



Wolf's Lair

Fawn Lowery

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Wolf's Lair

BY

Fawn Lowery

*To the wonderful Editors and Artists at
Extasy Books.*

CHAPTER 1

Marti Hartman gripped the land bid rejection in her right hand. Her fingers were clenched so tightly that her nails were digging into her palm as she marched up the red gravel drive leading to Lucas Graywolf's canyon home.

"I'm going to make him wish he'd never gone up against me," she muttered, her teeth gritting together. "Of all the stubborn, pig-headed jackasses in the world..."

She halted her tirade, deciding to hold her anger until she was face to face with Lucas. It would do him no good to deny that he knew she wanted the land he had gone behind her back and acquired—she had the evidence clutched in one fist. A shard of heat rushed her insides. Why did he continue to make her so mad—and why couldn't she make herself believe that any relationship they had was over?

She had known Lucas for almost two years. They had met during a demonstration against animal cruelty that she and a dozen of her fellow

activists had organized in Tucson. Miles Laboratories, a large pharmaceutical company, had been using live animals as test subjects for one of their new products. She had been standing on the sidewalk across from the lab, peacefully holding her protest sign, when Lucas drove by in his pickup truck. Her gaze was drawn to him immediately—and a hot surge of unadulterated lust rose up inside her. He was the best-looking man she had ever laid eyes on.

Tall and broad at the shoulders, he filled the window opening of the truck with his presence. Wearing a denim shirt, his left arm crooked and lying on the door edge, he made eye contact with Marti as he eased the truck down the avenue. Tawny noted accentuated handsome chiseled features and collar-length black hair that peeked out from beneath a black Stetson cowboy hat. A pair of full male lips curved slightly upward in a hint of a smile as he dipped his head and acknowledged Marti.

Her knees went weak, and for a few moments she forgot all except the inspecting interest she had seen in his eyes. A shiver of longing raced through her insides and when Lucas pulled the truck to the curb and shut off its motor, she knew he was as interested in meeting her, as she was him.

It began for her then—her rocky relationship

with Lucas. Until that day, she had known of him by reputation only. He was the owner of Graywolf Land Development and Construction Company, and quite successful. He was known for buying up large chunks of land – wasteland to most everyone else – and developing elaborate housing developments. His ancestors were Ute Indians and despite the modern-day trappings of society Lucas took advantage of, he rigidly adhered to certain ancestral traits. His treatment of women – his domineering ways – soon had Marti looking for a way out of their relationship. But sex with Lucas was the binding tie that kept her in his house for six months. In the end, during a horrific argument over something as trivial as the name of a new mare Lucas had purchased, Marti packed her bags and left.

Three months later, she opened the wolf sanctuary on land she had inherited from her father. Having learned about a government project to save the lobo, she made the necessary contacts and offered her one hundred acres as a refuge. Within days, her plan was accepted, and she began fencing the property. A week later, the first inhabitants arrived, a scrawny male lobo and two skittish females.

She spied Lucas as she marched off toward the pasture where he kept his prized stallions, a small herd of nine, adjacent to the expensive barn he

had erected for breeding clients' mares—a small sideline that he had successfully turned into a multi-million dollar business in the short span of five years.

He spied her immediately when she stepped around the corner of his house—or maybe he had heard her jeep when she slammed on the brakes and skidded to a halt in the driveway—or perhaps he had been expecting her, since he was all too aware of what he had done to her, her wolf sanctuary, and perhaps, all of Silver Valley. He raised one hand and tipped the black Stetson he wore to the back of his head, then turned and slowly led the mare he had just bridled toward the barn.

Marti bristled. *Damn him!* He saw her cutting across the yard toward him and he deliberately went in the opposite direction. *Damn him!* He was insisting she play by his rules if she wanted to speak with him.

For a brief second her steps faltered. Did she really want to follow Lucas into the barn? Did she really want to be confined in any structure where he had total dominion? Her questioning served to mirror her own insecure feelings toward the man. Wouldn't she ever get him out of her head?

She reached the wooden gate enclosing the barn lot and lifted the latch, letting herself inside the pasture. The sheer beauty of the horses Lucas

tended so diligently at once engulfed her senses. Two of the sleek creatures started walking across the green lot toward her, as though recognizing her. She immediately felt the tug on her heart. But then, she rejected the animals' attentions. She was there to have it out with Lucas and she couldn't afford any softening of her heart before she affronted him. She rushed across the expanse to the mouth of the barn, finding the door standing open and Lucas leading the mare into a stall.

"Lucas!" she yelled, raising the hand holding the bid rejection. She marched down the aisle between the rows of stalls, her jaw set and her teeth clamped together.

Lucas didn't turn around, or glance in her direction. He picked up a currycomb and began grooming the mare.

"You are the most insufferable man I have ever known!" Marti spat. She came to a halt outside the stall, her hands on her hips. She stared at his back, her gaze trailing over the sensuous play of muscles beneath the covering of denim shirt as he curried the horse. He wore denim jeans, riding low on his lean hips and she felt an odd stirring of lust mingle with her anger as she allowed her eyes to inspect his body. "You knew I wanted that land. You knew I had plans to enlarge the sanctuary." Her voice sounded a little shaky she noticed, her anger almost bringing her to the brink of tears.

"You had no right to bid on it, Lucas."

Lucas glanced over his left shoulder in her direction. He saw her breasts rise and fall with her angry tirade, her eyes flashing green fire. She had a habit of swiping a hand through her blond hair when she got frustrated, and he stared at her while she performed the arousing gesture. For a moment, he was utterly mesmerized as he watched the play of light across the pale blond tresses and the careless way the strands collapsed across her shoulders. He lowered his gaze to her shirtfront.

Marti glared at him and she sent little darts of discord in his direction. He was eyeing her chest, looking at her breasts, perhaps recalling how her plump flesh felt against his palm. And—he was watching her throw a fit— all in relative calm.

"Stop staring at me!" she barked.

A chuckle leapt from his throat and his strong mouth curved into a teasing smile.

"How could you do this to me?" she questioned, shaking the rejected land bid. "Why did you go behind my back and buy that land when you knew I wanted to enlarge the sanctuary? Dammit, Lucas! I had plans for that land!" She glared at him, only to see his mouth stretch further with his smile.

"You had plenty of opportunity, babe. The Connor heirs ran the notice that they were taking

bids in the local paper for a week," he said matter-of-factly. He continued to groom the mare in the stall without missing a stroke along her sleek back.

"I know damn well you pulled some strings, Lucas," she quipped. If her temper rose any higher, she'd explode, she admitted, fighting for control of her emotions.

"No strings, babe. I just offered a bid John Connors liked."

A million retorts dashed through her mind, each one nasty and belligerent. She pulled in several deep breaths, trying to steady her pulse. On the outside chance that this might be one of Lucas' agreeable days—he had some occasionally—she might have the opportunity to reason with him.

"How much did you pay? I'll give you five thousand more." She held her breath and stared at the back of his head.

"The land isn't for sale," he stated, not bothering to turn around or even glance in her direction.

"Lucas," she began, and then paused, realizing her tone sounded like a pitiful whine. "Surely you're not planning on building houses on that ground. No one wants to buy a house next door to a wolf sanctuary." Why in hell had she said that? And one glance at Lucas' face and she knew he was thinking the same thing.

He held her gaze while he stepped outside the stall, a small, condescending smile on his handsome face. A renewed feeling of yearning began in the pit of Marti's stomach as her gaze swept his length. His body was as familiar to her as her own, the tight muscular planes, the dips and peaks, the chiseled contours where hair roughened flesh gave way to smooth supple skin.

A tremor of nervousness took hold of her limbs and in an effort to keep her emotions a secret from Lucas, she took a step back, pinning her shoulders unnaturally against one of the stalls. The thought that he was a predator leapt to her mind. *And I'm the prey*, she thought in the next instant.

She should seize the moment to run—to race out of the barn as fast as her legs would carry her. She had no business being there—in the barn alone with Lucas—completely void of other people. The mare enclosed in the stall behind her shuffled her stance, briefly alerting Marti to her presence and bringing an aroma of dry hay and straw bedding to her nose.

Lucas halted his approach within inches of Marti's body. She could sense the male warmth emanating from him, drawing her body into the realm of no return. She tightened her hands into fists at her sides, deliberately digging her nails into her palms in an effort to break the spell the man was trying to engulf her in—to no avail. She

was weak when it came to Lucas.

She knew he could read the expression in her eyes, the yearning, and the apprehension. He thought he knew her better than she knew herself, but he was wrong – wasn't he? Suddenly she was leery of him coming closer, of what he might do, or what he might make her think ... or feel.

He reached out one long arm and encircled Marti's trim waist, dragging her body against his, silently, his tawny gaze holding hers in a trancelike stare. And there was nothing Marti could do ... even if she'd wanted to. And a part of her wanted to rebel ... but couldn't find the willpower to act.

His hands splayed across her back, pressing her body into the lean contours of his. Her breasts pushed against his chest while he lowered one hand and clasp her buttock.

Marti felt the fire from his hands, the lusty invitation to sex in his stance, and the undeniable admission that he wanted to possess her. His scent assaulted her senses, a musky male aroma mingled with the smell of the barn. She felt her head swim as she tipped her head back to gaze into his face, a dangerous gesture because she was all too aware of Lucas' uncanny sense of awareness.

"How bad do you want the land, Marti?" he asked in a low rumble. He tightened the hand

clasping her buttock, pressing the unmistakable hardness at his crotch against her belly.

CHAPTER 2

It took every bit of willpower Marti could muster to step out of Lucas' embrace, to separate her body from the inviting sensuality of his. But by the sheer grace of God, she did it.

Halting her steps several feet away from Lucas, she spun around to look at him. It was when she saw the total amusement on his handsome face that she realized he had allowed her to leave his embrace. Anger flared at once inside her.

"Stop playing with me, Lucas!" she snapped.

He shrugged one broad shoulder and returned to the stall where he was grooming the mare.

Frustration mingled with her anger. Why couldn't she see that it was impossible to make Lucas act the way she wanted him to?

"I hate you!" she spat. Tears suddenly sprang to her eyes and she fought them back with every ounce of reserve left in her body.

His dark head jerked around. Her words stabbed at his heart and the evidence of his pain

was mirrored in his yellow gaze. But only for a second, then he turned his head and resumed his chore of tending the mare, his back to Marti.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that," she muttered, swiping one hand through her hair. "It was just that ... that... Why won't you listen to reason, Lucas?" She walked back to where he worked in the stall, her steps slow and pensive. "Why do we always have to argue?" She felt annoyed with herself for even coming over to his house. They would just never see eye to eye about anything.

Lucas stopped grooming the horse and put aside the currycomb. He walked to the end of the stall and rested his forearms on the top rail, then he pinned Marti with his steady gaze.

"The ground isn't for sale—for any amount of money," he stated.

His gaze was steady, holding her where she stood in the aisle between the rows of stalls. And she knew from past dealings with him that she had stung him with her words, but that he was refusing to let her see his hurt. Her senses suffered further pain because of his determination. If only she could take back her words—

"You've known for months that I wanted to expand the sanctuary," she said.

"The wolves will have to be satisfied with what land they already have," he said matter-of-factly.

"If I could expand the facility, I could save

more of the creatures."

One corner of his mouth tugged upward into a half-smile. "You animal activists are all alike."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she bristled. Her hands rose to prop atop her hips.

He chuckled at her. "You can't save every lobo in the world, Marti."

"I can damn well try, Lucas!" she countered.

He shook his dark head at her. "Your cause is not my concern."

Then it was her turn to feel the sting of *his* words. And they cut to the quick. Damn him. He had just as well said he didn't care about her any more. For a second she feared her knees would buckle, then it became immensely clear that she couldn't possibly make Lucas hand over the land, and she should leave before any further words passed between them.

Turning on her heel, she stalked out of the barn. Hot tears stung the back of her eyes but she fought the need to let them flow.

Take a deep breath, she told herself. Take a deep breath and forget the conversation you just had with Lucas.

"Fat chance," she muttered at precisely the same time her cell phone began ringing. Glad for the interruption, she released the snap on the leather pouch clipped to her jeans pocket and read the lighted display before taking the call.

"Marti, you need to come back to the sanctuary as soon as possible. All hell is about to break loose!"

Manuel, Marti's assistant at the wolf sanctuary, sounded unnerved, then he hung up as abruptly as he had summoned Marti back to the premises. She quickly began sprinting across the barn lot to the gate. She had no idea what was wrong, but the urgency in Manuel's voice gave her goose bumps.

Her back tires threw gravel on Lucas' driveway as she hurried to turn the jeep around and head out of the canyon. If there was one thing that could get under her skin, it was any threat to her beloved lobos. And she held her breath that something besides the worse was going on there. Manuel was an excitable man, as was Maria, his wife. But the pair was good helpers around the site. Manuel was always willing to help in any capacity, being one of the animal activists Marti had known since high school.

Her worse fears were about to be realized when she raced into the parking area at the sanctuary. She spied John Gilroy and Sam Weatherbe, two local ranchers, standing near the office. She then saw Manuel and Maria on the front porch. The breath caught in her throat when she saw the rifle Manuel held. She rushed from the jeep and ran across the gravel lot. Bounding up on the porch of the office, she ripped the gun from Manuel's

hands.

"What in the hell..." she screeched.

"Gilroy is threatening to kill the lobo," Manuel rushed to say. His darkly tanned face was framed by an angry scowl and his short stocky body was poised to do battle. Maria stood in the open doorway of the office wringing her hands.

Marti stood the rifle inside the office door, much to Maria's relief. She gave Marti a nervous smile and made the sign of the cross on her chest, then went to sit down. Marti turned questioning eyes on the two ranchers, trying to make sense of it all.

