

MENAGE EVERLASTING



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Ménage Everlasting

MALLORY'S BEARS

Copyright © 2014 by Jane Jamison

E-book ISBN: 978-1-62741-618-4

First E-book Publication: April 2014

Cover design by Les Byerley

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DEDICATION

Thank you to the publisher, editors, and all the staff at Siren Publishing. I feel fortunate to work with such professional, friendly, and caring people.

Jane Jamison

Table of Contents

[Title page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

MALLORY'S BEARS

*Werebears of Shatland,
Texas 2*

JANE JAMISON

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Chapter One

“Mal, are you sure this is a good idea?”

Mallory Quinn let out a hard sigh and shot her best friend Mike “Kid” Shorter a pointed look. “We’ve already been through this. My source—”

“How do we know we can trust him? Even you admit that you don’t know the guy. Don’t you think it’s kind of suspicious that he’s so willing to squeal on his neighbor?”

The thought had occurred to her, but she couldn’t simply discount the man’s claims. “My source is a rancher, too. Who better to know what’s going on? He

said they're raising the cattle and knowingly sending them off to a slaughterhouse that uses inhumane methods of putting them down. If we can't get people to stop eating meat, the least we can do is to make sure that the companies providing the meat are doing so according to the government's guidelines."

Mallory loved all kinds of animals. She couldn't think about hurting any living thing. However, she was also practical and realized that it was a fact of life that most people ate meat. If she couldn't change an entire country's attitude about feeding off other living creatures, then she'd at least make sure the killing of the food source was as

humane as it could be. Her job as a bank teller was mind numbing. Her work as an animal activist excited and fulfilled her. She and Kid, who worked as a teller in the same bank, often took their vacation time to travel around the country and check out rumors of inhumane cattle treatment.

“I agree, but your source is the neighboring rancher. Don’t you think there might be a conflict of interest? That maybe he has something to gain from telling lies about these guys who run the Triple X Ranch? Maybe they’re competing for the same water source. Or hung up on the same woman. You never know what that guy’s motives might be

for squealing.”

The Triple X Ranch. The name alone would've caught her attention, even without her source telling her about their shady practices. Why would anyone give their ranch that name? Unless, of course, they had other shady things going on. That, however, wasn't any of her concern.

“The same woman? Kid, I think you've been reading too many romance novels.”

Yet she had to admit, even if only to herself, that Kid could be right. The man who'd contacted them through her website and had talked them into coming out to the middle of Nowhere, Texas, had seemed a little odd. He'd had

amber-flecked eyes and overly large teeth. Teeth large enough to be called fangs. But she couldn't judge her sources by their looks, could she?

Kid shook his head, sending his long, red ponytail flipping across his lower neck. At two hundred and fifty pounds and standing six feet, five inches tall, Kid wouldn't get lost in a crowd. Yet although he was bigger than anyone Mallory had ever seen, he was also the sweetest, gentlest man she'd ever known. They'd met at the bank, which hired both of them at the same time, and they'd become fast friends overnight. If he hadn't been gay, she might've thought about a different kind of relationship.

She'd given him his nickname, calling him Kid like he was her kid brother, to remind herself that he wasn't sexually available to her.

"I don't think that's the case. Most ranchers are friendly with their neighbors, so it's telling that he told us about them." She took a good, hard look at the herd grazing in the pasture. They didn't appear mistreated, but then again, they weren't only talking about mistreatment on the ranch, but at the slaughterhouse the ranch sent its cattle to. Granted, the cattlemen weren't in control there, but didn't they have a responsibility of knowing what methods were used? Unless, as she suspected, they didn't care. That alone made them

culpable.

“Look, Kid, if you don’t want to be a part of this, it’s fine. Head back to the van and I’ll get the job done without you.”

He frowned, turning his big, lovable mug into the face that reminded her of a bulldog. “I can’t let you do this alone. But let’s get going, okay? The sooner we get this done, the sooner we find a hotel with a hot shower.”

His beefy hands took hold of the barbed wire and spread the dangerous lines apart. After dropping the paint cans and brushes on the other side of the fence, Mal eased her body between the barbs and into the pasture. She turned,

and with heavy gloves on, took the wire from him.

“Do you think you can get through without getting caught?”

Kid eyed the small space and shook his head. “Not a chance.” He held up his finger. “But I think I’ve got another way.”

She wasn’t sure what he had in mind until he’d picked up a tree stump that had been torn from the ground and set it next to the fence. He placed one of his size-seventeen feet on top of the log.

“Hold up. Are you planning to jump over the fence?” She wouldn’t put it past him. Even as big a man as he was, he was very agile and graceful.

“Why not?”

“Okay, I can see that, but once you’re over here, how do you get back?”

“The stump’s close enough to the fence that I can roll it under then use it to jump back.” He pushed the camera bag under the lowest wire.

It made sense. People sometimes mistook Kid’s big, round face as a sign of lesser intelligence, but that was far from the truth. The man was smart as a whip. That and the fact that he reminded her of a big teddy bear made him the perfect friend for her.

“Hurry up.” She darted over to a heifer that was farther away from the main herd. “Easy, baby. I’m not going to hurt you. Not like the mean, old rancher

that's fattening you up just to kill you." She was thankful that the animal didn't understand what she was saying.

Kid made it over the fence with a resounding thud. He came to her side, moving gracefully and quietly, then grabbed hold of the heifer's ear and wrapped his huge arm around its neck to keep it still. "Paint her, Mal, and let's get out of here. I don't want a butt load of buckshot in my ass."

"Are you ready with the camera?"

"Naw. You'll have to do the shooting. I don't think she's going to pose for you once I let go."

"Okay, keep her still as long as you can." She doubted anyone smaller than Kid could've managed to do that.

She petted the sweet, trusting bovine again, then took the paint can and brush, and started writing. Taking care not to spook her, she made bold strokes, moving the bright red lettering from an inch above the front leg, across her body, and onto the hind leg. Once she was finished, she stood back and admired her handiwork.

SENTENCED TO DEATH

“Yeah, that should send the message all right.”

“Get going, Mal. Even I can’t hold an antsy cow for long.”

She hurried to get the video camera, then returned as fast as she could without trying to startle the animal any more than

it already was. The poor thing's eyes were wild, the white of its eyes completely circling its pupils. "Okay, baby. Smile for Mamma."

Her aim brought the heifer into focus as Kid ducked his head to keep his identity unknown. Later, they'd employ the old hidden-by-a-blur-of-pixels technique to further hide his face.

She cleared her throat, then started the video, speaking clearly and evenly as she'd practiced. "This is a heifer on a Texas ranch. Like so many others, she will have a very traumatic and painful death."

She scanned the camera so that it picked up the rest of the herd, then centered the frame back on the painted

letters. “From our investigations, utilizing both Internet sources and personal accounts from a neighbor near the ranch, these cattle, including our sweet little friend here, will soon wind up in a slaughterhouse. Terrified, the poor animal will be killed while she’s still conscious. Governmental guidelines, albeit still falling short of anything this reporter would call humane, call for the animal to be totally unconscious at the time of death. Supposedly,” she let the sarcasm layer her tone, “being unconscious will cause it less pain. I, for one, doubt it. And that’s assuming she’s really knocked out.”

She zeroed in on the pleading eyes. “Please, please, understand. This is unnecessary cruelty. Stop eating beef so that poor, defenseless animals like our peaceful friend need not die.”

She pivoted the camera, placing only her eyes in the frame, then gave her final lines. “Frightened, caged, and then killed without mercy. Would you like to die that way?”

She pressed the stop button and lowered the camera. “And we’re clear. Short and sweet, right? What’d you think?”

Kid let the nervous bovine go. It hurried toward the herd, mooing its displeasure. “It looked good to me. Are

we doing another one or is one enough for the day?”

“Maybe one more with the slogan, ‘Cows have feelings, too. Do you?’ written in a different color. Red was great for this first one, but let’s use gold paint next. That color will stand out against the brown hide better. Plus, I’d like to get at least two videos done before we get out of here. It’s better to get as much done as we can now than to have to come back another day.”

“Whatever you say, boss.”

She wasn’t Kid’s boss or anyone else’s. They didn’t make a dime from their efforts, but it was worth it if they could save one animal from horrendous torture.

“Grab that one over there.” She pointed at an even smaller heifer. Maybe it wasn’t totally fair, but using the scrawniest cows gave the video more impact than using a large, healthy brute of an animal. As far as she was concerned, she had to fight fire with fire, making the most of her videos to reach a consumer that, if given the choice, would choose their fast-food burger over the humane treatment of a cow any day.

Kid gave her a salute—a gesture he knew irritated her—and moved into the herd, his hand outstretched as he cooed at the animal.

* * * *

“Aw, hell, do you see that?” Rick Northman pushed his cowboy hat higher onto his forehead and stared at the scene below him. “Damn it all to hell.”

“Fuck.” Gunner followed the curse with several more. His brother was usually the easier going one, but after finding yet another mutilated cow, even his mood had shifted to the dark side.

Rick and Gunner owned the ranch their father had started. They’d spent their entire life running cattle and horses, but lately a problem had come up that wasn’t, unfortunately, all that uncommon. Someone or something had killed almost a half dozen of their herd along with one

of their horses. They'd also lost several of their chickens one night, although they'd been locked in the coop. Other ranchers, werebear and werewolf alike, were having the same problem.

“Do you think they're the ones?”

Rick squinted from the vantage point they'd taken on top of the small rise. The two people, one small woman and a very large man, hadn't notice them yet. He tugged his binoculars out of the pack tied behind the saddle and peered at them. “Naw. They don't have knives or any other weapons.”

“Then what's the girl holding?”

“It looks like a video camera.”

“What's she doing with that?”

Rick scowled as he read what was

painted on the cow's side. "I think they're filming that heifer. They painted something across its hide, but I can't make out what it says."

"You're shitting me."

"Nope." Rick handed the binoculars to his brothers. "Take a look for yourself. Can you read it?"

"No, but I'm willing to bet it's not *Sally Was Here*. Maybe it's *Tip Me Over*?"

"You're just a regular laugh riot."

Still, the joke was pretty funny even though it reminded him of the trouble they'd had last year when a group of college students had driven out to the ranch and had tried to tip a cow over

onto its side. Cow tipping was a myth he wished he could wipe out of existence. Although cows sometimes dozed while standing up, they laid down to sleep. Even if the kids could've tipped the cow over, it would've been able to get back on its feet. Their prank, however, could've injured the cow.

All their prank had done was frighten the animal. One of the kids had gotten a well-deserved kick in the leg for his participation. They'd heard the boy's wails and had come running. Yet instead of helping the injured student, they'd changed into their bear forms and had run the group off their land, insuring that they'd never come back.

They'd caught hell from the rest of the

clan for letting humans see them in their animal forms. Bears weren't common running around in pastures among cattle and their stunt could've brought unwanted attention to other werebears. Still, it had achieved their goal and given them one hell of a good laugh to see the kids run like the devil himself was chasing them.

“That big one looks like he could kill a calf with one hand tied behind his back.”

Gunner was right. The man was large enough to grab a cow by the neck, yank its head up, and slide a knife along its throat with little effort. But that wasn't the way the killings had gone down.

“That’s the point. A man would only need one stroke to kill a cow. Naw, our animals looked like they’d gone through an oversized deli meat cutter.”

They’d discussed the killings often and had talked to other ranchers in the area. From what they could gather, whoever or whatever was slaughtering the animals was doing it for fun or malice. No meat had been eaten or cut out and taken away. Instead, the multiple slash wounds and the way the animals had been gutted spoke of an attacker that was filled with rage. The killings were deliberate and cruel acts.

“Let’s check this out before it becomes a YouVideo sensation.”

Gunner scoffed. “It’ll never happen.

No one wants to watch a cow chewing its cud compared to watching cute kittens or puppies romp and play.”

“Unless there’s something funny or outlandish written on its hide.” Rick tugged his hat into place. “Besides, they’re trespassing.”

“Yeah, they are. Are we going to do this as men or as bears?”

Rick couldn’t help but straighten his back at the question. They hadn’t transformed in several days and his inner bear was aching to get free. But now wasn’t the right time. Besides, he didn’t want the clan to jump down their throats again. “As men. I’d like to get a good look at her before we run her off.”

“At her, huh?”

Shit. He'd fucked up. “I meant at what she wrote.”

“Uh-huh. I'm sure that's what you meant.”

“Go sit on a stick, little brother.” Rick added the “little” knowing Gunner hated to be called a little anything, including a little brother.

“Damn, man. You're losing your sense of humor in your *old* age. Are you sure you don't have that stick up your ass?”

Rick chuckled, acknowledging Gunner's dig. Every year around his birthday, his brother would razz him about his age even though he was only four years older. Thirty-three wasn't

old, but as long as he was older than Gunner, he'd get the same "old man" treatment.

He heeled his horse into a gallop before Gunner did. For some unknown reason, he didn't want him to reach the girl first.

By the time they'd made it to the two trespassers, a buzz of electricity had begun to sizzle up and down his spine. The closer they got to them, to her, the stronger the current. It was as though someone had hooked him up to a power line and flipped the circuit to sear straight through his body.

He glanced at Gunner and saw his confused expression. He'd bet anything that he was picking up the same

sensation.

He leaned forward and urged his horse to go faster. Running a horse in a pasture that was torn up with the herd's hooves wasn't the safest thing to do, but he couldn't slow down. The hum took over all of him, giving him no choice but to rush to its source.

The nearer they came to her, the more he studied her. She was far too short to be his type. Hell, she couldn't have stood high enough to reach low hanging fruit. He liked tall, sinewy blondes. But her body? Yeah, that was pretty damn amazing.

Her long, coppery hair reminded him of the brownish-red color of a bucket

sitting in the sunlight. He could see how full and lush it was even though it was pulled into a ponytail. The color was beautiful, eye-catching, especially with the strange pink stripe running down the left side to draw his attention down to her full breasts.

Her face wasn't the angular shape he usually liked, yet it was intriguing. She could've been the cover model for *Girl Next Door*, but with an enticing underlying allure that had him all too aware of his growing cock. Her face had a sweetness about it that made him wonder what color her eyes were. And her lips? They had him aching for a good, old-fashioned kiss.

He reined his horse to a stop, swung

his leg over the saddle, and dismounted. Dropping the reins, he strode toward her, ignoring the giant of a man who stood nearby. Gunner was off his horse, but hadn't moved.

“Lady, are you two lost?”

To her credit, she stood her ground, pulling her shoulders back as though ready to take him on. The glint of alarm in her big green eyes hadn't faded, but that only gave him more reason to respect her.

“Not at all. I know exactly where I am and what I'm doing.”

She was a feisty one. At least she had that going for her. Okay, that and the curviness of her body. For such a little

thing, she had breasts that would rival the town whore's paid ones. Not that he knew from touching them and he'd never tell Sugar Honey that. She was more than proud of her new boobs.

The woman's waist was small. Or was it the wideness of her hips that made her waist seem like he could fit his hands around her and touch fingertips? Either way, the package was a damn good one.

"Is that right? Then you know that you're on the Triple X Ranch. I'm Rick Northman and that's my brother, Gunner. This is private property, which means you probably also know you're trespassing. Have I got it straight?"

"Hey, Rick, check it out."

Rick twisted around to find that Gunner had rounded up one of the calves. He gritted his teeth, and had to choke back a snarl. “Lady, what the hell do you think you’re doing? Why’d you paint my calf?”

She had the audacity to fist her hands on her hips and act as though he was the one who’d done wrong. “Maybe it is your land and maybe that’s your calf, but that doesn’t mean it deserves to die an awful death.”

What the hell was she talking about? Did she know about the animals that had been killed? He reassessed his earlier opinion. Could she be involved?

Until then, he hadn’t paid much

attention to her friend. Was he her man? If so, he didn't want to tangle with him if he could help it. As a man he'd have to work hard at besting him. As a bear, he'd take him out with one strike of his paw.

“What are you getting at?” Maybe if he let her flap her yap a little longer, she'd spill enough information to make sense.

“Can't you read?” She tilted her head to the calf Gunner was holding.

Damn, but she was irritating. And yet, even as irritating as she was, he couldn't dismiss the growing need to have her. He wanted to tear off her clothes and wrap her legs around him. But at the same time, she filled him with a curiosity to know her better. When had

any woman ever gotten to him that way?
Especially so fast and hard?

“What’s that supposed to mean, anyway? Sentenced to death? Don’t you know that’s why ranchers raise cattle? To sell for public consumption? Or are you telling me that you’ve never eaten a hamburger?”

She opened her mouth, no doubt ready to give him a sassy answer, but he waved her off. “The real question is why you’d write that on one of my cows. Do you think cattle read?”

She hardened her face, then held out her hand for the camera she’d given to her big man as they’d ridden up to them. “Take a look for yourself.”

He had a bad feeling that he'd gotten tricked, but he still had to see. Taking the camera, he held it up and watched the video. Once he was finished, he had the urge to smash it to the ground.

“Don't bother breaking it. I already sent the video to my e-mail.”

Aw, shit. “And what are you going to do with it? Watch it every night while you curl up on your couch with your thirteen cats?”

She was not the type of woman who'd end up alone with a bunch of cats. But he loved seeing her get even angrier. She'd be fun to razz.

“I'm going to upload it to YouTube and let the world know what's

happening to these poor creatures.”

“Poor creatures? Are you serious, lady? These animals live better than some humans I know.” The word *lady* didn’t do her justice. Maybe *princess* or *queen* would. He was surprised that such a small person could command his respect in such a short time.

“Who’s this guy? Is he your husband or your bodyguard?”

The huge man stepped closer to her, then offered his hand. “I’m Mike Shorter, but people call me Kid. This is my friend, Mallory Quinn.”

“Kid, we’re not here to make friends.” She seared Rick with another glower. “Especially not with men who are cruel to animals.”

That did it.

His anger whipped around in a frenzy, rising to the surface with a boil. “Look, lady, I don’t know where you’re getting this shit, but we don’t treat our animals badly. If you don’t like raising cattle for food, then that’s your problem. Until they arrive at the production facility—”

“You mean the slaughterhouse.”

The growl slipped out before he knew it. Her eyes widened, but again, she showed her stuff by not running. Smaller growls had sent grown men scurrying away as fast as they could.

“Whatever. It’s the cycle of life. Everything needs to eat.” As a human, he enjoyed a good steak or burger. His

bear, however, tended to eat more fish and vegetables, but he wouldn't tell her that.

He was astounded and even angrier when she laughed.

“For your information, it's the circle of life, not the cycle of life. And no. We don't need to eat other living beings. We're not savages any longer.” Her haughtiness grew. “At least, most of us aren't.”

“Not that I owe you an explanation, but listen up. We send our cattle to a quality-run meat packing facility. Our animals are killed in a humane way with a facility that toes a hard line on following all the governmental regulations.” He gritted his teeth so hard

he thought he'd crack one.

“You send them to Lawson Industries, right?”

“How'd you know that?” She wasn't just some liberal, tree hugger. She'd done some research.

“Did you know that Lawson Industries doesn't make sure that the cattle are unconscious after they drive that pole into their heads and send them along the production line?”

“It's not a pole, it's called a bolt gun and it instantaneously kills the brain. There isn't a more humane way to die. No pain. Nothing, but sudden death, got it? Hell, I couldn't ask for a quicker, easier way to die.”

“Then why don’t you go and take their place?”

He swallowed back another growl then wanted to pop his brother on the back of the head for chuckling. “Look, lady, I’ve seen their facility firsthand. They keep the cattle safe and calm up until that moment when they use the gun. Keeping the cattle calm and without injury leads to better, more tender meat. Why would Lawson do it any other way? Better meat means better sales.” Why was he bothering to argue with her? He knew the truth.

“Oh, sure. They’re really calm when they herd them into the pens and cram them together.”

“Lady—”

“My name is Mallory.”

He didn't want to say her name. Calling her *lady* wasn't as dangerous. Calling her Mallory made him think of the way she looked and the lyrical sound of her voice. Still, he wouldn't mind trying her name on the tip of his tongue. He had a feeling that it would feel just right.

“Let me educate you a little. A good packing plant has lots of pens. When the cattle come in, they don't cram the animals together like you're saying. They break them into smaller groups with room to move before they drive them into a chute and into the plant. The

chute's high enough that the animals can't see what's going on and don't get afraid."

Why was he bothering explaining it? And yet, he knew why. She was special. Maybe more special than anyone he'd ever met.

"That's what I said. They get herded inside to be killed in a brutal, cruel way."

He almost lost it. His fangs erupted through his gums, and if Gunner hadn't taken him by the shoulders and hauled him backward, he would've shifted in front of her.

"Mallory." Gunner's tone was softer. Then again, he was usually able to maintain his cool better than Rick could.

“Where are you getting your information?”

“If you must know, from a neighbor of yours. He told me who you’re selling your cattle to. Lawson Industries is the worst of the worst.”

“Aw, fuck.” Rick heeded Gunner’s stern look to stay back. “I’ll bet anything it’s that damn were—” He stopped, all too aware of his near-slip. “That damn Burton Shenton.”

He doubted she would’ve admitted that he’d guessed correctly, but the subtle change in her expression and her quick blink told him that he’d guessed right.

“Not just from the neighbor, but from

insider videos, too.”

Gunner laughed, throwing her a curve. “Let me guess. Videos off the Internet, right?”

Her expression gave her away again.

“Because everything you see and read on the Internet is factual and true, right?”

She swallowed, then crossed her arms. A challenge if Rick had ever seen one. “I’ve seen the videos. They aren’t faked.”

“Maybe not, but they are edited to get a certain shock value.”

“I disagree. From what I’ve seen—”

Rick couldn’t stand it any longer. The whatever-it-was he’d felt earlier had grown steadily stronger, adding to his attraction. He felt compelled to touch

her, to feel her skin under his hands. She'd taken control of his mind as well as his body, urging him to forget that he'd just met her. Urging him to throw her over his back and take her home with him. Instead, he opted for a more civilized option.

He moved fast and took hold of her arms. The moment he did, he lost any chance of denying the compulsion.

An even more intense jolt of the electric current hammered at every nerve in his body. It wrapped around him, tightening, until he knew he couldn't break free. Hell, he didn't want to break free. From her stunned expression, she'd felt it, too.

Her friend moved to step between them, but she held him off. “It’s okay, Kid. I’m okay.”

The big guy eased away from her, but not too far. Rick figured that if the man wanted, he could take hold of Rick and send him flying.

Rick’s hands shook. What the hell was happening between them? Why did he want, hell, need to touch her so much that it ate at his gut?

“Mallory, we could run you off our land and have this done, but I don’t like the idea of you thinking that we treat our animals badly.” Gunner was de-stressing the situation.

Rick heard the strain in his voice. He

had to be feeling it, too.

“How about this? Come and stay with us.” Gunner nodded at Kid. “Both of you. See how we run our ranch.”

“I don’t think—”

“Hang on before you say no. Don’t we deserve a fair hearing? If at the end of your stay, you still think we’re cruel, heartless bastards, then I’ll help you send out your video. Hell, I’ll even send one to Lawson.”

“I never called you heartless or bastards.”

He gave her the smile that so many women had found irresistible. “No, I guess you didn’t. So? What do you say? Will you give us a chance to prove you wrong?”

It was obvious that she was still unconvinced. Rick added his own incentive. The turmoil of lust she'd started inside him wouldn't allow him not to. "I'll have a friend of mine check into Lawson's. Not that I think he'll find anything wrong."

"If I do, will you agree that I can report what I find? Without interference? Without editing on your part?"

"Yeah. If you can show me that we're doing a bad job of treating our animals, then I'll give you the green light myself. So do we have a deal or not?"

She glanced at her friend, then stuck out her hand. "Deal."

Chapter Two

Dirt billowed into the air behind the van as Kid followed the directions that would take them to the home of the Northman brothers. Mallory hadn't meant to take them up on their offer to stay with them. Why should she? She already had a witness to their brutality as well as photographic proof. She had no doubt that the packing plant the ranch used employed highly objectionable and even illegal means to kill the animals. But once she'd touched Rick's hand, she hadn't been able to turn down his offer. If she'd let all her inhibitions run wild, she would've jumped on top of him and

slammed her mouth to his.

Talk about a shocker, both figuratively and literally.

And Gunner? She hadn't touched him, but she'd experienced the same reaction of heightened awareness to his presence. It was like she was the lightning rod and they were the lightning.

She stared out the side window, absorbed by her thoughts and the strange, inexplicable sensations wreaking havoc to her nervous system. What was that weird vibration that had ripped into her? Was it sexual attraction? That was part of it. And who could blame her? The Northman brothers were drop-dead, take-me-now sexy.

But when had a handsome face and

terrific body, even two of them, ever thrown her for a loop? She'd always been drawn more to geeks and men whose intelligence far outweighed their sexy appearance.

“Okay, I’ll say it. This is crazy. There’s no reason to stay with these men.”

She was about to agree when Kid kept on going.

“Except for the fact that they’re hotter than hell.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

As she’d known he would, Kid broke into one of his trademark booming laughs. “Riiight. I thought you were about to drool when Rick took hold of

you.”

“Rick is it? You’re already calling him by his first name?”

Kid glanced down at the directions the men had scribbled on the back of a fast-food receipt Kid had pulled out of his pocket, then made a left turn onto another dirt road.

“What am I supposed to call him? Mr. Northman? I don’t think so. That’s not conducive to romance.”

She twisted around to gawk at him. “Romance? What are you talking about? Kid, are you interested in one of them? Because if you are, I can tell you that you’re not their type.”

“Why not? Because I’m big and beautiful?” He chuckled, the sound being

almost as loud as his laugh. “Yeah, I know. They’re as straight as they come, all right. That, my girl, is a damn shame.”

“Will you try and remember why we’re here?” It was a reason she needed to remember as well. Why had she agreed to stay with them?

“I will if you will.”

“Don’t even go there, Kid. I am not attracted to these guys in the least.”

“Uh-huh. And I don’t love me a big old juicy steak.”

That was their one bone of contention. After learning how the animals were treated at the processing plant, she’d given up eating anything that had a face.

But Kid still loved his burgers and steaks.

He caught the way she glared at him. “Yeah, yeah. I know what you’re thinking. I believe in everything you do, but I still recognize that I’m a meat eater and I’m not giving that up. All living things have a purpose in life, to provide food, shelter, or whatever.”

“And our purpose is to keep them safe.” They’d had the same argument a hundred times before, but she’d never give up trying to make him see the light. She had a feeling she’d be the same way with the Northman men.

“Now that’s what I call a house.”

She followed Kid’s gaze to the huge two-story, columns-in-the-front, *Gone-*

with-the-Wind-style home that was up ahead. The sunlight made the white exterior of the home even brighter against the manicured bushes lining the house and the long driveway that led up to the wide steps ascending into the home.

“Good, God, Scarlett, did we just arrive at Tara?”

She couldn't answer. She was too busy admiring the house. But her admiration shifted when she saw Rick and Gunner striding out of the huge red barn that was several hundred feet away from the house. The barn, although nothing as spectacular as the house, was well-kept.

Kid pulled the van up to the front of the home and waited for the Northman men to reach them. “Is it just me, or do they remind you of that old billboard ad? You know. The one where the rugged cowboy’s lighting up a cigarette?”

“Down, boy. Remember—”

“Yeah, I know. Remember why we’re here.”

Rick and Gunner sauntered over, then without pausing, waved them on to follow them into the house. Kid and she took one glance at each other, then hurried after them.

She hadn’t given any thought to what she’d expected the interior of their home to look like. Maybe with a grand

staircase and large paintings of their ancestors? Instead, she saw rustic furnishings that spoke of easy comfort. She paused inside the foyer and did a circle to take in the rest of the place. The staircase wasn't grand, as it led straight up to the second story. Although the furnishings seemed overly large, there weren't a lot of pieces. The living room spread out in front of them while two open double doors led into a dining room and a sunlit kitchen. The dining room boasted a long wooden table and an assortment of chairs, while the kitchen was in need of updating from the seventies.

The strange current of energy that had caught her by surprise simmered over

her again. Gunner was beside her, and although he was speaking to Kid, he had his attention fixed solidly on her.

“You guys can take the first two rooms at the top of the stairs and to the right. Rick’s room and mine are down the other way toward the end of the hallway. Feel free to freshen up. Rick and I need to get back out and take care of the horses.”

She wasn’t about to let the chance get past her. “How about if I come along? You know. For research.”

“So you think we’re abusing our horses, too?”

She liked the lift of the corners of Gunner’s mouth. He was teasing her, and

yet, she didn't mind. She had a feeling that she'd like anything he did. Both to and with her. "That's why I'm here, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

What did that mean? When she looked into his eyes, those amazing brown depths threatened to consume her, and she knew exactly what he meant. She dropped her gaze, almost afraid that he could control her without saying another word.

"Follow us, Mallory."

"Mal."

He stopped as he headed toward the door, followed by Rick. "What?"

"People call me Mal. Short for Mallory."

Rick shook his head. “Naw. That won’t work.”

“I’m sorry?” Was he trying to tell her that her name wasn’t any good? “Um, yeah. That’s my name.”

“Mal’s not good enough. Or pretty enough.” He sized her up, taking her in from the top of her head down to her toes. “I’m going to call you Mallory. That fits you better.”

All at once, she wished that she was dressed in something better than an old faded T-shirt and worn jeans. She felt the heat rise to her cheeks as she tried to smooth the wrinkles out of her shirt, then heard Kid’s chuckle.

“Whatever. I won’t be here long

enough for it to matter.”

“If you say so...Mallory.” Rick smiled that shit-eating grin that both irritated her and thrilled her.

Gunner’s laugh was almost as loud as Kid’s as the men headed down the front porch and out to the barn.

The aroma of horses, hay, and a myriad of other smells hit her as soon as she entered the barn. Another set of double doors was open at the opposite side allowing air to circulate from one end to the other. After seeing a few other barns, she had to admit that theirs was well-maintained and clean. Large stalls with plenty of room for the horses to move around dominated two walls with a wide strip of land between them. Two

rooms were on either side of the back doors that she assumed led into smaller rooms where more gear as well as medications and other supplies were stored. Saddles and bridles hung from hooks or were neatly arranged on shelves. Food was clearly labeled and protected in metal containers from insects and marauding vermin.

“Does it meet with your approval, Oh, Mistress of Animal Treatment?”

She'd quickly found out that Gunner was the jokester and Rick was the more serious of the two. The fact that Kid found Gunner's jokes entertaining didn't help. But she had to admit they were funny. Sometimes. “I don't know yet. Let

me give it a good looksee first.”

Rick made a scoffing sound, then let out a short whistle. A bark answered him as a black and white Sheltie darted around the last stall and ran toward Rick. As soon as the dog got close enough, he jumped into the air and landed in Rick’s arms. The dog greeted his master with lots of whines and licks, and it was easy to see that Rick returned the love.

“This is Rebel.”

Rebel squirmed in Rick’s arms, then hurled his body at Gunner. Gunner caught him in midair and went through the same loving greeting that Rebel had given Rick. By the time the dog leapt out of Gunner’s arms to the ground in front

of her, she'd already fallen in love.

She knelt down and let Rebel give her a few kisses, too. "You are such a sweetie. Is this your home, boy? Oh! Okay. Now that was a wet one." She wiped away the slick of wetness from her cheek as Rick whistled, drawing Rebel back to him.

"Sorry about that. Rebel never met anyone he didn't like."

"I don't mind. I love dogs. I just wish my apartment complex allowed pets."

Rick motioned for her to follow him. "That's too bad. I'd hate to be without a dog. Most of us don't like dogs much, but we've always had at least one."

"Yeah, me, too. But until I decide to

buy a home, that's what I have to deal with. Besides, I'm gone too much to have a pet."

She narrowed her eyes, suddenly aware of what he'd said. "What did you mean about most of you not liking dogs? Don't a lot of ranchers have dogs?"

