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BY

DEIRDRE O'DARE

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NELLIE'S ROGUE STALLION AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

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In memory of Yavapai Chief and Leo Mix. This old horse lover has never forgotten the incomparable feeling of riding a well-trained stallion. Good graze to you both, my equine friends. Somewhere there surely must be some shapeshifters, passing on the gift of Epona, the Horse Goddess, to take on Her likeness when the need arises. What a thrill it would be to meet one!

Thank you to my friends at Amber Heat who provided me with the chance to write this story, a special personal dream that I now offer to friends and fans.

CHAPTER 1

Lenore "Nellie" Campbell brought up the rear. Swiping dust off her face with a bandana already saturated with sweat and caked with red dirt, she sighed. *Ain't it just like Pa to put me riding drag*.

They'd been beating the brush all day, running out every bangtailed, half-wild mare and colt they could find, as well as rounding up all the better quality mares the wild stud had stolen. So far the real quarry had not showed. She almost prayed he never did.

Pa swore this time he'd get that dad-blamed red stud hoss, if it was the last thing he did. Jack Campbell had sent out all but three of the Bar Lazy C cowboys to go horse hunting. Of course, Nellie went, too. There wasn't much in the way of ranch chores that she didn't take part in. She could ride, rope and herd with the best of them.

Mama was probably spinning in her grave to know her daughter had become a total hoyden and tomboy. Nellie dimly remembered her mother as a perfect lady. But pooh, what fun is it to sit home and knit or something? Nellie knew she was as good a cowboy as any hand on the ranch. Pa was likely just as happy to keep an eye on her anyway. He never told her to stay home, at least.

Nellie had seen the rogue stallion several times. When she thought about the beautiful animal being shot or even worse, gelded, something died inside her. Coppery-chestnut with a narrow white blaze down his face and one white sock on his off hind foot, he flowed when he ran, seeming to skim over the ground, not matter how rough. He was as wild and wonderful as the desert wind.

Yes, he did steal mares, which was the big issue. Always good ones, too. Why would a horse like that want to mate with scrubby mustangs and strayed-away ponies, though? He couldn't be a scrub himself. She'd seen plenty of Thoroughbreds and the new Texas quarter horses that were not half as magnificent. The red rogue stud had become almost a legend in this part of Nevada. Seemed like nobody could catch him.

A lot of cowboys had tried. One or two got a rope on him—or claimed they had—but they all came home with a busted rope, and likelier than not a bunch of bites and bruises for souvenirs. They all told wild stories about how that crazy hoss got away. They said there was something downright uncanny about him. He was far too smart and wily for a normal horse, as if he had powerful Indian medicine or some kind of magic powers. They claimed he was, for sure, an own son of Satan.

Pa had the catchin' corrals built up in the box canyon. They were stout, no denying that. They'd certainly hold the mares and colts, and if the stallion got inside, they'd hold him, too. Since the riders had gathered about all the mares that could possibly be in his harem, Pa said he figured the stud would show up sooner or later to try to figure a way to bust them out again. Only the joke would be on the Red Rogue this time because, when he came in through the outer fence to get close enough to sniff noses with the mares and work on that fence, he'd find there was no way back out again.

Nellie heard more whooping up ahead. They were too far into the dust cloud to see, but she figured the lead riders where chivvying the herd into the long alley leading to the inner corral. When she got a bit closer, she saw that was the case. The last of the stragglers were being urged up the narrowing way when she arrived. Pa got down off his big black gelding and slammed the gate shut, a gate stout enough to hold five longhorn bulls—or one wild stud.

"That'll hold 'em tonight," he said. "They've got plenty of water from the spring, and one night without a lot of graze won't do much harm. We'll camp over on the far side of the spring. Wait to see if the Red Rogue shows. I'm betting he does before morning."

Nellie followed Pa and the ten cowboys over to the campsite. Old Pete, the cook, had the chuck wagon set up and the Paiute kid that helped him had spread a dining fly and gathered enough scrub wood for a cook fire. She took care of her horse and then lined up for supper. It was beef stew with combread, but there was peach cobbler for dessert.

The meal was washed down with plenty of strong black coffee. Pete always said if you threw an old horseshoe into the pot and it didn't float or dissolve, it was pretty poor coffee. At least it was blacker than India ink. Nellie could swear to that herself. Bitter, too, but that was all right. Woke you up right smart on a cold morning.