"Something's been attacking our cattle, Miss Hartman," Gilroy said, placing his hands on his hips. He was a big man, bulky, with graying hair and leather-like skin. His ranch was sprawling, one of the biggest in the territory, and lying directly North of the sanctuary. "We think some of your pet wolves have a taste for good beef."

Marti felt anger surge through her insides. She darted her gaze from Gilroy to Weatherbe, then back to Gilroy.

"I feed the wolves regularly. They aren't hungry, Mr. Gilroy, nor has any of them broke out and killed your cattle. You're barking up the wrong tree. Go look elsewhere for a predator." She set her teeth and stared at the rancher, mad that he should even consider the idea of the captive

wolves preying on his herd.

"You're saying it isn't possible for any of those lobos you've been protecting to get free of this fence?" Gilroy questioned, glancing at the metal wall of the sanctuary.

"I'm telling you you're looking in the wrong place for your predator, Mr. Gilroy." She tried to control her anger at the man, a chore that increased with his lingering visit.

"Have you released any of them lately?" Weatherbe asked.

Marti focused on the second rancher, equally deploring his mode of questioning. He was smaller than his cohort, older, with stooped shoulders and a crippled leg from an accident involving one of his bulls a decade ago. But he had the gall to insinuate she was lying to them about the wolves in the compound.

"I don't just open the gate and shoo them away, Mr. Weatherbe. The animals are released into specific locations all across the United States. They're returned to their natural habitats, where man has slaughtered them almost to extinction." She raised her voice an octave to make her point.

"Colorado *is* native to the wolf, Miss Hartman," Gilroy interjected. "Have you let any of them loose in this area?"

Marti was about to explode with anger when the sight of Lucas in his pickup truck pulling into

the gravel lot, distracted her. A flicker of relief traveled through her. If there was ever a time for reinforcements — it was then.

All watched as Lucas parked his truck and got out. He came to the gathering with measured steps, sure of his position within the community of Silver Valley, the ranchers, and the woman who was still his possession — regardless of her intent to deny the truth to herself.

"Lucas," John Gilroy greeted, offering his hand in a friendly gesture.

Lucas shook hands with both ranchers and greeted them amiably. One quick glance at Marti out of the corner of his eye, and he faced the ranchers as though ready to take up Marti's cause.

"There's a predator loose, Lucas," Gilroy said. "And we think its some of these wolves been set free to roam the countryside. Our herds are being attacked on a regular basis."

"What makes you think its wolves, John?" Lucas asked. "There are cougars and bobcats living in the hills. Have you found any prints? Has anybody seen anything?"

"Nothing, except a number of dead cattle, half-eaten, left to rot," Gilroy replied. He drew in a long breath. "I've made up my mind that if one more of my steers disappear, I'm coming over here and going wolf hunting."

Lucas narrowed his eyes at John Gilroy.

"I don't give a damn if those wolves are endangered or not. The killing of my cattle has to stop," Gilroy continued.

Lucas contemplated the situation for a moment, and then cocked his head at John Gilroy. "Suppose I have a look around," he said. "I'll take a few days and ride up into the high country, see if I can scare up anything."

"Suit yourself, Lucas," Gilroy said, glancing at Sam, then Marti. "But I mean what I say about coming back and hunting the wolves."

"Those wolves are protected by the government," Lucas reminded the ranchers. "And I'm willing to prove to you that it's something else killing your cattle, if you'll give me the opportunity."

"Alright. Take a few days. See if you turn up anything," Gilroy said, glancing over his shoulder at the fenced sanctuary. "But in case you don't find any clues, I'm a man of my word." He set his jaw, returning his gaze to Lucas.

A muscle twitched in Lucas' cheek. "I'm telling you, you're wrong about the lobo, John. And I'm a man of my word too."

A shiver of lust raced through Marti. Lucas's masculinity was never to be questioned. If he planned to do something—he would carry through with it—regardless of what it was. He was the Alpha male as far as Marti was concerned.

The conversation was over, the threats vocalized, Gilroy and Weatherbe left. Manuel and Maria took leave, with Manuel heading to the tool shed at the rear of the office and Maria making her way home to the cottage behind the main house. Watching the pair scurry off reminded Marti of the conversation she had with Manuel earlier that morning—after Manuel had spent an hour repairing a hole in the fence, an unsettling thing to discover at the compound.

“I think it was ground erosion, Marti. There was a big hole washed out from beneath the fence.” He shook his dark head as he removed his leather gloves and deposited the fence-mending pliers in his hip pocket. “I don’t think any of the lobos got free. There are no footprints in the area.” His eyes were filled with concern and a look of worry wreathed his face.

“We have had a lot of rain lately,” Marti said trying to vindicate the animals.

A ten-foot high fence surrounded the one hundred acre compound, a tall obstruction that none of the animals were capable of jumping over. But digging beneath the fence was a totally different thing. They all knew how to dig, and escaping wasn’t anything new to the wolves. None of them were in the compound by choice. Concerned activists who had heard of the project had delivered most of them.

Early in the year, two of the females gave birth to eight little healthy gray wolves in different parts of the compound. Short of providing makeshift shelters placed within the woods for the females to birth in, there was little requirement on Marti's part, as far as the mating of the pairs. The oldest male was always the dominating wolf of the pack, or family, ruling over all in the compound. During breeding season, if Marti had more than one male in residence, he was separated from the females, but she usually tried to keep only one breeding male in attendance at all times—utilizing the release program to the utmost.

For a second her mind shifted to thoughts of Lucas—he was so much like the lobo—predatory, possessive, and capable of standing his ground. And, she swallowed the knot of defiance—he was always in control. She ordered the thoughts out of her mind. In all fairness, she had to tell him about the hole beneath the fence. What if—God forbid—he turned up evidence that some of the wolves *had* gotten loose and killed the ranchers' cattle.

Lucas was cutting across the driveway in long, hurried strides to his truck, making Marti have to run to catch up to him.

"Lucas," she called, chasing him all the way to the truck. "There's something you need to know."

He pulled up short and turned around to face

Marti. The look of inquiry on his chiseled features pinned Marti in her tracks.

Quickly, she began relating the incident with the fence, her voice shaky as she looked up into Lucas' face.

"Do you really think you can find what's killing their cattle?" she asked.

Lucas stared at her for a moment, digesting her story about the hole washed out from under the fence and how Manuel found no footprints in the area. "Wolves aren't to blame," he said, giving his head a shake. "They don't leave a kill behind to rot."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Marti quickly voiced.

He chuckled slightly, his mouth pulling into a teasing grin. "You're the wolf expert, babe," he remarked. "You mean you have some doubts?"

"I can't say for sure that none of the wolves got out, but since there were no prints found near the fence..." she paused, looking up at Lucas. "If any of the wolves got out, it was within the last two days, Lucas. We keep a really good check on things around here. Those wolves are very important to me."

His tawny gaze caressed her face, slid slowly along the crest of her cheek and settled on her lips. For a second he just stared at her, as though he was remembering how it felt to kiss her, or the

taste of her lipstick.

"I better go," he said, turning to open the door of the pickup.

Marti stood in the driveway and watched him leave, her nerves on alert from all that had taken place. What if Lucas couldn't find what was to blame for the cattle's deaths? A shiver of dread settled in the pit of her stomach. What if...

"Oh shut up!" she muttered, turning on her heel. She strode across the driveway to the office. One thing she knew for sure. If anyone could find out what was killing the ranchers' cattle, it was Lucas Graywolf. There wasn't anything the man couldn't do.

CHAPTER 3

Marti paced the length of the small office, then turned and retraced her steps. Of all the problems to crop up, it had to be something concerning the sanctuary. And of all the ways to fix things, Lucas had to be the solution.

She combed one hand through her blond hair. There was no getting away from the man. It seemed just the moment she thought she didn't need him in her life again; something developed that only he could rectify.

She let out a long breath and halted her feet. For some silly reason she felt she should go with Lucas but at the same time she cautioned herself about being alone with him. He could be gone for days — even a week if he ran across any clues to follow.

She bit on her bottom lip. Being alone with Lucas day and night could pose to be hazardous to her health — mentally and physically. She ran her palms along her bare arms, remembering his

touch on her skin. He was a wonderful sex partner.

She gave her head a shake, tossing her blond hair across her shoulders. There would be no way she could resist him—should he desire her. And it was quite obvious that he was still interested. She recalled, with a lusty shiver, how his heated gaze traveled along her body only hours earlier.

Did she dare risk further contact with Lucas?

“He’s still in my heart,” she admitted with a low groan. “Else I’d have found someone else.”

For a moment her thoughts turned to the reason why she hadn’t made herself available to other men. God knew there were plenty in Silver Valley who had asked her out. Maybe it was just too soon after Lucas. Maybe the memories of him were still too vivid in her mind.

“And maybe the moon really is made of green cheese,” she muttered.

That’s all there is to it, she decided. She was going with Lucas to the high country, or wherever he was off to—and if something happened between them—well, one thing was for certain, she’d definitely enjoy it.

Marti left the office on the run and sprinted all the way to her house. Once inside she rushed to her bedroom. Quickly she crammed a clean pair of jeans and a long sleeve shirt into a small knapsack, wadded in a pair of socks, and underwear, then

hurried from the room. As she raced to her jeep parked at the back of the driveway, she yelled her intentions to Manuel standing on the office stoop.

"I'll be back in a few days. Keep an eye on things."

Manuel waved and nodded his head. "You can count on me," he called in return.

* * * *

Lucas was leading his saddled horse from the barn lot when Marti parked her jeep in the driveway. He turned and watched her run toward him, taking note of the packed bag dangling from her hand.

"Saddle me a horse. I'm going with you."

"No you're not."

"Yes, Lucas. I am," she insisted, propping one hand on her hip. "Don't be stubborn. You need me along."

He gave a short laugh. "I need you along like I need a case of hives," he remarked.

She felt herself getting riled. "I'm going, and I don't care what you say, Lucas Graywolf. Now, either saddle up a horse for me, or I'll do it." She stood staring at him, having given her ultimatum. Inside she hoped he relented and saddled the horse for her. He was so much better at it than she was. In fact, he was better at most everything, she

conceded, sighing.

Lucas pinned his steady gaze on her. The sun was at her back, gleaming across her mane of blond white hair, making her head seem as though it was surrounded by a halo. He chuckled again. She was no angel with a halo, not by a long ways.

He turned away, returning his attention to the adjustment of his bedroll behind his saddle. Having Marti along on a tracking trip would be a distraction he didn't need.

"Lucas, are you going to saddle up a horse for me?" She resisted the urge to pat one toe in the dirt, an impatient gesture she usually gave into when she was waiting for him to obey one of her orders.

"You really think you need to go?" he asked, frowning at her.

"Please," she said and then bit her tongue for having uttered the plea.

"All right," he said, relenting. He dropped the reins of his horse and headed toward the barn. "At least you'll keep my bed warm at night," he muttered and shook his head.

"What's that?" Marti yelled.

"Nothing," he returned.

* * * *

The terrain stretched out flat, barren, and dry once

they rode off Lucas' ranch in the canyon. They headed north, toward the higher elevations, where mountains towered and the inclines were treacherous.

Marti kicked the mare in the flanks, making her cantor to keep pace with the chestnut stallion Lucas rode. She hadn't been on a horse since she left Lucas, she reminded, trying to get the feel of the animal beneath her body.

Lucas headed in the direction of the Gilroy ranch intent on picking up a trail, if possible, and following it into the high country. More than likely, the wildcat or puma that was traveling down from the slopes to attack the cattle was following the same trail back up into the hills.

Once reaching the outskirts of the Gilroy property, Lucas slowed his mount to a walk and pinned his inspecting gaze on the ground. Every now and then he stopped, dismounted, and searched along a particular area.

Marti sat atop the mare and watched him, noting how her heart raced at the mere sight of him mounting and dismounting his horse; how he bent over and peered at the dry earth under foot; the contemplative look on his handsome face. He looked so much like one of his Ute ancestors that it was uncanny—almost as if he was somehow caught in a time warp; a man belonging to yesterday, yet forced to live in this modern world.

She shook her head and tried to divert her thoughts to why she had made Lucas bring her along. She was there to help, not that he looked as if he needed any help. She watched him mount up, throwing his right leg over the back of his horse and settling in the saddle in one seemingly fluid movement. She felt her pulse quicken at just the sight of him.

He reined his horse round and took off at a slower pace than previously, keeping his eagle gaze on the ground. He had found a trail, and they were now tracking something.

"What is it?" she asked. "Tell me it's not one of my wolves."

He glanced over his shoulder at her. "Big cat. Cougar, or panther."

A relieved breath came from her mouth. She'd been hoping he would have good news. Then it dawned on her what he had really said, and she felt suddenly shaken inside.

"Cougar or panther?"

"One or the other. Can't tell which at this point."

He sounded so matter-of-fact, not bothering to guess one way or the other. And he didn't sound scared either, she noted, but then, she had never witnessed him displaying fear of any sort.

She gazed at him sitting in the saddle atop the chestnut colored horse. They were a magnificent

pair, he with his lithe body, and the horse so fabulous in its muscular form. It was then she spied the rifle case hanging from the saddle horn and realized Lucas was armed. Of course, she thought. How else did she think he would handle the culprit he tracked?

* * * *

The sun was setting by the time they reached the foothills. It shone a glorious display along the western horizon, purple and golden, with slices of magenta and aqua. She gazed up into the hills looming before them. Patchy sagebrush dotted the gray-black mounds, rising sharply to small pine groves strategically growing where the mountain streams nourished in the summer runoff. They would be stopping for the night soon. Not even Lucas Graywolf, with his wealth of abilities, could track in the dark.

In a few minutes Lucas reined his horse to a stop and dismounted, announcing they would camp there until morning and then resume the search at daybreak.

Marti slid off her horse, a bit sore from the hours in the saddle. With one hand, she rubbed her backside, and then spied Lucas laughing at her attempt to get feeling back in her hips.

"I know," she said, beating him to the punch. "I

insisted on coming along."