"Sure." Rick shrugged, averting his eyes. "I didn't mean anything by it."

She wasn't quite sure why, but she didn't believe him. Still, it wasn't a big enough deal to keep questioning him.

She leaned against the first stall that Rick went into. The beautiful bay horse lifted his head and nickered at his arrival, then butted his muzzle against the man, obviously asking for a treat. Rick dug into his pocket and pulled out a

small chunk of carrot.

“Here you go, Skipper. Hey, now. Don’t get greedy.”

Rebel scampered after Gunner as he went into the stall on the other side. Gunner took off the saddle and started brushing the horse she’d seen him riding. Kid leaned on the railing of that stall, but kept most of his weight off it. More than once, he’d ended up breaking whatever he was leaning on.

She studied the stall and the rest of the barn again. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t find fault with any of it.

“Do you ride, Mallory?” Rick bent over to examine the animal’s

horseshoes.

A second before she'd started to correct him, to tell him to call her Mal again, she stopped. Her mother had named her Mallory and she'd never liked it much. It had seemed too girlish. But coming from Rick, the name sounded pretty good.

"I do. I took equestrian lessons when I was in my teens."

Rick straightened up, his eyebrows lifted, and an amused expression on his face. "Equestrian lessons, huh? Folks around here just call it riding. Did you do the fancy jumping stuff and put pretty bows on your horse?"

He'd caught her slip up. Or had she wanted to impress him? Most of the

time, especially when dealing with Texas ranchers, she preferred to keep her past hidden. As soon as they found out that she'd grown up with wealthy parents, they tended to disregard her opinions. She didn't flaunt her wealth, which is part of the reason she'd taken the cashier's job at the bank. Aside from giving to many charities and funding her research on animal cruelty, she stuck the rest into investments. She wasn't even sure how much she was worth any longer.

“It's called dressage and the fancy jumping stuff is called hurdles racing. And yes. I put pretty bows on my horse, but only for competitions.”

“I bet you wore the black coat and the little black hat, too.”

She let out a sigh, resisted the urge to face Gunner, then gave into it. “Yes, that’s kind of a requirement, especially when you compete. Go on. You can make fun of it all you want, but you have to be a damn fine rider to do the hurdles.”

Rick finished checking his horse over, then left that stall to walk toward the back of the barn. Tilting her head to the side, she watched him, enjoying the lazy way he walked. His butt was a fine thing to study.

Kid cleared his throat, breaking into her trance. She rolled her eyes at a

grinning Kid and hurried after Rick.

“Have you ever done any cattle drives or barrel racing?”

“No, but how hard can it be?”

Rick shook his head and strode out of the barn to a large pen. A number of cows plodded around the arena, stopping every once in a while to munch on a patch of dry grass. “Harder than you’d think, I bet. Sitting a good saddle isn’t enough. You have to know the animals you’re dealing with.” He gave her a stern, piercing look. “Do you know cattle, Mallory? Or are they just big dogs to you?”

He didn’t give her a chance to answer and she wasn’t sure she would’ve known what to say. Instead, he opened

the gate, then waved her toward the cattle. “Feel free to check them over. Make sure we haven’t beaten or starved them. I wouldn’t want you to misrepresent us.”

“Trust me. I’ll tell it straight.”

One look around told her what she needed to know. None of the animals appeared neglected. If anything, they looked healthier than most she’d seen on other ranches.

“As you can see, we take care of them. We make sure they get the best feed and the medications to help them stay healthy.” He pushed his hat back and found her eyes. “I love my cattle, but I understand that they’re not pets. Cattle

ranchers supply a necessary service to help feed people, but we make sure their lives and their deaths are handled the right way. Got any questions?"

The only questions she wanted to ask were about him. She couldn't do that. "No. Not yet."

If she'd dared, she would've asked him if he felt the same sizzle that she felt. But if he did, then what? Did he feel the same urgency? An urgency to grab hold and make him kiss her until her legs gave out? Did he feel the urgency to thrust her chest against his and fondle her breasts?

She wanted him and his brother more than she'd have thought possible. It didn't make any sense, but the compulsion was there. It went crazy

inside her. If they'd given her half a reason, she'd have let them strip her clothes, leaving her naked and vulnerable. Even with Kid standing nearby.

The world swayed around her as another flash of energy—*is it lust?*—swept over her. She had no choice but to reach out for anything—*him!*—to keep from falling over. Her hand fisted in Rick's shirt as her hand disobeyed her mind.

“Mallory?”

Somehow, she'd ended up in his arms. Her heart pounded in an uneven rhythm. Her breath hitched in her throat. Her knees still felt weak, barely able to keep

her standing.

“Are you all right?”

She lifted her gaze and found his mouth. His lips were firm, yet she had reason to think they'd be soft at the same time. She wanted, hell, needed to kiss him. Like a deep sea diver, she needed his kiss like it was air to breathe.

It wasn't until her eyes found his that she lifted her other hand and took a hunk of his hair. Tugging his mouth to hers wasn't professional, but to turn him loose wasn't an option. If she didn't have his lips on hers, she had no doubt she'd die.

His groan echoed the yearning inside her as his mouth crushed against hers. The groan flowed inside along with his

tongue. He yanked her into his arms, forcefully molding her body to his. Answering him with a moan of her own, she nibbled on his lower lip until he tilted her head and deepened the kiss. The breath his kiss had given her was gone in the next moment as he stole it away. She welcomed his tongue inside, skimming hers over his to draw up more of his taste. Strong, girder-like arms enveloped her, bringing her onto her tiptoes. She reached up even more and bent him low over her body.

She thought she knew how to kiss and be kissed, but she was wrong. Until Rick had put his mouth to hers, she'd only been fooling herself. Other men's kisses

paled in comparison. What she'd believed to be desire before now diminished into a child's fantasy. This was so much more, yet she couldn't find a word that could describe it. Rick kissed her like a woman should be kissed, with power and control dominating her until she wanted to beg him to kiss her between her legs. She had to have more kissing and, God help her, more everything.

“Mal?”

At first she didn't recognize her own name. Rick had called her Mallory and now nothing else seemed to fit. She was lost to him, ready to sacrifice the life she'd known for a few more moments of his kiss.

Someone cleared their throat and she dismissed it. Who cared what else was going on around them? Who cared if anyone else was alive?

“Are you having fun, man?”

Gunner.

At once, her body and mind was at war. She wanted Rick, craved him, and yet there was another she yearned for just as much. Could she have both of them?

It was Rick who finally broke the kiss and held her away from him. A rush of emotions overwhelmed her. Disbelief gave way to disappointment, and anger came and went in blistering speed, to be replaced with humiliation.

Gunner and Kid stood in the shade of the barn, staring at her. She would've expected Kid to be stunned at her behavior, but he wasn't. Like Gunner, he had on a knowing smile that changed into a smirk that said "I told you so".

"Hell, yeah." answered Rick. He tipped his hat at her in a "thank you, ma'am" kind of way and stepped back from her.

"You're all right, aren't you, Mal? You didn't like inhale too much horse shit and have a stroke, did you?" At her narrowed eyes, Kid attempted to cover a chuckle with a cough.

She wasn't about to stand there and let Gunner and Kid make fun of her. Putting

her head down, she marched past them. “Come on, Kid. Let’s get moved into our rooms.”

Yet when she was halfway down the middle aisle of the barn, she couldn’t help but overhear Gunner’s teasing words.

“Would you like my brother to meet you in your room and finish your, um, research?”

She didn’t dare turn back. If she did, he’d seen the blush on her face. Instead, she did the only thing she could think to do. She lifted her hand in the air, then stuck her middle finger toward the ceiling. Their laughter followed her all the way back to the van.

Gunner pulled Rick away from the grill. “Don’t you think you’re pushing it?”

Rick pretended ignorance, then flipped one of the juicy burgers. Flames leapt upward as the grease dribbled on the coals. The other side of the grill contained thick pieces of steak. “What are you talking about?”

“Cut the crap. You haven’t cooked out in over a month. Now that we have Mallory here spouting animal cruelty, you’re dying for a good, all-beef hamburger? You’re baiting her and you know it.”

Rick flipped another burger. “Yeah. So what? I like seeing her all riled up. Besides, we eat meat, plain and simple. The faster she figures that out, the better it’ll be.”

“Fine, but I’m heading for town once she gets a whiff.” He’d let his brother catch her wrath. Afterwards, maybe she’d be more receptive to talking—or kissing—him instead of his brother.

“Coward.”

He didn’t clue Rick in on his plan. “Yep. I’ve got a big old yellow stripe running down the middle of my back.”

“That’s a load of crap, but if that’s how you want to play it, then that’s fine with me.” Rick slid two of the burgers

onto a nearby plate. He shot a cocky glance at Gunner, then went back to manning the food. “Did you pick up anything unusual about her?”

“Damn it. I knew it. You felt it, too.” Gunner had sensed the connection from her the moment he’d dismounted and seen her big, green eyes. He’d assumed his brother had felt it, too. At least, he’d hoped he had. That was the way it was most of the time, but even as rare as it was, sometimes the woman both werebears wanted as their mate didn’t feel the instinctual bond with both men. If that had happened, it would’ve devastated them.

They hadn’t had time to talk about it until now. Besides, he’d wanted to take

his time to think about it first.

Rick hooked the spatula on the side of the grill. “So you’re sure? At first, I didn’t know if I was imagining it or not. But then, once she laid one on me—”

“Hold up. *She* kissed *you*?” He’d gotten jealous when he’d seen Rick and Mallory in a fierce lip lock, but the fact that she’d initiated the kiss made it even harder to take. Sure, they planned on sharing their future mate anyway, but as brothers they had more than enough sibling rivalry to go around. He’d wanted to be the one to make, or get, the first move.

“She sure did. Shocked the hell out of me, but it was every bit as good as I’d

hoped.” Rick glanced over at the picnic table where she and Kid were talking, their heads bent over a notebook she’d been furiously scribbling in. “She’s the one, all right.”

“That’s something. After all these years, I figured we weren’t going to find her. Hell, I was even going to suggest that one of us take off and try to find her.”

Gunner couldn’t believe their luck. Not all werebears found their intended mate. Or, if they did, she wasn’t always available. Sometimes she was already married, or even worse, dead. The special connection, that instant bond that all werebears and their mate felt, was supposed to bring them together, but

sometimes even fate got its wires crossed. They'd heard others talk about the bond, the invisible rope that many called an electric current, but hadn't let themselves think about it too much. Yet the older they got, the fear that they wouldn't experience it had grown stronger.

“Well, she's here now.”

“That she is, little brother. That she is.”

For once, Gunner didn't mind being called his “little” brother. “Wouldn't you know it?”

“What?”

“It figures that our mate would show up with a huge chaperone by her side

and a head full of nonsense.”

“She’ll learn the truth soon enough.” And yet Rick’s voice held an edge of doubt to it.

“At least, the truth about us.” The information she’d told them about Lawson Industries, however, hadn’t sat well with Gunner. If it was true, then they’d want no part of them. “What if she won’t change her mind? How’s she ever going to fit in with a bunch of bears? We like meat and that’s not going to change.”

“I guess we could always start eating like real bears do. They’re more omnivorous than we are. It must be the human side of us that craves meat.”

“If you think I’m going to eat berries and flowers, you can think again.” He

didn't like fruit much and wasn't a big fan of vegetables or fish, either.

“Let's worry about our diet later. Until then, we have to work on getting her to accept the fact that she's our woman. After that, we can show her our bear sides. Getting her to accept that we raise cattle for people to eat isn't big on my list. Let's take this one problem at a time.”

His mouth was dry from all the talking. The cooler full of beer was still inside the house where he'd left it.

“Do you think she could be right about Lawson's?”

“Damn. I hate to even think that way.”

He agreed, but he couldn't shake the

gnawing gut feeling. She'd been so damn sure. "Let's get Tyler Hastings to put it on high priority. He lives close enough to Lawson's facility that he can schedule an impromptu visit. If we were nearby, we could do it, but there's no time to run up north and check them out ourselves. Not with our cattle getting killed."

"Lawson's always had a clean record. Why doubt them now? Because of what she said?"

"That and a gut feeling. Besides, she could have it right. We haven't visited the place in over a year. If she's right, I want to know."

Gunner pulled back the edge of a foil wrapper sitting in the corner of the grill. Instead of finding the usual diced

potatoes inside, he found various vegetables including zucchini, potatoes, onions and both green and red peppers. He smiled, knowing his brother had prepared the roasted vegetables for her more than for themselves.

“Just tell him not to make it obvious that we’re checking up on them. I wouldn’t want to ruin a solid business relationship because of rumors.”

Rumors, whether based on fact or not, could kill a business. “I hope you cooked enough. That Kid guy looks like he could pack away a side of beef by himself.”

“Yeah, I have another pound of thawed hamburger in the fridge, too.”

“Good thinking.” Gunner slapped him on the back. “Then again, that’s what you’re good at. Thinking.”

“At least one of us is.”

“Bullshit.” Gunner lifted his hands like a surgeon waiting for the nurse to help get his surgical gloves on. “Still, I bet she’d rather have a man who’s good with his hands instead of his head.”

“If you ask Mallory, I think she’d tell you that I’m good at that, too.”

“Fuck you, bro.” Yet he was smiling as he headed back to the house.

Chapter Three

Mallory stared down at the charred piece of dead animal on her plate. She bit back a curse then brought her gaze to Gunner. “This is a joke. It has to be.”

Both he and Rick feigned ignorance. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mallory.”

The tingle warped into her again when he called her Mallory, just as Rick had done. “The hell you don’t. Do you really think I’m going to eat this?”

Gunner shrugged, keeping up the pretense. “How should I know? Just because you’re investigating us for cruelty to animals, doesn’t mean you

don't eat steak. Would you rather have a hamburger?"

"No. Thank you." They were baiting her, trying to make her angry. And damn it all, if they weren't succeeding. She wouldn't give them the satisfaction of getting upset at them. Instead, she stabbed the offending steak, plopped it back onto the platter with the other meat, and scooped up a generous spoonful of vegetables.

Kid sat beside, but even then tried to sneak a burger onto his plate without her noticing. When she gave him a what-the-hell look, he only shrugged.

"I'm hungry, Mal."

"Whatever."

The tension between her and the three

men was almost as heavy as the sizzle of lust zipping between her and the Northman men. She bowed her head and concentrated on eating her vegetables.

Gunner was the one to break the awkward silence. “Mallory, what got you into the business of investigating ranchers and how they treat their animals? Did you suffer a traumatic experience? Like maybe a cow biting your butt?”

Although she was still miffed at them, she couldn't help but smile a little. Gunner had a way with words, turning them so that they were humorous even if the question wasn't.

“Not at all. Animals have always

treated me with respect, which is why I do the same to them.”

Gunner broke off an edge of his hamburger meat, then tossed it over his shoulder to Rebel. The dog jumped and caught it in the air.

“And does this pay the bills? Are you with PETA?” Rick crammed a huge bite into his mouth, then grabbed a steak off the platter and dropped it on the ground at his feet. She heard the sound of Rebel chowing down.

She wished she worked for PETA. That was her dream job. “Not exactly. My day job is at a bank, but on the weekends I work for an organization called Animals for Humans. We provide service dogs to people with disabilities.

Researching possible animal cruelty is what I do in my free time.”

Half expecting a joke, she was surprised and more than a little pleased when both men put down their food and gave her appraising looks.

“That’s great,” offered a sincere Rick.

“It figures.” Gunner hurried on at the sight of her lifted eyebrows. “I mean, you obviously care a lot about animals, everything from dogs to cows. I’ll bet you’re very good at your job. All your jobs.”

“She is.” Kid’s words were muffled as he chewed. “She’s got a way with animals and people. And a kind heart.”

“I get that.”

She shivered, loving the way Gunner smiled at her. “So how long have you two lived on the ranch?”

“All our lives.” Rick took a swig of his beer. “Our family’s owned the land for some time.”

She had to ask. Had wanted to ask since she’d first met them. “For a long time, huh? So your father or grandfather named the ranch? I kind of figured you two named it. You know. After your porn addiction.”

Gunner choked on the last bite he’d taken. Laughing, Rick thumped him on the back. “I hate to disappoint you, but the name comes from the fact that our ancestor, the one who first laid claim to

the land was illiterate. He wrote his name by making three Xs on the paper.”

She felt the warmth of embarrassment form a ring of heat around her neck. “Oh. That makes sense.”

Gunner cleared his throat and downed a long drink. “I like your reasoning better. Maybe that’s the story we’ll use from now on.” His gaze jumped to Kid and back. “Although you could help us make the Triple X Ranch a real triple x place.”

She was the one to almost choke on a slice of zucchini. Was that a proposition? She found herself hoping that it was.

Suddenly, she could picture them standing over her, their shirts off and

their jeans unzipped. Their cocks would thrust straight out at her, prompting her to take one in her hand and the other in her mouth. She swallowed and imagined how musky and deliciously sinful Gunner's shaft would taste.

When she saw Kid watching her, she shook the lust-filled thoughts away. She'd already caught enough flak from him after he'd noticed her attraction to them. "Um, if you don't mind, I think I need to rest a while. It's been a long day."

Kid gave her a curious look, but she ignored him. Thankfully, he didn't say anything about their having gotten up late before making the trip from Dallas to the

ranch. He should've been more tired than she was since she'd fallen asleep during the drive.

"No problem." Gunner stood up.

"Do you need help with anything? You've got an attached bathroom if you want to take a shower." Rick's eyes seemed to grow lighter with bits of amber. "Just let me know if you want me to wash your back."

She stumbled a little as she stood up from the picnic table. "Uh. No. I'm sure I can bathe myself."

Halfway to the house, she heard Gunner call out.

"You can bathe yourself, but it wouldn't be half as much fun. Holler if you want us."

Us?

The only thing more shocking than Gunner's offer was the fact that she wanted to take him up on it.

Both of them in the shower with her?
Hell, yeah.

* * * *

“Why don't we just get it over with and tell her?”

Rick finished rubbing the oil over the saddle. He'd assumed Gunner would ask that question sooner or later. And sooner it had been.

“It's too soon. Give it time. We're having a rough time getting her to

believe that we're not sending our cattle to a shady processing facility. You think she'd handle, 'Hey, that strange feeling you're getting? That means you're our mate. And, oh, yeah. We're werebears. You know. Men who can change into bears?'" He laughed at Gunner's groan. "Yeah, that'll go over easy."

"You're right. It's just that I can't keep my hands off her for much longer. At least you got a kiss."

"I did. Which makes it even harder not to take her." Rick led the way back to the house. His gaze lifted to the bedroom window.

There she is. Up in that bedroom. If I wanted, I could march up the stairs and spread her legs.

He ran a hand through his hair. “Give it time, bro. Until then, concentrate on the tracking down who or what’s killing our stock.”

“I’ll try, but that’s not half as much fun.”

Rick chuckled, once more appreciating his brother’s humor. He kept his gaze away from the window. If he didn’t, who knew what he’d do?

* * * *

The longer Mallory was around Rick and Gunner, the more nervous she became. After the disturbing, yet intriguing conversation at the end of

dinner, she'd rushed to her bedroom to try and sort out her thoughts.

And her emotions. Sorting out her thoughts was a lot easier than understanding her feelings. What the heck was going on inside her? It was like someone had started a fire on coals that had long since grown cold. Sitting across from them had left her reeling from her growing craving. Craving for raw, wild, uninhibited sex. The kind of sex she'd only fantasized about.

What was it about them that made her mouth water and her palms itch to hold their cocks? If she believed in magic and supernatural things, she'd swear they'd put a spell on her.

Kid hadn't helped calm her nerves,

either. As soon as she'd gotten up from the table, he'd run after her and started hammering her with questions.

From what he'd seen, she was already lusting after their bodies. Then after they'd made her laugh more times than she could count, he'd started picking out event venues to hold the wedding. She'd slapped his arm and tried to change the subject several times, but had given up and left him standing in the hallway. Frustrated with herself as much as with him, she'd slammed the door in his face.

How could she explain anything to him when she didn't understand it herself?

She soon found out that being alone didn't help. After settling into the room

which consisted of laying out her toiletries, she couldn't find anything else to take her mind off the men. What was the point of unpacking? She wouldn't stay that long. Instead, she paced the room like a caged bear in a zoo.

Or did she mean lion? It was funny how her thoughts went straight to a bear. Or was it the photograph of a group of bears that hung over the bed that had her thinking about them? She climbed on top of the old-fashioned farm-style feather bed to get a better look. Were the bears posing? But that was ridiculous. Animals didn't pose. Whoever had taken the photo had gotten lucky and caught the exact moment when the bears just happened to appear as though they were

posing. She was surprised that whoever had taken the photo had managed to get four bears together in one spot, much less close enough to get all of them in one frame.

“Girl, you are losing it.”

She clambered off and started pacing again.

Muttering to herself was a bad habit, but one that she hadn't bothered to stop. Most people assumed that she was talking on a phone through a headset.

“Remember why you're here. These animals need you.”

Need. Oh, hell, how she needed Rick and Gunner.

“Urgh. Stop it. You're not here to hook

up with anyone, much less them. No matter how sexy they are.”

She'd always had a fascination with cowboys. When the men had ridden up, she'd been blown away. They were so manly, so virile sitting on top of their horses. Then when she'd seen their chiseled faces and heard the low timbre of their voices, she'd felt the warmth between her legs spur to life. Before she'd forced herself to stay on track, she'd had to smother a sigh. It was a good thing, too. With the way they'd watched her, their intense looks centered on her like she was prime rib, if they'd heard the yearning in her sigh, they would've jumped on her in a minute flat.

But none of that explained her wild

reaction to them. Although it wasn't half as strong as whenever she was around them, the arousal of desire still sang over her skin. They were amazing and sexy as hell with their cowboy hats and perfectly fitting jeans, the type of men she'd never thought she could attract. She'd given up on thinking her fantasies and wet dreams could ever come true. Those were for starry-eyed young girls, not someone like her who had her head on straight and her mind set firmly on her goals. And yet, here they were, the subjects of her investigation and the objects of her lust sitting at a picnic table and chowing down on meat.

She groaned and flopped onto the bed.

Instead of being disgusted when they chewed on a hamburger, she'd found her mouth salivating, her attention focused on the stubble running along their square jaws and wondering how it would feel to skim her hand along the prickly hair.

Before she knew it, the sun had set and she'd moved on to wondering how the rest of their bodies would feel. Hard as rock? Soft to the touch in other places? Flaccid? Or erect and ready to roll?

"This is insane."

"Mal, are you okay?"

Had Kid stood outside her room all this while? "I'm fine. Go away."

"I think we need to talk."

The last thing she wanted to do was talk about her strange feelings. But she

knew Kid well enough to know that he wouldn't give up. He'd stand outside her bedroom all night if he had to.

Checking her appearance in the mirror—*why are my cheeks so pink?*—she opened the door and found his big mug staring at her, worry emphasizing the lines in his lovable face. Guilt swamped her. He cared for her like a sister and she'd slammed the door in his face.

Determined not to let him get the first word in, she preempted his first question with one of her own. "I'm starving. Want to raid the kitchen? I didn't get much to eat at dinner."

Kid was never one to turn down food. "Sure. You know what I always say. If

there's a fridge, I'm a-eatin'."

She led the way, easing around corners, then checking below before they hurried down the stairs. Only a couple of lights were on, but they gave her enough room to find her way to the kitchen.

"I guess Rick and Gunner have already gone to bed. Do ranchers do the 'early to bed, early to rise' thing like farmers?"

She hunted for plates, utensils, and whatever food she could find. After getting two plates, she found the walk-in pantry and a loaf of what looked like homemade bread. Did people still make their own bread?

"Beats me, Kid. Either that or they're trying to avoid their house guests."

"There's no way they're avoiding us."

Or at least, not you. Not after the way they were looking at you over dinner. I'm surprised they remembered I was there."

She rummaged in a drawer and found a knife. "See if you can find some jelly in the refrigerator. And maybe some raw veggies." Getting out six pieces of bread, she began spreading the peanut butter along its smooth, soft surface. Kid would no doubt eat three of the four sandwiches.

"Here you go."

She took the grape jelly and dipped her knife into its gooey goodness. "I am so hungry."

"Then you eat two of them."

She gave him a “yeah, right” face and had them both laughing. “Shh. We don’t want them to find us. In fact, grab a couple of those water bottles and let’s take our food out to the porch.”

The night was balmy whenever the slight breeze let up. They sat in two rockers with a small table between them and began eating. For several minutes, nothing was said. Instead, she leaned back and studied the bright stars above her.

“I could live on a ranch like this.”

Kid stopped rocking, almost as surprised as she was at her admission. “Could you live on this ranch?”

She tried to make a sound somewhere

between a laugh and a scoff, but fell short. “Where did that crazy idea come from?”

“From the fact that they’ve got a hankerin’”—he grinned at using the old-time word—“for you big-time. If I had to make a bet, I’d say those two guys fell head over boots in love with you the second they saw you.”

Did he really think so? A flutter erupted in her stomach that had nothing to do with her hunger. “Oh, my God, Kid, you’re such a hopeless romantic.”

“Yeah, I am, but I know what I saw. And I saw the same thing from you.”

Obviously, he wasn’t going to drop the subject. She took a sip of her water, determined not to meet his intense gaze.

“I think you were in the sun too long.”

“Go on, Mal. Try and deny that you feel something for them.”

She could try to lie, but Kid had a way of knowing whenever she did. “Fine. I admit it. I’m attracted to them. But simple lust is a far cry from falling in love with two men I don’t even know.”

Kid finally leaned back in his chair, letting her relax. He took a huge bite, devouring half his first sandwich. “Normally, I’d agree with you, but not now. Uh-uh. I don’t know what’s going on, but something sure is.”

She worried her lower lip, then decided to tell him. Setting down her plate and drink, she gripped the arm of

the chair and dived in. “Maybe you’re right. At least about something going on.”

His eyes grew big as he put his food and drink down and leaned toward her. “Finally. You admit it. Spill.”

“I can’t explain it, but every time I’m near them, hell, even now when they’re not right here, I get this strange sensation inside me.”

“What do you mean strange? Good strange or bad strange?”

“Good.” She thought about it a moment longer. “Yeah. Definitely good. Amazing. Exhilarating. Like I can’t wait to run my hands and tongue all over them. Like I want to crawl on top of them and have my way with them.”

“Wow. That sounds incredible.” Kid crammed the rest of his first sandwich then most of his second sandwich into his mouth. He swallowed it all whole. “Then why don’t you?”

She paused, her hand in midair with the water bottle. “What? Are you kidding? First, I don’t know them.”

He waved that excuse away. “Oh, bull. I can’t think of a better way to get to know them.”

She let out her exasperation in a groan. “Second, they might be involved with cruelty to animals.”

He hesitated, then spoke his mind. “Sorry, but I think we’re accusing innocent men. From what we saw today,

they treat their animals better than most people treat their pet dogs. The only thing missing is for them to carry a calf around in a very large purse.”

“And third...” Her mind blanked.

“See? You can’t come up with another reason. So just do it already. I know I would.”

“You’d hump a post if you thought it would call you later.”

Instead of being insulted, Kid let out a loud laugh, then slammed his palm over his mouth. He paused a moment to see if he’d awakened the men. “That’s the truth. Still, how many times have you told me about your fantasy of sex with two hot cowboys? Well, here’s your chance. Grab it before you lose it.”

A tingle ran down her spine. Could she do that? Should she? She may not understand why her body felt so wonderfully weird whenever they were around, but she did know that she'd love to fulfill her fantasy. Even if only for a short time.

Kid waited, an expectant expression making his face light up. "Besides, you could use a good fucking."

"Kid!"

"I don't mean that you're a bitch or anything, but it wouldn't hurt you any to let go for a night or two. So will you?"

She didn't want to say, knowing he'd hold her to it like a promise. "I'll think about it."

“I’ll take that as a yes.” He stood, snagging his empty plate. “I’m going back for fourths. Do you want another?”

“No thanks. I’d rather sit here and look at the stars.”

“Suit yourself.”

She lay her head against the chair and let her mind wander. As they had almost all day, her thoughts took her back to the men. She smiled as the image of them riding toward her grew stronger. Their eyes, sometimes growing brighter with bits of an amber color mixing with the brown, locked onto her. Or were Rick’s eyes hazel? They not only brought in the amber, but changed with the way the sun hit his face. She’d have to look closer

next time to be sure.

“Couldn’t sleep, huh?”

She jolted upright, aware that she’d gotten so caught up in her thoughts that she hadn’t heard them coming. “Um, I was just kind of daydreaming. Or rather, night dreaming. Whatever you call it.”

Rick eased into the chair Kid had vacated while Gunner leaned against the railing and stretched out his legs, crossing them at the ankles. He didn’t appear apologetic even though he said, “Sorry. We didn’t mean to bother you.”

Oh, you bother me, all right. You bother me in all the right ways.

She realized now that she’d felt the zing of the energy whip into her again before they’d let her know they were

there. Her body came even more alive as though dosed with a full load of adrenaline. Should she ask them about the sensation? But if they didn't feel it, she'd get nothing but embarrassment for doing so. It was better to keep quiet.

Surely if they'd felt the same thing, they'd say something.

"That's okay. I guess I should be going to bed." She began to rise when Rick took hold of her arm.

"Stay and talk a bit first."

His request wasn't gruff or confrontational. For that reason and because she couldn't bring herself to leave them, she nodded and sat back down.

“I wonder where Kid went to. He was supposed to be getting more to eat. I hope you don’t mind that we helped ourselves.”

“Not a problem. You didn’t eat much at dinner.”

She resisted the urge to say why, and instead, decided to change the subject. “It’s really pretty out here.”

The pride shone on their faces. Gunner stuck his hands into his pockets and slid his gaze skyward. “Yeah, it is. And quiet. At least, it usually is.”

“Usually?”

“Kid has one hell of a snore on him.”

She laughed, knowing what he was talking about. She often had to take a

sleeping pill whenever they traveled together, even when they had separate rooms. Kid's snoring reminded her of a 747 airplane revving its engines. "You might want to invest in earplugs. Or move him into the barn."

She winced at her slip of the tongue. "Not that we're staying longer than tonight. Oh, wait. So he went to bed instead of getting more food?"

That was odd. He'd only had three sandwiches, hardly half what he'd normally eat.

"You're welcome to stay as long as you want." Rick's mouth twisted into a smile. "To get the evidence you need, of course."

"Thanks." What more could she say?

That she'd use the time to crucify them? Or that she'd love to spend more time with them? More personal, got-to-have-you time?

She met Gunner's gaze and felt the sizzle heighten so fast and hard that she was sure they could hear the hum of her body's sexual motor going into high gear. She crossed her legs, sure that if they looked at that part of her body, they'd see a dark spot forming between her legs. She was wet, hot, and needing relief that only they could provide. She trembled and lowered her eyes. That, however, didn't help when her attention landed on Gunner's crotch.

"We meant to ask at dinner, but we

were..." Rick hesitated, searching for a word.

"Distracted," offered Gunner.

She jerked her gaze away.

"Anyway, we wanted to ask about Kid. He said he was your friend."

"He is. I've known Mike—Kid—for a year now."

"And how good a friend is he?"

She frowned at Rick. "Not that it's any of your business, but he's a very good friend. Why do you ask?"

"I know you two say you're friends, but is there anything else between you?" Gunner shifted from one foot to the other.

"Are you asking if Kid and I are emotionally involved?" The fact that

they were asking the question had her trying not to beam. That was verbal proof that they were interested.

“Emotionally or sexually,” added Rick who didn’t appear half as nervous as Gunner.

“Again, not that it’s any of your business, but no to both.” She paused, giving her next revelation more impact. “Besides, I’m not his type. He’s gay.”

If that wasn’t relief swamping their faces, she didn’t know what relief looked like.

“Gay, huh?” Rick nodded over and over, as though he really liked her answer.