The sun set before they were done their meal, but the fire cast enough light to eat by. Before real dark, Pete lit a kerosene lantern in the chuck wagon to see to clean up. After that, they sat around and shot the bull for a bit, but soon the group began to disperse to spread bedrolls and settle in for the night. Nellie spread her bed close to Pa's without him having to say anything. None of the cowboys were under fifty and they knew better than to even think about making any moves on her, but Pa took no chances.

At this rate I'll be single 'til I'm fifty. It was beginning to bother her—she was certainly of marriageable age at twenty-two, with no prospects in sight. Guess Pa figures to live forever, unless he plans to leave the ranch to just me. That'd be dumb 'cause he knows damn few cowboys would work for a woman, even if she could ride circles around them. Why don't he want a son-in-law to learn how to run things when he's gone? Maybe the right man just hasn't showed up yet, but I'm sure tired of waiting.

She took that troublesome thought into dreams as sleep claimed her. It had been a long and weary day. Tomorrow didn't promise to be a bit better either.

* * *

Nellie wasn't sure what woke her, but, as she came fully awake, she heard a muffled noise. It was a sound strange enough to penetrate her slumber. She snapped awake, thinking maybe it was morning already. No, it was still pitch black dark, except for the stars overhead. Then she heard it again, a hushed whicker, like a mare would make calling her foal when it strayed a little far, or just maybe a stud would make when he was looking for his herd.

All around the little vale where they were camped, snores and mumbles echoed, but that horse sound still came through clearly. Easing out of her bedroll, Nellie tugged on her boots and tiptoed toward the corrals. Her eyes were used to the dimness so she could see pretty well by the starlight.

Sure enough, there was a horse between the inner and outer fences. It trotted back and forth, tossing its head. Now and again it gave that soft whicker. Some of the mares came clustering up to the inside fence and answered him. It was the stud, of course, big as life. He'd pushed through the trap gate to get closer to his herd and he was caught now. She didn't think he knew that yet, though, because he was too busy fretting over the mares and how he was going to get them free.

Oh, Lordy, but he's magnificent! His long mane was just a shade darker than the blazing red-brown of his sleek coat. His tail was like a flag, blowing on the wind as he held it high, shifting nervously back and forth. The blaze shone white in the starlight and she would swear his eyes glowed like coals. He wheeled and kicked at the rails of the inner corral. Although his hooves thudded hard on the wood, nothing cracked or even seemed to shift. He tried it a couple more times, but it wasn't doing any good.

Nellie wasn't sure why, but she reached a sudden decision. *Nope, Pa's not going to ruin this horse! I can't let it happen.* She slipped silently around to the main gate of the outer pen and opened it. The horse paid her no mind at all. Then she went to the inner pen and struggled to work loose the massive iron fitting that fastened that gate shut. It was heavy and awkward, hard as Hades to move even an inch, much less open.

When the deep, soft voice spoke just behind her she almost jumped out of her skin. "Don't. You'll only get in trouble. I don't want that to happen. I can get it myself if I have to."

She whirled, not sure if the stud had suddenly started talking or just what was going on. The horse was nowhere to be seen, but a man stood there, a very tall and well-built man. A very under-dressed man, too, clad only in a breechcloth, like some of the Indians wore in the summer. He looked something like an Indian, too, yet he didn't. He seemed to be very clean, which, in itself, was strange out here in the desert.

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"If you're here when Pa gets up, he'll either shoot you or tie you up and cut you," she warned. "I don't want that happening. It isn't right. I figured you wouldn't leave without the mares, so I opened the main gate. There's no getting out the way you came in, you know. Well, not for a horse anyway. I was fixing to let the mares out if I could just get this damned gate to open."

He shook his head. "No, please. Don't do it. I will go before sunrise and shut the other gate behind me. Nobody will even know I was here. I'll study on it today and come up with another way out of this, even if I have to stay in my man-form to think it through. Go back to bed. I promise you they won't find me here when morning comes." Nellie could hear the earnest intensity in his low voice.

"Are you sure? If Pa does, he'll get his rifle or that big knife he uses to make steers out of bulls. Then I'd have to do something desperate. That would be worse." Nellie shuddered as the horrible images flashed across her mind.

"Trust me, I'll be gone. For a human filly, you have a good heart, and you're fair to look upon. I appreciate your concern. It will be rewarded in time, but go now before anyone wakes and finds you missing."

Reluctantly, Nellie made her way back to the camp and slipped into her blankets without a sound. Pa still snored, apparently worn out by

the previous day's hard ride. She huffed out a relieved yet puzzled sigh, then let sleep claim her again.