He didn't reply, but began unsaddling the horses and setting up camp.

Marti hurried to help gather sticks for the campfire, her thoughts returning to the one time she and Lucas had camped out on his ranch. The overnight had been her idea, actually, after an afternoon horseback ride ended abruptly when a heavy rain set in. They were caught along the northern boundary of the canyon, near an old cabin that remained from the previous owners of the property. They built a fire in the stone fireplace and stripped out of their clothes. Then they made love on an old rug in front of the fire for long hours into the night, finally falling asleep in each other's arms.

"I remember," Lucas muttered, not bothering to turn and look at her. He assembled the dry sticks and grass they had gathered for the fire and struck a match to it, tending it until it got going.

Marti glanced at him, knowing in her heart that he too was remembering their time together in the old cabin. A shiver of longing raced through her insides. It had been such a simple time then—before she came to realize that Lucas wanted to dominate her—or that she needed to rebel against him, if for no other reason than to prove herself worthy of respect.

"Tell me again, Marti, why you left me."

Had he spoken the words, or had her wild imagination conjured them up in her mind? She stared at the back of his head, trying to decide.

He turned suddenly, clasping her gaze. "Well?"

"Well what, Lucas?" she queried, her brows drawing together in a puzzled frown. "What did you say?"

He got to his feet, stretched his arms over his head for a second, then walked over to his saddle lying on the ground and retrieved his bedroll.

"Why did you leave me, Marti?"

Her hands rose to prop atop her hips. "Because you're so damn bossy, Lucas."

He chuckled and shook his head. "I'd like to shake some sense into that pretty blond head of yours, but you'd claim I was abusing you." He ran one hand through his dark hair, and then turned his attentions back to setting up the camp.

Silence hung in the air like a vapor filled cloud.

"I suppose you expect me to cook supper," he remarked, glancing at her.

"Of course," she answered, shrugging her shoulders.

"Very well," he replied. He walked over to his saddlebag and extracted two cans of beans. Smiling at Marti, he tossed her one of the cans.

"*This* is dinner?" she quipped, barely catching the can before it plopped in the fire. "Lucas. Can't you do better?"

"You knew you were coming, but you didn't pack any food?"

She shrugged her shoulders again. "I wasn't thinking about food."

"Really? What *were* you thinking about?" he inquired, coming to sit beside her near the fire. He gave her a spoon, and a metal can opener to get the beans open. "Warming my bedroll?" he pressed, pinning his gaze on the side of her face.

She made herself really busy, feeling his tawny eyes glued to her face. She opened the can and folded back the lid, then passed him the can opener.

"I noticed you didn't bring a bedroll," he said, laughter in his tone.

She gave him a surprised look, and then giggled suddenly. "Damn! You're observant, Lucas!"

"Should I take your absentmindedness to mean you intend to share my bedroll?"

Marti paused, the bite of beans lying on her tongue. She had stared at him all day—from one angle or other and despite her efforts; sexual thoughts had invaded her mind. She hadn't been with a man since leaving Lucas and given their remote circumstances—the fast descending darkness and the rugged landscape... She had a decision to make.

CHAPTER 4

Whenever she made up her mind about something, there was no turning back. She wanted Lucas to make love to her and she knew – given half a chance – he would read the seductive look in her eyes.

But what happens after the sex? Marti thought this as her mind raced ahead of her emotions. How would she feel once the orgasm waned? She tried to fight off the thoughts – tried to shut her mind to anything but her fiery desire for Lucas.

How could she keep denying her feelings for the man? She was living a lie. Her heart would always belong to Lucas. A shard of objection cut into her thoughts. Yes. Lucas owned her heart, and if he weren't aware of it already, he would figure it out before they returned to civilization.

She was immensely grateful to him for offering to help find whatever was preying on the ranchers' cattle. So, would Lucas think she was merely offering herself as a token gesture of

gratitude?

"Don't think I'm willing to trade sex for your helping me," she blurted out, her gaze glued to his. "I'm just horny as hell, Lucas. And thought you might be ... well... you know."

He chuckled and tossed his empty bean can into the fire ring. "Horny? You're wondering if I'm horny too?"

She shrugged one shoulder, and grinned slightly. Staring at him she saw the amused look that suddenly appeared on his face and for a split second, a sharp stab of rejection speared her insides. What if he'd been with someone else? What if he'd found another woman? God! She would die if Lucas ever went to someone else.

He made no move to touch her. He merely sat and stared at her, leaving her to wonder.

Marti felt her insides begin to quiver.

It must be true. I'm offering myself, and he doesn't want me. There must be someone else.

"Do you think I've gone for nine months without getting laid, Marti?" His voice held little emotion, as though he were speaking about the weather, or some nonessential thing.

She blinked her eyelids against the sting of tears. She couldn't let him see her cry. After all, she had been the one to leave him—she had been the one to reject him. It certainly hadn't been the other way around.

"I don't know, Lucas," she muttered, her voice strained.

"Does it matter?" he asked.

She tried to keep from screaming. His question implied that he'd been out screwing every woman in Silver Valley—or so she thought. Confused as to how to answer him, or torn between jumping up and running away or tossing herself head-first into the campfire—she swiped one hand through her hair in agitation.

The gesture didn't go unnoticed by Lucas' keen eyesight.

His staring was getting to her. She had to get away from him. Jumping up abruptly, she strode past the campfire, intending to disappear into the darkness, when Lucas reached out and grabbed her left arm, upsetting her balance.

Marti let out a yelp and landed with an audible plop across Lucas' lap. His arms pinned her tightly and before she could utter any kind of protest—he pressed his mouth to hers in a heated kiss.

She kissed him back, wound her arms around his neck and pressed her breasts into the sturdy wall of his chest. Confusion spun round in her mind. Was there another woman in his life? The tears she had been holding at bay squeezed out of the corners of her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

His mouth was warm and tender against her lips, kissing her as if she was the only woman in the entire world. But could she believe it? Lucas was the most handsome man in the world as far as she was concerned, and he could have any woman he chose to pursue. Like hell he had gone without getting laid for an entire nine months!

Anger suddenly reared its ugly head! Marti suddenly pushed herself free of Lucas' hold, landing on her butt in the dirt between his feet.

"Who the hell is she?" she blurted out. She glared at him, though it was almost impossible to see his face through the sheen of tears covering her eyes.

A low chuckle sounded from Lucas' throat. "Let me see if I understand this, babe. You don't want me, but you don't want anybody else to have me either?" He chuckled again. "Celibacy is a dirty word in my dictionary." His mouth pulled into a teasing smile. "I think you're jealous, Marti."

"That's ludicrous!" she snapped. Her butt hurt where she hit the ground, and she was awfully close to the fire, but she didn't dare move. She just sat there leering at him, waiting to hear his answer to her question.

Lucas surprised her when he suddenly stood up. "I'm going to check on the horses," he announced, ending the conversation.

Within moments, he disappeared in the darkness. Marti scrambled to her feet. Brushing the seat of her pants with one hand, she went to the other side of the fire ring and plopped down on a big rock.

Was she jealous?

She was still sitting on the rock, her chin propped on one hand, thinking about Lucas' accusation, when he returned to camp. He tossed a bedroll down beside the fire and it suddenly dawned on Marti that she was at his mercy. And her sudden intake of breath told Lucas as much.

"I know, Marti. You didn't bring a bedroll. Tsk, tsk," he said, clicking his tongue at her. "The only thing you didn't forget was your sharp tongue."

"I'm sorry, Lucas," she said, twisting round on the rock to look at him. "I was in such a hurry..." She broke off her words. Next he'd be expecting an apology for accusing him of being with another woman. She fought the sudden flare of anger the thought brought to mind.

Lucas opened his bedroll and spread it on the ground, and then he stretched out on it. Marti's mouth dropped open.

"Lucas?" she began. Surely he would share—wouldn't he?

"Yeah, babe. I guess you're at my mercy." He propped his head on one hand and smiled at Marti. "Come on over," he invited, patting the

blanket beside him. "I'll make you an offer you can't refuse."

He wasn't a stranger she had decided to have sex with—he was Lucas Graywolf—the man she loved but couldn't live with. It was crazy to think she could have tempestuous sex with him one minute and then reject him the next. It was impossible. She bit her bottom lip in uncertainty as she slowly rose from her seat on the rock and walked toward Lucas.

It's like walking off the edge of a cliff, she silently thought.

Marti's hesitation was all too obvious. She had a turbulent childhood, and suffered emotional abuse at the hands of both her parents. They had been two people who should never have gotten married, let alone produced a daughter. Marti was gentle and sensitive, yet haunted by memories of an uncaring father who divorced her mother when Marti was seven. Her mother became the breadwinner then, taking on the rearing of Marti single-handedly. To all who worked with Trudy Hartman down at the local bakery, she epitomized the doting parent. But behind the caring façade, emerged a woman consumed by anger who regularly demeaned Marti for even existing. As a result, Marti grew up embittered and wary, believing she was incapable of loving or receiving love — especially from a man. Lucas was caught

in the crossfire. Unable to convince her that he loved her or that she was worthy of his love.

Sex was the one thing they both had in common. They each liked sex, and therefore the bedroom had proven to be a place of neutral territory where they enjoyed each other's bodies and the sex act to the apex.

Lucas pulled Marti down on the woolen blanket beside him. If only she'd grow up and realize that the past was over. Both her parents were dead – they couldn't hurt her any longer.

The ground was hard, but Lucas' warmth soon penetrated her clothing and gave her something else to think about. She stretched out beside him, rolling to her side when Lucas wound one arm around her waist and urged her closer. The urge to have sex with him returned with lightening haste as he began to kiss her.

His mouth was demanding and his arm around her waist became like a steel band, holding her tightly and refusing to give her any room to get up and leave. The feeling of being possessed was overwhelming and had it not been for the rekindling of sexual desire, she would have rebelled against his mastery.

The smell of him went straight to her senses. A faint aroma of aftershave mingled with the smoky scent of the campfire and a trace of musky sweat lingered from earlier in the day before they'd

traveled into the foothills. There was a familiarity about him that reached out and drew her closer, made her senses churn with want.

She expelled a shaky breath as Lucas' hand caressed the curve of her left hip. Why couldn't she get this man out of her head? His palm was warm and pressed against her jean covered leg just hard enough to bring her attention to where it was traveling ... and alerting her to what was on his mind.

She was too weak to deny him.

His mouth melded perfectly with hers. The slightest pressure of his lips atop hers caused her to open her mouth to him, to welcome his tongue inside and to join in a sinful play that further ignited her senses.

His hand traveled the length of her thigh, then back. His fingers delved between her legs and stroked the tight covering of denim at her crotch. Marti moaned and straightened her legs, giving him further permission to touch her.

Lucas parted her thighs with his knee, splaying her legs wide on the blanket, and then he slid his palm along her inner thigh before returning his hand to her crotch. The heat of his palm quickly breeched the covering of denim and made Marti drag in a quick breath. She hadn't been touched in months and she sensed Lucas knew it. Her earlier admission of being horny came to mind.

I can't live with him – yet I can't live without him either, she thought.

His inspecting hand at her crotch soon had her panting for breath and his kisses... those sensual kisses...

Marti's eyelids flickered open, only to spy Lucas gazing down at her. At first her senses were rocked. She blinked her eyelids at him, aware that their locking gazes hadn't halted his hand at her crotch.

The yellow glow from the flickering campfire threw his face into shadows, making her have to guess at his expression. His head was tipped at an angle, as though he were accessing her – for what, she could only guess.

Stupidity, perhaps, she thought suddenly. How can one woman be so naïve as to think she could share a man's bedroll and not give in to him sexually? Yes. That would qualify as stupid.

He lowered his head and kissed her mouth, putting all speculation on her part to rest. The next to take place would be the sex act ... and she was looking forward to it ... needing it oh so badly ... and yet ...

"Stop thinking, Marti," Lucas ordered.

Her body jerked to attention. Could he really read her mind?

His hand moved quickly from her crotch to the neck of her denim shirt, brushing her left breast as

he began releasing the buttons and pushing aside the fabric, exposing her bra. Her breasts heaved against the confining garment and true to form, Lucas rolled her to her side just long enough to unhook its clasp. Then he pushed the bra upward, exposing her breasts.

He had been right to order her to stop thinking. For God's sake! She was in his arms, the very place she craved with every fiber of her body – and he was making love to her. What more could she ask for?

A jumble of thoughts vied for attention. If she gave in to him, if she had sex with him, she'd be falling right back into the trap she had fled from.

But to deny Lucas would be to deny her self.

Her thoughts took an abrupt turn when Lucas released the snap on her jeans and pushed the tab on her zipper down. She had allowed him too much access to halt things now, she decided, her senses reeling. She pulled in a shuddering breath as Lucas stripped her jeans off her hips and pushed the denim along her thighs.

Lightly he caressed her belly with his palm, trailing his fingers across her skin as though she were fine porcelain. Lower he ventured until his fingers delved amid the blond bush at her crotch.

"Oh, Lucas!" she breathed, arching her hips upward to press her crotch against his fingers.

"I've missed you, babe," he admitted, his head

descending to nuzzle her neck. "I've missed you like a man thirsting for water."

He took total command of her then, caressing her with his hands and his lips. And Marti savored every nuance of his attention until her senses were spinning out of control.

"Enough playing," she finally cooed in a soft, breathy voice. "Take me now." She groped at his shoulders, urging him to come to her, to enter her body with his and fulfill the heat of passion he had manifested within her. "Now, Lucas," she urged, imploring him with her eyes, glazed with her desire.

Lucas dipped his head and nuzzled her breasts with his mouth, flicking his tongue wetly against her erect nipples. He trailed his lips onto her waist, delving the tip of his tongue into her dimpled navel, and smiling slightly at her surprised reaction. Lower he worked, inching his tongue along her silken body, along her abdomen, across her hip, then into the valley between her legs.