“Yep. He likes his sexual partners

with different equipment than mine. And hairier. You know. As in bears.”

From their reaction, she wondered if they knew the nickname for gay men who were larger, hairier, and masculine-looking like Kid.

Gunner’s laugh rang out and Rick soon joined in. “He’s a bear. Well, I’ll be damned. We should’ve picked up on that.”

“I guess we were too involved to pay attention. That’s a hell of a good deal.”

“What’s up with you two? I don’t get why Kid being a gay man is so funny.”

They exchanged another telling look. It was obvious they didn’t want to tell her. “Okay, well, it’s fine if you don’t want to answer. I’d better get some real rest

anyway.”

She never made it to the door.

Chapter Four

Rick grabbed Mallory's arm and yanked her to him. The force of his hold swung her around until she bumped against his chest. He inhaled, drawing in her sweet aroma, and let the whirling spin of his lust wreak havoc in his body and mind. Restraining himself a minute longer wasn't an option. Having done so for most of the day had been hard enough on him. If he didn't have her soon, he'd break apart.

The soft "oh" she made as he spun her around was like a siren's call to his inner bear. The beast inside him growled, then burst outward. If he hadn't

expected that to happen, he wouldn't have been able to hold it back. Even then, it was like standing in front of a fast-moving semitruck and holding up a hand to stop it.

He held her arms, her body flat against his as he gazed into her brilliant green eyes. Her eyes were unique, smoldering orbs of emerald that took hold of his cock and sent it straight into an erection. Her body was warm against his, radiating a heat that only his intended mate could give him. She trembled and it delighted him.

“What are you doing?” Her whisper was breathy in an urgent seductress way.

He shook his head, determined not to let her talk him out of it. “Don't talk.”

He should've known she wouldn't obey him, but that was part of her charm. He'd always liked spunky women who had minds of their own. Crushing his mouth to hers, he cut off her attempt to speak, no doubt to argue.

Had anything ever tasted so good? She was like his favorite food, his need to breathe air, the wine he loved in the evenings all rolled into one. He devoured her mouth, craving more and more of her flavor. She was a sex kitten and a wild cougar combined into the form of his intended female.

She pushed against him, but it wasn't forceful enough to convince him that she meant it. If she'd fought against him,

really fought against him, he would've turned her loose even though he feared it would kill him. Instead, when she didn't fight, he pulled her even closer. If he could've made her body sink into his, he would have done just that.

She moaned, another sign that she didn't want to resist. His hand slid to her rounded butt, then cupped it to shove her crotch against his legs. She was short, but he'd solve that problem easily enough. Taking her under her arms, he lifted her and moved forward, driving her back against the house. She broke their kiss, her eyes wide with alarm, until he couldn't stand to see the fear any longer. But that didn't mean he'd let her go. Instead, he buried his head against

the curve of her neck. He nibbled as his hand found its way to her legs.

Wrap them around me, he silently urged.

The fact that she did sent his bear roaring its glee. The animal clawed at him, tearing him from the insides out, but he'd never give into it. At least not all the way. Keeping all the shift back was an impossible feat. The tips of his fangs burst through his gums to lengthen his teeth. And yet, somehow, he managed not to sink his fangs into her neck and claim her.

Claiming her would come later.

“Rick.”

He heard the pain of burning desire in

his brother's voice, but he didn't care. To stop, to let his brother have his share of her, wasn't going to happen. He was too insane with his lust for her. Like the connection that had brought them together, his need couldn't be broken.

He yanked on her T-shirt, pulling the material away from her body so he could slip his hand under and feel the softness of her belly. Her bra gave way and he found her breast. Pain from the pressure of his cock against his jeans seared into him, but he didn't care. That pain was nothing to the agony he'd experience if he didn't have her.

“Damn it, Rick. Share.”

He growled at Gunner's intrusion, then almost let his beast go free to attack

when Gunner put his hand on his shoulder. He lifted his head, met his brother's amber-flecked gaze, and groaned. Keeping her next to him, he turned around and put his back to the wall.

She gasped, her body jolting when she felt Gunner's hand grip her shirt and tear it away. The sound of the material ripping sliced into the air along with the first sign of her refusal.

“No.”

He met Gunner's eyes and saw the same answer he'd give her. They weren't going to let her go. Not unless she demanded it more forcefully.

He lifted his head, ready to see the

fear in her eyes and the unspoken demand to put her down. Instead, his heart skipped a beat as he saw blatant lust written all over her face. She wanted them as much as they wanted her.

In the next moment, he'd torn her jeans, ripping the front of them away from her, then shoving them down over her bare feet to fall to the wooden floor. His brother snagged her panties before he could, getting rid of that barrier to her treasure.

Her mouth was parted, her breaths coming hard and fast. And still she didn't make them stop.

His fingers plunged into her pussy, saw her quick inhale, then a sharp release of breath as she accepted his

invasion. His bear's growl slid out of him, but she didn't flinch. Her legs tightened around him, using her knees to strengthen her hold. She supported her weight against his as he jerked his jeans open, then shoved them to his ankles. His cock thrust out, ready for action, and pushed against her smooth mons.

Damn. She's so wet and hot.

She'll be tight, too.

He shoved his hand against her, ramming it against her slit as his fingers slid deeper into her pussy. Working them back and forth, around and around, he watched her face, using the small changes of her expression to find her sweet spot.

She tensed when he found it, then closed her eyes. Yet before she could climax, he withdrew his fingers, grabbed her legs, and pounded his cock inside her, his shaft hunting for the tender patch his fingers had found.

I was right. She's fucking tight.

As tight as she was, he felt her clench her pussy walls, pressing against his aching cock even tighter. His balls drew up, and faster than he'd have wanted, yet unable to control it, his orgasm thundered through him.

“Damn it!”

She clutched the hair at his neck, then lay back so fast that he almost didn't catch her. She shoved her thighs against

his. The shudders rolled out of him as he dug his fingers into her shoulders and kept her to him. Her hair flowed over her back as she put her face toward the roof of the porch and cried out her torturous delight.

Like the intended mates they were, they climaxed together, mixing their juices. He slammed into her again, determined to hit the back of her at the zenith of his release. The thin line between pain and pleasure bore into him, pushing him to let her go while clinging to her all the harder. She cried out again, and as she did, Gunner covered her mouth.

“Easy, baby. We wouldn’t want to wake up Kid.”

Rick clung to the remnants of his orgasm, his mind spinning as anger hit him. When had he ever come so fast? He'd wanted his first time with his mate to last, but he'd had little control. The intensity of their coming together had set off a sexual bomb that neither of them could have defused.

“Mine.”

Rick wanted to protest, but the energy to do so was gone as Gunner, his jeans and boots kicked to the side, tugged her away from him. Gunner carried her to the railing and set her down. Roughly, he pushed her legs apart and thrust his cock inside her. Rick, still struggling to regain his breath, pulled his jeans up, then fell

into a chair.

* * * *

Mallory was lost in a sea of sex. When Rick had first grabbed her, she'd been frightened, even terrified. But then the sizzle that had taken over her body and mind since arriving at the ranch had suddenly spiraled toward the heavens. Instinct, nothing like she'd ever experienced, snared her, driving away all the protests her mind shouted. She went from zero to sixty in the space of only a few seconds, her body becoming an instrument meant solely to give and receive pleasure.

She'd wanted Rick as much as she'd

ever wanted anything. When his fingers pierced her, she'd rocketed upward, leaving nothing left but the feel of him inside her. Heat radiated from his body to hers, back again, then centered in her pussy. Without a shred of doubt, she knew she'd waited for him, for them to have her. Nothing, and yet, everything made sense.

Her heart still pounded in her ears, her pulse racing at light speed even after her megaclimax with Rick. Then when Gunner had stolen her away, the electric energy coursing between Rick and her had shifted, surging toward Gunner.

She didn't hesitate to open her legs when he put her on the railing. Her

fingernails dug into his arms, even to the point of breaking his skin and bringing forth spots of red.

Like Rick, Gunner was a master at wielding his weapon of desire. He plunged into her, each time going harder and farther. He was huge, too, spreading her pussy walls until pleasure threatened to change into pain. His mouth found her nipple, his tongue lavishing it only to take it between his teeth and tug on it.

The wood underneath her buttocks rubbed against her skin as Gunner's arms enveloped her and kept her pulled against him. She locked her ankles behind him and held on, certain that if she didn't, she'd fall backward into the garden.

Her fantasy was coming true. Kid had urged her to let it happen, and yet she'd tried her best to resist. Once Rick had trapped her in his arms, her resistance had dissolved, flooded by the sensations that muddled her thoughts.

She whimpered, daring to turn Gunner loose to ease her hand between their bodies. His abdomen, hard as any stone wall, struck her hand as she moved her fingers to spread her folds. She rubbed her clit, positioning her hand to feel his cock work back and forth. The slickness between her legs made it harder to pinch her clit, but she didn't have to touch it hard. Her clit, like the rest of her body, was on fire.

She rubbed, adding another level to the feeling of his cock driving into her pussy. Her clit set up a pounding beat, aching so much that it put her on the edge of pain. She leaned back, angling her body to give him easier access to her G-spot. She had no doubt that he'd find it just as his brother had done.

“Fuck, you’re so tight.”

Gunner’s eyes had changed, going from a soft seductive brown to a lighter shade that sparkled with tiny dots of amber. His hand covered hers, helping to glide her fingers over her clit. Her juices covered both their hands.

“Next time I’m going to taste you first.”

A thrill powered through her at the vision of his head between her legs.

“Look at me, Mallory.”

She lifted her gaze to his and her breath hitched in her throat. The look he gave her stunned her. How could anyone, especially a man she'd just met, look at her with such hunger, such need, such... Was it love? It was impossible, and yet, she would've sworn that's what she saw. She glanced at Rick who leaned forward in the chair, his lust-clouded eyes fixed on her face, and saw the same remarkable glint there.

Gunner took hold of her legs, lifting her bottom higher while pushing her upper torso back. She let out a yelp as

she felt her body sliding off the rail, but she needn't have worried. His strong arms, muscles rippling with the effort, secured her to him.

With a groan, he pierced her pussy again, harder and stronger than before. His fingers moved hers out of the way, then captured her clit between them.

Delirium, filled with the sinful delight of his cock inside her pussy, sent her flying over the edge of another climax. She was beyond thought, beyond caring if what they were doing was right or wrong. The only thing she cared about was feeling his cock inside her and her body next to his. Time to think about what she'd done would come soon enough. Her body shuddered, sending

out blast after blast of her cream. She'd given herself to them, all of her being, and expected nothing in return except to see the elation on their faces and feel their cum sliding between her legs.

His thrusts were hard, primal, almost brutal, and yet each time his cock entered her, the sensation of it pushing toward the end of her brought unmeasurable joy. He could do whatever he wanted with her and she wouldn't complain. Hell, she'd rejoice.

Her body worked on its own now. She was unable to tell it what to do, how to move. Uncontrollable trembles racked her as she held onto him, letting his shudders struggle against hers. She

clawed at his back, needing to get the pressure of her release out in every way she could. Bright flashes of light set up fireworks behind her eyelids as she gave in, her body erupting in an orgasmic explosion.

Her body shook, blocking out everything else.

“Easy, baby. Just let yourself go. Don’t worry about anything. I’ve got you.”

She clung to him as the night air whispered against her body. Shudders still shook her like aftershocks. She’d never experienced anything like it. Not one, much less two.

And still, the hum inside her was still there, inching higher and higher. Whether

it would last, she didn't know. But if that was what had drawn them together so quickly, she'd welcome it to stay.

Gunner eased her onto her feet, holding her until she was steady. She leaned against him and put her face against his strong chest.

"That was great, baby. Better than I imagined and I imagined a lot."

Rick was next to her, his hands running over her body, soothing her while sending the need for them rising. "That was amazing. *You* were amazing."

She struggled to find the right thing to say. "I don't know what came over me."

"It's okay. We were swept up in it, too."

Embarrassment swamped her. “I never do this kind of thing. Never.” What would they think of her? Even though she wasn’t staying long, how they viewed her suddenly mattered more than she could say.

“Baby, it’s okay. It’s only natural. We’re drawn to you and you’re drawn to us.” Rick brushed her hair back and pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck.

“I can’t believe this.” She wanted to stay, wanted to feel their hands all over her again. Failing that, just listening to their voices would’ve been enough. Yet how could she? She’d already made one mistake. No. She had to get away from them. Only then would she be able to

think straight.

“Stay.” Gunner took off his shirt, leaving himself totally naked, and put it around her, tenderly, lovingly.

“No. I’ve got to get back to my room. It’s okay. I’m okay. Just let me go.” She didn’t bother to gather the shreds of her clothing. Instead, she darted inside the house and raced up the stairs to her bedroom.

By the time she reached her room, she was in tears. Nothing made sense. Tomorrow she’d be gone and the brief time they’d had together would only be a memory. One she would treasure.

But wasn’t that the problem? Leaving them behind on the porch had been hard enough. How could she leave them

behind forever?

Wracked with sobs, she threw herself onto her bed.

* * * *

Rick snagged Gunner's arm, keeping him from running after Mallory. "Leave her alone."

"But she's crying. That's not how sex with us should end, man."

Rick's gut twisted. How had things gone from so great to so fucked up so fast? "I know, but it's not going to do any good to talk to her now. Give her the night. Once she calms down, the connection will bring her around again.

Until then, she needs the space. Otherwise, we're going to overwhelm her and that might send her packing."

Gunner yanked on his jeans and Rick started doing the same. Like his brother, he wanted to comfort her, but if he did, he was afraid he'd want her again. She didn't need another romp of sex right then. That would only make her more confused.

"We need to tell her. Now that we've had her, we can do that, right?"

He considered it and wanted to tell her, but the time wasn't right. And the thought of telling her? That put a churning in his gut that was born of fear. If they told her so soon, would she run?

"Not yet. We still have the problem of

the stock getting killed to deal with. Plus, if having sex this fast threw her for a loop, can you imagine what it'd do to her if we told her what we are? Naw, one thing at a time. Let her get used to feeling the connection, then we can tell her the rest."

"What if she leaves before then?"

"She won't. We won't let her."

Gunner groaned, then flopped onto a chair. "It's the real deal. *She's* the real deal. You know that, right?"

"Yeah. I do. And after this, there's no doubt that she feels the connection."

"Then why do you razz her so much?"

Rick smiled and wondered if he could explain something he couldn't get a grip

on. “I don’t know. Remember the Cursons?”

“What the hell do they have to do with this?”

Don and Mary Cursons were a couple who lived in Shatland and were infamous for their screaming matches and public arguments. “Remember how much they fought?”

“Yeah. Most of us were surprised when they didn’t kill each other. But I’m still not getting it.”

“They fought like hell on earth. But do you remember what they did after the fights?”

Gunner chuckled, finally getting his point. “I sure do. Half the town could hear them making up, having sex

anywhere and everywhere they could. Damn, sometimes it got downright embarrassing for the rest of us.”

“That’s right. They fought hard and they made up hard. That’s what old Don said. He also said they loved each other more than life itself. That it was an intense love that had their emotions swinging first one way then the other.”

“And you think that’s how it is with you and Mallory?”

“It could be. We just haven’t worked out all the kinks yet.”

“It’s the connection, all right, but it’s her, too. She’s beautiful and smart and funny and—”

“Everything we ever dreamed of.

Yeah, she's the one, all right."

"But we can't tell her."

Rick pushed down the urge to run upstairs and tell her everything. "Not yet. But we will. Soon."

"I hope you're right about when, bro."

"Me, too."

* * * *

The next morning, after a long and fitful night interspersed with dreams of Rick and Gunner making love to her, Mallory finally forced herself out of bed.

She recalled the embarrassment of last night, but in the light of day, she didn't feel that way any longer. After all, she

was a grown woman and had the right to have a little fun every so often. It wasn't a mistake. Aside from the fact that they hadn't used protection—a fact which she regretted, but couldn't do anything about now—she had to admit that given the opportunity, she'd do it again. The sex had been amazing, mind and pussy blowing, and her fantasy had come true. Why should she be embarrassed about that? Any woman in her place would've done the same thing.

As for what they might think of her for giving into them so quickly? That was the old double standard rearing its ugly head. Hell, hadn't they wanted her as much as she'd wanted them?

Then there was the strange connection she felt with them. Never had she felt so comfortable with two men who could turn her on as much as they did. It was as though she'd known them all her life. She thought about that and decided that wasn't true. It was more like she'd *waited* for them all her life, as though they were three lovers separated by time and distance, and had finally found their way back to each other.

It was a fanciful idea, but one she couldn't shake.

So what now? Was last night a one-time thing? Were they just having a good time with the woman who was causing them so much trouble? If they thought of

it as just a fling, would they ask her to leave today? Even if they did, she wasn't sure she could. She was drawn to them in an invisible, incomprehensible way, but that connection was as strong as a massive chain wrapped around her body and locked to theirs.

She had to face them. Only then would she know where she stood.

She hurried to get dressed, then studied her reflection in the bathroom mirror. The wrinkled shirt and faded jeans didn't do much for her figure. In fact, she looked like an old married woman, the kind who no longer cared about her appearance. She could sort through her suitcase again, but she knew it wouldn't help. The clothes she'd

brought were all the same. Boring and comfortable, not at all the way she'd like the men to see her. But it couldn't be helped.

“Why should I care anyway? What happened was wonderful, but that's it. Getting involved with ranchers who've been accused of hurting their animals is a stupid move. What if the accusation turns out to be true? I need to keep my objectivity.”

And yet, she knew that was impossible. She could try and believe that she could stay uninvolved in every way, but the ache, the yearning for them told her she was lying to herself.

“Hey, Mal?”

She swung the door opened to find Kid giving her a sheepish look. “Good morning, Mal.”

“Hey, what happened to you last night?”

“I’m sorry I disappeared, but when I walked into the kitchen, I saw Rick and Gunner go out the front door. So, I figured I’d give you love birds some time alone. I went up the back stairs and straight to my room.” He wiggled his eyebrows up and down. “I’m sure you didn’t mind swamping my company for theirs.”

She tried to hide it, but knew it was too late. Just the mention of the Northman men had sent a hot vibration to

her pussy that she was willing to bet he'd seen.

“I was right, wasn't I?” He narrowed his eyes, then fisted his large hands on his hips. “Holy shit, girl. You got laid, didn't you?”

She had to get on her tiptoes to slap her hand over his mouth. “Keep it down, damn it. You don't have to tell the whole world.” But keeping Kid quiet was a feat she couldn't manage.

“You did! Tell me. I want all the deets.”

Most of the time, Kid acted like any man would, gay or straight, but whenever he got excited, he tended to lapse into the vocabulary of a high school gossip queen.

“Not on your life.”

“Aw, come on, Mal. Give.”

“Kid, I swear, if you hound me about this, I’m going to—” What could she do anyway? “Well, I don’t know what, but I’ll figure out something.”

“Was it Rick? Or Gunner?” His mouth fell open and his eyes were round circles. “Do not tell me you did both of them! Oh, my lord, hallelujah, the dry spell has been broken.”

She blushed and slapped him on the arm. “Okay, now I’m really not telling you.”

“Uh-huh.” He arched his eyebrow in a “yeah, right” gesture. “We’ll see about that.”

“Kid, I’m serious.”

The struggle for him to accept her decision was evident, but he finally gave in. No doubt because he figured he’d get it out of her later.

“Oh, all right. We’ve got to get a move-on anyway. Unless you need some breakfast. The guys and I already ate.”

“The guys and you? So you’re getting chummy with them?”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure what you mean, but yeah, I’m getting to know them.” His wide grin was back. “But I sure as hell didn’t get as chummy as you did.”

He’d scored a point with that one.

“But seriously, Mal. They’re decent

guys and I think we've got them pegged wrong. From what they told me and what we've seen, all they want is to keep their livestock happy and healthy."

"Until they send the cattle to slaughter, of course."

Kid had a sudden interest in his feet. "Yeah, well, that is their business. Just because we don't like it doesn't mean they're doing anything wrong. Rick mentioned that he was going to have a friend check up on Lawson's operations. After all, you can't expect them to drop everything—everyone—and run up to Kansas to check the place out. If they're putting cattle down the wrong way, then their friend will find out and let them know."

“Wow. So you’re saying you see it their way now?”

“It’s not their way or our way. It’s the right way that matters. We might be on the same team. At least some of the time.” He met her gaze dead on. “Raising cattle is their business and their livelihood. As long as they do it the humane way, then, no, I don’t see anything wrong with it.”

Kid rarely disagreed with her. When he did, he had a way of making her see his point and this time was no different. Her argument had never been with ranchers who did the right thing by their animals. That still didn’t mean she’d eat meat or condone raising animals for

food anytime soon, but it didn't make them criminals, either.

“Let's not get into it, okay, Mal? The guys want to take us out on the range today. They said something about checking the livestock and giving us a firsthand look. I think they're trying to win you over. So, like I said, unless you need to grab some grub first, they're waiting in the barn.”

“Grab some grub? Wow, you're really getting into this whole cowboy thing, aren't you?”

“When the cowboys look like they do, then I say, yippee ki oh ki yay.”

She laughed and tried to ignore the growing ache between her legs. She wasn't sure why they'd invited Kid

along, but that didn't matter. She'd find a way to get alone with them again.

"That's a good idea. I could use a ride."

She led the way down the hallway to the staircase. Kid lumbered behind her, worried that he'd break a horse's back with his weight.

"Once we've done the trail thing, don't you think we've seen enough? These guys are responsible, caring cattle ranchers. Or are we staying because you want more time with them?"

If she told the truth, she'd have no real excuse, other than her libido, to stay. "I think we need a little longer to be sure. And if, in fact, they don't know what

Lawson's doing, it's time they found out. I want to be here when they do."

"Uh-huh. I'm sure the Lawson thing is your big reason."

She whirled on him, ready to argue, but he stuck up one of his huge hands to cover her face. She yanked his big paw away.

"Okay, okay. I believe you. That's your reason."

A few minutes later, she was racing him to the barn. She was quicker and got there first.

Damn, but they're so hot.

Like a television ad for a new Western show, the men made her think of long, leisurely rides and cozy nights cuddled together in sleeping bags. Her body

tensed in all the right places and her mouth went dry. Two other horses were saddled and ready with their reins wrapped around the top railing of a stall.

It wasn't until she'd laid eyes on them and the tantalizing current hit her dead center, harder than ever, that she wondered. Had she ruined any chance of them having a longer, meaningful relationship? Her body craved theirs, but more stunning was the realization that she yearned for them in an emotional way as well.

What would it be like to stay with them for the rest of her life? What would it be like to have their children? When had she started thinking in terms of a

relationship? And yet, she couldn't dismiss the possibility, the hope that whatever was happening between could turn into something wonderful.

“Morning, sleepyhead.” Rick, dressed in his usual style of worn jeans, scuffed boots, and a black T-shirt, ran a palm over a large black horse. “We wondered if you were going to sleep until noon.”

She hadn't expected a huge greeting, but she'd hoped for more than a “mornin'” and an admonishment about sleeping in. They were acting like nothing had gone on between them last night.

Gunner gave her a wink and yanked on the saddle cinch of his horse. “We thought you'd like to get a closer look at

the livestock.” He shot her a bemused look. “As long as you don’t bring any paint. We like our cattle in their natural color.”

She loved his sense of humor, even when it was directed at her.

“But first, we’d like you to meet someone.”

She followed the men with Kid at her heels as they strolled down the middle of the barn and came to the last stall. A beautiful chestnut-colored horse scraped her hoof over the ground, demanding their attention, then shook her mane and moved toward the railing to lay her muzzle on Rick’s palm. The excitement of visitors sent the mare’s colt prancing

and whipping his tail in a frenzy of circular movement.

“This is Rocket.”

“Oh, my God, he’s so cute.”

“We figured you’d think so. Come on inside. Don’t make any quick movements, though. He’s like any other youngster. Skittish and ready to kick.” Gunner opened the gate as Rick kept the mother horse occupied.

Copying the way he entered the stall, slowly, with her attention focused on the horse and her colt, she got as close to the baby as she could. She lifted her hand, then waited for the go-ahead to touch him.

“Aw, he’s so soft and sweet.”

“Yeah, he’s a good one. He comes

from good stock. She's a great dam and his sire is one of the best in the area."

"So will he learn to run cattle? Or will you use him for rodeos and the like?"

Gunner cooed at the colt, trying to keep him calm. "We don't do rodeos much anymore. We'd rather stick close to home. But he's got his role to play."

"And what's that?" She made the same comforting sounds Gunner made. His wide eyes grew softer as he dared to push his muzzle against her leg.

"He's going to a friend of ours who runs a ranch for kids with problems."

"With problems? Like what? And how can he help?"

“Once he’s ready, this little guy will get paired up with a kid that’s had drug problems or comes from a lousy home. Horses have a knack for putting things in perspective and that helps the kids in residential placement facilities get their heads back on straight.”

“Really? That sounds great.” She caught Kid’s pointed look. Maybe she hadn’t done enough research before she’d accused Rick and Gunner of animal neglect. Two men who would help kids in trouble couldn’t abuse an animal, could they? Not to her way of thinking. “So you sell the horses to them and they train them?”

“We do both. The training comes free

with the purchase of the horse. We figure we got lucky in life so it's our way of giving back."

They're simply too good to be true.

She stopped, worry striking deep inside her. Maybe they really were too good to be true. What was the old saying? "If it seems too good to be true, it probably is"? What if last night was their way of distracting her or winning her over so she wouldn't see the truth?

She took her hand away, then faced him. Confronted him was more like it. "Is this your way of convincing me that you're good men? Helpful ranchers who have gotten a bad rap?"

He drew back, and scowled at her. "Damn, woman, why so cynical?"

Guilt and shame flooded her, wiping away the body heat she'd gathered from the Northman brothers. She had no reason to believe they weren't as good as they seemed. As for last night, they all shared responsibility for that and she didn't want anything to color her memory of it. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have accused you."

Gunner, however, had already stormed out of the stall and was striding toward the front of the barn.

Rick's hard gaze seared into hers. "You're a piece of work, you know that?" He gestured for her to get out of the stall, then closed the gate behind them and followed his brother.

“Hey, guys, give her a break. Sometimes her mouth gets ahead of her head. You can understand that. Right, Rick?” Kid scowled at her as he rushed after them. “Can we still go on that ride?”

She didn't hurry, not with the looks they gave her. By the time she'd made it back to the saddled horses, she was ready to apologize again. She hadn't been thinking when she'd said it. After all, she found it difficult to think straight anytime she was near them.

“I'm sorry. Kid's right. I don't think before I speak and I had no right to say what I did. Can you please forgive me?”

She would've sworn that they spoke a

silent language that was communicated through glances and body language. But she wasn't about to ask them about it. At least, not until later.

Gunner tugged the reins loose, then stuck his boot into the stirrup, and threw his leg on top of his horse. "We all make mistakes."

"And we did promise Kid a ride," added Rick.

Gunner clucked at his horse, getting the horse to move. "Choose either of the horses and saddle up. Although Kid might need the dappled mare. It's a lot gentler than the other one."

"You don't have to tell me again," joked Kid.

Mallory eased over to take the white

horse's reins and grazed her hand along its neck. She was thankful that the men had let her accusation pass. Clutching the saddle horn, she swung onto the horse. Rebel dashed around the corner, gave them a cheerful bark, then sat down on his haunches.

Thirty minutes later, she'd forgotten about her stupid remark. She was too entranced by the ranch to let any hint of doubt surround her. The summer's drought had left the ground dry and brown, but green patches of trees broke up the monotony. A small lake filled with fish was only a half mile from the house and looked tempting in the heat of the morning.

They passed through one herd after another while Rick pointed out the health of the animals. She didn't see any problems with the herds or with the group of horses that came up to them, seeking attention and to nicker at their mounts. The beauty of the animals, as well as the peacefulness of the land surrounding them, rolled over her as she rocked back and forth in her saddle. If she could ride over the ranch every day, she'd count herself as one lucky woman.

She might've been lulled into a serene state of mind if the Northman men weren't close-by. The strange sensation that she'd come to love cocooned her with their presence. She studied them,

from the way they sat tall in the saddle to the way they scanned the herd. They'd stop every so often to pass a loving hand over the head of a steer or the mane of a horse, then move on.

It was crazy, but she found herself resenting the attention they paid to the animals.

Good grief. I'm jealous.

They kept riding, urging their horses over the next ridge. She reined her horse to a stop as she took in two oil rigs pumping in the distance. "So you have oil wells, too?"

Rick pulled his horse up next to hers. Without thinking, she reached out to him, letting the sizzle that rushed between them bring her arm up. She blinked,

realized what she was about to do, then dropped her hand to her thigh.

“We have a few wells. In fact, with the way the industry’s going, we make more money from oil than from raising cattle. The oil leases run for several more years and we don’t handle any of the mechanics of getting the crude out, so we don’t give it much thought.”

She didn’t say as much, but the gray and black oil rig didn’t fit with the beauty of the rest of the land.

“Come on. Let’s catch up to Gunner and Kid.”

They spurred their horses into a gallop. By the time they’d caught up with the others, Gunner had his hand flat on

his horse's rump, his gaze scanning the horizon. He didn't appear happy.

"Do you hear it?"

She listened, but didn't hear a thing. Rick, however, did.

"Yeah." He listened again, then pointed toward the west, over another small rise. With a sharp whistle and a slight nudge of his boot heels, he had his horse running in that direction. Gunner was right behind him, leaving Kid as surprised as she was.

"What's going on?"

"I don't know, but I aim to find out." She pushed her knees against her horse's sides, then flicked the reins. The horse jumped into a full gallop.

"Hey! Wait for me!"

She lifted her hand at Kid's yell, but kept going anyway. By the time she'd caught up, she could see Gunner and Rick still on their horses a few yards up ahead. She stormed toward them, then pulled her mount to a skidding stop when Rick lifted his hand, motioning for her to stop.

“Mallory, stay where you are.”

Gunner tugged on his horse's reins, holding it back even as it danced and snorted. Rick did the same, then grabbed for Kid's reins to stop his horse. The men's bodies tensed as they straightened in the saddle and stared at an area off to their right. She followed their gazes, but didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

The wail of an animal in distress split the air. How had they heard it from so far away?

“What’s wrong?”

Chapter Five

Rick urged his horse forward. When Mallory started to come along with him, he spun his horse around. “No. I told you to stay put.”

She nodded, although she was dying to see what was making the plaintive sound.

Leaving Kid with her, the men cantered their horses over to a small ditch with Rebel hot on their heels. As tall as she tried to make herself in the saddle, she still couldn’t see anything. “What is it, Kid? You’re taller. Can you see what they’re doing?”

He stretched his long frame. “It looks

like they're hauling a calf out of the ditch."

"Is it hurt?"

"From the way it's caterwauling, I'd say so."

She couldn't stand back and not help.

"Let's go see."

"Mal, maybe we should let them handle it."

But she didn't wait to argue. Instead, she spurred her horse forward, then dismounted next to their horses and let the reins fall to the ground. "What's wrong with the poor thing?"

Gunner and Rick struggled with the terrified calf. It couldn't have been too injured from the way it battled them. Once Rick had shoved it over the edge

of the shallow ditch it had lain in, he pulled himself out of the hole and helped a struggling Gunner to pick up the calf and put it on its side.

“Easy, buddy, we’re not out to hurt you.”

A ripple of energy, not unlike what she always felt around the men, wafted over her. The men, their gazes locked on the frightened calf, spoke softly, too soft for her to hear. A few moments later, the calf stopped fighting them, and lay panting, its eyes no longer wild. Rick stroked its neck while Gunner examined it. Amazingly, the animal let them handle it without even a cry of alarm.

“Damn it.”

She tried to see why Rick had cursed, then noted the bloody area on one of the calf's back legs. "Is that a bite? Is it going to be all right?"