Lucas climbed atop Marti, mindful of the hard ground beneath her back. His cock was long and thick, hammer-hard and he hurried to place it between her legs, sliding inside her womanly core with one quick thrust.

Marti gasped at the size of him, his rapid entry into her warm, wet recesses. She clasped his hips

in her hands and began to move with him. Always the sex act was good with Lucas. He put her needs first — bringing her to climax with such intensity of passion.

She arched her back, opening herself up for him, wanting him to fill up her cavity with his body. His heat engulfed her, set her pulse racing out of control. Faster and faster he thrust into her body, bringing her to the brink of orgasm.

She panted through her mouth, gulping in large breaths of air as the climax bore down on her. She dug her nails into the rock-hard flesh of Lucas' buttocks, pressing him closer to her body as she bucked her hips wildly.

"Oh my God!" Marti exclaimed as the climax shot through her insides.

A crescendo of orgasmic sensations spiraled throughout her body, making her belly knot and her limbs tingle! She could barely keep from exclaiming her glee, from shouting at the top of her lungs that the orgasm had exploded within her.

"I'm coming, babe," Lucas said, lowering his head to kiss her.

His mouth was hot and wet against her lips. She tasted his sweat and felt the orgasm shake him as he exploded inside her body.

A thought suddenly speared Marti's senses, almost overriding the sensational orgasm she was

engulfed in. She and Lucas were having sex — without benefit of a condom!

“Lucas, we just had sex without a condom!” she stated, her tone worried.

Lucas was silent, still. Marti felt him pull in a long breath. “I guess you forgot those too,” he said. He rolled off her body and pulled her against his side.

“You’re the man. You’re supposed to be prepared.”

“Like hell.” He raised his head and looked down at her. “I don’t pack condoms when I ride into the high country, Marti.”

She stared at him for a moment. He didn’t seem the least bit concerned. “What if...” She couldn’t say it. She couldn’t even think it!

“What if you just got pregnant?” He reached one hand to her cheek and traced his fingertip along the smooth skin.

“You don’t seem concerned,” she muttered. The man was so hard to read—except for his dominating ways toward her — everything about him seemed a mystery.

“I’m not. I think I’d make a good father.” His fingertip lowered to trace along Marti’s lower lip. “And I think you’ll make one hell of a mother.”

“What?” she snapped, slapping his hand away.

“I said, you’d...”

“I heard what you said, Lucas. Now explain

what you meant." She wrestled round on the blanket, pushing Lucas away from her and pulling up her jeans.

He shrugged one shoulder as though not taking her seriously as he replaced his deflated cock inside his fly and zipped up. "I think you'd make a great mom Marti. Since you love animals and..."

"Never mind, Lucas! Let's just hope we don't have to find out."

The expression on his face said she had wounded him but he managed to turn his head from her before she glimpsed his face. If only she could come to grips with her past, perhaps they could get on with their lives — as a couple.

CHAPTER 5

"Beans for breakfast, Lucas?" Lucas chuckled at her as she caught the tin can he tossed her way. "You don't seem any worse for wear," he remarked. "After spending the night on the ground." He pulled his gaze from her and concentrated on his beans.

A red stain flooded Marti's cheeks as she locked gazes with Lucas. With little effort she could relive their sexual interlude in her mind.

They broke camp and rode north with Lucas picking up the trail they had followed the day before. The going was slower now, peppered with numerous stops while Lucas searched out the trail among the rocky terrain they were entering. Marti sat in the saddle and watched as he dismounted, easing his tall body to the ground in a graceful motion that defied definition, and then squatted to inspect the prints they were following.

She thought about last night, how she had given herself to him so easily, so wantonly,

abandoning all sense of rational where their relationship was concerned. Sex. It was all about sex. And how he could make her want him, so easily, without rhyme or reason. Carnal. Erotic. Passionate.

She watched him rise and walk the trail on foot, noting his easy long gaited stride. If only he didn't treat her so, if only he didn't dictate to her in every aspect of their lives.

"My people protect their women," Lucas said to her once when she flew into a rage over his treatment of her.

"Dammit, Lucas! I can think for myself!" she yelled, flinging her clothes into the old brown suitcase. It was just one of the times she thought she could leave him.

Lucas stood in the open doorway and watched her throw gravel from the wheels of the jeep as she left his ranch. She wasn't ever coming back. She'd show him!

A sigh escaped her lips. At first she came back regularly, it seemed, then she opened the sanctuary and threw herself into its running. It had kept her mind occupied, kept her from thinking about Lucas, but that was only while he remained out of sight. On the rare occasions when he came around, it was a different story, one she tried to change on purpose, to no avail. He was in her blood, like water to quench her thirst. She

needed him.

She watched him walk to the top of a high hill, and then disappear among the sandstone rocks dotting its slope. Animal tracks would be hard to come by in the rocks, she knew. She sat on her horse and waited, reaching a hand out to gently stroke the mare's neck.

Momentarily Lucas returned to mount his horse and lead off in the foothills of the mountain they were headed toward, silently, his hat pulled down low on his brow, shading his eyes, his expression contemplative. Marti followed, guiding her horse through the maze of rocks and hills behind Lucas.

It was nearing sundown when Lucas announced they would stop for the night. Bone-weary, Marti swung herself down from the horse, her hips aching from all the hours in the saddle, the revolting thought of more canned beans for dinner making her shudder.

"Gather wood for a fire," Lucas ordered, taking the reins of her horse and leaving her.

They were in the valley between two giant outcroppings of sandstone rock, somewhat shielded from the wind that seemed to have kicked up a bit. Marti brushed her hands along her arms, glad for the denim jacket she had thought to bring along. It got cold at night in the high country.

She set about gathering the wood, filling her

arms with fallen limbs and short dry branches scattered about the area. In no time, she had piled up the sticks and began a small blaze, then turned to see Lucas coming from the rocks with a freshly slaughtered rabbit dangling from his hand.

"No beans tonight," Marti said, delighted to see the meat. She watched Lucas thread the carcass on a green stick and rig a makeshift spit over the fire she had managed to build.

While the rabbit roasted, they set up their camp, gathering pine needles to cushion the one bedroll they shared, and settling the horses for the night. Marti watched without comment as Lucas pulled the rifle he had brought from the holster on his saddle. He checked the ammunition chambers, and then leaned the barrel of the gun against a rock near the campfire.

A shiver of expectation raced over Marti's skin. The animal they had been following was obviously closer than she perceived. Cautiously, she swiveled her head round, taking in the small valley between the rocky outcropping. While they had camped in a spot that shielded them somewhat from the harsh elements of the land, they had also put themselves in a precarious situation. There was any number of towering posts where an animal could get the drop on them, perhaps at night, while they slept.

"Don't worry," Lucas said in a low voice. He

turned the rabbit on a stick and added more wood to the fire.

Marti brought her gaze back to his form. He had been watching her inspect their surroundings, and read her mind. He looked at her then, locking his tawny gaze with hers.

"You're safe," he added, settling on the ground and leaning his back against the rock where he had leaned his rifle. He stretched out his long legs, crossing them at the ankle. Then he took a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and offered her one.

"I'm not scared," Marti informed him, joining him at the rock and seating herself beside him. She slipped one of the cigarettes from the pack he held out to her and positioned its filter tip between her lips.

Lucas slid his gaze over her curvaceous figure. She was scared, but she was too stubborn to admit it. He struck a match and lit her smoke, pausing to watch her full lips close around the filter as she took her first drag before lighting his own cigarette.

Darkness was settling around them. The temperature was dropping. But the rabbit was almost cooked. Marti's stomach was growling by the time Lucas finally handed her a hot browned piece to eat.

"I haven't eaten rabbit in ages," she said, then

wished she hadn't. The comment only opened the way for Lucas to remind her of the last time, but he didn't take the opportunity, to her surprise. He merely ate his half of the roasted meat and tossed the bones into the fire when he was finished. Marti chewed thoughtfully on the succulent meat, and then it dawned on her that she hadn't heard any gunfire before spying Lucas with the rabbit.

"How did you kill this rabbit?" she asked, her tone curious.

"Snare," he answered simply. He rose to make a final check on the camp before turning in for the night.

"Snare?" she echoed. "You mean with a string and a stick?"

He glanced at her with a slanted smile across his lips.

"But doesn't a snare involve setting the trap and waiting for the animal to find it? How did you manage to get the rabbit so quickly?" Her arched brows pulled together across the bridge of her nose.

He paused and looked down at her. "If you must know, Marti. I saw the rabbit in the rocks and outsmarted it."

I believe it, she thought, resuming her eating. Once more she had encroached on that private part of him, the part that seemed such a mystery to her—his Indian ways. She had lost count of

how many times she had questioned him about how he did certain things, only to be told it was 'the way of the old ones.'

She watched him leave, and then tried to listen for his footsteps as he circled the area, to no avail. He was as quiet on foot as the big cat he was tracking. Momentarily he stepped back into the light of the campfire, bringing a gasp of surprise from her mouth. It was uncanny how he could slip about without making a sound.

Lucas unrolled his bedroll and waited for Marti to lie down beside him before tucking the blanket around their bodies. Marti settled against his hard frame, her body sensitive to his, but her mind alert to the dangers surrounding them. Her eyes were as big as half dollars, and her wide-awake state didn't get passed Lucas' keen observance.

"You're safe," he said to her, hiding a laugh under his breath. "Stop worrying."

"I'm not worrying," she alleged.

"Liar. You're trembling."

"Okay. So I'm scared."

"There's nothing to be scared of. Go to sleep," he instructed, pulling her closer against his side.

"Easy for you to say. You've got the rifle lying beside you."

Lucas closed his eyes. "I'm not letting you be in charge of the gun. You'd wind up shooting us both."

She laughed in spite of things. "I should have brought my own gun."

"And food. Remember, you don't like my beans either."

"That's right. Next time..." she stopped, catching herself.

"Next time—what?" Lucas's eyelids popped open and he levered himself up on one elbow.

"Nothing," she said, pinching her eyelids shut.

Lucas watched her face and smiled down at her. Momentarily he caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger. Leaning down, he kissed her mouth, making her open her eyes.

"Go to sleep, Lucas," she said, her mind fighting her body over the statement.

He was warm pressing against her side, his lips tender on hers. When he began unbuttoning her shirt, she knew her will was collapsing. She caught his fingers in her palm, halting his movements.

"What about keeping watch for the panther?" she asked, looking up at him.

"I've got that covered," he assured her. "Trust me."

"Trust you?" she echoed.

He tugged his fingers free of her hand and resumed opening her shirt, momentarily baring one breast to his gaze. He trailed one long finger along its outer edge, lifting the fleshy mound into his palm, then he gently let his fingers glide

upward, to tease her nipple into firmness.

Fright seemed to dissolve from her body, replaced at length with a heated desire to make love with Lucas, but then he knew it would be like that, knew all he had to do was touch her, some where along her body, inch his masterful hands along her frame and she would give herself to him unbidden, lustfully.

"Lucas, stop," she insisted, the thought that they had no condoms coming to mind. "We can't keep having sex when we don't have any ... protection."

"I've got that covered too, babe. Trust me," he informed her. He sucked her nipple into his mouth and tickled it with the tip of his tongue.

Marti's emotions were running wild and it was growing very hot beneath the woolen blanket. When Lucas pushed the covering from their bodies, she relented and allowed him to strip away her shirt and bra.

His hands massaged her body, stroked her smooth contours and made her want him. He kissed her mouth and sucked her bottom lip between his, nibbling on it with his teeth. A low groan came from his throat. He wanted her.

Marti dug her nails into his back as he climbed on top of her. In another second, he lunged inside her womanly cave and began to move in rhythm to her arching body. Ecstasy hung on the abyss,

poised to soar with their lunging gyrations.

Marti was surprised, given the fact that minutes earlier she was scared of being attacked by the predator they were tracking, when she felt the orgasm taking hold of her body. She sucked in a deep breath and savored the mounting sensations, her senses completely consumed on reaching satisfaction.

Lucas was heavy atop her body, his chest pressed possessively against her bare breasts, his left arm was around her waist and his hand clutched her buttock, holding her securely against his thrusting groin. She felt very possessed and protected, and the feeling served to intensify the orgasm as it streamed through her body.

She arched her back and clutched his thrusting buttocks in her hands, needing to feel somewhat in command of her own climax. She opened herself up as much as she could and savored each time Lucas thrust into her hot cavity.

She moaned and withered beneath Lucas as the sensations took total control. The exploding sensations spread along every nerve within her body and took her breath away for a second. Ecstatic, she rode the wave of sensations, pinching her eyes shut and barely breathing for fear she would miss out on any nuance of feeling. Sex with Lucas was like nothing else in her life.

"Oh damn!" Lucas exclaimed.

Surprise collided with the orgasm Marti was experiencing as she felt Lucas pull his cock out of her cavity. In the next moment he pressed his swollen manhood atop her belly and resumed thrusting. It was then she understood what he had meant when she questioned them having sex without a condom. Lucas had not intended to come inside her—but to pull out when he grew near.

She felt a deep gratitude for him taking the initiative — even though she knew it would have a waning effect on his pleasure. She brushed her lips along his cheek as she pulled his body closer atop her own.

* * * *

Marti perched atop the boulder and looked off across the Plaines beneath. They had risen at daybreak, saddled the horses and ridden along the rocky slopes until the trail suddenly became almost nonexistent. Lucas had dismounted then and taken off on foot, telling her to stay put and wait for him.

For once she followed his command, without back talk, perching atop the highest boulder she could climb in her low-heeled cowboy boots. She had no idea where they were, just somewhere up in the high country, miles from Silver Valley and

anything familiar.

She sat on the rock and thought about her life, about the wolf sanctuary, and, most importantly, about Lucas. A ripple of anger traveled through her when she recalled how he had bought the acreage she had planned to purchase. She didn't believe for one minute that he ever intended to build houses on it — though Lucas wasn't prone to lying to her. She sighed. In the back of her mind she thought he had bought the ground to use as a leveraging tool against her — a tool to lure her back to his house. But he hadn't, as yet, revealed his plot, if indeed, her instincts were right.

Why couldn't things be simple? She wondered.

"And we've been having sex," she muttered, voicing her latest failure to keep out of his grasp.

She scanned the wide-open spaces from her perch on the boulder, but her thoughts were on anything but the scenery. She had wanted to have sex with him—and he was of the same mind—his willingness to oblige her was evidence of that. But, on the other hand, what man would refuse a woman willing to offer herself free for the taking?

She almost blushed at the thought. She'd never thought of herself as being promiscuous, but perhaps she was. She gave a slight chuckle. Was it considered promiscuity to have sex with the man you loved?

Her own thoughts shook her. If she truly loved

Lucas, wouldn't she overlook his domineering ways toward her? But then, she remembered, the past was hard to overlook. She had grown up with a parent who was filled with rage and subsequently took it out on her. It was no wonder she rebelled against anyone trying to dominate her in later years.

Her gaze traveled over the hills, dotted with sandstone and scraggly shrub. There was no sign of Lucas. The terrain had completely engulfed him from her view. She hoped he didn't get lost. Then she laughed at herself for having the thought. Lucas knew the land, could travel anywhere among the hills and mountains and not get lost. He was an Indian, a tracker—someone who felt akin to the land. He couldn't become lost if he wanted to. Silly, she suddenly chided herself. Why would he want to?

For a moment she remembered how, on occasion, Lucas hid himself away at his ranch, sometimes for weeks. Perhaps he was lost then, she thought, trying to imagine what he would do during those times. But then she supposed he tended to his horses, breeding the mares and arranging sales of the foals.

She suddenly caught sight of something glinting in the rays of the noonday sun. She pinned her gaze on the location, spying Lucas' raven hair as he scaled a boulder and paused on

its crest. The sun caught the barrel of his gun and reflected off the metal.

She watched him as he moved amid the rocks, wondering how he was tracking any animal among the terrain so different from where they had previously found the trail. Within a few minutes, he disappeared from view and she sat on the rock and wondered what had become of him. One second she had her gaze pinned on him, and the next, he was gone, invisible amid the rocks.

Almost an hour later, Lucas returned to her, carrying his rifle over one shoulder.

"The trail picks up again over that hill," he told her, pointing one hand. "We'll ride around the base of the mountain and pick it up in the morning." He glanced overhead, noting the sun starting into its afternoon descent. "We should be on the other side of the hill by nightfall, if we ride hard." He strode to his horse and mounted up, expecting Marti to do the same.

Marti scrambled down from the rock, scratching her calves on the bramble bushes at its base, but keeping quiet about it for fear Lucas would want to stop and bandage her up, which would probably only lead to another sexual interlude as soon as he put his hands on her. She heaved a deep sigh. If only she could resign herself to letting him dictate to her. But, she was a woman of the times, and not to be commanded by

any man, least of all Lucas Graywolf.

She bounced along in the saddle while the mare ran briskly to keep pace with Lucas's horse. One thing she knew for sure, she thought as she held on tightly and let the animal have her head, once all this was over, once the animal Lucas was tracking was found, and destroyed, she would settle in at home for a week's rest. So far she had experienced aches in places she didn't even know she had.

But it was the nightly lovemaking with Lucas that made her sleep soundly, she admitted in the next thought. Those warm, wild, erotic sessions with Lucas were all that kept her going during the day. She was physically active, or so she always believed she was, but out chasing around the high country with Lucas in the lead was taxiing emotionally as well as physically.

But she had been the one to insist she come along. She had even badgered him into saddling a horse for her. A small frown drew her arched brows together in contemplation. She had never been able to make Lucas obey her before. She smiled ruefully. He had let her come along because he wanted her to come along. The realization hit her right between her eyes. You rat, she thought, staring at his back as she jostled along in the saddle behind him.

* * * *

"Need a massage?" Lucas asked when he ended the day's ride. He gave Marti a hand getting off the horse, noting how stiff she appeared.

"Produce a hot tub of water for me to soak in, Lucas. You seem to be able to do just about everything else."

He slid her a sly look, smiling slightly out of one corner of his mouth.

"How about luke-warm water?"

Marti pinned her gaze on him, frowning slightly. With one hand she rubbed her hip. "Don't tease me, Lucas. I'm serious."

"So am I," he said. He nodded his head toward a grove of pine trees. "Check out the pool of water on the other side of those trees."

More than a little skeptical, Marti walked over to the stand of trees and then pushed her way through their dense foliage. Delight shot through her insides when she spotted a mountain pool.

"Oh, Lucas. It's wonderful," she called, busily removing her clothes. She couldn't wait to immerse her sore body in the cooling water, to have her aches taken away and her nerves soothed. She tore her clothes off in record time and raced to the waters edge, then jumped in. Suddenly the icy chill engulfed her and she lunged upward trying to get out. "Oh! It's cold!"

Lucas stood on the bank and laughed at her. "It's the runoff from the mountains, silly." He pointed to the crest looming behind the pool.

Marti followed his pointing hand, spying the snow-capped tops of the mountain peaks. "We're not going up there, are we?" she asked, her teeth beginning to chatter from the icy water.

Lucas shrugged his shoulders.

She couldn't find the bottom of the pool with her toes, or else she was already frozen, she thought, as she made her way to the edge of the water and crawled out. How stupid that had been, she thought—jumping in a mountain pool and not thinking about it being cold. Well, it wasn't the first time she had done something stupid, and from the looks of her life, it wouldn't be the last time either.

Lucas stood nearby and watched her shake and shiver while she tried to get dressed, then he walked over to help her, but he didn't offer her any clothes, he gathered her into his arms instead, folding her inside his own shirt. Marti dropped the underwear in her hand and snuggled closer to him, taking advantage of his immediate warmth and his willingness to share.

Her wet breasts pressed against his shirtfront and she snaked her arms around his waist. Hungrily, Lucas began kissing her, feeling her inch closer in need of warming.

"I'm freezing," she managed to say, her teeth clattering together.

"But you forgot all about being sore, didn't you?" he asked, pulling back so he could look down into her upturned face.

"I won't forget that you let me take that icy plunge. I'll get you back if it's the last thing I ever do."

A low growl came from his throat. "I like it when you threaten me," he said, claiming her lips again.

He ran his palms along her bare backside, clutching her naked hips and holding them in his big hands. He was rapidly getting aroused at the feel of her, wet, chilled, yet hot to his touch.

"Lucas, build a fire," Marti insisted, trying to break free of his clasp. "Hurry, before I catch pneumonia."

He groaned at her suggestion, but released her to gather wood and set up camp. Marti pulled her clothes on, aware of his hot touch lingering on her body. Once more he had sent sexual arousal wafting along her insides, knotting her nerve endings in a frazzle of emotion. She expelled a lengthy breath and finished dressing, dropping onto the bank at the water's edge to pull on her boots.

By the time she walked back through the grove of trees to the campsite, it was well after sunset.

Lucas had the fire blazing, the horses fed and bedded down for the night, and their supper laying on a rock, warming.

"I swear, Lucas. When I get back to civilization, I'm never eating another bean for as long as I live," she avowed, hands on hips, shaking her head. "Couldn't you think of anything else to pack?"

He chuckled at her. "Jerky. But you don't like that either."

She wrinkled up her nose at him. He was right ... again. She didn't like jerky, and she damn sure didn't like beans any more either. But she picked up one of the cans and set the opener to it, forgetting her dislike long enough to quell her gnawing stomach.

"I'm sorry," she said, polishing off the beans. "It wasn't like you knew I was coming along," she said, turning her gaze on him. He sat on a rock across the campfire from her, his rifle lying nearby.

"I thought you would have stayed behind to keep an eye on things at the sanctuary," he said, touching the flame of a match to his cigarette.

"Manuel can tend things. Besides, I'm curious about what's been attacking the ranchers' herds. I'm relieved that the prints you found aren't canine."

He shook his head at her. "I never believed it

was wolves to begin with. John and Sam were just making noise. They're too damn lazy to track down the real culprit."

She looked at him, surprised at his words. "You're saying they intimidated me so I'd do the job for them?"

He smiled out of one side of his mouth, and then took a drag on his cigarette. He blew a plume of white smoke in the mountain air above his head. "Can you think of a better way to get the job done? They knew you'd be bound and determined to defend those wolves you house, and one sure way to get you to remedy their problem was to pay you a little visit and threaten you."

She stared at Lucas. "That's exactly how it happened. They let me know I had to do something or they were going to kill the wolves and find a way to close down the compound. Those yellow bastards!" she sputtered.

Lucas' jaw was rigid and his amber eyes were narrowed.

"How did you know what they were up to?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "Just call it instinct," he said, looking away. He aimed his gaze toward the grove of trees. The mountain pool was probably a watering hole for some, if not all, of the wild animals in the area, but he wasn't certain if the cat he was tracking would come around.

"What is it? Do you hear something?" Marti asked, her voice rising to a nervous squeak.

He glanced at her suddenly, smiling. "I should have packed a gag for you," he remarked.

Marti's jaw dropped open in surprise, then, with a quickness that surprised her as well as Lucas, she hurled the empty bean can at him, narrowly missing his head as he ducked aside.

"Stay by the fire and be quiet," he said, getting up. "I'm going to have a look around." He took the rifle and went toward the grove of trees, noiselessly.

He always found a way to amaze her, she thought, waiting beside the fire. She warmed her hands, holding them out in front of her body and then inched closer to the flames, adding a stick of wood from the pile lying nearby. If Lucas was right about John Gilroy and Sam Weatherbe, and he probably was, she admitted, recalling the conversation almost word for word with the men, then anytime in the future, when their herds were threatened, she could expect trouble from them. She felt her hackles rise. She didn't like dirty dealings, especially by able-bodied men who were capable of handling their own affairs. She chewed on her bottom lip and contemplated the matter. There must be some measure, legal or otherwise, she could take, that was, besides expecting Lucas to come to her rescue every time.

She thought then of his unexpected arrival at the sanctuary that morning. She never did ask him why he came around since the situation with Gilroy and Weatherbe seemed to overshadow all else, least at the moment it did. She decided she would bring up the subject when he returned to camp, after he'd made his check of things. Suddenly she felt grateful to him again for taking up her cause. In fact, had he not come to the compound at that precise time, she wouldn't have known what to do. Maybe she would have shot them herself, or stood idly by while Manuel pulled the trigger. She suddenly found herself wondering what action she would take the next time, and getting madder by the minute. Those ranchers couldn't threaten her compound and get away with it. She had to do something.

Lucas returned suddenly and stepped into the light made by the campfire, startling Marti somewhat. He came to sit beside her, leaning his rifle across the saddle he had removed from his horse.

"You never told me why you came to the sanctuary the day Gilroy and Weatherbe paid me that visit," she said.

"I saw you running across the yard to your jeep and then hurrying away and I thought I'd better follow you just to see if there was any trouble."

"You have very good instincts, Lucas," she said,

a smile pulling at the corners of her mouth. "If you hadn't come to my rescue, I don't know what would have happened."

He reached out one arm and stroked her cheek with his forefinger. "I'm never far away, babe."

CHAPTER 6

There was a noise, unfamiliar, drawing nearer, and there was the cold, penetrating, chilling, intruding on her senses, waking her. Marti jerked her eyes open, so cold she could hardly think. Lucas was gone. She was alone, covered up with the blanket, beside the rock ring where the campfire once burned.

She struggled to sit up, to listen, and to gather her wits.

Shivering, she tried to see through the murky darkness. It wasn't yet daylight, or was it only twilight surrounding the camp space and hours away from sunrise?

"Lucas?" she said, her voice gravely in tone. She pulled the blanket around her shoulders, deciding she'd rebuild the fire just as soon as she was able to move her fingers enough to search through her jacket pocket for a match. "Lucas?" she called again, but knew her voice wasn't carrying past her own presence. She turned her

attention to building the fire within the circle of stones beside her.

The notion of leaving the blanket long enough to gather kindling was briefly considered, and then with the prospect of soon being warm as an incentive, she scrambled to her feet and began gathering the sticks she needed from across the campsite.

Momentarily she was blowing softly on the smoldering pile she had constructed in the fire ring, already imagining the roaring flames she would soon be warming her cold body beside. The bottom had fallen out of the temperature, and she mentally reminded herself that the higher up they traveled in the mountains, the colder it would be. The trip was becoming less attractive all the time.

Then she thought about Lucas again. Where had he gone? She glanced around once the fire had taken hold, checking on a whim to make certain his horse was still tethered along side hers.

"He'd never go off and leave me," she muttered out loud. The sentence stuck in her mind. If Lucas was anything, he was dependable. She could rely on him. She always had to admit that to herself. He had never let her down along those lines.

She suddenly felt her mind fill with questions. Why was she so insistent that Lucas treat her differently than he had in the past? He was bossy, demanding, commanding. Yes. He was all those

things. But, he was dependable. He had never told her he would do something and then not followed through with his promise to do exactly as he said. He was a man of his word.

It suddenly dawned on her that he had stuck by her through their months of turmoil, and her decision to leave him. And he had not sought another woman—or at least she hadn't caught him with another woman.

She tried to return her thoughts to the present, warming her hands at the fire, feeling the chill wane slightly from her limbs. She brought her gaze up to look at the sky. It was star-studded, clear, ebony. She decided it wasn't near daybreak, but late into the night as she had suspected. But when had Lucas left their bed?

She warmed for a time at the fire, debating whether to go have a look around for Lucas, or stay put as he had instructed her to do previously. It was then she noticed his rifle was gone from where he had propped it against a rock earlier. She decided for sure to remain at the fire ring, and not go traipsing about in the dark in search of him. It wasn't likely that he would shoot at anything without seeing what he was aiming at, but it wasn't worth the chance of proving otherwise either.