The men were too busy helping the calf to bother answering her questions. Instead, Rick pointed at his horse. "Mallory, reach inside that rolled up pack on the back and pull out a couple of those ties."

"Ties?" Why would a cowboy carry around a tie?

"Yeah. Hog ties. Two strips of leather to bind its feet."

"Oh." She hurried to his horse, then dug in the pack. At first, she didn't feel anything that reminded her of leather.

Then her fingers passed over one, then another. She pulled them out and held them up in a triumphant show.

“Move it, woman. We don’t have all day,” chastised Gunner.

She dashed over to them and held them out as they each took one. Like cowboys going for the win at a calf roping event at a rodeo, they had the animal’s legs bound together, front and back.

“I’ll go fetch the pickup.” Gunner strode over to his horse and was in the saddle with one smooth move. “Kid, come back with me. You can wait on the vet while I bring the pickup back.”

“Will do.” Kid took a lot longer to get into his saddle, but at last he made it.

“What can I do?” She didn’t know

how she could help, just that she wanted to.

“Stay with me, Mallory.” Rick had hold of both the bound front legs as well as the back ones. “You can help keep him down and on his side. And as calm as we can get him.”

“Okay.”

Gunner and Kid wheeled their horses around with Gunner yelling and spurring his horse into a gallop. Kid’s worried eyes found hers, but he didn’t complain. Instead, he kicked his horse with his heels, and gripped the reins as the horse bolted into a run, almost jerking him out of the saddle. Rebel ran after them.

She made a grimace as she went to her

knees on the other side of the calf. “Maybe I should’ve followed Gunner back to the house. We’ll be lucky if Kid doesn’t fall off and break his neck.”

“Maybe, but it’s too late now. He’s a big guy. It’ll take more than a fall to kill him.”

“From your mouth to God’s ears.” She stroked the calf that seemed a lot calmer than she did. “Easy, baby. It’s going to be all right. What could’ve bitten him?”

“Almost anything, but I’m guessing that’s a wolf’s bite.”

“A wolf?” She looked around her. Was the wolf still in the area?

“Yeah. I’m surprised it didn’t kill him. Either the calf got away from the wolf,”—his jaw muscles twitched—“or

the wolf didn't mean to kill it.”

“Why would a wolf attack it and not want to eat it?”

“Most wolves wouldn't attack unless they're hungry. At least not normal wolves.”

“Normal? What does that mean? Are there abnormal wolves?” She saw something pass over his face and realized before he spoke that he wasn't going to tell her the whole truth.

“We've had a problem lately with the cattle and even a horse getting attacked. But the wolf didn't eat anything. Not one damn bite as far as we can tell. He just tore them apart and left the carcasses behind.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. The way you say it makes it sound like the wolf’s on a vendetta. Like it’s doing it out of spite.”

“Yeah, but we won’t know the reason until we find which wolf, or wolves, is doing it.”

She hated it when the idea came to her, and wanted to keep the awful thought to herself, but, as Kid had said, sometimes her mouth jumped ahead of her mind. “The calf’s going to be all right, isn’t he? The truth.”

“I hope so. Why do you ask?”

“Isn’t he what you’d call a downer?”

Rick groaned, then let his head fall to his chin. When he lifted his gaze to hers,

she could tell that she'd made yet another mistake by asking.

“No. A downer is a term they use at packing plant when a cow gets hurt and can't stand up on the processing line. This little guy can walk, but we don't want him to. Not until the doc has a chance to look at his leg. Unless the doc says he can't save his leg, we'll take care of him until his wound heals.”

“And if he can't save the leg?”

“We'll do what we have to do. Anything else would be inhumane. Damn, you don't think much of us, do you?”

“No, I do. Really. And I'm sorry. I have a couple of problems. First, I ask a lot of questions. Second, I can't seem to

keep my foot out of my mouth.” She smiled, hoping he’d get her joke. “Is that what they call hoof and mouth disease?”

He let her off the hook, rolling his eyes at her horrible attempt at humor, then murmured soft words to the calf. “Naw. You have *foot* and mouth disease and I have the cure.”

“You do? What is it?”

In the next instant, his mouth was against hers. The kiss demanded her full attention as his tongue whipped inside her mouth, then made a quick route around hers. The ever-constant tingle that ran under her skin morphed into a surge of power that had her mind spinning. The world around her ceased

to matter as his hand cupped the back of her neck and held her to him.

She leaned forward, her hand pressing against his chest to keep her steady. Her temperature rose, turning the warm summer morning into an inferno that came from within. If he'd told her to forget the calf and get undressed so he could ravish her, she would've gladly done so. His kiss took over any sense of time or urgency, other than her own.

His palm left her neck, then skimmed along the curve of her shoulders, and over to her breast. She moaned, hoping he'd continue. Yet, to her dismay, he pulled away.

“You’re a hard woman to understand.”

“I am?”

“Yeah, you are. First you want to hang me out to dry, thinking I’m an animal abuser. Then you’re ready and willing to fuck my brother and me last night.”

The calf jerked as she reared back. Anger swelled in her, powering throughout her body in trembles of rage. “I wasn’t the only one doing the fucking, you know.”

“Hey, you’re getting it all wrong.”

“How’s that?”

He ran a hand over his face, then dropped it to soothe the calf. “Maybe this isn’t coming out right, but we don’t think of it, of you, as an easy lay.”

She crossed her arms, mindless of the calf’s stirring. “Gee, that’s good to

know. So I'm not an easy lay. Good for me." What did that mean anyway? Was that a compliment? If he'd meant it as such, it was damn sorry one.

"Mallory, will you stop getting angry at me and let me say what I need to say?"

"Go ahead. I'm not stopping you." The anger that had taken hold of her was a pitiful second to the pain that tore at her gut. Anger was easier than hurting, but harder to hold on to.

"Last night wasn't just a fun time for either of us. Hell, baby, can't you feel it? There's this thing between us, the three of us. I know you've got to feel it."

The denial was on her lips before she swallowed it back. "I don't know what I

feel.”

“Don’t lie to me. I can see it in your eyes and feel it under my hand. Your heartbeat gives you away, not to mention the scent of your arousal.”

There it was. The strange flecks of amber she’d seen last night. “My scent? Are you telling me that I stink?”

He chuckled, then stroked the calf. “Everyone, every living thing, has its own unique aroma and you’re not different in that way. You’re different because your scent is part of what draws Gunner and me to you. Admit it, Mallory. You can feel the energy between us. That’s what brought us together last night. That’s what brought

us together so hard and fast.”

He had to see the truth written on her face. “Do you know what it is?”

“In a way. It’s a kind of energy that brings a man, or men, and a woman together.”

When the calf stirred again, he held its head and stared at it. The calf quieted. How did he do that? Was he the calf whisperer?

“Are you talking about fate? Like star-crossed lovers?” She was ready to laugh along with him. She’d have to. How else would she cover the fact that she believed in such a thing?

“Call it what you want. It doesn’t matter. All we need to know is that we belong together.”

Her mouth dropped open, surprise and joy fighting against reason. “Together? You and me?” Before she’d met them, she wouldn’t have given the idea any thought. But now? His explanation fit and it was the only explanation she had.

“You, me, and Gunner. All three of us. Just like we were last night.”

She was ready to fall into his arms again, ready to believe that they were the good men they seemed to be. Ready to believe that her fantasy had come true. But was she ready for more?

“Prove it.”

He reached over until his mouth hovered an inch from hers. His eyes met hers, pinning her to him without a touch.

She couldn't move, wouldn't have, even if she could have managed it.

His hand slid over her jaw, going to the back of her neck again. She prepared herself, her heart setting up an erratic rhythm.

Kiss me.

She wanted to say the words out loud, but her throat had closed up, her body tense with anticipation. At last, he tunneled his hand into her hair, then pulled her mouth to his.

He crushed his mouth to hers and plundered his tongue forward to wrestle with hers. Then, all at once, when he'd made a mess of her mind and weakened her body, he softened the kiss. She feared he'd pull away again.

But he didn't. Instead, he slowed the kiss down, even as the intensity of it grew. It was hot and thorough, a kiss she'd remember for the rest of her life.

She tried to lean closer without putting her weight on the calf. How the animal remained quiet, she'd never know. If it felt only part of the heat that was winding around her, it would've run like it was escaping from a grass fire.

Her nipples hardened, her breasts swelled as she tried to arch her back. She longed for him to forget the calf and touch her. Her pussy clenched, then released, then clenched harder, longer. The burn between her legs roared to full life. She was as helpless as the bound

calf lying between them.

What the hell?

She wanted to scream at him when he turned her loose. The roar of the pickup headed their way brought her back to reality.

“My brother has lousy timing.”

“Yeah, he does.” Sitting back, she pressed her fingers to her lips and wondered if Gunner would see the kiss lingering there. If he did, she’d have no problem letting him even the score.

The calf’s patience, however, had worn off. Letting out a pitiful mewl, he jerked at the ties around his legs. Rick gave her a heated glance that sent her own flame firing higher, then scooped the calf into his arms. She stared up at

him, mesmerized at his strength. Even Kid, the strongest person she'd ever met, couldn't have lifted a calf with such ease.

Gunner piled out of the truck, then lowered the tailgate and hopped into the bed of the truck. After Rick handed the calf off to him, Gunner set it down, then lifted a hand and waved to her. Rick strode around to the driver's side.

"Follow us back to the house. You can lead Rick's horse although he'd probably make it back on his own. Kid's waiting for the vet to show."

"Will do." She'd rather have ridden in the truck with Rick, but gathered the reins of Rick's horse then mounted hers.

At least the ride back would give her time to think.

* * * *

Mallory and Kid stayed out of the way as the vet and the men talked over the calf's condition. She was relieved to know that the calf wouldn't be put down. Instead, they'd determined that he could stand on his own, and other than taking care of the wound, there was little else they had to do for his recovery. They moved the calf into a pen at the side of the barn, then brought his mother in for him to nurse.

She studied them, noting how tender they were with both animals. The sight

of the mother pushing her nose against her calf warmed her, putting a lump in her throat.

“I don’t know how the little guy got away from—” Dr. Haskell glanced at her then settled his focus back on the calf.

Rick looked at her, too, then jerked his gaze away. Were they afraid to talk in front of her? Which, of course, meant she wasn’t about to walk away. If it wasn’t so obvious that she wanted to eavesdrop, she’d get closer. Instead, she wiped away the tear that slid down her face, then tried to act like she wasn’t paying attention. Her big friend wiped his own tear away.

“It’s the same, right? The way the bite is, as well as being like all—”

She concentrated, but she couldn’t pick up the rest of what Gunner said. Damn.

“But it’s definitely not a wolf’s bite. At least not a real wolf—”

Not a real wolf? What did Rick mean? What were they not telling her?

Gunner gave her a quick smile, then took Dr. Haskell’s arm and moved him farther away. Now she couldn’t hear anything they said.

“You’re stuck on them.”

She’d known Kid wasn’t going to let that subject go. “I said as much, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but something’s changed.” He lifted his hands in defense. “I’m not talking about sex. Or at least, not entirely about sex. It’s more than that, more than you being hot for their bods. I was only half kidding before, but I think you made a choice.”

“A choice about what?”

“A choice that you made here.” He put his hand over his heart. “And not here.” He lifted his hand to point to his head. “I don’t think you could leave them if you tried. Hell, girl, it’s as plain as a roach on a bagel. You love them.”

“Are you serious? And I’m a prisoner here?” She laughed, yet wasn’t he right? Her love for them—and yes, now that

he'd said it out loud, she knew she did love them—bound her to them. Had that strange sensation wrapped around her and tied her to them as surely as if it had been a rope? But she was a prisoner who didn't want to be set free.

Oh, lord. How did that happen?

“Yeah. You're a prisoner of the heart.”

She started to laugh again, but his serious expression drove that away.

“It's okay, Mal.” He pulled her into a huge bear hug. “I know what you're feeling and you're lucky that you do. Not many people get to feel that way. I'm happy for you.”

Tears moistened her eyes as she laid her head against his belly. “Damn it,

Kid. You make it sound like I'm losing you. Geez, you're such a diva."

His chuckle rumbled against her ear. "Yeah. I am and proud of it."

When he pushed her away, she knew he had something more to tell her. "What's going on?"

"Now don't go getting all flustered, but while I was waiting for the vet, I got a call from my brother."

"Is there anything wrong?" She'd known his mother was in failing health. Had, in fact, urged him to stay home with her. He'd refused, saying his mother would rather have him doing his job than playing nurse to her. Although she'd only met his mother a couple of times, she

could easily see her telling her son exactly that. Louise Shorter was a large woman in both bulk and weight, with a sharp wit and an even sharper mouth. She told it straight and didn't care if anyone liked it or not. Mallory had liked her from the start.

“Mack said she's getting worse.” His big brown eyes were darkened with worry. “I need to get back.”

“Of course you do. I'll get packed right now.”

“No, Mal, you don't need to come.”

“Sure I do. She's your mother and I want to be there for her.” She rested her hand on his big arm. “And for you, too.”

“Thanks, but Mack said she told him to say, and I quote, ‘Tell Mal to stay and

do what she has to do. I'm not going anywhere anytime soon.””

“But—”

“No, Mal, that's what she wants and I'm not about to go against her wishes.” He captured her face between his two paws. “You stay. I just wish I didn't have to leave you stranded here.”

Funny how she thought of his hands as paws. “Don't worry about that. I'll get Rick and Gunner to take me into Shatland. If I remember from my research about the area, the bus line runs through there.”

“Yeah, it does. But you're not to leave until you're ready.” He gave her knowing look. “Whether that's tomorrow

or never. You got that?”

“Never? That’s not going to happen.”

“Uh-huh. If it does, it’s fine. I’ll stay in touch either way.” He lifted her, surprising her, then whirled her around before plopping her on the ground. “Be happy with them, Mal. Don’t let your crusade ruin your chance at love.”

She slapped him on the arm. “Forget about me. Get your butt moving. Your mamma needs you, ya big jerk.”

“Okay, okay. I’m going. Tell the guys good-bye for me.” He winked, then with the gracefulness no one would ever have expected from a man his size, he spun around and strode toward the house.

He was halfway there when he turned around. “Mal?”

“Yeah?”

“You tell them that if they don’t treat you right, I’ll come back and kick their asses.”

Damn, how she loved that big man. “Will do. But trust me. If they don’t treat me right, I’ll kick their asses myself.”

Kid’s booming laughter filled the air as he pivoted back toward the house. Even though she’d see him again, she couldn’t help but feel like a part of her was leaving.

“Where’s Kid going?” Gunner’s voice thrilled her, making her remember how it felt to be in his arms. She almost asked him to hold her.

The waft of electric lust hummed into

her. “His mother’s ill and he’s got to get back.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. But don’t worry. I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

She sought the answer to her question in his face. “How do you know?”

He froze like a criminal caught in the act. Did he know something she didn’t? It hit her that she’d asked herself that same question many times. Maybe the men weren’t as open and forthcoming as she thought they were.

“Isn’t that what people are supposed to say?”

His response made sense, but she didn’t buy it. “Yeah, I guess. Is the calf going to be all right?”

Rick stalked over to them. “He’s fine.

More shaken up than anything else.”

“I don’t blame him. But it’s weird.”

“What’s weird?” Gunner shifted from one foot to the other, then tugged on his hat.

Nervous much? “When we were waiting for the truck and had the calf on the ground, he was really calm. It was like Rick was able to keep him still without a problem. I remember thinking that he was like a calf whisperer.”

When they didn’t laugh, she had to wonder if she’d found the answer. “You’re not a calf whisperer, are you?”

“Not a chance. If I was, I wouldn’t need a horse to herd them into the pens.”

Both men headed for the house, giving

the vet a lift of their hands as he drove off. The van was already gone, and once again, the absence of Kid left her feeling sad.

“Since Kid took the van, I’m going to need a ride back home. There’s a bus line that runs through Shatland, isn’t there?”

She almost ran into them when they whirled around and formed a human wall. Their confused expressions struck a soft spot in her. They didn’t want her to leave any more than she wanted to go.

“You’re not sticking around?” Gunner shook his head. “Naw, you can’t go. You aren’t finished investigating us yet.”

“Actually, I am. And I want to apologize. I should’ve checked you out

better before painting that cow and making the video. You treat animals better than any ranchers I've ever seen."

Rick crossed his arms. The glint in his eyes said what he didn't voice out loud. *I told you so.*

"There's still the matter of Lawson Industries."

"Don't worry about that. I'm having a friend check them out. He'll get back to me as soon as he can. If what your sources say is true, we'll end out business relationship and find another plant to work with."

"But you won't get out the business of selling your cattle to a slaughterhouse?" As soon as she'd said it, she wished she

could take it back.

“This is our life. It’s how we make a living. You need to accept that and move on.”

Move on? Was he asking her to leave? A sharp pain stabbed her in the chest like a heart attack. She struggled to breathe and fought to keep the misery from overwhelming her. “I thought you made enough money from oil that you could stop doing the cattle thing.”

That glint changed into a flash of irritation. “I said we make more money doing that than doing ‘the cattle thing’.”

She hadn’t wanted to get angry or to make him mad, either, but they’d gone there nonetheless. “Could you live on the oil money alone?”

“That’s none of your damn business.”

She half expected to see smoke coming from Rick’s ears. “Fine. My business here is over.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Hey, you two, calm down.”

Gunner reached out for her, but she yanked her arm away.

“At least that part of it is.”

“What other part is there?” Rick hooked his thumbs into the pocket of his jeans. “Except finding out about Lawson’s? You don’t have to stick around for that. I can e-mail you the findings. Providing you trust me to tell you the truth.”

“I’m talking about the things you’re not

telling me. Like what happened to the calf. You two were very hush-hush with the vet.”

“That is also none of your business. Unless, of course, you think I took a bite out of him.”

“Easy, Rick.” Gunner stepped between them, taking each of them by an arm. “You two sure get twisted up sometimes. Maybe that’s just how it’s supposed to be between you, but I don’t like it. Both you need to calm the hell down.”

But her emotional guns were loaded and aimed straight at Rick. “Of course I don’t think you bit him. That’s ridiculous.” Damn, he was such an irritating man. “Gunner’s right. Enough

said. Can I ask you to give me a ride into Shatland tomorrow?”

“If that’s what you want. Expect to get up early. The bus only comes through every so often. If you miss it, you’re stuck here for another few days.”

Stuck there longer? She wouldn’t have minded that one bit. In fact, she’d wondered what it would be like to live there with the two men she loved. Was she sure she loved them? As much as she didn’t want that to be the case right then, she couldn’t deny her feelings. She’d thought Rick had felt the same, but maybe she’d gotten that all wrong.

“Shit, Rick. Why the hell are you—”

“Shut the fuck up, man.” Yet Rick

pointed a finger at her instead. “You better be ready to go on time. Got it?”

“Hell, if you want to get rid of me, why not take me there now? I’ll get a hotel room for the night.”

“Shatland’s a small town. They don’t have a hotel. Not to mention that you wouldn’t be safe there.”

“Why not? Are there monsters in Shatland?”

Gunner groaned and dropped his head to his chin.

Why didn’t they say there weren’t? Did a town like Shatland have lots of criminal activity?

“Like I said. Just be ready to leave in the morning.”

She watched Rick eat up the distance

to the barn. Anger and hurt swirled amid the flow of the strange sensation that always existed between them. Before they'd gotten into the argument, she'd plan on asking them more about it. Was it fate? Or just an excuse to get laid?

Now it looked as if that next time would never come.

"It's okay, baby. Give him some time."

Burning tears stung her. "No. He meant what he said."

"No, he didn't." Gunner snatched his hat off, then held it to his chest. "I don't want you to leave and neither does he."

"He sure has a fucked-up way of saying so."

“Yeah, he does. But that doesn’t mean he means what he says. Especially when he gets riled up. Let him calm down.”

“No. I’m sorry. I have to go.” She couldn’t take it any longer. Even if Gunner cared for her, it was all too evident that Rick’s feelings didn’t run as deep. She couldn’t imagine a world with just one of them, much less a life living on the ranch with the other brother around, tempting her day in and day out. She knew enough to know the brothers would never separate.

“Baby—”

“Don’t call me that.” Darting away as he tried to take hold of her, she rushed into the house. Tomorrow morning

couldn't come fast enough. Or, if she wanted to admit it, slow enough.

Chapter Six

Mallory woke up early then remained in bed and listened to the birds singing outside her bedroom. She'd slept fitfully throughout the night, at one time hearing the howls of wolves, but she hadn't gotten out of bed to investigate. The idea of leaving Rick and Gunner had drained her of any desire to do anything but lie there and wipe away the tears that kept rolling down her cheeks.

Could she tell Rick she was sorry? She'd stood up for her principals, but had she lost the loves of her life by doing so?

She no longer cared that they raised

cattle. They were right in saying that it was a necessary business. People ate meat. How else were they supposed to get it? And wasn't it better to have the cattle raised by men who cared about the health and well-being of their animals? Men who would make sure that they were put down using humane methods?

Damn it. I've made a mess of everything.

She could hear them moving around downstairs. Although they hadn't knocked on her door, she assumed they were waiting for her. As soon as she'd packed her suitcase, she'd have to hold her head high and go downstairs. She wouldn't bother with breakfast. How could she eat knowing she'd never see

them again?

It was just a stupid argument. She could make things right if she'd get over her bullhead stubbornness. What if she told them that she loved them? Would that make everything right? Or would it give Rick another reason to ask her to leave?

Wiping away what she was determined would be her last tear, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and headed to the bathroom. A quick shower would give her the strength she needed to get through the day. At least, she hoped it would. If not, she'd break down on the way to Shatland and beg them to let her stay.

No. If nothing else, I'm going to keep my dignity.

* * * *

“Damn it, Gunner, I don’t want to talk about it any longer.” Rick put his back to his brother. Not only to signal that the discussion was over before it began, but to keep Gunner from seeing his pain.

He’d acted like a jackass. He knew it, Gunner knew it, and he was pretty sure Mallory knew it. Yet as hard as he tried, he couldn’t bring himself to apologize. What good would it do anyway? She’d never fit in on a ranch that raised cattle for meat.

“Come on, man. Are you willing to give her up?” The agony Gunner felt was entrenched in his tone. “Because I’m not. I’d give everything up, including our home, to keep her.”

“She won’t leave.” The connection they shared, the bond between intended mates, would keep her there. After spending time together, the primal instinct that drew them together was growing stronger with every minute that passed. Even if she wanted to leave—which he doubted—the connection would keep her with them. Wasn’t that the way it was supposed to go? He had to believe that.

“Oh, I get it. You’re counting on the

connection to make her stay. Instead of admitting that you never wanted it to go that far, you're going to rely on that to keep her with us? Fuck, she's going to need you to say something. Didn't you see her face? Didn't you see how hurt she was? That tore me apart. Hell, someone could've ripped out my heart and it wouldn't have hurt as much."

Rick growled, warning Gunner not to grab hold of him again. "I admit it. You're right. It was a shithead way to act. But I don't think it was enough to make her leave. Even if she manages to ignore the pull toward us, she won't ignore her feelings. She's falling for us, just like we've fallen for her. I can see it in her eyes."

He wished he could believe what he'd said, but doubt churned his gut. "She'll come down in a minute and say she was sorry and that'll be the end of it."

"I wouldn't bet on it." Gunner sneered at him. "Oh, wait. That's exactly what you're doing. You're both as stubborn as mules, and right now, almost as smart."

His inner bear roared to life, ready to lift up onto its hind legs and strike out at his brother. They'd fought often while growing up, each one leaving wounds on the other, but they'd never fought as full-grown men. He shoved his animal back down, unwilling to give in to his anger. And, if he had to admit it, his fear.

Fuck. What if she really does want to

leave?

“I’m telling you, Gunner. Back the hell off.”

“How about I apologize for you? I’ll do anything to keep her here. Even that.”

“Don’t you get it?” Rick tunneled his fingers through his hair, resisting the need to tear a chunk out. “If that argument sends her away, then it wasn’t meant to be. Maybe we’ve got our wires crossed or something. Maybe it’s fate’s way of telling us that she’s wrong for us. She’ll stay if she’s really feeling the connection.”

Gunner stared at him like he’d grown a third eye. “Or maybe it’s just an asshole’s damn pride fucking up the rest of our lives. Come on, man. She needs to

know that you give a damn.”

“Let it go, Gunner.”

Gunner gritted his teeth, then let out a low growl. His eyes flashed amber and his fangs snuck over his lower lip. “Bullshit. So you’re testing her? If she doesn’t do what you think she should, then that’s it? Fuck that.”

“I’m ready.”

Her voice floated over to Rick. The sound had a lilting quality to it, yet was tinged with a tremor that only his werebear hearing could’ve picked up on. She stood at the entrance to the living room, her suitcase in her hand. Although he wanted to hold out his arms and have her hurry into them, he kept them at his

side.

“Rick?” Gunner, his body shaking as he shoved his beast back down, darted his gaze from him to her and back, urging him to go to her.

“You’re leaving?” It was a stupid question, but it was the only thing he could think to say.

“That’s the plan.” Her tremulous smile came and went.

Did she want to stay? Had what he thought they’d share been real? He almost gave in, ready to do whatever he had to do to keep her there. The words asking her, hell, begging her to stay, were on the tip of his tongue. Instead, he said, “Want to grab some breakfast before we go?”

Gunner snarled, then put his back to her. Rage burned in his eyes as he glowered at him. It wouldn't have surprised Rick if his brother hauled off and belted him one.

“No thanks. I don't want to miss the bus.”

“Yeah. You're right.” He was trapped, caught between his stubbornness and his hope that the force of the connection would keep her there. “Let's get going.”

* * * *

Her mother once told her that she was more stubborn than a preacher with a sinner in one hand and an invitation from

God in the other. The preacher, torn between meeting God and saving the sinner would hang on to both, too stubborn to let go of either one. Mallory couldn't help but think she was in the same predicament as the preacher. Either she gave up her principles or she gave up the men she loved. Like the preacher, she was too stubborn to choose which one to turn loose.

No. That's not the way this is. All Rick has to do is ask me to stay. If he did, then I'd do whatever I could to find a compromise.

She took a glimpse at Rick as he pulled the pickup into the parking space in front of the Earline's Eatery. None of them had spoken a word since they'd

gotten into the truck and driven to Shatland.

I have to say something. If I don't, it's over.

Shatland was a small town with one central street, with side streets heading west and east, all running outward from Main Street. The shops were quaint, with flower pots and lots of homey charm. The people, however, were, for lack of a better word, different.

Although she knew Rick and Gunner came into Shatland every so often for supplies, the looks they garnered from people walking along the sidewalk had her wishing she could tell them to turn the truck around. Some of those people

stopped and stared with eyes that were cold and hard. Others, those who reminded her of the men, regarded her with more interest than hostility.

“Um, guys, why is everyone staring at us? Er, at me?”

Gunner, who'd remained quiet, too, turned away from the window and took her hand. The current that had seemed lost during the ride came rushing back, bringing tears of relief mixed with sorrow.

“Don't let them get to you. Shatland's a friendly town.” He inclined his head, indicating two men dressed in dark clothes and standing in the shadows. “There are a few folks who aren't all that sociable, but you rarely see them out

during the day.”

“Why? Do they work the graveyard shift?”

He blinked, then gave her a soft smile. “You could say that. And the other folks just need a little time warming up to strangers. That’ll change once they understand that you’re with us.”

“But they can already see that I’m with you.” She forced a smile as a young man and woman paused along their way, then slowly lifted their hands to the men.

“Not just physically with us, but really with us.”

As in a threesome? She nodded, fresh pain washing over her, then startled as Rick opened his door and slid out.

Gunner did the same, but offered his hand to help her out.

“Come on. Earline’s got the best breakfast around these parts. We think it’s even better than Milly’s Coffee Spot over in Forever.”

“I wouldn’t know. I haven’t been to Forever.” She followed Gunner as he led the way into the restaurant.

The restaurant was filled with wonderful aromas. Scuffed tiled floors weren’t pretty by any means, but they were clean enough to eat off them. A yellow counter stretched along the wall with napkin holders and wire stands filled with laminated menus. A jukebox rested against the wall leading to a hallway and the restrooms. The place

reminded Mallory of a diner straight out of the fifties.

Rick groused, his tone low and grumpy. “Don’t bother going to Milly’s. The people there don’t like us much.”

“Why?” She didn’t really care. She just wanted to keep him talking to her.

“Because they can’t stand that we’re all so damn happy, that’s why.”

“Hey, guys.” A pretty young woman swayed over to them.

“Hey, it’s good to see you. Are your men here?”

Mallory scanned the room, following Gunner’s gaze.

“Two of them. Josh had other business to attend to. See? Right over there in the

corner.” She reached out her hand in welcome. “Hi. I’m Mayla Weaton. You’re new in town, aren’t you?” The girl’s big brown eyes were the perfect shade for her long, auburn hair.

“Sort of. I’m Mallory Quinn.”

“So, Mallory, how do you like the Triple X Ranch? That’s some name, isn’t it?”

She wasn’t sure how to answer. If she went into too much detail, Mayla might ask her how she’d come to stay there. “I like it. And yeah, the name kind of threw me at first.”

“Then you’re staying for a while?” Her gaze jumped from Rick to Gunner. “Maybe for a long while?”

She’d never believed that a heart

could actually hurt. Now she knew the real meaning of the word *heartache*. “No. I’m leaving today. On the bus, that is.”

“Really?” Mayla frowned at first Rick then Gunner. “I thought I heard from Dr. Haskell...” She trailed off, then fortified her smile. “Never mind. You know small towns. If they didn’t have gossip, they’d dry up from boredom.”

She hooked her arm in Mallory’s and tugged her along with her. “Come with me. I’m dying for some girl talk. I’ve been cooped up on the ranch far too long and Earline’s too busy to talk. Guys, go keep my men company.”

She waved at the older woman who

was slipping from one table filled with customers to the next. “That’s Earline.”

Earline appeared as though she was old enough to have opened the restaurant years earlier. And yet, the woman had a spry step and a sweet smile that made Mallory feel more welcomed.

“Are you sure you don’t want to get back to your table?”

“It’s okay. You two go on.”

Rick and Gunner ambled over to two men, large men like themselves, who were busy scarfing down a plate piled high with food. Were they Mayla’s partners? Or husbands? Or just friends like Kid was to her?

“My guys, Jadon and Curt, would rather me leave them alone so they can

get caught up on all that ranch stuff. And then there's the problem with the were —" She froze, then slipped into a chair at one of the few open tables. Two empty mugs waited for coffee. "Uh, with the wolf that's killing cattle."

Mallory took the chair across from her. "We, I mean, Rick and Gunner found a calf the other day that had gotten bitten. So they're sure it's a wolf that's killing livestock?"

"We think so. Don't worry. The men are on it."

"Have you lived in Shatland all your life?" Somehow Mayla didn't look like the rest of them. It wasn't the way she dressed or looked, but something else

she couldn't define. She studied her harder, but couldn't put her finger on it.

Mayla flicked her auburn hair back over her shoulder. "No. In fact, I only got here a month ago, but I love it here."

Mallory could sense the stares still settled on her. "I don't mean to be rude, but do they always stare at newcomers?"

"Yeah, they kind of do. But don't let it bug you. It's just their way. Folks around here are really nice. Okay, maybe not the vam—" She darted her gaze away, then back. "A few tend to keep to themselves, but they don't bother anyone. Not much anyway."

"Not much?"

Instead of answering, she waved at Earline. "Hey, Big E, when you get a

chance, could you get some coffee for my new friend? And a plate of your breakfast special, too, please.”

“Thanks. I’m starving. I’d better eat something soon. Otherwise, I get as grumpy as a bear.”

Tension rippled in the room as everyone stopped talking and stared at her with more intensity. She stared back for only a moment, unable to stop doing so when she saw the flash of amber in their eyes.

“Anyway, how are you getting along with the Northman brothers?”

“Oh. I, um, I mean, we were doing okay.” Could she tell Mayla the truth? Although she sensed that they would

probably have many things in common, she wasn't ready to spill her guts.

Mayla leaned over the table toward her. "Did you feel it?"

Was she talking about the strange, wonderful sensation? Or was she fixated on that? "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

Judging from the tilt of her head, her new friend didn't believe her. "Yes, you do. I can see it in your eyes."

"Mayla, really, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't start slinging that shit with me. You felt it, all right. The invisible cord that runs between you three? The feeling that if you don't have their hands all over you, you're going to go insane?"

Tell me you haven't felt that."

She didn't want to lie. Besides, she couldn't force the truth from her face.

"You did. I knew it." Mayla leaned back with a satisfied smug. "You love them."

Mallory sucked in air and tried to check to see if the others had heard. And yet, the simple declaration Mayla had made tore at her heart. She'd love to hear Rick and Gunner tell her that they loved her, but that wasn't going to happen. "It doesn't matter now."

She was almost relieved when Earline deposited a cup of steaming coffee in front of her. Trying hard not to focus on the others, she shifted her attention to

Earline, the fascinating owner of the restaurant.

Earline was a heavyset woman with graying hair that was pulled back and ran down her spine. Mallory had a feeling that, if she ended up in a physical fight, the large woman could hold her own with some of the men. The same sweet smile she'd been greeted with flashed at her.

"I guess you're Mallory."

"Uh, yes. That's me."

Gray eyes that held a gleam of humor were flanked by laugh lines. "Then you're Rick's and Gunner's woman." She fisted one hand on her hip as she held a coffeepot in the other. "I hear you've been giving them hell about how

they treat their animals.”

Mallory wasn't sure how she was supposed to respond to that. If she got defensive, she assumed that most of the others would jump onboard to take the men's side. No doubt a lot of them ran cattle ranches, too.

Mayla held her cup up for Earline to fill. “Don't go giving her a hard time, Big E. She doesn't know what it takes to run a herd. I bet she'll come around to our way of thinking soon enough. You know, once she becomes a permanent fixture around here.”

Permanent fixture? If only.

She added a packet of sugar to her coffee. “No, Mayla, you've got it all

wrong. I'm leaving today. I'm taking the next bus."

Why was everyone staring at her again?

Mayla's mouth dropped open. "No. You can't. Believe me. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. This is true, undying love. You can't give up on it so easily."

Irritation had her gritting her teeth. "Seriously. This is no one's business but mine. I don't know where you got the idea anyway, but please, just stop."

Earline set the pot down on the table hard enough that Mallory was surprised when it didn't break. She fisted her hands on her hips and hollered, "For shit's sake. Gunner? Rick? What the hell

do you think you're doing? How can you let her get on the bus and ride off?"

The heat burst into her cheeks. Her face had to be as red as a fire engine. "Oh, my God. Earline, please don't."

"Please don't what, honey? Everyone knows you're their mate." She narrowed those strange silver eyes at her. "You know it, too, right?"

She couldn't answer. Not with the men remaining silent.

"Big E, it's none of your damn business."

Rick, please, don't get into it with her. Just get me out of here.

"Maybe I should leave."

She jolted as Earline's large hand

came down on her shoulder, holding her in her seat. “Bullshit. Boys, I don’t know what you did to make her leave, but an ostrich with its head in the sand can see she doesn’t want to go.”

She heard the scraping of chairs across the worn tiled floor. Steeling herself wasn’t going to help much. Not when she felt so vulnerable.

“We don’t want her to leave.”

She gaped at Rick. “You don’t?”

“Of course not.” He scanned the audience, then took her by the arm and pulled her toward the front door.

She was outside and standing on the sidewalk, her heart hardly daring to beat for fear of making him change his mind. Gunner pushed through the door, then

made a low noise that sounded a lot like a growl, and waved Earline and Mayla back inside.

“How about a little privacy, ladies?”

Need, simple and raw, drove into her like a Mac truck wheeling through a driving rain. She wobbled on her feet, then found her center and lifted her head.

I'm not going to touch them. If I do, I'll never leave even if they tell me that they lied to the others and don't really want me to stay.

Rick paced off, then spun around and came back at her. “Damn it, Mallory, if you weren't so fucking bullheaded, this wouldn't have gone so far off the track.”

“Look at the pot calling the kettle

black.”

He glared at Earline. “Get. Back. Inside.”

“Boy, don’t you tell me what I can and can’t do.” Earline narrowed her eyes even more than she had before.

“Big E, let’s give them some space.” Mayla took the older woman’s arm. “Just remember what I said, Mallory. It’s once in a lifetime.” She tugged Earline along with her.

“Both of you need to end this right now.” Gunner pointed down the street. “Here comes the bus.”

An older bus, one that looked like it had driven to hell and back, pulled to the corner a few yards down from the restaurant. The bus driver, a young man

with long hair that fell in front of his face, opened the folding doors, then leaned out of the bus.

“Hey, anyone needing the bus?”

“I said to end this now.” Gunner confronted his brother. “Tell her or I swear I won’t be responsible for what I do.”

She bit her lower lip and silently prayed that Rick would say something, anything. If he didn’t, she would. Mayla was right. Whatever was between them was too good to throw away. No matter how bullheaded Rick got.

“Damn, you two. Speak up.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I was wrong.”

They'd spoken at the same time. That had to be a good sign.

Gunner grinned, then slapped his brother on the back. "It's about fucking time." He turned to her then. "Mallory, do you still want to leave?"

"Do you want me to leave?" She had to have some reassurance that they wanted her. Even if they didn't say those three little words that she longed to hear, she had to hear them tell her to stay.

"Hell, no."

Hearing Gunner say that was like hearing the song of a beautiful songbird. Still, she needed to know that Rick felt the same way.

"Like I said. I'm sorry." Gone was the

hard steel in his eyes. In its place was an urgency that matched her own. "I want you to stay. More than anything, I want you to stay."

The bus driver still waited on the steps. "Are you coming, lady, or not?"

She loved them. What else mattered? It wasn't the time or the place to tell them, but she wasn't going to leave. The time would come.

She shook her head at the driver. "Not."

Chapter Seven

Coming back to the ranch felt like coming home. Strangely, they hadn't spoken much on the way back, but the tension that had layered over them in the first ride was gone.

Mallory was happier than she'd ever been. Just hearing them tell her to stay was enough. She wouldn't push them for more.

Rick stopped the truck in front of the house, slid out of the truck, and headed up the front steps. She'd hoped he'd help her out and her disappointment must've shown.

Gunner cozied her against his body,

wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “Don’t let him get to you. Admitting he was wrong is major for him. I can’t remember the last time he told anyone he was wrong.”

Rick didn’t look back. Instead, he entered the house, letting the screen door bang behind him. “Are you sure he really wants me here? He said so, but the way he’s acting doesn’t leave me much to cling to.”

“We both want you here. I know it’s only been a short time, but we want you to stay. Provided you can handle what we do for a living.”

“I can.” She twisted so that she could face him, then lay her palm against his chest. “I still don’t like it, but I know

that the things your neighbor told me were lies.” She’d ask them later if their friend had checked on Lawson Industries yet. All she wanted at that moment was to be with them.

He brushed his hand along her cheek. “Rick and I have waited a long time for you to come along. To be honest, I doubted you would. Now that you’re here, we’re not going to lose you. I promise you that the next time Rick’s bullshit gets in the way, I’ll take a two-by-four and knock him upside that rock he calls a head.”

The sizzle had grown, overwhelming her until all she could think to do was to kiss him. Yet, it didn’t feel...whole. Not

without Rick.

She lifted her eyes to his. “Would you take me upstairs? I want you. Both of you.”

He shoved the door open. “Damn straight I will.”

When she tried to get out, he snatched her into his arms. She let out a yelp, then pressed her body to his. Feeling like the heroine in a romance, she clung to his neck as he took her inside the house.

“Rick. Upstairs. Now.”

Rick held a bottle of wine and was about to take a drink straight from the bottle. Setting the wine down, he didn’t question his brother. Instead, he strode toward the staircase and followed them upstairs.

Gunner was like a man possessed as he moved down the hallway. She kept her face against his chest. First a loud *bam* then a *boom* startled her as Gunner kicked open a bedroom door and let it slam against the wall.

He tossed her on top of a large bed. She only had long enough to wonder whose room it was before he started tearing off his clothes. Rick stalked into the room and began disrobing, too.

Maybe it was her need for them. Maybe it was her love for them. Whatever the reason, they seemed to grow larger in build and sexier every time she saw them. She remembered their brick-wall bodies, but now those

walls had enlarged, becoming massive mountains that hovered over her. She didn't move, fearful that she would break the charm they shared.

They came together, one brother as handsome as the other. Their jaws were locked, their eyes ablaze with the strange amber color. Wide shoulders led down to narrow waists that pointed toward their curved, purple-veined cocks. Her breathing became gasps, her heart rate doubled.

“Mallory, we want you to stay. Do you understand that now?”

She nodded at Gunner, her voice lost in the effort to breathe.

“*We* want you to stay,” repeated Rick. His mouth worked as though he wanted

to say more, but couldn't.

She knew how he felt. Too much emotion whirled around her and robbed her of her speech. Would she ever talk again? Would she ever feel the need to do so?

"We won't ask you to promise us more than that. But promise that, for now, you'll stay."

At last, her words found her voice. "I promise." She wanted to order them to come to her, yet agonized that she'd do or say something wrong.

"But you have to know." Gunner skimmed his eyes over her, torching the kindling of her desire as no ordinary match ever could. "We can be rough.

That's how we like it. If you're going to stay with us, then you have to get used to it."

"Tell us, Mallory."

Rick hadn't spoken loudly. He didn't have to. She would've hung on his slightest whisper. "Yes. I accept."

Rick lunged at her like a mountain lion jumping off an overhang and landing on its unaware prey below. But she wasn't unprepared. She grabbed for her shirt, but it was a useless move.

Rick had already torn it away.

A growl came along with Gunner's attack. As Rick bent low and snagged her bra with his teeth, Gunner took hold of her shoes and tossed them aside. Her bra went flying away as Gunner tugged

off her jeans and panties in one swift tug.

Rick took her arms and pulled them over her head. She cried out, but the sound was muffled as he crushed his lips to hers. He was rough, both with his hands that enclosed over her breasts and with his tongue as he thrust it into her mouth. He tasted of wine and more, of the indescribable flavor that was all his.

She moaned, her body only now recovering from the shock of their assault. Arching her back, she pushed her hard nipples against his palms, determined to tempt him to pinch, twist, or bite. His kiss deepened, as nibbles on her lower lip became hard, quick bites that stung her flesh.

Her world whirled around her as the weight of their bodies sank her into the mattress. Every inch of her was alive with the buzz of the energy that passed from one to the other, then back again. She gave in to the sensation as it warped over her skin like a thousand tiny bees, giving her pleasant stings.

Gunner's wrists surrounded her ankles. She kicked out in a natural defensive reaction, but it did no good. The softness of fur wrapped around each one as he stretched her legs out and upward.

Surprised, she jerked her head to the side to see past Rick. Black cuffs lined with red fur were attached to cords that

he'd tied to each of the two bed posts. With a wicked grin, Gunner yanked on the cords, sliding her body over the bed while raising her legs higher and her butt off the mattress.

“Take it easy, baby.” His hand cupped her crotch. His finger slid over her juice-slickened clit. His touch was the spark that the inferno had waited for allowing the blame to burn even hotter.

“That’s it. I want you all over my hand. I’m going to eat you out until you scream my name.”

“Then stop talking about it and do it.” The urgency inside her took over, driving all other thoughts away. She had to have them. Had to feel their bodies against hers. How didn’t matter.

Rick swung his leg over her to straddle her chest. “We will. All in good time.”

He pushed her breasts together, playing with them as they jiggled. “Fuck me with your tits.” He rocked against her, sliding his cock back and forth between her breasts. The feel of his cock against her skin was exhilarating and she couldn’t help but flick her tongue over his cock as it played hide and seek. She felt his cock grow larger, longer. Placing her hands over his, she helped keep her breasts together, adding even more pressure against his shaft.

Rick leaned his head back and moaned. “Damn, but that feels good. But

I don't need your help.”

He reached somewhere beside him and, taking another set of cuffs that looked like the ones on her ankles, he snapped them around her wrists, then pulled her arms over her head. Leaning over her head to secure the cords to the head posts, he dangled his cock in front of her face. She giggled, then made good use of his position to lap her tongue around his length.

As soon as he had the cords tied, he flattened his hands against the wall and lowered his head. His eyes closed and his expression became one of pure lust. She sucked on him, putting every bit of effort into hollowing her cheeks and dragging him in. Determined to give him

as much pleasure as she could, she circled her tongue around him, sucked, then released, then did it again.

Like a trail of desire, Gunner's fingers massaging her clit sent a line of need racing toward her mouth. What one brother gave, the other gained. She was the lucky one in the middle.

These were her men. She no longer had any doubt. Having been numb to the idea of getting on the bus and leaving them behind, an explosion of relief had burst apart inside her once Gunner had carried her up to the bedroom. She realized that, no matter what might have happened in Shatland, she couldn't have left. Her heart knew where she

belonged. It had taken time for her head to realize what her heart had already known.

Gunner moved between her legs, sliding his thighs under her lifted buttocks and taking the strain off on her legs. His hand slipped underneath her, caressing the seam of her buttocks. “Sweet. Damn, but you’re amazing. Just breathe, baby.”

She gasped as something cool and slippery entered her anus. Where she’d expected his fingers, she’d gotten a butt plug. Never having experienced one, she was thrilled at the way her ass muscles tightened around it. At first, it was a little painful, but that gave way to sinful delight. She sucked on Rick’s cock and

dragged on his cock, making it feel the way her butt hole did.

When Gunner put his mouth against her pussy, she jerked away from Rick's cock and let out a cry. She dragged in a breath, then closed her eyes and moved her head side to side, letting Rick's cock slide from one side of her face to the other. The softness of his mushroomed cap left a trail of pre-cum along its path.

The sigh of enjoyment Gunner gave her as he came up from licking her pussy drove her into a flight of ecstasy. The little things, soft touches, and moans of satisfaction, turned her on even more. She'd never known that sex could be like this. She'd never believed she'd be

caught between two men, men she'd come to care about and respect so deeply.

They were a threesome, not only as their bodies joined together, but because the intangible bond that had brought them together now strengthened, taking a thread of their instinctual, primal pull and transforming it into a rod of unstoppable awareness.

Each man caressed her, then attacked her, going from gentle to hard, then back again. The changes left her standing on a sexual tightrope, uncertain what would come next, unprepared to handle one emotion as it washed into another.

Rick was unrelenting as he shoved his cock forward, rubbing between her

breasts and forging a friction-filled path along her skin. Gunner ate her up, his tongue playing jump frog between piercing her pussy then swiping over her swollen clit. One hand twisted the butt plug while the other massaged her clitoris.

They drove her crazy with a disease that only they could cure. Rick leaned forward and slammed his cock into her mouth as he worked his hips back and forth. She ached to skim her fingers along his abdomen, to feel his muscles working like a rhythmic machine. The tendons in his girder-like legs rippled and flexed, pumping his cock into her time and again, driving farther into her

throat until she choked. He backed off, opening eyes that were filled with sparkling amber. The muscle in his jaw twitched as he fought to maintain control.

The tips of his eye teeth slipped over his bottom lip.

What is that?

She stared harder, trying to clear her head enough to know that what she saw was only her imagination gone wild from the sex. But before she could force her muddled mind to work, he'd closed his mouth again.

That wonder was soon lost as Gunner eased back, letting the chill of the air waft over her heated pussy. He shimmied underneath her farther, then

pressed the tip of his cock against her pussy.

“Get ready, Mallory. I’m going to fuck you until you scream.” He laughed, then plunged his cock inside her, smooth as silk, yet hard as steel. “Cream then scream, baby.”

She was ready for him, and yet, no one could have prepared her for how hard and long he was. He ripped into her, taking her breath away. She did cry out, the sound once again muted by Rick’s cock.

Gunner’s cock stretched her walls, putting up a friction that was unequaled. The wildness, the primal lust that had taken her over from the first moment

she'd met them, gained complete control, ridding her of any other emotion. Her body wanted them, and now that she had them, she wouldn't stop until she'd taken everything they could give.

Making a noise not dissimilar to the growls the men made, she yanked on her restraints, lifted her head and dragged Rick's cock inside in one fast move. His eyes grew wider and she almost laughed at his ecstatic expression.

Moving against Gunner was impossible with her hands and legs bound. Instead, she rotated her hips, and if she could've seen his face, she knew that he would've mimicked his brother's stunned look.

I have you now and I'm never letting

go.

She gave control away to her muscles and the craving of her body for theirs. Using her body as she'd never done before, she fought against the rising ebb of her release. She wouldn't let go before they did. This was her time to please them.

She sensed that Rick's mind had given way to his body as well. His expression was tense, concentrating. Was he trying to have her climax before him? She whipped her tongue around and over his cock and saw his fortitude shatter with the drop of his jaw.

His gaze met hers just before he gave in.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he paused, then plunged his cock into her mouth again. He drove it to the back of her throat, gagging her, but she managed to hold on. Warm, sweet seed shot outward. She gulped down the richness of him as fast as she could.

He opened his eyes again, the sanity they'd held before was now lost to his orgasm. His body shuddered along with his shaky groan as he pulled away from her, then fell to the side.

“Shit.”

Gunner rammed into her again. Having the butt plug inside her ass along with his cock inside her pussy riveted her to an even higher level of sexual

stimulation. Like an out of body experience, she let her body drift away, only to be plunged back into her physical being as the ferocity of his cock slicing into her brought out the screams he'd said he'd earn.

“Rick! Gunner! Oh, God. Please!”

She was lost. Whether she came first or Gunner did, she couldn't know. Her mind spun out of control, whipped into a whirling top from the frenzy tearing through her body. She screamed again, again calling their names. She'd be satisfied if she spoke no other names for the rest of her life.

Up and over, her climax rolled out of her, coming together with his. They were connected, more than with mere sex, but

by a recognition that they were meant for each other and no one else. She didn't care that they hadn't spoken words of love. What did it matter when she knew the truth of it, deep in her heart?

Her body splintered apart, the shards of it falling away as her climax shuddered its way outward. Gunner bent over her, the bucking of his release quieting until, at last, he laid his head against her stomach and let out a long sigh filled with satisfaction.

She wasn't sure how long they stayed that way, with Gunner lying against her, his limp cock still inside her bruised vagina. With one arm slung over her chest, Rick joined them.

“Mallory, stay.”

It wasn't the words Rick had spoken, but the tender, vulnerable way he'd said them. She swallowed back the urge to let her returning emotions swarm over her.

“I will.”

But for how long?

Holding back that question was one of the hardest things she'd ever done.

* * * *

Mallory understood that Rick and Gunner needed to work the ranch. If she'd thought she could help them, she would've offered. But she knew nothing about ranching, other than to recognize

cruelty to animals, and that was no longer an issue. She just wished that they didn't stay away so long, sometimes working all day, then disappearing again at night "to take care of other things." She assumed that one of those "things" was the wolf that was terrorizing the ranches.

But why weren't they telling her about what they did? They shared their bodies with her, but she couldn't shake the feeling that they weren't sharing all of their life with her. Should she question them? Or would that cause more problems?

No. They'd tell her eventually. She had to trust them enough to wait.

Missing them was harder if she did

nothing, so she opened her computer and got to work. After, of course, checking her e-mail.

She had several short e-mails from Kid. The first was to tell her that he'd arrived home and that his mother was doing better. The second was a reminder that she didn't need to leave the ranch. He'd enlisted help in handling other complaints they were checking on. The third was the shortest one that got straight to the same question she'd been asking herself since she'd awakened.

Do you love them?

Leave it to Kid to get straight to the point. Unfortunately, that question led to others.

Do I love them? Yes.

Do they love me? I think so.

But what does that mean? Would I move to be close to them? Is this enough for them? Or would they want me to live with them? Will they want to get married later? What about children?

There's so much that has happened, and yet not much has been said.

She'd never thought much about marriage like other women had. But maybe that was because she'd never had anyone she'd even consider marrying. Now that she did, how could she marry them both?

Since bringing her home a couple of

days earlier, they'd had little time for each other. When the men were able to get back to the house, she hadn't wanted to barrage them with questions. She'd heard enough of their exchanges to know that whatever they were doing had their livestock's best interests at heart. Still, that didn't mean she wasn't disappointed when they'd dragged in very late and had gone to separate bedrooms instead of coming to hers. Feeling let down, she'd gone back to her room, determined not to seem clingy.

Once, they'd awakened her with soft touches that had led to a wild romp of quick sex. When they'd finished, she'd hoped that they would linger, lounging in bed together. But a call had gotten them

hurrying out of the house, skipping the breakfast she'd wanted to cook for them.

Damn wolf.

She hated the idea of harming any animal, domesticated or otherwise, but the wolf that kept attacking the cattle and even horses was different. He was a rarity, an animal that didn't kill for food, but for sport.

She sighed and tried to concentrate on an article supporting the industry of cattle ranching. Her mind, however, wasn't ready to work. Not when her desire to have Rick and Gunner sandwiching her between them kept popping up and forcing every other idea away.

At least she couldn't be faulted for a lack of trying. But the day dragged on with very little work getting done. Instead, she'd finally close her computer, then had kept herself busy by cleaning the house and doing their laundry. By the time the sun had set, she'd grown too restless to stay inside.

One of her favorite places was the porch. The home was like many in the area, with a generous-size porch and several rocking chairs. She couldn't resist sitting there and enjoying a hot toddy. Taking her tea-and-whiskey combination with her, she chose a chair near a small table, then eased into it and placed her mug down. The night was

clear, giving way to a spectacular view of the stars. A full moon hung overhead, the darker craters of its surface begging her to find the man who lived there.

It was a perfect night for romance. The only problem was that Rick and Gunner hadn't made it home yet.

"Where are you guys, anyway?"

She gazed at the moon and talked to the man staring back at her from the sky. "This just sucks. You're up there and making the world look so romantic, but where are the men I love?" She glanced around her, aware that it was the first time she'd spoken her feelings out loud.

The man in the moon remained silent.

Which as it turned out was a good thing. The sound of the back door

opening and closing earned her attention.

They're home!

Not bothering to take her mug along with her, she threw open the front door and rushed toward the back of the house. She hadn't gotten far when she almost barreled into Gunner and Rick.

Stunned, she took them in, naked as the day they were born.

None of them spoke. Instead, they seemed lost in the moment, each of them wondering what to say.

“Did I miss a skinny dipping party?”

Gunner's usual lighthearted attitude seemed forced. “Nope. We'd have definitely invited you to that.”

She let out a breath, all at once,

overwhelmed by their nude and hotter-than-hell bodies. They were sweaty and dirty, but that only made her want them more. Drawing in a long breath, she took in the fragrance of their bodies mixing with the labor of their work.

She didn't want to ask them any questions save one, but asking them to take her to bed seemed off somehow. Instead, she finally gave in and asked the question that begged to be asked. "Um, then what are you doing running around without any clothes?"

A horrible thought came to her, almost knocking her off her feet with its brutality. Were they out having sex with another woman? But why? Wasn't she enough for them? And why wouldn't they

have gotten dressed afterward?

“It’s not what you’re thinking, Mallory.”

Rick acted like he was angry at her for even thinking that way. His tone was sharp and unwarranted as far as she was concerned. “You don’t know what I’m thinking.”

“You’re thinking that we’re cheating on you.”

Were they cheating on her? But she didn’t have any right to accuse them of cheating, did she? After all, they’d never committed themselves to her or said they were exclusive. But he’d said the C-word, not her. “Okay, fine. You do know.”

She steeled herself against the answer.
“So? Are you?”

Gunner pulled her against him, then sought her eyes with a look that smoldered with need. “We’d never do that to you. It’s not our way.”

Confused, she made her mind work against the sizzle that rushed between them. “Then what’s going on?”

“It’s nothing that concerns you.” Rick growled.

“Nothing that concerns me? You’ve spent very little time with me since we got back from Shatland and now you come in late at night and butt-naked. And that’s not my concern?”

Damn it. I sound like a nagging wife.

“Rick, maybe it’s time.”

Gunner wanted to tell her, that much was clear. He was right. It was time to clear the air. “Tell me what’s going on. I know you’re holding something back.”

Rick started to say one thing, then changed his mind. She was sure of it.

“Not tonight. I’m worn out.” He seemed to mellow. “But we will. I promise we will when the time’s right. Until then, you’ll just have to trust us. Can you do that?”

“I don’t—” She gasped, just now seeing the wound on Rick’s hand. “Oh, my God. You’re hurt. What happened to you?” The only thing that could wipe away her desire for them was her

concern for their safety.

Rick lifted his arm, acting as though he hadn't noticed the bloody wound on his forearm. "It's just a scratch."

"Are you kidding me? It's deep and it's still bleeding." She broke away from Gunner to take hold of Rick's arm and get a better look, but he wouldn't hear of it. "We need to take care of it. You should see a doctor. You might need stitches."

"I don't need a doctor or stitches." He jerked his arm away when she tried to take hold of it again. "Leave it be, Mallory."

"But—"

He was pounding up the stairs before she could finish her sentence.

“Don’t let him get you down.”

“Why is he acting that way? I didn’t do anything wrong.” Tears sprang to life. She’d had hopes that they’d spend the night together, but those hopes had gotten trampled on. Even having Gunner so close to her, ready to comfort her, didn’t make her feel any better.

“We had a rough go of it tonight. But that’s no excuse. He’s an ass for taking it out on you.”

“Why? Please tell me what’s going on? Is it about the wolf?”

He tilted his head at her. “Yeah. That damn wolf has been at it again.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you’re naked.”

He glanced up the stairs, then gave her a small smile. "I can't get into it without Rick. But like he said, we will tell you." He skimmed his palms along her arms. "Can you hang in there a little while longer?"

"I shouldn't have to. Gunner, please tell me."

He was trying to decide if he should tell her, but once he'd made up his mind, she could see that he'd decided not to.

"Please, Gunner."

"I can't. Not yet. Just know that we're doing our part to catch him."

Him? Instead of it?

She backed off from his advances, unable to stand to have him touch her

when he wouldn't open up to her.

"Give it time, Mallory."

"I'll try, but I can't promise that I can."

"That's all I can ask."

He started up the stairs, leaving her alone again.

Her chest burned with his rejection.

How could she feel so close to Rick at one point, then feel like she didn't know him at all in the next? Had she made a mistake in staying? Yet, she'd had no choice. The attraction, the ever-present pull she had with both men gave her no choice. As badly as she hurt at that moment, that pain was nothing compared to the pain she'd suffer if she never saw them again.

* * * *

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”
Gunner fisted his hands, ready to come to blows. Or better yet, he’d shift and use fangs and claws to make Rick see his mistake. “Are you trying to run her off?”

Rick washed the blood off his already healing wound. “Fuck off. I’ve had enough crap tonight.”

“Damn it, Rick. Her finding us naked was a good opening. We could’ve told her the truth right then and there.”

“No.”

Fuck, but his brother was frustrating.

“No? Come on. We can still do it.”

“I said no. Think about it. If we told her tonight, would you be sure that she wouldn’t freak out? And if she did, what would you do if she took off running? A woman out in the dark with that rogue werewolf around? That’s just asking for trouble.”

“I wouldn’t let her get that far.”

“Okay. So you’d bring her back to the house and then what? Lock her in her room until she accepts us for what we are?”

Rick was backing him into a corner, but he had no way out. “Yeah. Maybe. I’d at least make her understand and show her, if I had to.”

“Oh, don’t worry. We’re going to have

to do just that. She won't believe it until she sees us." He wiped a hand over his face, his fatigue showing in the deepening lines. "Gunner, I know I'm stalling. First because I'm afraid she won't want us and take off. Second because I just don't have it in me right now. Like I said before. One problem at a time. I'm worn out and I can't take any more tonight."

He was right. Every inch of his body hurt. If he had to shift one more time...

They'd shifted, running through the pastures, checking the herd out and looking for any signs of the wolf. At one point, they'd run into Jacob Carr, one of the unofficial leaders of the werewolves

who lived in Forever. After shifting back into their human bodies, they'd talked about the killings. Even some of the werewolf ranchers had suffered losses. Jacob, one of the few werewolves that the Northman brothers liked, assured them that he and his brothers, Jayden and Jackson, were doing everything they could to find the werewolf that was responsible for all the trouble.

“Fine. We'll keep playing it your way. But if you let your shithole attitude get in the way again, we're going to lose her for good. Even the connection can't make up for you being an asshole.”

Rick blew up a lot easier than he did, but, although it sometimes took a while

for him to work his anger out, he always came back to a level-headed way of thinking.

“I know. I screwed up again.”

“No shit.”

“Yeah. No shit.” Rick flopped down on top of his bed. They had enough bedrooms in the house so that each of them could have their own room, but soon they hoped that they could join Mallory in the largest bedroom. That was the room they’d saved for the woman of their dreams.

“I’ll take care of it,” said Rick. “Once we have time to do it right, we’ll tell her.”

Gunner gazed out the window, his

mind already drifting to the problem that had kept them away from her for far too long. “I’m going to hold you to it. Soon, too.”

“Yeah. Soon.” Rick rose and started for the bathroom door. “First, the werewolf. It’s just a matter of time before we find the bastard.”

Gunner felt the hackles rise on his bear’s neck. Its claws flexed and a warning growl rumbled in his chest. “Is that right? Is that all it is? Just a matter of time?” It was his turn to blow up, but at least he’d taken his frustration out on his brother and not Mallory.

Rick cocked an eyebrow at him. “Yeah, it is. The bastard’s slick. I’ll give him that. But he’ll fuck up soon

enough. And when he does, we'll get him."

"Then we turn him over to Jackson and the pack?"

He knew Rick hated the idea of letting the werewolves decide the rogue's fate. He'd rather exact justice on his own terms.

"I don't know. Let's decide that after we nail his ass."

"Done. Until then, we keep looking." He shot his brother a hard look. "And you start treating our mate the way you should."

* * * *

Another two freaking days.

Mallory paced back and forth in the living room.

Two freaking awful, sexless days.

She checked the landing of the second story, expecting to see Rick and Gunner at any moment. If nothing else, she'd get to see them before they left. She'd made sure of that by getting up at five in the morning. They wouldn't leave her behind today. That was the promise she'd made to herself.

They weren't going to get away with it. Telling her to stay and then ignoring her wasn't going to work. She'd have it out with them once and for all, demanding that they tell her where she

stood. Were they playing with her? Or were they as serious as they'd led her to believe? What the hell was going on?

She'd paced into the living room again when she heard the thud of their feet as they headed down the stairs. "Hey, hold up."

Rick stalled for a second, then started moving again. Gunner, ever the easier one to talk to, grinned at her. "You're sure up early."

"The better to catch you with." Her Little Red Riding Hood joke fell flat. "I'm going with you."

Rick spun around. "The hell you are."

"Yeah, I am. I can help. Just tell me what to do and I'll do it."

"Baby, that's nice of you to offer, but

this is—”

“I swear, Gunner, if you tell me that it’s ‘man’s work,’ I’ll kick you so hard you won’t be able to sit in a saddle.”

He visibly cringed, his hands going down to cover his crotch before he realized what he was doing. “Who me? I’d never say that.”

“Maybe he won’t, but I will. This isn’t a job for a woman. Especially one who doesn’t know the area or the animals involved.”

Why was Rick so damned difficult to get along with? He hadn’t been Mr. Sociable to begin with, but lately he’d become a major bear of a grouch. Killer wolf or not, she was going to make him

see reason.

“What do I need to know? A wolf’s killing your livestock.”