She took a cigarette from the pack in her jacket pocket and lit it, listening for noises from Lucas, or

any sound that might give a hint as to what he was doing or where he had gone. It seemed unusually quiet, she thought, straining her eyes to see through the darkness. Suddenly she began to feel scared. What if something had happened to Lucas?

She discarded her smoke in the fire, and got to her feet. She needed to find Lucas. She needed to know if he was all right. But which direction should she go? She turned her gaze on the stand of trees separating their campsite from the mountain pool. It would be pitch dark in among their branches. Did she dare risk getting lost? She bit her bottom lip, contemplating.

She paced around the campfire, rubbing her upper arms with her hands. Why had she awakened? Was it just because she was cold? Or had some noise, an animal—the big cat Lucas had been tracking — disturbed her?

She paced faster around the fire ring, becoming worried on top of being scared. What if Lucas was lying out in the brush, hurt, maimed perhaps by the wild animal he hunted? Her fright intensified. What if he needed her help and was unable to summon enough strength to call out?

“Lucas!” she suddenly yelled, pricking her ears up. “Lucas!”

“What?” he replied in a hoarse whisper.

Marti jumped as though she had been shot,

then spun around to spy Lucas stepping out of the darkness into the faint glow of the firelight.

"Oh, Lucas!" she exclaimed, rushing forward to throw herself into his arms. "I woke up and you were gone. I was scared to death that something may have happened to you." She squeezed his body to hers; so thankful he was safe and unharmed.

He chuckled deep in his throat, and then embraced Marti's shoulders. "Something spooked the horses and I thought I'd have a look around."

"Did you see anything?" she asked, pulling back to look up at him.

"Nothing. But I probably scared it away."

"What if it was..."

"The cat?" He shook his head. "Not likely. The tracks we've been following are a few days old."

"Really? I thought maybe it might come to the pool to drink."

He looked away, giving her the idea he might not be telling her everything.

"Don't worry. You're safe," he assured her. "I see that you practiced your fire building skills. Good idea. It's cold up here in the high country." He walked her over to the fire and made her sit down. "It's still a few hours before dawn. We should go back to bed."

Maybe it was the way he said the last sentence that turned her thoughts away from the danger

lurking out in the darkness, or the fact that he slid his tawny gaze along her body as he spoke, but like magic, she began to think about being in his arms, warm, cuddled, safe.

Lucas picked up the blanket from the ground and gave it a shake, ridding it of the excess dust before spreading it out once more on the spot where they had first fallen asleep.

Marti watched him, thinking how familiar the task appeared to be to him. It was almost as if he clung to all the old ways of his ancestors. Before she knew it she was smiling, imagining him camping out, maybe traipsing off by himself into the mountains just so he could commune with nature.

Lucas turned suddenly and glanced at Marti over his shoulder, as though knowing what she was thinking, a smile on his face.

"You know Mazie usually does the housework around the ranch," he remarked, tiding the corner of the blanket on the ground.

"I was just imagining you in buckskins and..."

He lunged at her suddenly and wrestled her to the ground, and then he tickled her ribs as though she were a child. Marti giggled hysterically, forgetting all about being scared minutes earlier.

He pinned her to the ground, atop the blanket he had spread so carefully, and then lowered his weight on to her body, covering her mouth with

his own. He kissed her deeply, holding her hands against the ground above her head.

A surge of want, strong and needing, engulfed her body and mind. He was rough, holding her fast, yet gentle as a kitten in his tending of her mouth. His lips pressed upon hers, caressing, kneading, and claiming his right to her. She felt possessed, owned, yet exalted in being possessed and owned. Her mind whirled in a vortex of simplicity mingled with complexity. Where did she leave off and where did Lucas begin?

The thought was staggering. Had she not separated herself from him? Had she not taken her clothes and left his house? Hadn't she removed herself from his bed and rid herself of his touch? A new awakening took root inside her head. She had never totally left Lucas — for he was unable to leave. He was part of her being, part of who she was.

Slowly Lucas loosed his hold on her hands, and slid his palms down her arms to pause on her breasts. He began opening her shirt, conscious of the chill in the air, yet needing to feel her flesh beneath his hands. She lay still, gazing up at him, expectant.

The cold touched her skin and she shivered, but just as quickly, Lucas placed his hands on her and began sending his heat mingling with hers. She closed her eyes and savored his moving fingers,

the gentle caressing, and the arousing inspection.

Touching her breasts only led to further foreplay. With heat rising inside him, he opened the fly of her jeans and traced his hands across her bare abdomen before pushing her pants off her hips and joining himself to her.

They came together in the cold night, warmth escaping into the darkness as they thrust about on the thin cover of woolen blanket near the campfire. When Marti reached her climax, Lucas once again pulled his cock out of her cavern and came against her belly, cheating himself of her warmth, but keeping peace between them.

Marti, warmed by the sex and Lucas' shared body heat, dozed in his arms. When she awoke a few hours later, she found herself alone again. But he hadn't left her as he had before. She lay on her side and watched him build another fire to heat the morning beans. She rubbed her eyes and sat up, at first not remembering the events of the night, then she saw his rifle and it all came flooding back. She had feared something might have happened to him, and had felt uncanny relief, of a sort, when she found out he was safe. She stared at him as he handed the predictable breakfast to her. Not even the beans bothered her now, it seemed. They were merely a portable breakfast, but the thought of losing Lucas forever, perhaps, had rocked her senses.

"How much longer do you think we'll be out here?" she asked, looking at him. She felt the keen urge to get back to civilization and some semblance of the modern-day world.

"You mean how many cans of beans do I have left?" he quipped, grinning at her.

"No," she said, shaking her head. She had gotten over the beans, but she didn't want to explain how to him. "When do you think we'll catch up to the cat?"

He gave her a straightforward stare. "Any time now."

"Any time?" Her breathy reply was almost lost in the space between them. "But didn't you say..."

"Yes. And I also said you were safe."

"Thanks," she muttered. Yesterday she would have exploded at him for keeping the truth from her, but not now, not since she had the revelation last night.

They finished their beans in silence, then saddled the horses and resumed their tracking of the dangerous big cat.

CHAPTER 7

Marti noticed Lucas seemed to be highly alert, more so than his usual Ute way of silently assessing everything in sight. He sat up straighter in the saddle, kept his rifle lying across his lap so he could get at it easier, and yelled at her if she dared lag behind.

So it was with every effort that she kept up with him, urging the mare with the toes of her boots, clicking her tongue at her so she would step up the pace. It seemed silly but the animal didn't seem the least willing to follow Lucas' horse up the steep inclines, and at first she put it off to her own ability to steer the mare, but as the two horses began verbally snorting and whinnying, she soon realized they were letting the people they carried know of their fears.

"Lucas," she called, eager to tell him her discovery.

He held up his right hand, bidding her silence. Glancing over his shoulder at her, he shook his

head and frowned. He was all too aware of what was going on with the horses, and the dangers they were walking into.

"What is it?" Marti called in a hoarse whisper.

The mare suddenly stopped in her tracks, raised her nose and sniffed the air as if she were a dog on a scent, then Marti felt the animal's tension, seconds before she reared upward with her front feet, pawing the air.

In a flash, Lucas threw his leg over the saddle of his own horse and raced back to grab the reins of Marti's mount. Marti clung to the saddle horn, jerked forward and almost unseated when the horse reared up. Heart pounding against her ribs, she managed not to scream out, knowing her silence might be crucial to finding the cat, which was obviously somewhere quite near.

"Easy girl," Lucas soothed and then he said something to the animal in his native tongue and patted her neck.

Marti dismounted and looked nervously around, trying to see the object of the horse's fright. She saw nothing, but knew the cat was out there, close, or the horses wouldn't have reacted in such a way.

The horses quieted, to some degree. Lucas motioned for Marti to stay behind with the animals, while he took the rifle and scouted farther up the trail. She didn't argue, afraid to

climb back on the horse for fear of being unseated the next time she reared up. She clutched the reins in one hand and kept swiveling her head round, trying to be a good look out. Both horses continued to snort and step nervously from foot to foot, unnerved still. Momentarily Marti began talking to them in a low voice, as Lucas had, but in English, since she had no idea what he had said to them in the Ute dialect. Funny, she thought, in all the months she had known Lucas he only seemed to use his native tongue when he tended his horses. But there was once, she gently reminded herself, giving in to a smile. They hadn't known each other too long before they gave into their lust for each other and made love. Afterward, Lucas stroked her cheek and said something she didn't understand in his Ute language, but when she asked him to translate, he merely smiled and kissed her lips.

Suddenly she willed her mind to return to the situation they were immersed in. Now was no time to go daydreaming about something that had taken place months ago.

The crack of rifle fire drew her attention and caused her and the two horses to become startled. Quickly, she spun around; trying to decide which direction the shot had come from. North? West? Her head swiveled on her shoulders. The two horses whinnied and stepped about nervously.

"It's okay," she said in a quiet voice. "It's okay."

The horses weren't listening to her, she realized as Lucas' stallion tried to yank his head free of her hold on his reins. She was almost knocked off balance as she tried to hold the big animal, then his antics spurred the mare into a fit of nerves. She began jerking her head and pawing the ground with one front foot.

"Settle down," she cautioned, trying to reach one hand up to rub her nose. "Settle down."

Another shot sounded and she thought for sure Lucas must have killed the cat by now. Two shots would bring down any animal, wouldn't they? In the back of her mind she thought, Lucas never misses when he takes aim at something.

Trying to hold the horses was proving to be somewhat of a challenge. Neither clearly wanted to be there in the rocky terrain, waiting on Lucas to return. She bit her lip, trying to decide what to do next, then she spied a small clearing, one they had passed through en route to the rocky incline, and decided she would walk the animals down the hill and wait there for Lucas. Maybe getting them away from the close proximity of the rocks would ease their tension.

Sure enough, the second she began leading them down the slope of the mountain, they quieted. Relieved that she didn't have to exert so

much physical strength to restrain the horses, she let up on the reins, giving the animals their heads to walk to the clearing. It was almost eerie to watch, she decided. They seemed to know where she intended they go. They entered the clearing and stopped, standing quietly, except for their ears, they seemed to swivel about the tops of their heads, listening first in one direction, then jerking round to listen in another direction.

Aware that she couldn't ground hitch the animals, and go off and leave them, Marti held on to their reins and stood looking up into the hills where she had last left Lucas, expecting to see him emerge from the mountainous terrain any minute. But several minutes seemed to drag by, and still there was no sign of him. She began to get worried, then wondered why she couldn't seem to control her emotions where he was concerned. He was probably okay. He was capable of taking care of himself, in most any situation.

She pinned her gaze on the spot where she had last seen him and bit her lip, nervously waiting to see him again. Suddenly the horses began to move behind her. She felt them tug on the reins in her hand.

"Shhh," she said over her shoulder. "Settle down."

But the pair only seemed to grow more rambunctious, pulling at the reins, then snorting

and tossing their heads in the air. The mare whinnied loudly, drawing Marti's full attention as she made an attempt to jerk free.

"Whoa!" Marti said in a voice louder than she intended. The animals were stepping nervously all around the clearing, the stallion tossing his golden mane and tail while the mare circled round his flank. "Whoa! Whoa!"

Then suddenly all hell broke loose. Both animals made lunging runs at Marti, pulling the leather reins free of her hands just as she spun round and spied the reason for the frightful uproar. Approximately twenty feet off she saw the sun glisten on the black coat of a panther and just as she felt a scream rise up in her throat, the big cat headed straight toward her, lunging from the top of the rock with a powerful leap.

The scream tore from her throat, as her feet slipped on the loose pebbles where she had been standing and she caught herself on one hand and her left knee. Scrambling up she felt fear gather in the pit of her stomach, and could almost imagine the piercing teeth and claws ripping into her body, when she heard the rifle shot crack through the air.

Everything happened so fast. There was a snarling yowl and then the sound of a heavy thud. She whirled around, seeing the massive body of the big cat sprawled only yards from the clearing.

Shaken, she clasped one hand to her throat, just as Lucas appeared in front of her. His dark handsome face was scowling, and his Indian temper at a full boil.

"I left you up there, in the rocks!" he spewed, pointing toward the slope of the mountain. He marched off to the panther, to check the kill.

Marti was shaking all over, even her teeth were chattering together as if she were freezing. She had never been so scared in all her life. She watched Lucas inspect the carcass of the panther, squatting to get a closer look, and then he rose and walked toward her. She stared at him, not knowing what to say. He had saved her life. She should thank him. But he was mad as hell. His jaw was set in that rigid jut she knew so well. Maybe she would just stand there, silently, pretending to be transfixed by the size of the panther he had just murdered.

Lucas walked to her, not stopping until the toe of his right boot hit the toe of her left boot. He towered over her, looming between her and the glare of the sun. He seemed bigger than life. And in most ways, he was.

With a motion that startled the hell out of her, he pulled her into his arms, crushing her against his chest. Tentatively, she eased her hands onto his waist, then inched her arms around him. The smell of him, woodsy, male scented, filled her

nostrils, and teased her senses. She stared into the tanned hollow just beneath his chin; saw the familiar whisker stubble along his jaw, and then reveled in his familiarity.

"Lucas," she said, taking a step back from him. "I'm sorry I disobeyed you. The horses were so restless, I thought..."

"I saw you. I knew what you were doing," he said, looking down at her.

"Then why did you yell at me if you knew why I brought the horses down here?" She was perplexed a little by his show of anger at her.

"You were safe in the rocks, Marti."

"But the horses were scared to death."

"Yes. They knew of the cat. They alerted me to its close proximity." A smile, small, strained, brief, came to his lips, but then he returned his mouth to the hard line she had seen earlier. "But that doesn't dispel the fact that you moved when you shouldn't have. The cat just proceeded to trail you into the clearing."