“It’s more than that. A lot more.”

She caught the exchange that passed between them. “When are you two going to let me in? It’s fine for you to get between my legs, but when it comes down to really letting me get close, to trusting me with your problems so I can help, you close the door fast.”

“This is bullshit. We don’t have time for this.” Rick pivoted on his heel and strode toward the back door. “Move it, Gunner.”

They had longer legs and were faster than she was. But that didn’t mean she wouldn’t do her best to keep up. She

followed them out the back door, picking up her pace as they widened the length of ground between them. It wasn't long before they'd disappeared into the shadows of the barn.

She hurried, running now, but it did no good. "Where'd you go?" How could they have gotten their horses saddled that fast, much less left the barn without her seeing them?

A horse nickered, bringing her attention to the closest stall. She'd seen Rick riding that horse several times and knew it was his favorite. "Where's Rick, fella?"

The growl brought her to a stop, fear zipping into her like the sharp end of a

sword. Hardly daring to breathe, she searched the area of the barn to her left where the beginning of the sunlight eking its way over the horizon couldn't reach.

Cold, amber eyes, brilliant and glowing, met hers.

Chapter Eight

Mallory drew in a breath that burned in her throat. The gray wolf, a huge animal that was twice the size of an average wolf, pulled back its lips. The snarl came first before the ominous sound of the growl rolled out from him. The eyes blazed with fury, but it wasn't the kind of hate she thought she'd see in an animal's eyes. The hate that burned within the wolf was different, more personal. More human.

Where were Rick and Gunner? She dared not take her attention off the wolf. If she did, she was certain she'd look back just in time to see it launching its

body at her, jaws open, fangs ready to sink into her flesh and tear her open.

She had two options. She could face the wolf head on, grabbing for the nearby shovel to use as a weapon. Or she could run like hell.

The distance to the shovel was still far enough that she wouldn't get to it before the wolf reached her. That left her with only one choice, and it was a sorry excuse for a real answer.

Taking a steadying breath, she gathered her courage. The wolf lowered its head, its ears lying back and its tail low but swishing back and forth, a signal of its intent to attack. It took one step closer, then another. On the third step, Mallory spun around and ran.

Please, let me make it to the house.

She heard the panted breaths of the beast behind her. Without checking, she sensed that it wasn't running as hard as it could.

It's playing with me. Tormenting me like a rabbit it would soon pounce on.

Her heart pounded, her breath burning her throat. The distance between the house and the barn had never seemed so immense. She knew in that next moment that she wouldn't make it. But she still had to try.

Halfway there. Keep going.

She pressed on and heard the whine of her breath as it met her panic. Why hadn't he attacked her yet?

She was almost to the front porch steps when Rick and Gunner yelled at her.

“Mallory!”

Where were they? She had to look, had to know that they were close enough to save her.

A glance over her shoulder sent her sprawling to the ground. She landed on her side, then rolled before coming to a stop on her back.

“Gunner, get to her!”

The sky was beautiful with light swatches of white and gold from the rising sun splashing across the blue as it transitioned from dark to a light. She studied it, ready to be plunged into

darkness as death descended on her.

Instead, Gunner's face appeared above her.

She blinked, unsure if she could believe what she'd seen.

"Baby, are you all right?"

Suddenly, awareness jerked her back. She was alive and Gunner had saved her. He pulled her into his arms, then lifted her. Giving into his support, relishing the way his warm body felt next to hers, she closed her eyes and surrendered to him.

He carried her into the house and set her on the couch. Pointing a finger at her as though she'd done something wrong, he ordered her to stay put, then rushed out the front door.

“No!” She had to stop him, had to keep him away from the wolf. Yet her legs wouldn’t hold her as she pushed off the couch and tried to stand.

Agonizing minutes passed with no sounds. Guilt rode her like a bronc free from its halter. If she hadn’t chased after the men, they wouldn’t have run into the wolf. But where had they gone? She’d seen them go into the barn, but hadn’t seen them leave. Had they gone out the back?

“Where are you? Please, come back.” Determined to find them, to do anything to help them, she pushed off the couch, her legs finally allowing her to hurry to the front door. Just as her hand fell onto

the doorknob, the door opened.

Rick took her by the arms, scanned her body from top to bottom, then let her go. A glimmer of a question flicked through her mind at the sight of his arms, the dark hair covering the smooth skin. But the question was gone before it had a chance to form into coherent thought.

“You look all right. Are you?”

She nodded, then reached out for him. If she didn't feel his body next to hers and know that he hadn't gotten hurt, she'd cry. Yet crying would only make him angry. “I'm all right.”

He stalked away from her as he did so often. “Damn it all, Mallory.”

Gunner didn't take her side this time. “We don't have time to tell you why.

Just stay in the house. Do you understand me?”

“If you don’t, I’ll swear I’ll hog-tie you to the couch and nail the damn doors and windows shut.” Rick’s eyes were wild as he ran his hand through his hair once, then again. “We’re wasting time.”

Gunner threw open the door. “Please. For once, do what we say, Mallory. And lock the door behind us.”

She couldn’t argue with them about the need to lock a door because of a wolf. It didn’t matter. The relief she felt after finding out that the wolf hadn’t hurt them overshadowed everything else. “Yes.”

They were gone in the next minute.

She did as they’d told her, turning the

lock in the door and bolting the dead bolt. Peering out the closest window, she searched for them.

How had they moved so fast?

A flash of dark brown garnered her attention to the side of the barn. Another wolf, not the gray one that had chased her, lifted its head, and against her better judgment, she would've sworn it stared right at her. Their gazes held, then it whirled around and disappeared behind the barn.

Rick's arm. Something wasn't right about it.

Or rather, something was too right about it.

The memory of his wound came back. The wound that should've taken days,

even weeks to heal, was gone. Not even a scab or a scar remained.

The wound, their eyes, she had to find out what was behind both.

* * * *

A day had come and gone with the men staying out well past the time when Mallory had finally given up waiting for them and had gone to sleep. She wondered why they didn't join her, even if it meant waking her up. The only sign that they'd been home was a note left on the kitchen table.

Stay inside. We'll be back as soon as we can.

They'd come home sometime last night, but why didn't they sleep with her? They'd had sex enough times that they had to know she'd want them in her bed. Gunner's excuse that they didn't want to disturb her with their odd hours made sense, but they still hadn't come to her even after she'd explained that she didn't care if they woke her up from a sound sleep.

At least her time alone hadn't been a total waste. She'd spent the day working through her plan. A plan that would give her the answers she needed.

Since she saw the amber flecks the most when they were upset or turned on, she'd do her best to stir those emotions

in them. Hadn't they said they enjoyed rough sex? If that was true, then she'd make sure that their next time together would be as rough as she could handle it. Once she'd gotten them turned on and recovering from a hard romp, she'd slip in the question of Rick's arm. No one healed that fast. There had to be a logical explanation for it.

She met them as they came through the back door. Rick groaned, his jaw tightening. Gunner, looking more fatigued than she'd ever seen him, tossed her a confused look.

"We're home to get a bite to eat and then we're going back out." He ran a hand over the stubble across his jaw. "Okay, just say it out loud. A blind man

can see that something's on your mind."

"Why won't you let me go with you?" She knew why, but that was the first part of getting them riled up.

"It's too dangerous. We've talked about this. And after yesterday, with the wolf, we can't risk it."

"That's my point. It's just as dangerous around here."

"Not if you stay inside the house like you're supposed to," grumbled Rick as he marched past her.

Anger flared inside her, but she pushed it back down. She had to stay in control of her emotions. It was their anger she wanted to see, not hers. "Tell me what's going on with this wolf.

Where is it? Why can't you find it? I mean, come on. How hard can it be to kill one lousy wolf?"

Gunner shouldered his way into the living room, then eased behind the bar. He got out two glasses, then poured whiskey into both of them. After giving one to Rick, he held the other out to her, but she refused. He slugged the drink back.

"This wolf is different. Smarter."

She knew that from firsthand experience. "I know that. I saw it in his eyes. He looked at me like he knew what I was thinking."

They exchanged one of their telling looks that were beginning to irritate the hell out of her. If her plan was to work,

she had to know when to push and when not to. When it came time, she'd push hard.

“Still,” she smirked, meaning to needle them, “it is only a wolf, right?”

Gunner threw a wrench in her plan with his easygoing nature. “Baby, we’re sorry we haven’t been around for you lately. But right after you came here, the wolf increased his attacks. That calf that was injured? He was only one of about fifteen others.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” She hadn’t realized so many animals had been injured or killed.

“Thanks, but I’m only telling you so you’ll understand.” He placed his palm

on her hair then let it slide down until it came to rest on her shoulder.

She basked in the thrill his touch gave her. But one touch wasn't enough.

"If we don't take care of him soon, then we're going to lose a lot more animals."

"Gunner's right." Rick downed the remainder of his drink. "I know it's been rough on you, but after staying up all night to search for the wolf, then getting up to handle the regular chores, we just don't have the energy for—"

"For me?"

He turned his heated glare on her, making her feel like a jerk for what she was planning to do.

"It's not like we haven't wanted to be

with you.” Gunner let out a sigh, then dropped his arm. Exhaustion shone in the darkened circles under his eyes.

“I don’t care about the sex. I want you beside me, even if you only want to lie next to me and sleep.” It was both a lie and the truth. Her need to feel them against her was dwarfed only by her need to feel them inside her. But she’d take what she could get. For now.

Rick poured himself another drink and drank it down in one quick gulp. “Take a look at us, Mallory. We’re filthy and we probably stink to high heaven.”

She couldn’t lie. The longer she stood close to Gunner, the harder it was to breathe in the rank odor. They were

sweaty like the other time, but now they were covered in dust and dirt as well as other grime she couldn't identify.

“We could always take a bath together. I could wash you.”

Gunner groaned and moved toward the stairs. He gripped the railing. “Damn, woman, you’re driving me crazy. Don’t you know how much we want to do that?”

“Then, damn it, do it.” She pulled her T-shirt over her head, leaving her bare breasts exposed. Almost immediately, amber flecks appeared in their eyes. Giving them her best come-here look, she undid her jeans and let them drop to her bare feet. Their hungry gazes fell to her smooth mons.

“Are you sure you’re too tired?” She chuckled, adding an edge of snarkiness. “I thought you guys were rough.”

“You want it rough, huh?”

She thrust out her chest, daring Gunner. “I don’t think you can handle rough. Not in your present pitiful condition.”

“Girl, you’re just the thing I needed to get me going again.” Rick set his glass down on the bar with a loud bang, then strode toward her. If she kept to her plan of seducing them, then getting them to talk, she’d find out everything she wanted to know.

Sliding her tongue over her lips to further distract them, she took off

running, slipping past Gunner to bound up the steps. “Catch me if you can, guys.”

They came after her, hot on her heels. In a strange way, it reminded her of the gray wolf as he ran after her, delaying the moment that he'd strike. But this time, she didn't want to get away.

Fooling them, she raced past her bedroom to the door at the end of the hallway. She'd just opened the door when a naked Gunner grabbed her and pushed her back. He threw her on top of the bed. Rick came beside them and took the arm his brother hadn't already caught.

How had they gotten undressed so fast?

The amber had grown more prevalent. She'd been right in recognizing that the color was stronger whenever they were angry or horny. Fighting against them, but not too hard, she kicked out, then paused, dragging her breath in and out.

"This isn't my room," she puffed out.

"It is now. If we'd had time, we would've moved you into it before now."

"Rick, didn't she say something about us stinking?"

"I seem to recall something about her taking a shower with us."

"She sure as hell did."

Gunner's grip on her arm tightened as he jerked her to her feet. "Come with

me.”

Rick got past them and was already turning on the water in the huge shower. The bathroom, although modest with simple décor, boasted a shower that had two heads and was large enough for five people.

Before she could ease under the spray, Rick grabbed her other hand and tugged her inside along with him. She yelped as the warm water hit her, then worked to stay on her feet when Rick whirled her around to the other spray of water. Gunner adjusted the temperature on both, making it a pleasant warmth that spread over her body, wetting her hair into a slick of darkness with a slice of pink darting through it.

Rick tugged on a strand of the pink. “Why’d you put this color in your hair?”

“You don’t like it? Do you think it looks ridiculous?”

“Naw. It suits you.”

She fell back to her plan of baiting them. “Still, if anything’s ridiculous, it’s that soap on a rope.” She pulled the rope off the shower bar and held it up. “Who still buys these things?”

Gunner snatched it from her. “We like it.”

“I guess it has its purpose. You.” She took Rick by the arm and made him twist around until he faced the wall. “Hands on the wall, big guy.”

“What for?”

“You’re not touching me again until you smell like a human being.”

Again with the telling look? Is it a brother thing?

She took the soap away from Gunner, then rubbed the bar of soap over Rick’s back and felt the rush of current pass between them. He was massive, the width of his shoulders spanning an average man’s width and more. Sliding the soap over his back wasn’t enough. Making lather on her hands proved less effective in getting him clean, but it was definitely more appealing. Her hands slid over his back, down around the strong arm muscles, then along the lean line of his waist. She paused, wondered

if she dared to explore between his legs, then thought better of it.

Stick to the plan, girl. Turn them on, but not too fast. Make them earn it.

“Turn around.”

He obeyed her, adding a smirk to his face.

“Get rid of that grin.” She slapped his hand away. “Like I said. No touching me until you’re clean.” She had to slap Gunner’s hand away, too, as it strayed to her breasts. “You wait your turn. Got it?”

“Shit, but she’s bossy.”

Rick’s chuckle rippled through her chest and into her soap-covered hand. “Good thing she’s sexy.”

She met his gaze, lifted one eyebrow

as if to say “is that right?”, then wrapped her hand around his package. He startled, giving her a little payback. She stroked him, the soap sliding her palm easily up and down his cock. His eyes colored even more and his body tensed, preparing for more. When at last she couldn’t stand it any longer, she stepped away, then signaled for Gunner to “assume the position.”

“Good. My turn.” He leaned his back against the wall and gave her one of his drop-your-panties grins. If she’d had any underwear on, she would’ve done just that. “Start with my front, baby. I’m a dirty, dirty boy. Especially between the legs.”

She shoved him back as he reached for her and started applying soap in slow, circular motions. He was as solid as his brother. Between the two of them, they'd cornered the market on sexiness. No wonder she'd never found any other men that attractive. The Northman brothers must've been at the front of the line when good looks were handed out. They'd gotten more than their fair share.

By the time she'd finished washing his chest, not daring to dip lower and getting a complaint from him for not doing so, she was aching to forget her plan and get down to the business of satisfying both herself and them. "Hands on the wall."

"Are you sure? I think you might've

missed a spot.”

“Gunner, I swear, if you don’t let her get done washing you, I’m going to toss your sorry ass out of the shower.”

It pleased her that Rick was so impatient to get his hands on her. At least she wasn’t the only one dying to have sex.

She finished washing Gunner, hurrying a little at the end to get done so she could really touch them. “I guess this soap on a rope works okay.”

Gunner took the rope from her. “And not only for the soap part of it.”

Her gasp came as Gunner moved her around, putting her back to him, then tying the rope loosely around her wrists. Rick stepped forward, bringing her to

him, then bent his head to take in a nipple. His hand slipped between her legs.

Damn, how I've missed their touch!

Her craving took over, wiping her plan from her mind, as his fingers found their place against her clit. His tongue swept over her hard nipple, mimicking the way he rubbed her throbbing hot center. She laid her head back, letting the spray hit her from both sides. Warm water trailed over her body, but its heat was nothing compared to that of her men's bodies against her skin.

She leaned against Gunner as he played with her butt cheeks. His tongue trailed over the curve of her neck,

splintering her resolve even more.

“I’m dying to fuck your ass. You know that, don’t you? Tell me you want me to fuck your ass.”

She whimpered, struggling to remember what she was supposed to do. “Yes. Fuck my ass. Fuck my mouth. Fuck every part of me.”

“I guess she’s as horny as I am.” Rick nipped at her other nipple, then thrust his fingers into her pussy.

They were everything she’d dreamed of and more. They were the cowboy heroes of her fantasies and the strong men she’d almost given up searching for. They’d proven her wrong about their ranch and now they’d proven her wrong in her misguided belief that men like

them didn't exist.

Gunner clutched her wet hair and jerked her head back. The movement hurt for a flash, then was gone.

He put his mouth against her ear. "You wanted it rough, right?"

A flicker of fear came and went. She trusted them, more than she'd trusted anyone. "Give it to me rough."

"We wouldn't want to disappoint our woman." Rick twisted her nipple, biting down on the other one.

She cried out as Gunner added a slap to her rump, then another smack to her other butt cheek. His finger thrust into her anus without warning, without preparation. Yet whether it was because

she wanted it so much or because the warm water had helped, the sting was short-lived. Another finger followed the first one. He spanked her again, then bit down on her neck.

For a moment, for only a moment, the fear came back. She had believed he wouldn't actually bite her. Yet had his teeth felt sharper than they should have?

Gunner jerked her hair again, bringing her head back even farther. "Beg for it, baby. Beg us to fuck you."

She'd never begged for anything in her life. At first, her stubbornness railed against the idea, but another swat to her butt brought her around. If they told her to get on her knees and beg them, then she'd do it with a smile.

“Please, fuck me. I need you so much. I’ve missed you more than I can say.”

Rick brought his lips to hers in a sweet kiss that contradicted their rough treatment. “We missed you, too, baby.”

She stared into his eyes, no longer caring that they were filled with the strange color. What she saw in them brought a lump to her throat.

He loves me.

His lips crushed against hers, hard, needy, unrelenting. She moaned, pouring the sound into his mouth, his tongue a spear that would vanquish any resistance. Kissing him back, she met his urgency with her own.

They possessed her, with their kisses,

with their exploration of her body. No part of her was left out, no part of her didn't buzz with the electric sexual tension that was always with them. They'd called her their woman, and although she hadn't voiced it, they were her men. But they knew. They had to already know.

Rick tore his mouth away from hers all too soon, then bent down, the wicked look on his face stilling her heart. Yet she didn't expect his next move. He squatted down, then wrapped his arms around her legs. "Hold her, Gunner."

She squealed as he lifted her high, her legs draped over his strong shoulders, his stone-hard arms bearing most of her weight. Falling backward, she found

herself in Gunner's equally powerful arms.

Rick shoved his face against her pussy and sucked her clit in with one quick draw. He pressed his tongue against her clit, then just as she was about to explode, slid it down and through the seam of her pussy. His breath puffed against her mons as the water struck him and cascaded down the hills and valleys of his back. Rick pushed against her harder, so hard that Gunner had no choice but to back up and brace himself against the shower wall. The spray from the second shower head ran down her breasts as Gunner's hands found their way to cup them.

Rick's growl rippled over her skin. Ramming two fingers into her pussy, he took hold of her butt cheek and lifted her even higher. He drew her clit in again, sucking then stroking it, matching the constant working of his fingers into her sheath. He was a machine of raw sex, continuously giving himself to her while taking all she had.

Delirious, sinful pleasure scoured her. The way they handled her, as though they couldn't hold her hard enough or drink from her mouth and pussy long enough spoke of the primal urge that stormed outward from her core. Her body tensed, then released, then tensed again as their onslaught continued. She moved as much

as she could, but her movements were restricted. At once, she burned for them, but she could no longer control what her body did. Her rising release had taken over and wasn't about to turn her free until it had found its relief. Heaven was within her reach as she laid her head to the side and moaned out her climax.

Rick lowered her to her feet, then took her from Gunner's arms and turned her to face the wall. He pressed her cheek to the tile.

"Baby, try to understand. Don't ever push us again like you have for the past few days. You have to learn to trust us."

Denial flashed into her. Yet, if she hadn't seen his arm, the one that had healed so fast, she might not have

challenged him even then.

“You don’t own me, Rick. You can’t tell me what to do.”

She was rewarded with renewed irritation. “Yeah, I can and I will. You’ll do what we tell you, especially when it involves ranch business. Do it, baby. Do it for us.”

“Especially when it’s dangerous. It’s like Rick said. You have to trust us.” Gunner flattened his hand against her bottom, then left and came back with a hard slap to her butt cheek. He added more, spank after spank, until she almost forgot her irritation.

She jerked and tried to move away from the wall, pushing her ass toward

Gunner to dare him to spank her again. Rick pressed her against the wall again, shoving her face and her breasts hard against it.

Her plan was back on track. The added perk was that she'd get not only the answers she wanted, but the time together that she needed. "So you want me to obey you? Is that it?"

She wondered if they noticed how the rope around her wrists had worked loose, to the point of almost falling off. All she had to do was wiggle her hands a little.

"You've got it, baby." Rick's cock, erect and oh-so-tempting, moved against her outer thigh.

"Do as we say, Mallory, and we

promise you, you'll be glad you did."

"Please. I need to see your faces." She twisted around to rest her back against the wall. Holding their attention with a sultry arch of one eyebrow, she wiggled her hands and felt the rope slip off her wrists.

"You guys are sure good at giving orders." She skimmed her gaze over them, taking in their cocks. "But I have to wonder. With all your big talk, are you sure you two big, strong men can handle a girl like me?"

Gunner's hand rested against the flat of her stomach. She hoped he wouldn't move it over her hip to her butt. If he did, he'd noticed that she wasn't tied up

any longer.

“Yeah. We’ve got you, all right.”

Rick never lacked for confidence. If she hadn’t decided to get back to her plan, she might’ve given in again. They were so animalistic in the way they looked at her. Not like she was a piece of meat, but as though she was the greatest treasure on Earth and they’d discovered her.

“And you’re fast, too, aren’t you?”

Rick nodded, then bent over to nibble at the hollow of her neck. “Fast enough.”

Gunner, however, leaned away, suspicion oozing from him. “What are you getting at?”

“Fuck talking, man. My cock’s primed and ready for action.”

“Gunner, please. I want to feel you inside me.” She leveled her gaze at him, giving him her sultriest expression. She placed her palms on one shoulder of each man, but she had them so entranced that they failed to notice that she was untied.

Gunner groaned, taking her breast and squeezing it until it hurt. She smothered a giggle. “Are you two ready for some real action?”

Gunner’s gaze drifted to her hand. “Hey, wait a sec.”

She shoved them, as hard as she could, then banged her hand against the door. Before they realized what she’d done, she was out of the shower and darting

for the bedroom. Laughing, she made a beeline toward the hallway, but as she'd suspected would happen, they tackled her before she'd made it ten feet.

She struck the floor hard, pounding the air from her lungs. Gunner landed on top of her, knocking out what little air was still left inside her. He clutched her hair, and pulled her up, putting her on her hands and knees.

“Let’s get rough, baby.”

She struggled, but it was impossible to get away. “Yes. Rough.”

Rick spread his feet and took a stance in front of her. “You’re quick, but you’ll never be as fast as we are.”

She tossed her wet hair over her shoulder. Gone was the need to get

answers. At least until she'd managed to quench her thirst for them. "Fuck me, damn you."

Instead of placing her on top of the bed, Gunner flipped her over onto her back. The move surprised her, giving her no chance to complain as Rick went to his knees next to her, then shoved her onto her side.

"Keep her there, man." Rick strode away to somewhere behind her.

"No problem." Gunner held his body over hers, giving her a good chance to study just how wide his shoulders were. He was all muscles and no body fat. His pecs were a perfect blend of soft flesh and hard steel, like a mechanical man

come to life. His wet hair dripped tiny droplets onto her breasts which he licked off, making her tremble with his hot, quick flicks. He shook his head, sending even more water to sprinkle over them so he could lap them up, too.

“Are you going to fuck me or drip on me?” She started to scramble away, but his hand wrapped around her ankle. He tugged her toward him and flipped her on her back again with the slightest of ease.

“I’m going to fuck your brains out.” He spread her legs, then, keeping his eyes locked to hers, rammed his cock deep inside her.

She let out a scream of surprise, but surprise soon morphed into wild need.

The need she'd shoved down for what had seemed like forever ripped wide open. Wrapping her legs around him, she held him to her. She clung to his arms and thrust her pelvis toward him, urging him to go as far as he could.

Where was Rick? Having both of them inside her at the same time was the only way to feed her lust-filled beast.

Gunner had hold of her legs, his expression tense as he took her breasts in his hands and squeezed. Her juices flowed over the fleshy part of her bottom. His cock glistened as he drew it out of her then reversed directions to pound into her again.

As her animal of lust came to life

more and more, she realized that the climax she'd had in the shower wouldn't compare to the one building inside her. She was torn, physically and emotionally, her feelings warring against the primitive craving inside her. Their lovemaking, although rough, was nonetheless as lovely as if they'd showered her with roses and whispered sweet words. Love came in many forms, twisting raw, sinful sex into a force more powerful than anything simple carnal satisfaction could ever create.

Rick fell to their side, bent over and kissed her. Like the time before, the kiss grew in intensity in rapid succession, then was gone.

“Rick, please.” If he didn't know what

she meant, then she'd be lost.

“Get her on her side.”

“Naw, man, I have another idea.”
Gunner, his muscles tensed, eased his cock out of her. He stood, taking her along with him. “Get on top of me on the bed.”

She gritted her teeth. If she didn't get his cock and then Rick's inside her at the same time, she wasn't sure what she'd do. Trembling, she waited for Gunner to lie on top of the bed. He reached into the nightstand beside him and brought out a tube of lube.

“Come here. Let me get you ready.”
After squeezing some of the lube into his hand, he stroked his cock, covering it

with the gel.

Rick laughed. "Leave it to my brother to want a sandwich."

She was shaking when she knelt over Gunner with her face at his feet. Squeezing out more, he gently spread it over her butt hole, then worked it into her dark space. His fingers fought against her clenching walls of nerves, but it didn't take long for her to relax.

"Ready? Sit on me, baby."

He guided her to him, and once she could feel the tip of his cock at her anus, she shoved her body back. He entered her, forcing his huge cock to spread her open. She moaned, the sharp pain filling her. Closing her eyes, she worked her body back and forth, rocking against

him. Bursts of pleasure filled her, this time from the back to the front.

“Lean back on me.” He helped her ease her body back, bringing her hands to the bed on either side of him. He nibbled on her neck. “That’s it, baby. Just relax.”

The farther she bent, the stronger the pressure was inside her. She wet her lips, and as Rick dipped the bed to climb up, he positioned himself on top of her.

He lined her up, then drove into her. She bucked, but she was caught between the two of them as their cocks impaled her.

Having both of them with her, both of

them receiving as much pleasure as she got from them, added a higher level to their lovemaking. Together they drove into her, piercing her, plunging into her with abandon.

“Mallory, you feel so good. So right.” Rick kissed her, adding a third pleasing element to the experience. His growl rolled out from somewhere inside his chest to flow into her mouth. Again he pumped into her, and her pussy walls clamped around him. Holding his body over hers with one hand, he massaged her clit until it was burning and throbbing, seeking relief that would only come with her release.

If she could've, she would've held them to her forever. Her body, however,

betrayed her, building her climax until it had no place else to go. The friction of one cock shoving into her pussy as the other plundered her asshole grew. The tide of her release washed closer to the shore. She had no choice but to set it free when Rick snagged her nipple in his mouth at the same moment that Gunner lifted up and bit her on the neck.

“Bite me! Harder!”

Gunner bit down, stinging his bite into her flesh. She screamed out her orgasm as it exploded, taking all of her with it. The pressure was so incredible, shredding her so she could do no more than let their movements work against her trembling ones.

Gunner fell back and groaned out his release. Hot cum filled her butthole then slid out of her to cover both of them. Rick held on a moment longer, then pulling away from her, he lifted his head and...roared.

She gaped at him, too exhausted and stunned to move.

Did he just roar? Like an animal?

Chapter Nine

After prodding him several times, Rick finally scooted off her and fell to the other side of the bed next to Gunner. Mallory hadn't thought she had the energy to move, but after seeing Rick open his mouth and let out a sound that could only be called a roar, she had to get away.

She snatched up a nearby quilt and wrapped it around her body. "What was that?"

Rick appeared unfazed. "What was what?"

"What was that sound you made?"

Even if Rick hadn't paid attention to

what he'd done, Gunner had. He punched his brother on the arm, then flung his legs over the bed. "That's just a weird sound he makes when he comes, that's all."

"Bullshit. I've never heard anyone make that kind of noise. It sounded like it came from an animal. A really big animal."

"I didn't even know I made a sound." Yet Rick didn't look at her.

What is with them? Yet another secret?

"Double bullshit." Her plan had gone awry. She wasn't the one who was supposed to get angry and spill her guts, but that was exactly what was happening. Holding back was no longer

an option. If she didn't get answers soon, she'd have to question everything she knew about them.

“Mallory, what's the big deal? So I groaned.”

“You roared. Like some bear getting up on his hind legs and bellowing. That wasn't a groan or a growl. It was a roar. No doubt about it.”

Rick slid off the bed, then started for the door. When he got close, her hand covered the place where he'd suffered the injury. “What happened to your wound? I saw it and there's no way it healed that fast.”

The flash of anger darkened his expression. “Mallory, I don't where

you're getting this shit, but it's time to let it go. We had a great time just now. Why go and ruin it?" He jerked his arm away.

"Tell me the truth."

"Mallory, don't push." Gunner stayed on the end of the bed, acting as though he was relaxed, but his body was tense.

"Fuck this." Rick stalked out of the room. She couldn't stop him anymore than she could force him to tell her what she wanted to know.

But she had to try. Gunner was more sensible, more accommodating than his brother. "And your eyes. Why do you get that weird amber color in your eyes?"

"So you're questioning me about our eye color now? What can I say? People's eye color change all the time. It

depends on what you're wearing." He glanced down at his body. "Or what you're not."

"They don't change like that." She sat beside him. Even after having already made love, the urge to kiss him almost overpowered her anger. Whatever it was that they had between them, it was relentless in its conquest. She was ready to surrender to its will again. "Please, Gunner, if you care for me, you'll tell me the truth."

"Okay, fine." He glanced at the door. "Rick's going to kill me for telling you, but here it is. You thought he roared like a bear, right?"

"That's what it sounded like."

“Well,” he dragged in a breath, “that’s because it was the sound a bear makes. You see, Rick and me? We’re werebears. Men who can change from humans to bears.”

She stared at him, trying to understand what he’d said. Her stare soon turned into a dark glower. “Fine. Don’t tell me. But at least don’t feed me some nonsense about being were... Whatever you are.”

“Werebears. We’re werebears.”

She broke into a belly laugh. She had to give it to him. He could always make her laugh. “Okay, sure. You’re werebears. Now tell me the real truth.”

He opened his mouth to speak and she was sure he was going to finally tell her

the truth. The house phone interrupted her chance.

“I have to get this.”

“No, you don’t. Let Rick pick up.”

He shook his head, then answered the phone. “Gunner here.”

* * * *

Rick had already gotten dressed in clean clothing by the time Gunner caught up with him. His brother’s expression was sour, telling him more than he wanted to know.

“Fuck. Who called?”

“Wallis Rilas. He said he found a dead cow and an injured calf on the road between our places.” Gunner looked like

he was about to say more, then slammed his mouth shut.

Wallis was a werebear who liked solitude and rarely interacted with anyone. The fact that he'd called about the cow instead of handling the carcass himself meant it was bad. Real bad.

“What were you going to say?” He studied his brother, sure that something was up.

“Uh, nothing. Just that it doesn't look like we're going to get any rest.”

“Nope. But getting with Mallory was better than any amount of sleep.” Gunner was out of the room, no doubt to get to his room for clothes.

Why can't we find that damn wolf?

With werebears and werewolves alike searching for him, Rick couldn't figure out how the bastard had eluded them. It just didn't make any sense.

The day had already sucked enough, but now that the wolf had made another killing and Mallory was mad as hell, it was going to suck even more. She had a right to know everything. Lying to her, even by omission, was eating away at his gut. He vowed they'd tell her as soon as they had enough time to deal with her reaction, good or bad. So far, they hadn't had enough time at home to do more than sleep and eat. They were in and back out hunting as soon as they could.

Bullshit.

The real reason twisted his gut a little more.

What if we tell her and she leaves?

He shook the awful thought away. Gunner was right. Telling her would have to happen soon. Real soon.

He met Gunner downstairs, ready to spend the rest of the day and night searching for the wolf. He'd have to saddle up another horse so he could let his favorite, Gallahad, get some much needed rest. When the hell was he going to get his own much-needed rest?

Gunner was faster than he was in getting another mount ready. "Rick, I need to tell you something."

"What?"

“I told her.”

Rick froze. “You told her what?”

“About us.”

Shit. “Without me?”

“Come on. I’ve tried to get you to tell her. So, I just decided to get it over with. She knows something’s up and she has a right to know.” Gunner paused, yet he knew he was going to say more. “I think you’re afraid to tell her.”

“Bullshit.” His brother knew him all too well. Besides, he’d already admitted as much. “So? What’d she say?”

Gunner turned away. “She didn’t believe me.”

Laughter rolled out of him, then the mirth changed to sadness. It was going to

take a lot to convince her. “At least you got it out of your system. But don’t worry. We’ll do it when we get back.”

“We’d better.”

“Just get ready to go.”

He’d just cinched up his saddle when he noticed that his brother had led Sweetie Pie out of its stall. Gunner pointedly ignored him, which was never a good sign.

Shit. Tell me he isn’t saddling that horse for her.

“Damn it, Gunner.”

His brother held up his hand in a feeble attempt to ward off Rick’s rage. “I know. But I’m getting caught between the two of you bullheaded, stubborn—”

Gunner stopped, his gaze going past

him. Rick didn't need to turn around to know she was there. He could sense her as though the connection had snapped a chain around his neck and turned him toward her. She was irresistible even when he wasn't looking at her. When he finally did, she took his breath away. Had he ever told her as much? He promised he'd tell her that along with everything else.

As soon as we have more time.

Coward.

“Those are the same thing. Stubborn and bullheaded, I mean.”

Rick couldn't find strong enough words to say what he was feeling. Or maybe he could and knew he shouldn't.

If he did, they'd never make it back out to the hunt. Instead, he'd carry her back into the house, lock the doors, turn off the phones, and keep her in bed for the next week.

He mounted his horse, which was safer than looking at her. Instead of saying what he wanted to, instead of telling her how hot she was, he ground out his order. If nothing else, he'd keep her safe. "You're not going with us so just get on back in the house."

"Aw, crap." Gunner handed the reins to Mallory, then got on his horse. "I'm out of this. You two figure it out." He clucked to Fleet, urging his horse out of the barn. "See you there."

"Mallory, please, all I'm doing is

trying to keep you from getting hurt.” Trying to talk to her was like trying to talk to a stone wall.

She tossed her hair over her shoulder, then put her boot in the stirrup and slung her leg over her horse. “Suit yourself. I’m going whether you want me to or not. Deal with it.”

Her gaze shifted to the rifle that rested in the holster slung behind the saddle. “Or are you going to shoot me to stop me?”

“Of course not, Mallory. Don’t you get it? I’d never hurt you. And it would kill me if anyone else did.”

She blinked, surprised at his revelation. Her mouth parted in a way

that nearly drove him wild with need. “I’m going and you’re not stopping me.”

Damn, but he liked a feisty woman, even if she was irritating as hell. Maybe because she was stubborn. And especially when her backside looked so damn good in a saddle.

I should tan her hide. Not that it'd do any good. But shit, it'd feel good to do it.

He admired her stubbornness. She reminded him of himself. As far as he was concerned, that wasn't a bad thing. It was that last thought that finally convinced him to do what she'd told him to do. Just deal with it. “Gallahad, stay away from females. They're more trouble than they're worth.”

Trouble came in a different form as they rode over to the side road that lay between Wallis's and their ranches. He heard the cow before he noticed its dead calf. Her plaintive mooing reached across the expanse of the pasture, leading them to her like a signal beacon. It churned his gut, but he kept a straight face, knowing Mallory would find the scene difficult to take.

As they crossed over from the downed fence to the dead calf, he could already hear her sniffs. Damn, how he hated to hear a woman cry, but it was worse knowing it was his mate that fought back the sobs. He had to give it to her, though. Her face was scrunched up as she

teetered on the edge of breaking down, but she managed to keep from letting go completely.

“Babe, you don’t have to see this.”

* * * *

Mallory shook her head at Rick. Gone was the anger she’d felt toward the men. In its place came the utter heartbreak for the calf and its mother. Determined to face the horror, she pulled her horse up to Gunner’s, then slipped off. She couldn’t, however, bring herself to get too close to the calf. Even from several feet away, she could see the mutilation it had suffered.

Gunner bent over the calf, checking for

who knew what while Rick dismounted and headed toward the gully on the other side. She didn't have to ask to know what was lying there.

Gunner straightened up as his brother came to his side. "She's dead?"

She trembled when Rick didn't answer right away.

"No."

The mother had survived. "Should I ride back to the house and call the vet?" At least there was hope for one of the animals.

Rick's face said otherwise. "No. She's too badly injured."

"But I don't understand. You said she was alive." Did he plan on lifting it onto

his horse? That didn't make sense, given the weight of the animal.

Rick let out a ragged breath, and for the first time, appeared defeated. He strode to his horse, stopped as though reconsidering his plan, then pulled the rifle free of its holder.

He couldn't be serious. And yet, the tautness of his back, the fierceness of his expression, said he was.

“Rick, no. You can't kill her.”

He walked back toward the gully. “I have to.”

She jumped off her horse and ran to his side. The cow lifted its head and let out another baleful moan. Mallory turned away. The cow's insides were pulled out of her body and she was covered in

blood. It was a wonder that she was still alive. But she was alive.

“We have to try and help her. Please, let me get the vet. I can lead him back here.”

He yanked his phone out of his pocket. “Don’t you think I want to call him? But it’s no use. She’s already as good as dead. Even the vet can’t save her.”

“At least let him try.” She couldn’t, wouldn’t let him kill the poor animal. Wasn’t it enough that her baby was dead? She clutched his arm, but he yanked it away.

“Let it go. The only thing I can do now is to put her out of her misery.”

“No, don’t. We can think of something.

Please, give her a chance.”

He broke away from her a second time. “Damn it. Stop grabbing my arm before you get hurt.”

“But you can’t. I’ll do anything. I’ll call for help and bring the best veterinarian in that I can find. You can’t just—”

It happened so fast that her mind couldn’t comprehend it. The blast of the rifle discharging stunned her, bringing her to an abrupt stop. Fresh blood spurted from the wound in the cow’s head.

Gunner took her by the shoulders and pulled her into his arms. She shook, unable to control her body’s reaction. Closing her eyes and blocking out the

sight of Rick, the rifle still in his hand, she pushed her face against Gunner's chest and let the tears she'd fought against so valiantly take over. Rick's footsteps echoed in the ensuing silence as he strode back to his horse.

"She was still alive. He didn't have to kill her."

Gunner would agree with her. But if so, why hadn't he stopped Rick from killing an animal that needed help?

She flattened her hands against his chest and lifted her gaze to his. "He shouldn't have shot her. We could've gotten help. He could've at least let us try." He was with her in this. He had to be.

“Mallory...”

She refused to believe he wouldn't agree. “What is it? You know he was wrong to shoot her.” She searched him, trying, hoping he'd say yes.

“No, baby, he wasn't wrong. It was the only thing he could've done. It was the humane thing to do. She was beyond help.”

Pain tore her apart like she had a rabies-infected animal caught inside her trying to get out. She stumbled away from him, too sickened to touch him any longer.

“Get a grip, woman.”

“Get a grip?” She whirled to confront Rick who had just shoved his rifle back

into its case. “Get a grip? Are you fucking kidding me? You shot that poor animal without even thinking about ways to save her. You did it without feeling a damn thing about it, too.”

“Come on, baby, you know it’s not like that.”

“Do I, Gunner? I don’t think so.” She backed away, keeping her distance from Rick who had gotten back on his horse. “Maybe this is the real you. Maybe you’ve put on a show this whole time and now I’ve finally gotten to see the real Northman men.”

“Baby, you’ve got to listen—”

“No, Gunner.” Rick’s expression was filled with a sadness that she’d never seen. “Let her talk.”

She knew she'd better stop, but she couldn't. Had she been wrong about them from the start? Had she given not only her body, but her heart to two men who could be so ruthless?

"You shot her and I think you liked it."

"Mallory,"—the warning was clear in Rick's voice—"you're going too far."

She kept her eyes on Rick as he leaned forward in the saddle. The softness of his voice chilled her more than any of his heated outbursts.

"I'm going to say this once and that's the end of it. Only God Almighty could've helped her. And if you hadn't noticed, I'm not a god. I'm just a man trying to run a ranch in times that make it

anything but easy. I treat my animals with respect and I try to treat people the same way. That fucking wolf terrorized her. He killed her calf, then dragged her through a barbed wire fence. Then he came after her.”

She took in the downed fence. What kind of wolf could break a fence like that? Not an average size one, but the one she'd seen in the barn could have.

“These animals aren't our pets. We treat them right, but in the end, ranching's a business. Sometimes it can be a rough business, a heartless business. When an animal needs to be put down, then we do it. We don't like it, but we do it because that's what's right for the animal. Despite what you

might think right now, we don't let our animals suffer. To not put her down would've been cruel. That's the way it is on a ranch. If you can't handle that, then maybe you need to leave."

He wanted her to leave? He couldn't have hurt her more if he'd pulled out his rifle and shot her.

"Rick, shut the hell up." Gunner shook his head, his glare still aimed at his brother. "He didn't mean it, baby."

She didn't want to believe him, didn't want to let the nagging idea that he was right surface past her heartache. Defiance and stubbornness joined her denial. "I know you're hiding things from me." The need to confront them had

finally boiled to the surface. Her pain and her fury had to have a target, and right then, that target was Rick.

She'd gone that far and there was no turning back. Her plan had failed, so what did she have to lose? "I'm talking about how your eyes get this amber color in them whenever you're turned on or angry." She pointed at Rick. "See? That's not a normal change in color."

Rick closed his eyes. Had he done so out of frustration or to hide the amber from her?

"And your arm. You can't tell me that your wound just went away. Hell, even a scratch would still have left a mark on your arm."

He opened his eyes, eyes that were

filled with pain. “Are you finished?”

“Answer me, damn it.” She clenched her fists, holding back the need to strike out. “I swear, if you two don’t give me some answers, I *will* leave.” She narrowed her eyes at Rick. “But I guess that’s what you’re wanting anyway.”

A flash of the tender side of Rick came back, but it was gone so fast she wondered if she’d even seen it.

“I shouldn’t have said that. Gunner’s right. I didn’t mean it. I spoke out of anger. But at the same time, if you can’t accept us the way we are, then what else is there to say? It’s your choice, Mallory. All I ask is that you make it soon. Don’t drag it out.” Rick took hold

of the reins, then swung his horse around. He turned and gave her another sorrowful look, then put his horse into a gallop.

She couldn't stand all the emotions warring inside her. Seeing the cow put down had struck her in the core, digging its sharp claws into her. Part of her denied that he was right, and yet, another part, the part of her that reasoned, grew louder.

“Baby, try and understand. Rick's not the best with words, but once his anger takes over...” He closed his eyes as though gathering his resolve, then opened them and met her gaze. “We want you to stay. More than anything, we want you to stay. Let me talk to him.”

She yearned to hold him, but couldn't give into the need. He sighed and stepped away.

“And what about the poor animals?”

Gunner mounted his horse. “There’s nothing we can do now except drag their carcasses back to the house and dispose of them.”

“He just shot her. Without even trying to get her help.” She clung to her need to be right. Was it a matter of ranch life? Or were Rick and Gunner not the caring men she’d thought they were?

“You’re wrong about that.” He glanced in the direction Rick had gone. “You pushed him when he didn’t deserve it, Mallory. He’s as torn up

about the animals as you are. Maybe more so. Your pushing him didn't help things." He leaned back in the saddle and took the reins. "Are you coming?"

"In a minute."

Gunner looked in the direction Rick had gone. "I don't like leaving you out here by yourself."

"I'm okay. It's not that far anyway. I want some time alone. Please. I'll be all right."

He didn't like it. That much was written all over his face. "Can you get back to the house on your own?"

"Yes." She wiped fresh tears away, tears that had nothing to do with the cow and her calf. "Should I leave?"

"Hell, no. I'm asking you to stay.

Don't let Rick's short temper run you off. Please, Mallory, stay. I promise you we'll answer all your questions when you get back."

She tried to answer, but the words caught in her throat.

"Okay, then. See you at the house. But if you're not back in five minutes, I'm coming back here." Settling his hat farther onto his head, he spurred his horse into a gallop and rode off.

She wanted to do more for the cow and her calf, but what? Knowing that the ranchers, and most anyone else, might think her crazy, she stood over first one then the other animal and said a small prayer.

The ride back to the house lasted longer than she'd thought it would. It was as though the horror had seeped into her body and taken away all her incentive to hurry.

* * * *

Gunner wasn't like a lot of werebears who didn't like werewolves. He figured they were like anyone else. There were good ones and there were bad ones. Jacob Carr was one of the good werewolves from the nearby town of Forever. Still, it wasn't a welcomed sight to see Jacob standing in front of their house talking with an already

irritated Rick.

They were deep in conversation by the time he'd looped his horse's reins around the hitching bar next to Rick's horse. They'd take care of their mounts, brushing them down and giving them feed after Jacob left.

"We're doing all we can. You know that, Rick."

"Then you're not doing enough."

Jacob was a reasonable man, but Gunner had to admit that Rick could get under even the most level-headed man's skin when he was in a mood. And he was definitely in a mood.

"And what are you bears doing about it?"

"It's a damn werewolf that's doing the

killing. That makes him your problem, not ours.”

Rick took a step forward, his gaze locked with Jacob’s. For both werewolves and werebears, it was a confrontational gesture. Gunner got between them, then shot his brother a warning look.

“We’re going out every night. Hell, we haven’t had two hours a night to rest or to spend with our new mate. And it’s getting harder to keep things from her.”

“Then why didn’t you tell her?” Jacob’s intense look said it all. “If she’s really your intended mate.”

“Mallory’s the one, all right, and we should’ve told her before now. But I

wanted to have enough time to explain it to her, time enough to stay by her side while she tried to accept it. No way would I leave then even if the damn wolf came onto our land again. I wanted to break it to her without all this other shit getting in the way.” Rick growled. “Fuck, I don’t know why I’m telling you any of this.”

“I did tell her, but she didn’t believe me.” Gunner’s own bear twisted his gut, warning him that it was about to break free. “Rick’s right. When I told her she didn’t believe me. It’s going to take time to prove it to her and more time to get her to accept it.”

“It’s none of your damn business anyway how we handle her.” Rick’s

inner beast was at the surface. His eyes blazed amber and his growl was filled more with the sound of a beast than with a man's groan. "Just know this, Jacob. Once we catch up to that fucking werewolf bastard, we're going to get payback for our losses. After that, you werewolves can have him."

"Rick"—Jacob's face hardened—"you know that'll cause problems. If you get to him first, you hand him over, unhurt. Do you get my meaning?"

Shit. If he didn't diffuse the situation soon, there'd be hell to pay. It had taken a while, but the werewolf pack of Forever and the werebear clan of Shatland had forged a tenuous truce,

hoping to live in peace. The vampires, who for some unknown reason tended to favor the werewolves, had helped in the process. He didn't want to see a war break out now.

“Jacob, we're in this together.” He pushed back a snarling Rick. “We're doing whatever we can to help out, but this is a rogue werewolf.”

It was almost funny to see a werewolf look sheepish. No shifter wanted to see one of their kind go bad. “Yeah, he is. We still don't have any idea who he is. Or if he's working with others. I can promise you, though, that he's not from Forever.”

Rick snorted, a derisive sound that had Jacob pulling back his lips in a snarl.

“Like we can trust a werewolf’s word.”

“Damn it, Rick, knock it off. Jacob’s one of the good ones. He keeps his pack in line.”

Rick met his gaze, then backed off. “He got two more of ours.”

Jacob groaned, but at least the sound held more groan than growl. “The town had a meeting about the problem. We’re going to do our best to compensate any werebear who lost stock.”

That was more than he’d expected. He had to give Jacob and his brothers, Jayden and Jackson, respect for that. Being the unofficial leaders of the werewolves in Forever, they’d no doubt had a large part in coming to that

decision.

“That’d be appreciated. Tell your brothers that we’ve got most of our people out checking their herds every night. If anyone catches this werewolf, we’ll give you a call.”

“Thanks.” Jacob checked Rick, obviously unsure if Rick was going to back off for good. “I’ll get going. If you want help with those two carcasses, I’m happy to lend a hand.”

Rick flared again. “We don’t need your help. You just get that fucking wolf.”

“Fine. Just offering, is all.” Jacob backed away, not turning around and showing his back to them until he’d made it back to his pickup.

“You could’ve handled that better.”

Rick leaned against the railing, making a show of acting as though he was relaxed, but Gunner could see through the act. His brother was still upset about the cattle and even more about Mallory.

“I guess you’re thinking I owe her another apology. Again.”

“I don’t know which of you has the harder head, but if you guys don’t stop butting against each other, we’re all going to lose out.” He wasn’t sure how he’d handle it if he had to make a choice. Could he choose between his brother and his mate?

Chapter Ten

Mallory had arrived back at the house after skirting around it, hoping to avoid running into Rick. Once she'd tied her horse close enough to their horses so that they'd see it, she'd come up to the rear door of the house, then slipped inside. As she'd reached the stairs, she'd heard voices and her curiosity had gotten the better of her.

I should tell them I'm here, then go upstairs. Or better yet, just go. I can't eavesdrop. That wouldn't be right.

Yet she couldn't resist. Had she heard Rick talking about her? She leaned her head against the door.

“Just know this, Jacob. Once we catch up to that fucking werewolf bastard, we’re going to get payback for our losses. After that, you werewolves can have him.”

Had he said werewolves? That, of course, was ridiculous. She must’ve misunderstood. Or were they joking like Gunner had joked with her? Concentrating, she put her ear against the door again.

“Rick, you know that’ll cause problems. If you get to him first, you hand him over, unhurt. Do you get my meaning?”

Was Jacob humoring him? Or did he believe it, too?

“Jacob, we’re in this together. We’re doing whatever we can to help out, but this is a rogue werewolf.”

She jerked away, sure that she’d heard correctly this time. *Werewolf. Oh, my God.*

Had she missed something? Did Rick and Gunner have mental problems and make up fantastic stories?

“Yeah, he is. We still don’t have any idea who he is. Or if he’s working with others. I can promise you, though, that he’s not from Forever.”

Rick snorted, a derisive sound she’d heard before. “Like we can trust a werewolf’s word.”

“Damn it, Rick, knock it off. Jacob’s

one of the good ones. He keeps his pack in line.”

Pack? As in werewolf pack?

It was impossible. And yet, they talked about it like they were discussing anything else.

“He got two more of ours.”

She gaped at the door. Rick was talking about the cow and her calf. She stumbled backward, then caught her heel on the bottom step. She sat down, hard, but barely noticed. Her attention was fixed on the door as her mind struggled to understand.

Amber eyes. Rick’s wound. Strange teeth. Growls and snarls.

Gunner had said they were werebears. Had he told her the truth? But that was

crazy.

Her breath hitched in her throat. It couldn't be real, could it? And yet didn't all those factors point to them being werewolves? Or were they werebears? How could she know? Did she want to know?

And yet, she already knew.

She had to get away. The men she'd trusted to tell her the truth had lied to her. But it was more than a lie. They were either insane or...supernatural creatures. She clamped a hand over her mouth to hold back a hysterical laugh. Or was she the insane one?

Primal survival instinct took over as she half ran, half scrambled up the stairs.

She'd grab her purse and phone, leaving her suitcase behind. If she was lucky, they'd see her suitcase and think she was still around somewhere. In the meantime, she'd call Kid and beg him to come rescue her.

Rescue her? How had her life gotten thrown upside down so fast?

She hurried to get her things, then crept down the stairs and paused. Although she could hear Gunner's and Rick's voices, it didn't sound like they were talking to the other man any longer. She had to get going before they came inside and caught her.

How much more pain could she handle? She'd gone from suspecting them of animal cruelty to loving them,

only to be twisted up inside when Rick had killed the cow. He'd been right to put the animal out of its misery. The long ride home had given her enough time to get past her shock and realize that she'd been wrong to rail at him. She had intended to apologize later, after he'd cooled down.

But now? Now she'd found out that creatures like werewolves and werebears really existed. What were they called in books? Shifters?

She closed the back door behind her as quietly as she could. She couldn't take the chance that they'd have supersensitive hearing like the shifters in books and movies did. Glancing over

her shoulder every few moments, she ran into the pasture, intent on taking the roundabout way back to the main road. Once she was there, she'd call Kid.

What would she tell him? He'd guessed early on that she loved them. Kid would dig and dig until he found out why she'd left. And then promptly take her to a psychiatrist.

She pushed across the pasture and dug out her cell phone as she walked. Checking back toward the house yet again, she punched in the speed dial number for her friend. Her heart sank as it went straight to voice mail.

Fuck. Why now?

Kid had a habit of not charging his cell phone. She'd cautioned him about it

often, but none of her warnings had worked. The only thing left to do was to leave a message and hope he'd get back to her soon.

“Kid, it's me. Please call me as soon as you can.”

She'd just ended the call when it hit her that she should've gone ahead and asked him to come and get her. And to tell him that it was urgent.

A noise behind her had her wheeling around. When she did so, she tripped over a large rock and went down on her butt.

“Ugh.”

But she didn't have enough time to get to her feet before she lifted her gaze to

the huge man. He was as tall as Rick and Gunner and even bigger. His muscles bulged from the sleeves of his black T-shirt and his legs strained at the denim of his jeans. He was undoubtedly strong. Yet although his bulk was massive, his blond hair, blue eyes, and rounded face gave him the appearance of the boy next door. She had an awful feeling that he was anything but that.

“Crap, that was a hell of a fall. Are you okay?” He smiled, the teeth larger than normal.

Was she imagining it? Or had her eyes finally been opened?

He held out his hand, offering to help her get up. Her gut instinct, on full alert, told her not to take his offer. She ignored

his hand, got to her feet, then put distance between them.

She squinted at him. Had she seen his eyes glow with bits of amber? And yet, they were blue now. “I’m fine. Thank you.”

“What are you doing out in the middle of a pasture?”

She swallowed, then clutched her phone. The urge to dial the house itched at her fingertips, but she couldn’t call the men. Not now that she knew what they were. “I could ask you the same thing.”

He laughed, a mirthless sound. “You sure could.”

His bright blue eyes suddenly filled with amber, glowing in a way that

whipped fear into her.

He's one of them.

“What’s the matter? You act like you saw a ghost.”

Why was he taking off his shirt? She stared, entranced even as panic blared warning signals to run.

“What are you doing?” Her voice came out as a whisper.

“You’re the woman who’s staying at the Northman place, aren’t you?” His hungry gaze took its time running down her body then back up.

Could he be a friend of theirs? Or an enemy? She decided to go with the truth. “I am.”

He glanced around, putting on the pretense of looking for them. “Are the

guys around? I'd like to say hello."

It was time to lie. "Um, yes. They're within earshot."

"Well, now, that could put them at quite a distance. Werebears have really good hearing."

She backed up two more steps when he dropped his jeans to the ground. "Leave me alone."

"Aw, sweet thang, where's the fun in that?"

She took off running, dropping her phone as she did. But like with Rick and Gunner, she didn't get very far.

She fell face-first as he tackled her. Holding her wrists, he put his body on top of hers, pinning her to the ground. A

whine escaped her as she sucked in air as best she could with his enormous weight on top of her.

He sniffed, then drew in a long, slow breath. “Fucking A, but you smell good. I can see why those beasts want you.”

She had no chance of struggling against him. He was too heavy, too strong. Instead, she closed her eyes and tried to ignore the feeling of his hand pushing beneath her shirt to fondle her breast.

“You’re going to give me a treat. Cows are fun to kill, but the mate of two werebears? Now there’s the real fun.”

She screamed, the sound bursting from her lungs. “Rick! Gunner!”

Amazing her and surprising the man,

an answer to her cry rang out.

“Mallory! We see you!”

Gunner. Thank God.

“You fuckin’ bitch.”

Oh, hell. I can feel him. His body feels different. Oh, hell. He’s changing.

“Stay down.” He fell to her side.

Daring to take a look, she saw the impossible.

Gray fur flowed over his skin. Cracking noises erupted as his bones broke on their own, then moved into nonhuman positions. His eyes glowed with even more amber and fangs sprang outward as his jaws grew longer, forming a long snout. He writhed as though in pain as growls came and went

with the transformation. His clothing tore away. A tail sprouted and hands morphed into paws.

The werewolf sprang to his feet, lowered his head, and growled at her.

She cringed, turned her face to the ground, and got ready to feel his fangs drive into her flesh. When it didn't happen, she almost didn't believe it. He was up and running, leaving her lying on the ground.

Rick and Gunner rushed to her side, then helped her to her feet.

“Baby, are you hurt?”

“Go! He's the one you've been searching for.” She pointed in the direction the wolf had gone. “Don't worry about me. Get him!”

She didn't have to tell them again. They bolted after him, tearing their clothes from their bodies as they ran. The change took them even while in motion. In only a few moments, two large brown bears chased after the wolf.

It was true. If she'd had one ounce of doubt left, it was gone. Her men, the men she'd fallen in love with were werebears.

Bears.

The thought came and went lost in the gust of wind as five wolves bolted past her, running after her men and the killer. They were powerful animals, pounding the earth underneath her.

Before she could understand what was

going on, they'd disappeared over the small rise.

* * * *

Rick almost barreled into the wolf pack, but managed to throw his weight to the side before impact. He growled as he went into a roll, but he was back on his feet quickly. Gunner slid to a stop, then let out a warning growl a moment before he slammed into one of the wolves.

Damn. He hated that wolves were faster than bears. But then, bears were generally stronger.

Jacob, in his wolf form, stood on top of the rogue wolf, his jaws tightened

around its neck. Although Rick knew the other wolves in their human forms, he could still recognize them as wolves.

He shifted, letting the transformation flow over him like the rushing waters of a turbulent stream. “Turn him loose. I’m going to tear him apart limb by limb.”

Gunner shifted, then snarled, giving his human version of his bear’s snarl. “Rick’s right. He’s ours. Hand him over.”

“You know I can’t do that.” Jayden motioned to Jacob who had reverted to his human body along with the rogue werewolf. “We’ve got this. You can head back home and let us deal with our own kind.”

“Fuck that. He put his dirty paws on Mallory. He has to pay for that.”

Rick and Gunner came together, their shoulders touching and faced the pack. It was their right to seek revenge.

“Rick. Gunner. Back off.” Jayden stood his ground with his pack mates forming a semicircle in front of the rogue werewolf. “If you cause problems, you’re only doing what he wants you to do.”

“How? Who is he anyway?” Rick knew a lot of the residents in and around Forever, where most of the werewolves lived, but he’d never seen that guy.

“He just moved to town, but no one knows much about him. His name’s

Steven Mishton and he's from a pack in Houston. I should've suspected him from the start."

Brandon, a large black werewolf, changed, then sneered at Jayden. "Shut up, man. They don't need to know our business."

"I'd agree, but they're already involved." Jayden shook his body, as most shifters did, to rid it of the remaining vestiges of the change.

"Because he killed our livestock?" That was a good enough reason, but Rick got the impression that there was more to it. He'd love to curl his hands around the man's neck.

"That and because of the real reason behind it." Jacob had the man by the

hair, holding him until Will Braxton yanked his arms behind him and held him still. “Jackson got wind a couple of hours ago from Steven’s cousin in Dallas. Steven here has an axe to grind. He heard about the peace between our two peoples and wanted nothing better than to put an end to it. Seems he doesn’t care for werebears much. I can understand the feeling, but not his actions.”

“So he started slaughtering our cattle figuring that we’d blame you guys. Is that it?” Gunner worked his neck, getting rid of the lingering effects of his shift.

“That’s our thinking.” Jacob snarled at Steven. “We’ll get him to talk soon

enough.”

“Then why’d he go and kill werewolf livestock?” His scheme made sense to attack the cattle of werebears, but why kill his own pack’s animals?

“I don’t get that part, either.”

Steven struggled against his captors, then let out a laugh. “Why? Because it was fucking fun. But shit. I’d have had more fun if you two assholes hadn’t shown up. She’s smokin’ hot, that mate of yours.”

Rick hadn’t planned it, but it felt good to punch the guy. Steven fell back and would’ve gone to the ground if Jacob hadn’t kept him upright. Rick shook his hand out, but was sure that any amount of pain, even if he’d broken his hand, was

worth the slug he'd given the werewolf. Funny thing was, it was the only time he could remember getting to hit a werewolf without ending up with a pack of biting dogs at his heels.

“Feel better?”

He grinned at Jacob. “Yep. How about I give it another one?”

He had his arm back, ready to punch Steven again, when Gunner snagged his arm in midair.

“How about we go and find our mate? I want to know why she was in that pasture to begin with. Let them handle this asshole.” Gunner turned his arm loose, then nodded at Jacob and Jayden and sprinted away. He stopped after

going a few feet. “Are you coming, bro, or not?”

“I am.” Rick wanted to have another go at the lousy werewolf that had cost him livestock and almost his mate. Instead, he fell into step next to his brother, shifting back into his bear form.

They ran side by side back to the place where they’d left Mallory, but she was already gone. He put his nose to the ground, picked up her scent, then started running again. She was headed away from their home, toward the main road leading back into Shatland.

With every step he took, he relived the argument by the mutilated cow and her calf. When would he learn to hold his temper? He’d been torn up about the

cattle and had taken it out on her.

He ground his teeth together as the wind whipped over his fur. What would his life be without her? He hated to even think that it might happen. And Gunner? Hell, if she left, he'd never forgive him.

If she gave him the chance, he'd spend the rest of his life making it up to her. That and he'd learn to keep his big mouth shut.

He glanced at Gunner, saw the tension in his muscles, the worry in his amber eyes. How had Gunner kept from tearing into him when he'd fucked things up? He didn't deserve either a good brother or a good mate. But if he got the chance, he'd try his best to make them proud of him.

He almost collapsed in utter relief when they caught up to her a quarter of a mile away from the main road. Although they hadn't had time to talk about it, Rick stayed in his bear form, glancing at his brother every so often to see if he was ready to change back. Gunner kept running, his huge paws throwing up dirt as he loped in front of her, then swung his body around.

She let out a small cry, spun around, and tried to run in the opposite direction. Taking his cue from his brother, Rick darted past her, blocking her way. Her eyes were wide and her hair was in tangles.

“Leave me alone!” She darted to the

left and straight into Gunner's human arms.

He'd shifted just in time to catch her, then tossed her over his shoulder. Rick shifted, too, and kept to his brother's heels.

"Calm down, Mallory. We only want to talk to you."

"Put me down, damn you. I saw what you are. Let me go." Her body rocked on top of Gunner's. "I saw you. I saw all of you." The fear and anger in her eyes grabbed him, daring him to lie to her. "And the wolves that ran past me. They're all werewolves and you're both bears."

"Mallory, I told you what we are."

"No. I mean, yes. But did you really

think I'd believe you?" She let out a groan that was as close to a growl as a human could make.

"That's right. Now you know the truth." Rick paced closer as she continued to beat her fists against Gunner. "You saw what we are and I'm sorry we didn't tell you before now. At least, not in the right way. We're what we are, but you know *who* we are, too. Remember that."

She paused, flattening her palms against Gunner's back so she could lift her head. "Let me go."