She pulled in a surprised breath. Suddenly she felt like crying. If it hadn't been for Lucas, she might have been killed.

"It's done now," he announced, striding toward the horses standing a few yards from the clearing. "And you can be sure this is your final tracking expedition," he told her.

There was no humor in his voice, she noted,

trying to swallow down her remaining fright. And with good reason, she admitted. She had been nothing but extra baggage on the trip, him having to feed her, keep an eye out for her safety, and keep her out of harms way. She let out a long sigh. Thank God it was over. Now they could go home — or rather, she could go back to her home. And Lucas could go back to his ranch. The thought made her feel hollow inside.

She walked over to her horse, trying to assuage her feelings over the thoughts racing through her mind. They would be back in Silver Valley in a couple of days, three at the most, less, if they rode hard. But that wasn't necessary. Or would Lucas feel that way about ending the trip?

She walked her horse out of the rocky terrain, following Lucas; her gaze pinned on his back, not speaking, but trying to come to terms with all the new feelings raging inside her. Why hadn't she seen it before? Why hadn't she looked beyond her own selfish demands to be treated equally by Lucas and saw the love beneath his commanding ways?

By sunset she was ready to get off the horse's back, and make camp. Her butt ached and the cold temperature of the mountains had seeped into her bones. She needed a good meal and a hot fire to warm by. A groan slipped from her lips. More beans, she thought, and then giggled softly. Lucas

and his damn beans. Well, she was in definite agreement with him—this was indeed her final tracking expedition.

CHAPTER 8

Lucas presented her with another wild rabbit for supper, dressing it before threading it on a green stick and mounting it over the fire he had built earlier.

"Something besides beans," Marti murmured just loud enough for him to overhear. Smiling, she sat down beside the ring of rocks to keep an eye on the meal as Lucas went off to tend the horses.

She watched him with the animals, talking to them, stroking their necks and noses as he settled them in for the night. He measured out their meal of oats and water from canteens he had brought along. As she sat watching him, her thoughts turned to the way he had expertly shot and killed the panther. If it hadn't been for his quick action, she might have been killed, or maimed by the big cat.

"Lucas," she said later, when they were finished eating and were intent on smoking a cigarette. They sat across from each other, the

flickering campfire between them. Darkness had come and spread its cold chill around, making it hard to concentrate on much else except trying to stay warm.

He looked at her, waiting for the words to come out. He would have her back in Silver Valley day after tomorrow, back on the grounds of her beloved wolf compound.

"You're not still mad at me because I moved the horses down the mountain, are you?" she asked in a tentative tone.

He shook his head no, but his expression said differently. His brow was furrowed and there was anything but warmth in his tawny gaze.

"Then why are you looking at me like that?" she wanted to know.

"I was just thinking about John Gilroy and Sam Weatherbe. Has either of them given you any trouble in the past?"

Marti let out a long breath and shook her head. "John Gilroy paid me a visit once, but he claimed it was neighborly, just to drop by and meet whoever had bought the Hartman ground. He seemed a little surprised to hear that I was the heir of the former owner. He asked what my plans were."

Lucas was staring at her, perhaps remembering that only a month before she opened the wolf sanctuary, she was living in his house. But he

didn't add anything to the conversation as though knowing there wasn't anything he could say to alter things now or then.

"He didn't appear overjoyed when I told him my plans for the ground." She shrugged her shoulders and pushed her hair off one shoulder. "I never expected him to be a threat, Lucas."

He stared across the campfire at her, one corner of his strong mouth pulling upward in a slight smile. "Ranchers don't give a damn about wolves, babe. As far as they're concerned the animals are predators and need to be destroyed."

Marti bristled at his words but she knew all too well that he spoke the truth. Not everyone was sympathetic to the wolves' plight.

The campfire suddenly flickered in reaction to a sudden gust of wind and Marti folded her arms across her chest in an effort to keep the cold at bay. A chill in the air, blown down from the mountain peaks, suddenly engulfed the campsite. At once she watched Lucas gather their one and only bedroll from beside the fire and head toward a large outcropping of rock at the camp's perimeter. In a few minutes, he had rigged up a makeshift shelter from a fallen pine bough and his blanket.

Marti edged over closer to the fire as the wind violently whipped its yellow flames, almost putting it out.

"Oh my gosh! It's so cold," she yelped, scrambling up from the rock she sat on. She hurried over to where Lucas was arranging the blanket over the opening in the makeshift shelter and tried to help. She wouldn't be sorry at all when they got back to civilization.

"You'll come with me to John Gilroy's when we get back, won't you?" she said in a low tone.

The shelter Lucas had erected was just big enough for both of them to crawl inside and lay down. A giant sandstone boulder flanked the rear with the leafy pine bough blocking the wind from the front of the structure. The woolen blanket hung suspended on the bough shutting out the draft. It smelled of dried pine needles, which Lucas had spread across the hard ground, and a combination of dirt and dust particles.

"I can't say this is too cozy, Lucas," she commented trying to lie down and finding it rather difficult to get comfortable. Finally, she realized there would be no comfort for the duration of the night and managed to coil her body on her right side, pressing her back into Lucas' chest and legs, spoon fashion.

Lucas hooked one arm around Marti's waist and pulled her hips against his abdomen, pressing her rounded buttocks atop his cock.

Marti was well aware of the feel of him, his rising cock pressed against her butt. Did she dare

allow their sexual game to continue? She wondered. What would Lucas expect of her once they arrived back home?

"Lucas?" she queried again. "You *will* go with me to John Gilroy's ranch when we get back..."

"Yes," he replied in a firm voice.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for saving the compound. I really didn't know what to do until you drove into the sanctuary."

His arm tightened around her waist and he nuzzled her neck with his lips. "There are certain things a man should handle for a woman."

She nodded her head in agreement; trying to ignore how his caressing lips was making her feel. "I would never have undertaken this trip alone. I just don't see how you can track an animal and actually find it."

"Indians have been trackers for as long as there has been time. Tracking was how the old ones put food on the table." His mouth worked along the curve of her throat, tasting her flesh, nipping tenderly, nuzzling his lips into the soft area just above her collarbone.

His mouth was driving her crazy, making her lose focus. "When I was a kid, I was fascinated by Western movies, especially where there were Indians, usually dressed in buckskins, wearing feathers in their hair." She drew in a shaky breath. "You have none of the Hollywood hype, war

paint, scalping, war parties, but you're every bit the invincible warrior portrayed by the actors in those movies. You're a man living in the past, Lucas," she heard herself say.

He let out a long breath. "It's who I am, Marti," he said, an edge to his voice. "I'm a Ute Indian, with Shoshone ancestors. I won't—can't—deny who I am. I would be lying and I'm no liar." He somehow managed to separate his body from hers in the small confines.

"Don't put words in my mouth. I only meant to..."

"You want to change me, Marti. That's been the problem all along, hasn't it? You've wanted me to be something other than who I am."

"Lucas..."

"I'm sorry." He moved beside her, exiting the lean-to. In the next moment he was gone, leaving Marti alone.

* * * *

The remainder of the trip back to Silver Valley was silent, and clumsy. Lucas neither touched her, nor got close enough to give her the idea that she could smooth things over between them with sex. He was just distant and cold. The final night on the trail he let her have his bedroll and he went off somewhere in the darkness to sleep. It was dawn

before she saw him again, standing with his back to her, watching the sunrise over the mountaintop.

She had hurt him again, she thought. She had been wrong to comment as she had, or perhaps, her timing was off. As so many things in her life seemed to be, or so she felt a bit better trying to alleviate the blame from herself and shift it to some invisible force that she had no control over.

In the end, Lucas led her back to his ranch in the canyon. "I'll be over in about an hour and we'll go to Gilroy's ranch," he threw over his shoulder as he led the horses through the corral gate.

Marti slid into her jeep and started the motor. A wave of sadness seemed to wash over her at leaving Lucas in his hurt state after he had helped her for the past week. Had it been an entire week? At that precise moment, it seemed much shorter—as though they had only met and now must part.

She backed the jeep out of the gravel drive and headed toward the compound. There were matters besides Lucas that she needed to focus on. Manuel had been keeping an eye on things since she went away and he would be due some time off. Not that there was a lot to do at the sanctuary, aside from feeding the animals and policing the grounds daily, but there was paperwork that only she as director, could handle.

When she arrived at the compound she spied Manuel's pickup truck parked in front of the office. She parked and hurried inside, eager to tell Manuel how Lucas had tracked down the panther and killed it.

"I'm sure glad to see you," Manuel said, hanging up the telephone as she burst through the door. "All hell has broken loose in Washington." He tossed an envelope across the desk to her. "This came in the mail two days ago. They've cut off the grant money to run the facility and issued orders to shut it down by the end of the month."

Marti's jaw dropped open. "They can't do that!" she sputtered, pulling the letter from its envelope.

"It seems Gilroy and Weatherbe went to the Conservation Department with their claim of wolves attacking their cattle," Manuel related. "I guess one thing just led to another."

"It was a panther that was killing their steers. Lucas shot it three days ago," Marti said with anger behind her words.

Manuel shook his head. "The ranchers in this area have always been against the sanctuary."

"I know, but up until now they didn't really have a reason to complain."

"The government officials are sympathetic to the cattle producers in this region."

"But these wolves are an endangered species,

Manuel. They're government protected, for Pete's sake." She crumpled the letter notifying her of the retraction of grant money to fund her project. "I don't know what to do." She bit on her bottom lip. Lucas came to mind. She needed his help more than ever now. But would he be so willing to help her — now that she had made him mad?

CHAPTER 9

The way Marti figured, she had two choices. She could try and rectify things on her own, and probably lose the compound in the process, or she could go to Lucas and beg for his help. The begging part didn't set too well with her. Lucas had his pride — but so did she.

After pumping Manuel for all the information she could, she began making phone calls; in the chance she could fix things without going to Lucas. First she contacted John Gilroy, explaining that it had been a panther that had been attacking his herd, and relating how Lucas had killed it, in the hopes that he'd make a phone call and set things straight. But Gilroy didn't sound as though he believed her, which set her teeth on edge.

"Lucas should have brought the carcass back," Gilroy remarked.

"What in hell for? Or were you planning on making a rug for your fireplace?" Marti snapped. In the next instant, Gilroy slammed down the

phone, sending her into a cussing fit. "Stupid son-of-a..."

"Why don't you give that Senator friend of yours a buzz?" Manuel interrupted her tirade.

"Senator?" Marti repeated. Yeah. He could probably help out. But there was one catch. The Senator was Lucas' friend. She didn't know him from Adam.

Next she contacted the Conservation Department, only to be given the runaround.

"Look, this is important. I need to speak to somebody with a little authority," she yelled into the telephone. Then she was put on hold for almost ten minutes, only to have a message relayed from one of the rangers. He'd call back, or drop around, when he had time.

Hanging up the phone, Marti gave Manuel a dejected look. "Gilroy and Weatherbe have been busy while I was away. It almost looks as though they have this thing sewed up."

Manuel shook his head. "They had been biding their time, Marti—waiting for the opportunity to catch you off-guard."

She gritted her teeth as rage engulfed her. "Well, I may be down, but I'm not out... yet!" she said with a grain of determination. She levered herself out of the leather padded desk chair and headed for the door of the small office.

She broke the speed limit racing over to Lucas'

house. He had promised to go with her over to John Gilroy's house when she asked him previously, and while there was ample reason for him to change his mind about helping her at all, she knew he wouldn't. He had given his word and she could count on him to stand by it.

She tried not to think of her own situation with Lucas as she sped along the gravel road leading in to the canyon. Right now getting things straightened out with the ranchers, and the government, far outweighed her personal problems.

Lucas was still out in the barn when she arrived at his house. She parked her jeep and walked round the house, trying to get the speech she would relate to him in proper order. She hoped he didn't see the urgency in her eyes, but recognized the necessity in her voice instead. There was something about humbling herself before a man — any man — that took on a raw edge, stripped her of all dignity, and made her feel less independent by all standards.

She walked to the door of the barn and stepped inside, finding the interior shaded, smelling of horses and hay, and cool. Since she still wore the denim shirt and jeans she had on the trip back to Silver Valley, she merely pushed her sunglasses to the top of her blond hair and looked round until she saw Lucas in a stall along the far wall

currycombing the mare she had ridden on the tracking trip. She walked toward him, aware that he kept his back to her, acting as though she were nowhere near.

"Lucas," she said, pausing at the stall. The mare turned her great head toward her and poked out her soft brown nose to get her scent. Marti reached one hand out, stroking the gentle muzzle.

"I'll be ready in a minute," he said, continuing to brush the mare's back.

A little stunned at his words, she raised both brows in question. "Don't you even want to know why I'm here?"

He glanced in her direction, his expression masked. "You want me to go with you to John Gilroy's ranch because you got home and found trouble waiting."

"How did you know?" she asked, staring at him.

He locked eyes with her. "That's the only damn reason you'd come back here so soon, Marti." He let out an exasperated breath. "You forget. I know you pretty well too."

It was an understatement, she thought, but she didn't voice the comment. She had said too much already. She took the letter from the government bureau out of her hip pocket.

"This came while we were away," she said, offering it to him. "Gilroy and Weatherbe are

trying to put me out of business.”

Lucas fixed his tawny gaze on the extended piece of paper she held, then put the comb down and walked out of the stall. Taking the letter, he quickly read the notice. When he looked at her again, his expression was one she couldn’t read.

Lucas drove over to the Gilroy ranch with Marti seated beside him in the pickup truck, silently. When they arrived, John Gilroy came out of his front door to meet them. His facial expression was a match for Lucas, Marti decided, noting the stubborn set of each man’s lower jaw.

“Lucas,” Gilroy greeted, poking his right hand out.

He didn’t even glance in Marti’s direction, but that was okay, she decided, hating him for the trouble he had caused.

“John,” Lucas returned, shaking the rancher’s hand. “I brought back proof of the animal that was attacking your herd. I picked up its trail in your north pasture and followed it into the foothills, then into the high country.” He turned then and strode back to the bed of the pickup truck. He picked up a small leather bag and returned to where Gilroy stood with Marti. Stooping, he opened the bag and shook the contents out on the driveway. “The rest of the panther is about thirty miles due north of your property line, buried near a pine grove. The grave is marked by a large

sandstone butte."

All focused on the contents of the bag dumped in front of John Gilroy's feet. Two jet-black pointed ears lay on the gravel; blood stained at their knife cut edges.

Marti felt hot spit fill her mouth. For a moment she thought she might throw up, then she looked away. When had Lucas cut off the big cat's ears? She wondered. And when had he done the terrible chore of burying the animal?

John Gilroy stooped to inspect the proof Lucas displayed, and then he stood and faced Lucas. "I've always had a great respect for you, Lucas." He held out his hand to him. "You're a man of your word. Thanks."

Lucas slid his hand against Gilroy's, shaking it. "You won't be losing any more cattle to that cat. And you might be interested to know that I didn't find any other tracks, so that lone cat was more than likely enticed from his own territory in search of food."

"I'm grateful," Gilroy said, smiling at Lucas. He slid his gaze to Marti, just as Lucas presented him with the government notice she had received in the mail.

"And this little matter needs rectified," Lucas continued. "You can take care of this for me in exchange for my tracking down the cat who was killing off your herd, John." He gave him a

measured grin. "Then you and me can call it even."

Gilroy's face flushed bright red as he took the letter and read it. He looked at Lucas, nodding his head.

Lucas turned and strode back to the truck. Marti stared at Gilroy for a moment, then noticing Lucas' abrupt departure, hurried to catch up with him. Lucas opened the door of the truck and gave Marti a little nudge to get her moving across the seat, then he folded his tall body beneath the steering wheel and started the motor, all the while ignoring Marti's inquisitive stare.

"Why didn't you make him call while we were there?" she asked.

"That wasn't necessary."

"But how do you know? He just as well told me to go fly a kite, Lucas. He slammed the phone down in my ear less than an hour ago," she explained. "I can't trust him."

"But I can," Lucas said, looking in her direction. Momentarily he pulled over to the side of the road and shut off the motor. "At times, Marti, there's honor among men."

She blinked her eyelids at him. Not fully understanding, but hoping he would make her see.

"Gilroy said he'd take care of the matter."

"I didn't hear him say any such thing, Lucas."

"Trust me. He'll do the right thing, Marti. John Gilroy never wanted the sanctuary in the area in the first place and he took action against it months ago, honey. This just didn't crop up. I heard the rumor that he would shut it down shortly after you opened up. He was lying in wait and when his cattle started being attacked, he used that incident to blame the wolves." He started the truck and drove on to his house, silently.

Marti sat in the passenger's seat, jostling along because of the rough gravel road, contemplating what had just taken place at the Gilroy ranch.

"When did you cut off the panther's ears?"

"When I dug its grave."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think it was anything you wanted to hear while you ate your beans."

She laughed a short, silly sounding giggle.

"You didn't really think I'd track down that cat and kill it without taking proof of its existence back to Gilroy, did you?"

"I didn't think about it, Lucas."

He gave her a brief, studying look, but didn't say anything further. When he pulled the truck into his own driveway, he exited quickly, and silently, leaving her to return to her jeep and the drive back to the sanctuary.

CHAPTER 10

Six days later, a letter arrived from the government office in charge of the grant money for the compound, correcting the original notice previously notifying Marti of the change in funding. And the following day, one of the local conservation agents paid her a visit.

Marti had never been so relieved in all her life. Everything was back on track—everything except her feelings for Lucas. He was still mad at her and she had made no further attempt to set matters straight between them.

One of the females in the compound had given birth to a litter of pups and she had put all her concentration into keeping accurate notes about the pups. Small crudely constructed wooden huts were scattered about the sanctuary where the animals took shelter to give birth. These buildings were supplied with water and dry food to entice the female when her time arrived, and served as a reliable means for Marti and Manuel to monitor

the babies and keep their notes accurate.

Having just returned from taking account of the litter, from a safe distance along the fence line, Marti slid into her desk chair and began reviewing her notes. The litter was the second in the compound since the first of the year. That was a big jump in population in the past ten months, which meant another placement of some of the adults would be necessary. The compound could only sustain a certain number of breeding couples. There simply wasn't space enough to risk becoming over populated, which was just one more reason to be shut down, if the government saw fit.

She tossed her pencil on the desktop and leaned her chin on one hand. If only she had been able to acquire that hundred acres adjoining the sanctuary. But Lucas had beaten her to it.

"Lucas," she said aloud, sighing wistfully. She had been so busy the past few days with the new pups, and catching up on her backlog of paperwork that she had actually managed to keep from thinking about him. At first she felt like congratulations were in order. She chuckled at the thought. Then, just as quickly, agreed that her situation with Lucas was not funny in the least. If anything, it was confusing and sad.

She sat with her chin propped on her raised hand, staring out the only window in the small

office. She had a clear view of the woods inside the tall metal fence surrounding the compound. Just that morning a male lobo, tall at the shoulder, yellow eyed, rangy in form, came near the perimeter, raised his noble head in the air, and sniffed the human scent beyond his confine. She had thought instantly of Lucas as she looked at the magnificent animal. She had named him Sir because he seemed so authoritative over the others in the fenced area. She remembered the day he arrived at the compound, the fierceness of him, the utter show of defiance in his yellow eyes and sharp pointed teeth as he unabashedly bared them to Manuel and herself as they worked to release him through the gate into the sanctuary.

Yes, she mused, Lucas was so like the gray lobos kept behind the fence, untamed, defiant, and beautiful. And, she just realized, the last of their breed. Like the lobo, Lucas was the last of his kind. Full-blooded Ute Indian who was faithful to his heritage, to the extent of alienating his peers with his foreign ways. Lucas was the old world living within a modern society.

Sadness washed over her. Until that moment she had been at a loss for an answer to her problem regarding her feelings for Lucas. He had accused her of trying to change him—and he was right. She had wanted him to be something he wasn't—to deny his Ute ways, his very heritage.

She heaved a long shuddering sigh. It was mere coincidence that she had fallen in love with a man whose ancestral ways were so like those of her parents, but different in one very important factor. His commanding ways toward her had nothing to do with loathing and resentment. Tears sprang to her eyes. She had been unable to recognize the difference since both her parents had had abusive natures. It only made sense that she thought Lucas' ways were the same she had grown up with.

The sex with Lucas had kept her attached to him in a sense. But had she only realized that Lucas was commanding by nature and not because he was an abusive man, perhaps she could have understood his show of love to her.

He had always been gentle with her when he made love to her and in most instances she had been the one to start the argument whenever they disagreed. But then, she had never lived in any situation where there wasn't turmoil. Her parents had resented her presence in their lives. And when her father left her mother, things became unbearable at home.

But that was all in the past.

She brushed the tears away. She would go to him and try to explain her thoughts, try to mend the riff she had unknowingly created. She left the sanctuary and drove to Lucas' house, trying to put

things in a proper perspective. Maybe she could claim insanity.

"Maybe not," she said as she parked her car in his driveway. Lucas was no fool. And there was no reason why she should think she was smart enough to bluff her way around the situation; after all, he was mad at her for the very thing she had just managed to understand.

Mazie opened the door to her, smiling kindly as was her nature. "You're welcome to come in and wait, Marti. Lucas is at one of the construction sites. I'm not sure when he'll be back but I can page him if its urgent."

"I'll just come in and wait," Marti informed Mazie. "It's not necessary to page him though. I've plenty of time." Silently she thought, I'm not leaving here until Lucas and I have made up.

"Shall I make you some coffee?" Mazie offered.

"Yes, please. And bring it into the den. I'll wait for him in there."

She stepped into the wide foyer of the ranch house. Lucas hadn't changed a thing since she had left. She suddenly felt bombarded with memories – some bittersweet, others happy, wonderful.

The den was off the foyer, decorated in Lucas' native Indian motif. Polished pine floors shone brilliant in the bright spring sunshine penetrating the gauzy curtains at the front window. Hand woven cotton rugs, in muted tones of amber and

coral, enhanced the brown leather couch and comfortable armchairs grouped near the wide stone fireplace at the rear of the room. Marti took a seat on the sofa and inspected the photos on the coffee table. It had been a long time since she'd set foot inside the room, or even given a moment's thought to the pictures staring back at her from the brass frames. One was of her self, sitting atop a giant boulder Lucas had found necessary to move when he bought the canyon and decided to build his home. Another was a snapshot of her and Lucas sitting on the front porch of the ranch house.

She pulled her gaze away, feeling the memories tug at her heart just as Mazie came into the room with the coffee she had asked for. She poured herself a cup; mindful of how strong Mazie usually made the stuff, and settled back against the soft padding of the sofa to wait for Lucas.

She had plenty of time to survey the room before Lucas came in, plenty of time to decide what she was going to say to him when he got there, but all her well planned words took leave of her mind when she heard his pickup pull into the driveway.

He came in the back door, his usual custom with his work boots. She had to smile at the memory of how she had scolded him once, after she had just spent most of the day waxing the

many hardwood floors throughout the house, only to find he had tracked up three rooms and the foyer with muddy work boots.

He appeared in the doorway of the den suddenly and for the millionth time she wondered how he managed to walk without making a sound, and then she looked at him, moved again by his handsome looks as he waited for her explanation of why she was there.

"I'm here to apologize, Lucas," she said, getting to her feet. She searched his dark face for a reaction, finding none, except for the faint narrowing of his yellow eyes. "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings." She thought about pleading insanity again, and then dashed the notion. He was standing in the doorway, staring at her. "I realize now that it wasn't you who needed to change, but me."

He stepped into the room then, poking his hands into his jeans pockets, he came toward her.

"And what does that mean ... exactly, Marti?" he inquired, tipping his head to stare down at her.

He smelled like sweat and fresh earth. His jeans and shirt were dusty, his boots muddy. Had he broken ground on the newest parcel of land he owned—the land he had out bid her for? All at once she realized it didn't matter—it didn't matter whether he built houses on the land or did nothing at all with it. The land was no longer an

issue between them. Their love was the only issue and she was there with all intentions to make him see.

She pulled in a deep breath. "All this time, Lucas, I've been rebelling against how you treated me—your commanding, bossy ways because..." Her words faltered for a moment, and then she forced herself to continue. "It's very hard for me to talk about my upbringing," she said, staring at him. "Both my parents hated me..."

"No they didn't," Lucas said cutting off her words. "They treated you as they were treated, Marti. You were trapped in a cycle of abuse." Her eyes widened at his words. "You may think me uncivilized and belonging to the past—but actually, babe, I live in the real world. I know how you grew up—and I know how damn stubborn it made you." He smiled at her. "When you left me, Marti, I knew you'd be back—when you came to terms with yourself. When you understood that your past doesn't have to interfere with your future. I love you, Marti, and I'll never abuse you—no matter what."

He smiled slightly, then reached out and took hold of Marti's upper arms. "I was raised with the understanding that a man is to protect the woman he loves. And the woman is to tend the man she loves without question." He smiled down at her. "I was also raised with the idea that a man is

supposed to enjoy his woman, and that, Marti, seems to be the only Ute teaching I can honestly say applies to me and you."

She blushed in spite of her boldness where sex with Lucas was concerned.

"You seem to be quite willing to warm my bed, but aside from that, you are hardly the future wife of a Ute Indian. My ancestors would be ashamed of me."

"No. They wouldn't, Lucas," she countered. "I knew you were different, but then I thought I could change you. I was wrong. And I'm sorry. And I'm sorry I got mad at you for buying the Connor land."

"Babe, if I hadn't bought that ground, John Gilroy or Sam Weatherbe would have."

Marti's jaw dropped open. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I hadn't planned on telling you this, but I don't believe there should be any secrets between us. I ran into John Connors last month and he said John Gilroy had out bid you on the land. I suspected he was up to no good, so I asked Connors what he'd need to have to sell the ground out right. We made a deal right there, Marti."

She pulled in a quick breath. "Gilroy would have owned the ground right up to the compound boundary and he could have sabotaged the sanctuary," she sputtered. "That son-of-a..."

"But he doesn't own it, Marti. And he never will." He tugged her against his chest. "I'll give you the ground, honey—as a wedding present. Will you marry me?" He kissed her left temple.

She tipped her head and stared up into his tawny eyes. He was so handsome her heart jumped with love for him and her emotions gave a lusty surge.

"I love you, Lucas," she confessed. "And yes, I'll marry you."

He kissed her lips, softly, warmly, and then he brought his palms up to hold her face between his hands. "I know you truly love me, Marti. I've known it from the start."

She looked up at him questioningly.

"Just as I've known how to satisfy you sexually, I've known you'd grow tired of keeping your distance from me ... eventually."

"It's been ten months, Lucas. That's a lifetime. You didn't have to wait for me. You could have found someone else."

"So could you."

He kissed her mouth again, slowly, delving his tongue inside when she invited by parting her lips.

"I've never wanted anyone else," she confessed.

"And you're all I ever want, Marti, my love, my woman."

He whispered something to her then in his

native tongue, but she barely heard and couldn't fathom what the words meant.

"Tell me, in English, what you just said, Lucas," she coaxed, locking her gaze with his.

"I will love you till my death," he said in a soft, gentle whisper, then he pressed his lips against hers, reinforcing his words of love and devotion.

The end

About the Author

I began writing freelance almost twenty years ago and eventually my short stories became longer. The characters seemed to take over and draw their stories out. I first submitted a novella length story to Extasy Books in 2003 and it was accepted. That was *Captive Heart*, the historical romance now on the site. I have thirteen titles with Extasy Books. New ideas come to mind every day and some of them find their way on the computer screen. When I'm not writing, I enjoy traveling with my husband Dave.