Love, unforgiving and all-encompassing, tore through him. Her tone was filled with sorrow and pain,

pain that wracked him with guilt when he thought of how he'd treated her. If she didn't accept them and left, then he'd blame himself. If he'd been less of a grouch, if he'd shown her more love, then maybe she could've looked past their alter-identities. He'd been so hell-bent on finding the rogue werewolf first, that he'd lost track of what was really important. If she stayed, that would all be in the past.

“Give us a chance to explain.” Her sad expression stabbed into him. “Please.”

She blinked, obviously surprised that he would add that word. “Will you hurt me?”

It felt as though she'd stabbed him in

the gut. “Baby, we’d never hurt you. We’d rather die first.”

She blinked again, once more thrown by what he’d said. Another sharp pain hit him. To have his mate look at him that way, to think that she even had to wonder if they’d hurt her, cut him to the core.

“Put me down.”

“Put her down, Gunner.”

She landed on her feet, a bit wobbly. Or had she, for a moment at least, thought to run?

“Are you planning on carrying me to a cave?”

He smiled, thankful that she still had her sense of humor. “Nope. At least, not

until wintertime.”

* * * *

Their moods as they walked back to the house kept them from talking about anything except the rogue werewolf. They filled her in on what had happened and how the werewolves had caught the killer. She asked more questions about the werewolves and what would happen next with the killer, but none of her questions were about them or the werebears inside them.

They didn't ask her why she'd been in the field or why she'd run for the main road. They didn't have to.

It all seemed so matter-of-fact, so

normal like three friends out for a stroll. Until they came closer to the house. Then she had no choice but to speak.

“I know you won’t hurt me.”

“Good. We never would in any way.”

Gunner took a step closer to her, but she moved back. It was too soon to have his touch and the wonderful sensation that was back overtake her thoughts.

The men she loved were werebears. Nothing could’ve prepared her for that. Her mind still couldn’t get that wrapped around it.

“Come inside, baby. We need to talk.”

She laughed, an edge to the sound. “We need to talk? Ya think? I heard you talking to Jacob and then I saw you. All

of you.”

Rick held the front door open.
“Mallory. Please.”

She couldn't have said no to him then. Not with the yearning she saw in his eyes. Once she'd passed by him, however, the fear that had caused her to run came rushing back. She darted up the stairs and dashed to her bedroom.

Logic had gone out the window when she'd seen a man change into a wolf. Not thinking, she scurried to the other side of the huge bedroom.

They'd had sex in that bedroom and she'd been so happy. Now that time seemed so long ago. Since then, her perception of the world had gotten thrown out like an antiquated notion

from the past. The men she'd come to love—still loved—had turned out to be creatures from the pages of a fantasy book. She should've seen the signs that they were different earlier, but she'd gotten involved too fast. Her heart hadn't given her mind time to catch up. And then when Gunner had told her, how else should she have reacted except to think he was kidding? That he was just trying to break the tension between her and Rick?

Even accepting what she'd seen as true didn't prepare her for Rick putting a key in the door and turning the lock. What was he doing? She raced to the door, then backed up as Rick got in her

way.

Rick tugged a dresser open, then tossed jeans and a shirt to Gunner before grabbing clothes for himself.

Her eyes darted to the window. Could she escape that way? Did she even want to? Part of her screamed for her to flee. Another part, the part of her that had longed to fall in love, to find a man who would share that love, told her to stay.

Why couldn't they have been normal men? And yet, if they were, would she still love them with every ounce of her being?

"We need to talk."

"You already said that. And we will. But are you locking me up for good, Rick? Like a prisoner?"

“Of course not.” Gunner glanced at the door, then shrugged. “At least, not for good. We just need you to give us time to talk. We wouldn’t want you to run away before we’re finished.”

“And you need to keep me in this room to do that?” Her nerves jumped, her adrenaline powering up. “Unlock that door right now.” She had to get out. “You can’t keep me against my will.”

“We aren’t. Not really. I promise. All we ask is that you listen to us.” Gunner jogged to the side, nixing her second attempt to get by them. “Please, baby, just listen. When we’re finished, if you want to leave, then you can.”

Rick plopped into the nearby arm

chair, then put his head in his hands. He groaned, then lifted his head.

“Mallory, we want you. Not for a few days, but forever. You’re our mate.”

“So you show me that by slinging me over a shoulder and hauling me back to a place that I ran from? Is that what you thought would make me want to stay?”

“No. Shit. I don’t know. You didn’t give us much time to think first.” He threw up his hands then slumped in the chair.

She stayed away from Gunner. If she let either of them touch her, she wouldn’t be able to think straight. Half of the time, she was angry that they’d talked her into coming back. But the other half, she was thrilled, excited, and turned on that they

had.

She'd always wanted a man, men, who would take charge, the kind of men who were macho and commanding, even to the point of being primal. It looked as though she'd gotten her wish.

"Tell me everything. No holding back anymore. If you don't, then one way or another, I will leave and this time it'll be for good."

Gunner closed his eyes, frowning to put lines where there were none before. "We'll tell you everything."

"I'm waiting." She crossed her arms like a mother ready to listen to her disobedient sons' excuses.

"We're werebears. Men who can

change into bears anytime we want. We have an inner beast inside us. It's not a physical thing, but more of an emotional, primal entity that resides within us. When our bears are rising to the surface, ready to shift from human to bear, our eyes change from the color they are to ones filled with amber. When we're in our bear bodies, our eyes glow with that amber."

"Oh, my God. I saw amber in the eyes of those people in Shatland. And their teeth, your teeth, can really change into fangs? I don't know why I'm asking. I saw you." Would saying those same words over and over make her believe?

"That's right."

"So the whole town is filled with

werebears?”

“With werebears, faeries, vampires, and more,” added Gunner.

Her mind threatened to shut down. Faeries? Vampires?

“And you want me as your...mate?”

“We love you.”

It was a plain and simple declaration that sent her heart racing.

Rick paced toward her, but she wasn't ready yet to be held. Not that she didn't want to. Her body screamed at her to wrap her arms and legs around them. It screamed at her to tell them that she loved them, too. But if she wanted to think straight, she had to stay apart from them.

“Tell us you don’t feel the attraction.”

She opened her mouth to deny it, but even before she could speak, he cut her off.

“You can’t, can you? Go on. Tell us you don’t feel it.”

She couldn’t. As much as she tried, she couldn’t. If she wanted them to tell her the truth, then how could she lie?

Gunner didn’t try to get close, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t see the yearning in his eyes. “We call it the connection. Shifters and their intended mates recognize each other when the connection brings them together. You felt it. We know you did. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have come together that fast.

Tell us you know what we're talking about."

The connection swept over her again and it was stronger than ever. How could she turn her back on them? She loved them. She had no doubt about that. But did that mean she could live with them knowing what they were?

"I didn't understand it, but that's part of it, isn't it? It grabs hold of you, of your needs buried deep inside you, and doesn't ever let go, does it? Thinking logically about what you're doing, who you're doing it with, flies out the window."

"That's as good an explanation as any I've ever heard." Gunner shoved his hands into his pockets, probably to keep

from reaching for her. “It’s an invisible bond that will never fade away and will never die. We’re your men, baby, whether or not you accept us, whether or not you decide to stay. We’ll never love another woman.”

She’d longed to hear those words for so many years. And yet, now that she had, they hurt as well as thrilled her.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?”

Rick motioned for Gunner to hold back. “That was my fault. Gunner wanted to tell you earlier, but I wouldn’t let him. Although he ended up telling you anyway.”

“Not that you believed me. I would’ve shifted to prove it, but then that damn

call came and we had to leave.”

Rick’s jaw worked as though he had to chew his words before he could speak them. “I wanted it to be just right with enough time for us to answer all your questions and for you to take it in. Part of that was hoping that we could break it to you easy, but a big part of it was that I was just plain scared.”

“Scared? Of what?” She wanted to understand, needed to understand. If she couldn’t, then that left no option but to leave.

Rick tucked his head, almost like he was embarrassed. “I was afraid we’d frighten you off. Other werebears have had their intended mates do the same and they never recovered. Damn it all,

Mallory. I was too afraid that we'd lose you, so I kept putting it off, hoping that would give you more time to fall in love with us as men before you had to know about our animals. Looks like I might've been wrong about holding back. We might end up losing you anyway."

He was hurting. If she could take his pain away, then she would. But she wasn't ready to commit yet.

Would she have believed them if they'd told her earlier? Was Rick right that she would've run? Even now when she was certain of her love for them, she was finding it difficult to understand. If she'd found out too soon, before that love had grown, she wasn't sure she

would've stayed.

“Can you forgive me, Mallory?”

The plea in Rick's eyes tore at her. Yet she had to know more before she could give into the ache to soothe his pain.

“What does it mean? To be a mate?” She saw the hope on their faces and hated that she might have to squash that soon. “Truthfully, right now, with my head in a whirl, I don't know if I can love that side of you.”

“Then you do love us?”

Telling them the truth was one of the hardest things she'd ever done. Not when the truth wouldn't keep her there. “I do. I love you more than I can say.”

Their hoots of joy died when she lifted

her hand. “Stop. Please. Loving you is easy. The other? Knowing that you’re an animal inside?” She choked back a sob. “I don’t think I can handle that.”

“We’re still the same men you fell in love with. Whether we’re in our human forms or as bears, we’re still us.”

“What about a family? Would my, your, children be like you?”

“They could be.” An indescribable look covered Rick’s face. “Would you hate that?”

“That’s what I’m saying. I don’t know.” She wanted to scream at a world that had brought them together only to put up an impossible barrier. “Please. I don’t think I can stand much more of

this.”

“Baby, take some time to think about it. That’s all we’ll ask of you.”

Rick came beside his brother, doubling the pain she saw. “He’s right. Don’t make a decision tonight. Give it more thought. After having that asshole attack you and then seeing us and the werewolves, it’s too much for you to handle all at once. Just think about it overnight.”

Could she stay there, knowing that they were in the other room? Knowing that if she said no, she’d never see them again? Wouldn’t the connection draw them together once she let down the wall she’d built around her?

“For us, Mallory.” Gunner’s soulful

brown eyes dove into hers. “Think about it for you and for us.”

She couldn’t stand to talk about it any longer. The agony stabbing her heart was too much. “Fine. I’ll think about it. But I can’t promise what I’ll decide to do.”

“That’s all we can ask.” The hopeful expression on Rick’s face had died, but the hunger was still alive and fresh.

“But you have to promise me. You’ll unlock that door and keep it unlocked.”

“Of course,” offered Gunner.

“And if I decide to go, you’ll take me into town to catch the bus, right?” She saw their hesitancy and knew they didn’t want to agree to her terms, but what choice did they have?

“Agreed.” Gunner’s tone was low, soft and tortured.

She’d gotten her way, but it took everything she had not to call them back as they unlocked the door and left.

* * * *

“Rick, hold up.” Gunner kept stride with him. He felt his brother’s heartache and knew the suffering he was going through. His own torment was hard enough, but to know Rick hurt just as much tore at his gut. “She’ll stay. You have to believe that.”

“The hell I do.” Rick burst out of the house, stripping his clothes away as he

stalked toward the pasture.

He knew his brother well enough to recognize his need to run. His own bear clawed to get out, to prowl over the land. “Wait until dark.”

If a human saw two bears roaming around, things could get dicey. Most werebears kept their excursions confined to the cover of darkness. Thankfully, the human residents of Shatland and the surrounding areas knew about their existence, but they still had to be careful. They’d already taken that risk once today.

Rick kept going. “I can’t. I have to get this out.”

The agony that ripped into him had a tight hold on his brother. “Rick—”

He spun around, confronting him. His fangs slipped over his lower lip, his eyes glowing with hurt. “Don’t you fucking get it? I’m the reason she’s leaving.”

“What? No. Why?”

“I should’ve treated her better. I should’ve talked to her nicer. I should’ve told her earlier.” Rick tunneled a hand through his hair, his breaths coming quicker. “I should’ve shown her how much I love her.”

He’d had the same thoughts and would share in the blame. “I can say the same thing. Hell, if we’d told her the truth about why we were gone so much and what we are, she wouldn’t have had to

find out the way she did. But what's done is done. We can beat ourselves up about it, or just hope she stays."

"Fuck that. I've got to get out of here."

He had to let him go. To try and hold back his inner bear would only cause him greater pain. Gunner watched his brother shift, then tug his shirt over his head. Maybe Rick had the right idea. He lifted his gaze to her bedroom window.

Please, baby. Stay. Without you, we're lost.

The shift came swiftly as it always did. Amber filled the world as he dropped onto all fours, then broke into a run after Rick.

* * * *

Mallory didn't sleep. The night passed slowly, anguish keeping her wide awake. How could she sleep when she kept going back forth, deciding to stay with the men, then worrying that she wouldn't fit into their world? Did she want children who could change into bears? Could she leave them and hope to fall in love again? Even if she did, she knew a dead spot would always remain inside her, a special empty place that would eat at her for the rest of her life. Was that a life? Was staying with werebears a better life?

When the sun finally rose over the horizon, she was still torn, but she'd

finally made her decision. Taking her suitcase in hand, she left the bedroom and walked to the stairs.

She should've known they'd be waiting for her. Their faces were calm, but she saw the sorrow in their eyes when they took in her suitcase.

“You’re leaving?”

Her stomach tightened. Gunner sounded so surprised, so hurt. “Yes.”

Rick’s pain soon changed to anger that he made no effort to hide. He dragged in a shaky breath. “Then we’d better get a move on. You don’t want to miss your fucking bus.” He held out her purse that he’d retrieved from the pasture.

“Easy, man. We made a promise. Don’t take it out on her.”

“You’re right. I swore I wouldn’t let my mouth get away with me, and I already broke that promise. I’m sorry, Mallory.” His haunted gaze met hers. “For everything.”

Gunner took her suitcase from her as she made her way to the bottom of the steps. Keeping her gaze averted from theirs, she walked to the pickup and got in.

*Just keep looking straight ahead.
Soon, it’ll all be over.*

Or would it? Would her heart hurt forever?

She hadn’t expected them to talk much on the way to Shatland. But not at all? Like the time they’d taken her to catch

the bus before, a stoic Rick drove while Gunner kept his head turned toward the window. Even Rebel, who had jumped into the bed of the pickup, seemed sad.

Their electric energy, the connection, as they'd called it, was stronger than ever. But mixed with that was an overlaying tone of misery. If it hadn't been for that anguish, she wouldn't have resisted the urge to beg them to make love to her one last time. She bowed her head and tried to hide her tears.

They went on, the truck bumping over potholes as they headed toward Shatland and the bus line. Exhausted, the noise of the engine lulled her to sleep.

* * * *

“Damn it all!”

She startled awake and would've slammed into the dashboard if Gunner hadn't used his arm to break her forward motion. Confused, she looked to the men for an answer.

Rick was on his feet and out of the pickup with Gunner at his side. Both men shucked off their clothes as they headed toward the cow lying in the middle of the road. Rebel barked then hurled his body over the side and landed beside the pickup. His barks turned to growls.

She inhaled, coming fully awake as she gawked at the gray wolf, its jaws

and neck covered with the cow's blood.

Oh, please, no.

Rick and Gunner shifted as they rushed toward the wolf. Within a minute, they'd changed, their huge bear forms bursting from their human forms. Rebel was by their side, ready to stay with his masters. They were only feet away from the wolf when it transformed, changing back into a man.

It's him.

The man that had attacked her, the killer that had slaughtered the cattle, bent to the ground. Reaching to a spot that was hidden by the cow's body, he stood up and pointed a rifle at the men.

She screamed in the same moment that he shot Rick.

Chapter Eleven

Mallory didn't think. Couldn't think.

Rick went down on his front legs. Another shot shattered the air, jerking his body again. He staggered and roared, then went down on the black asphalt.

Rebel growled then launched himself at the man. His body jerked in midair as another shot rang out. Rebel yelped, full of torment, then fell to the road and landed next to Rick.

Gunner bellowed his rage, nudged his brother, then lifted onto his back legs. Slowly, rocking from side to side, he raised his massive paws into the air, claws extended, and came at the man.

She reacted, darting her gaze for anything she could use as a weapon. When she saw the shovel in the bed of the pickup, she lunged out of the truck, grabbed it, and ran to the side of the road.

Her thoughts turned to the memory of the poor cow lying in the ditch as she used the cover of another ditch to work her way behind the man. Gunner was huge, saliva dripping from his jaws. The man, his attention focused on the furious bear in front of him, backed away, cursing at Gunner, telling him that he'd die a slow, awful death.

She didn't let his threats affect her. If she did, the fear she held at bay would

take over and render her weak and useless.

The man taunted Gunner, shooting a couple of shots over Gunner's head. Although Gunner faltered in his step when the shots rang out, he kept closing the distance between them.

She scrambled out of the ditch, careful to stay out of the man's peripheral vision. Would Gunner recognize her in his bear form? Or would he attack her, too? And yet, if that was the case, she'd die happy knowing that she'd saved him.

Praying silently, she lifted the shovel over her head and crept toward the man. Gunner roared, whether at him or at her, she wasn't sure. Something made the man stop, lower his rifle then begin to

turn toward her.

Please.

Using every ounce of strength she could muster, she struck out, slamming the shovel against his head.

He yelled, then staggered back, dropping the gun as he did. But he wasn't out. Not yet. She hurried to him, then lifted her weapon again. He glared up at her, his glowing eyes filled with hatred.

She stared down at him, her own hatred giving her the last ounce of strength she needed. "No one hurts my men."

His eyes widened, terror filling them with a wild gleam. Fur spread over his

jaw as fangs layered over his lips. Bringing the shovel down, she rammed it against his forehead, and barely noted the sickening thud it made as skin and fur-covered bones gave way.

Slowly, she backed up, her arms heavy. Blood covered his face, a face she wasn't sure still existed. She dropped the shovel at her feet, then sank to the road.

I killed him.

“Mallory, damn it, he could've shot you.” A very human Gunner folded her into his arms.

Why was she shaking so much? Her teeth chattered and her mind swam. “Rick?”

Gunner glanced at Rick then back at

her, worry etched in his forehead. “Stay here. I’m going to call for help.”

He laid her on the road, gently, lovingly.

* * * *

Mallory sat beside Rick. She hadn’t left his side since several of the men’s friends had come to help them. They’d taken the killer, somehow still alive, with them and promised to return him to his werewolf pack on the condition that they exact their justice immediately.

She was relieved to find that she hadn’t taken a man’s life, but had no problem admitting that, if she had it to

do over again, she would.

“He’s getting better.”

Gunner rested his hand on her shoulder and she covered his with her own. “I know. The wound’s healing well.”

“Then get some rest. I swear he won’t die or anything while you sleep.”

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart. You know him. He’s too damn bullheaded to die. Men like him never die. They just nasty away.”

She laughed. “I guess that includes me. I remember someone saying that I’m just as stubborn as he is.”

Sadness enveloped her. “I’m sorry about Rebel.”

“Yeah. He was a good dog. A great

dog. Sometimes, I think I liked him more than my own brother.”

She smiled at his attempt to lighten the mood. They’d buried Rebel behind the barn under the tree where he liked to sleep on warm days.

“And that man?” She couldn’t bring herself to say his name.

“The Carr brothers took care of him. He’s been sent to another pack on the West Coast. One that will pound some sense into his head.”

“Huh. And here I thought I’d already done that.”

Gunner laughed. “You sure did. You with a shovel? That was fucking hot, woman.”

She could still see the man's face at times, but she was getting better at shoving those images away.

“Don't worry about the rogue werewolf. If he doesn't learn his lesson with this new hard-nosed pack, they'll exile him, making him a lone wolf. That'll leave him vulnerable to other packs and hunters. Trust me. For a werewolf, that's worse than a death sentence. Hell, it is a death sentence. Either way, he'll never show his snout around here again.”

“That's good to know.” One more time the image of the man's face came and she shoved it away. “I don't know if I could've handled losing Rick. I was a

fool to leave.”

“And we were fools to let you. But that’s over now. You’re staying.”

“I am. There’s nothing I want more.” She skimmed her palm along Rick’s arm. The same arm that had been injured and had healed so quickly. She had a lot to learn about werebears, but she’d spend her life doing that. “I just wish he’d wake up.”

“He will. Besides, I think he’s milking it.”

“Who’s milking it?” Rick opened one eye, then the next.

“It’s about time.”

“Damn, I barely get my eyes open and she’s already nagging at me.” Rick grinned at her, then sought out his

brother with a questioning glance. “Mallory, I need to tell you how sorry I am.”

It warmed her heart to know that she was the first thing on his mind. She pressed her fingers to his lips. “No, you don’t. I’m not sure my heart could handle an apology from you. Just get better. That’s all the apology I need.”

“No. Don’t let me get off that easy. I should’ve listened to Gunner and told you earlier. We lied by not telling you, by ignoring your questions. I treated you like crap even as I tried so hard to bring you closer. I’m sorry, baby. Sorrier than I can ever say.”

“It’s okay.” She didn’t want to cry. If

she did, she wasn't sure the tears would ever stop. "I understand and it doesn't matter now. I'm staying."

Gunner's hand caressed her shoulder. "I'm sorry for lying, too, and for not taking the time to tell you. We just got caught up in everything and forgot to think about it from your perspective. I should've forced Rick to tell you."

He chuckled at Rick's snarl. "Easy, bro. Don't hurt yourself."

"We love you, Mallory. More than life itself. Can you forgive us?"

Gunner's hand continued its path along her arm, exciting her with his gentle touch. "Yeah. If you don't. I'm not sure what will happen to us."

She took Rick's hand, loving the way

he searched her face. Hungry. Yearning. Vulnerable. “Yes. I forgive both of you.”

“Does that mean what I think it means?”

“Yes.” She thrust out her chin. “It does. After all, someone’s got to take care of you two. Besides, I love you two beasts.”

“You’re staying? You’ll be our mate?” He sat up even more, taking both her hands.

“Not that we deserve her.”

“Hell, no we don’t,” agreed Rick. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to let her go.”

She took her hand away. “I’m staying and I’ll be your mate on one condition.”

“Aw, shit.” Rick gave her a palm’s up after catching her haughty eyebrow lifting toward the ceiling. “Forget I said that. What’s the condition? Whatever it is, the answer’s yes.”

She reached out and took his hand, then Gunner’s. “First of all, you have to find someone other than Lawson Industries to handle your cattle.”

“We need to,” added Gunner. “Tyler checked into it and found out that you were right. They’re using practices we won’t stand for. I’ve already switched our contract to another facility. And trust me. Tyler has already checked the new place out. Other ranchers say they’re top-notch.”

“Then that’s an easy yes.”

“There’s more.”

“Aw, shit.” He cringed. “Again, forget I said that.”

She loved her men, but that didn’t mean that a girl had to give up her convictions. “I want you to do your best to get out of the business of raising cattle. Instead, I want to ask you to focus more on training the therapy horses. From the research I’ve done, that’s actually a more lucrative business. Besides, you’ll still have the oil wells.”

“She’s right about that, too. I can fill you in later, but we can make almost double the money we make from ranching if we get more horses and

spend the time raising them. Plus, you've got to admit, it makes us feel good to help out that way."

Rick was already nodding before Gunner had finished speaking. "It'll take time to phase out of the cattle business, but I'm game."

"Then you agree to my terms? If you do, I'll be proud to be your mate. Both of you."

"Then it's a deal." He pulled her to him. "I never figured I'd have to negotiate to keep my mate, but I'd do anything to make you happy."

"Would you paint a calf and put the message on YouTube?" She laid her head on his chest and heard the steady beat of his heart. Could he hear hers? It

was pounding loudly enough.

“Okay, now you’re going too far,” joked Gunner.

She laughed, then leapt up and grabbed Gunner’s hand to pull him onto the bed along with her. “Aw, shit. You ain’t seen nothing yet. I’ve got a lot more ideas.”

Their groans were louder than her laughter, filling her with a joy that was boundless. She’d come to Shatland to fight against animal cruelty and had ended up finding two animals of her own. They were her men. Her bears.

Epilogue

“Where are you?” Mallory held the phone to her ear as she stood at the railing of the enclosure and watched Gunner and Rick work with the new horse. For two bears, they had a special way with horses that should’ve sensed their inner beasts and been frightened. Instead, the horse was responding nicely to their commands.

After phasing out of the cattle business in less than two months, they’d started buying more horses and spending their days training them. Even they admitted that they enjoyed that more than herding cattle then having to send them to the

slaughterhouse. The last shipment to the meat packing facility they'd used since dumping Lawson Industries would go out next week. Once that happened, she'd breathe easier.

"I'm almost there. Be patient, girl."

She'd missed Kid so much in the short time since she'd moved to their home. Giving up her bank job was easy, aside from leaving Kid behind, and helping the men with the therapy horses was much more fulfilling.

Her life had changed so much in a few months, and all she could see was a bright future. She couldn't wait to share her life and her good news with Kid.

"And your mom? How's she doing?"

Gunner lifted his cowboy hat to her,

taking his attention away from the filly. He jumped to the side when the animal whirled first one way then the other, trying to get the men away from her. Misty, as Mallory had named her, would soon fall under their spell just as all the other horses had. Just as she had.

“She’s doing great. Back to her old self. Although now that you’ve found love, she’s pushing for me to get busy and settle down, too.”

“And you should. I highly recommend it.”

“Yeah, well, find me a cute little cowboy with a tight ass and I’m there.”

“Hey, I’m looking. It’s not easy to find anyone good enough for my best friend.”

“Ain’t that the truth?” He laughed, the sound bellowing in her ears.

“I can’t wait for you to get here.”

“Yeah? What are you doing right now?”

“I’m watching my hunky men train a new horse.”

“And what color is that horse?”

“What color?” It was a strange question, but then again, it was Kid. “Um, it’s black with white around its hooves. There’s a name for that part of the horse, but I can never remember it.”

“Ooh. And the white star on its forehead is pretty, too.”

“It is.” She paused. “Hey, wait a sec. How’d you know it has a star on its

forehead?”

Gunner and Rick turned, their gazes going past her as they started striding her way.

In the next moment, she was swept into the air. She let out a yelp, then started laughing as she recognized the huge arms engulfing her.

“Kid, put me down!”

He dropped her to her feet. She spun around and jumped into his arms, hugging him around the neck.

“Hey, watch who you’re hugging, big guy. That’s our woman.” But there was no menace in Gunner’s voice.

“I know.” Kid’s grin was as wide as his face. “I heard you three are a thing now. Of course, I knew you were meant

for each other from the moment we met.”

“Come on. Let’s get the grill out and get those steaks to cooking.”

She rolled her eyes at Rick. They were still eating meat while she feasted on vegetables, but she knew that was one thing she’d never change about them.

“Sounds yummy.” Kid leaned over and whispered in her ear. “As yummy as they look.”

“Hey, keep your paws off my men.”

Kid held up his hands to ward her off. “Okay, okay. I’m just saying is all.”

A few minutes later and the men were busy grilling steaks while she and Kid shared tall glasses of sweet tea at the picnic table.

“So, is it as good as it seems to be?” He wiggled his bushy eyebrows. “And I’m talking about *everything*.”

“Better.” She giggled, and sputtered some of her drink just as Gunner and Rick set a large platter of meat in front of them. At least the smaller platter held her grilled veggies.

“So tell me? You said you had some good news.”

“We sure do.” She looked to her men for the okay to tell Kid. Turning to him, she took his huge hand between her two smaller ones. “We’re getting married.”

He let out a whoop just as she’d expected he would. “That’s terrific.”

“Of course, it won’t be a legal

marriage since she can't marry the both of us. We're going to have a few friends over and do a ceremony of our own." Gunner's booted foot pushed against hers under the table.

"It looks like threesomes and gay marriages are on the same shit list in Texas. So? Is it going to be a big to-do? With lots of handsome groomsmen?"

"No. But I do have a favor to ask you."

Kid made a large hunk of meat disappear. Funny, how she'd never noticed that her men and Kid ate the same way. Fast and in huge quantities. Was it a male thing?

"Ask away. You know I'd do anything for you."

She smiled. Her men had said the same thing. “I want you to stand up for me. Kind of like being a male bridesmaid. Or something like that.”

“Yay! Of course. I’d be honored.”

“Cool.” Now came the hard part. She hoped Kid took the news better than she had. “There’s something else.”

Kid gasped, his hand fluttering to his lips. “Do not tell me. Are you preggers already? If so, will you name it Mike? Or Michelle if it’s a girl?”

Rick dropped his fork. “Whoa, man. Slow down. No one’s having a baby.” He lifted his eyebrows at her. “You’re not, are you? Not that I’d mind. In fact, it’d be great. But that’s not what you

were going to tell him, right?”

She swallowed a bite, but it went down hard. “No. I’m not pregnant. This news is about Gunner and Rick.” She tightened her hold on Kid’s hand. “I know this will be hard to believe, but it’s the God’s honest truth. I swear it.”

Kid’s happy expression went to a worried one. “Okay, now you’re scaring me. Spit it out before I pass out. Just know that whatever it is, we’ll get through it together.”

“Kid, Gunner and Rick are well... they’re...”

“Special? Honey, I already knew that.”

“Yes, but that’s not what I was going to say. They’re not just men. They’re...”

This was harder than she thought it'd be.

Kid glanced at her, then at the men, then back at her. His wide smile came rushing back. "Oh, girl, don't worry. I already know."

"You do?"

"Of course I do. How could I not?"

"I don't think you do, Kid. Let me just get this out before I lose my nerve." She took in a big breath and let it out. It was now or never. "Gunner and Rick are—"

"Werebears."

Now it was her turn to widen her eyes at him. "How'd you know?" She looked to the men. "Did you tell him?"

Why didn't they seem shocked?

"No, they didn't tell me. But you know

what they say about gay men, don't you?"

"I'm not sure. Tell me."

"It takes one to know one."

"What? I'm still not getting it."

"Girl, I knew they were werebears, well, because...I'm a werebear, too."

Her jaw dropped. Then came the confusion and a bit of anger, too. She glared at her men. "Did you know?"

"We had our suspicions," answered Gunner.

"Then why didn't you tell me?" Were they still hiding things from her?

"We couldn't. It's kind of a bear thing. You don't out another werebear. Since he hadn't already told you, then we couldn't, either." Rick let out a hard

breath. “Damn. We’re in trouble again, aren’t we?”

“Don’t be mad at them, Mallory. I think they were too preoccupied for it to really click the first time I was here. And they’re right. It’s like it is with gays. You don’t out someone without their permission.”

She should’ve guessed after finding out that werebears existed. There’d been clues. The way Kid ate such large amounts. The way she’d always thought of him as a big teddy bear. The way his hands had always reminded her of paws. His big booming laugh that echoed like a roar around a room.

“So? Baby, are you mad?” Gunner

offered her a weak smile. “Can you forgive us? Again?”

How could she be angry at them? They’d had no choice but to keep his secret. “No. I’m not angry. In fact, I think it’s really good.”

“Why’s that?” Kid preened. “Other than the fact that it makes me special, too? More so than before, of course.”

“Because now I have not two, but three bears of my own.” She lifted her glass of tea. “Here’s a toast. To all my men.”

They put their glasses together as Rick added, “To us. To all of Mallory’s bears.”

Mallory’s bears. Yeah, I like the sound of that.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Jamison has always liked “weird stuff” as her mother called it. From an early age she was fascinated with stories about werewolves, vampires, space, aliens, and whatever was hiding in her bedroom closet. To this day, she still swears she can hear growls and moans whenever the lights are out.

Being born under the sign of Scorpio meant Jane was destined to be very sensual. Some would say she was, and remains, downright sexual. Then one day

she put her two favorite things together on paper and found her life's true ambition—to be an erotic paranormal romance author.

Jane spends at least six days a week locked in her office surrounded by the characters she loves. Every day a new character will knock on the door of her imagination. Her plans include taking care of her loving husband, traveling, and writing at least twelve books a year.

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