* * *

Day began early. Ranchers and their hands could not afford to be slugabeds. There was always way too much work to be done. Before the sun had peeked over the distant saw-toothed shape of the High Uintahs, coffee was brewing and hotcakes frying with tempting odors that pulled everyone out of their bedrolls. Even before he ate, Nellie saw Pa went down and checked around the corrals.

He came back wearing a dark scowl. "Can't figure it out," he muttered. "Tracks in between the fences that have gotta be the stud's, but no sign of him, none at all." He turned to the two oldest and most experienced cowboys. "Do you reckon that crafty sucker could jump the outer fence?"

Bubba Perkins shrugged one hunched shoulder. "Danged if I know, boss. It's a good six foot high, but then I don't think that red stud is a common horse. Hell, for all I know, the sonuvabitch can sprout wings."

Nellie tried not to smile. At least the man-horse had kept his promise. He was gone, the gate was closed, and nobody was going to be able to figure out what was going on.

Good, he escaped. Wonder what Pa is going to try now? Then she almost pinched herself. I'm acting like that crazy dream was real. That whole thing last night has gotta be a dream. A wild stallion can't turn into a man and talk like a Christian gentleman! Heck he sounded real educated, civilized and everything. She shook her head, as if to dislodge the troublesome memory. In the light of day, it made no sense at all.

She pondered on the situation as she ate. If they kept the herd of mares and colts penned more than a day or two, they'd have to go back to the ranch and haul out a wagonload of hay. There were some good mares in the bunch. It wouldn't do to let them get too poorly. Even the

mustangs and Indian ponies could be broke and sold, if they were sleek and healthy.

Last time they'd gone in to Elko for supplies, they'd heard that the army was buying bunches of horses, and a number of livestock dealers were looking for gentle nags for some of the dudes starting to show up from back east. With Arizona and New Mexico becoming states, the unrest along the border with Pancho Villa raiding, and rumors of a war about to start in Europe, all sorts of things were busting loose.

After breakfast Pa, with Bubba and Curly Savage, scouted around and looked at the tracks. They all three came back scratching their heads. Looked like Pa was thinking along the lines Nellie had figured, though. About mid-morning he sent two riders back to the ranch with orders to pile the big wagon with all the hay it would haul and head back out post haste.

He then divided the rest up into three teams to ride circles and see if they could find any trace of Red Rogue. Maybe he had jumped out, or maybe he had never been inside. Still, he was bound to be looking for his mares. Surely he had a good enough nose to follow them and find they were all here. Nellie rode with Pa and Curly. They took a long swing out to the west toward the real desert, but didn't find any sign of the big stallion.

"It's like the damn ornery booger just vanished into thin air," Pa grumbled as they finally headed east again late that afternoon. "I swear that bloody horse is some kind of ghost or Indian medicine critter. He just don't act natural."

Nellie bit her tongue. She wanted to agree that indeed he was definitely not natural, but feared to say too much. Red Rogue would probably still need every advantage he could get to rescue his harem and make it away to freedom in one piece. Knowledge, however strange and debatable it might be, could tip the balance to the humans—the one thing she did not want to do.

There was no longer the slightest bit of doubt in her mind. She was bound and determined no harm must come to the stud. Somehow he was going to be important to her, critical to her very life. She wasn't sure how she knew that, but she did.

All at once, in a blinding flash like a heliograph, the assurance just came to her. When the time came, there would be something she could do and she'd do it. *I'll do everything I can to save you, but you're going to have to cooperate and help me.*

If the man-horse could change shape and speak, maybe he could also hear her thoughts. She hoped so. *Don't come back around until late, real late when everyone is asleep. I'll wake up and come help you then.*

CHAPTER 2

It was near sundown when they got back. They'd ridden the whole long, dry, sunburned day. For all that, they didn't see hide or hair of the red stud. Nellie smiled a private, little smile to herself. '*Course not. He knows, and he's hiding where there's no way we're gonna find him. Good.* That assurance had buoyed her throughout the long day.

By evening, the saddle felt like iron under her bottom, but she knew Pa and old Curly had to feel worse. So she'd be danged if she'd show any weakness in front of them. When they rode into camp, the others were also drifting in, all with the same discouraging tale. The outlaw stallion had flat vanished.

Just before real dark, the hands with the hay wagon arrived. By lantern light, they broke and scattered several bales inside the inner corral. The wilder mares hung back, but those that had been stolen from local ranches came crowding up to eat. Nellie knew the others would slip in as soon as the people had left. That didn't take long because everyone was tired and hungry. As eagerly as the horses ate, the hands wolfed down chili and biscuits, gulping gallons of coffee. No one stayed up to talk or sing around the campfire that night. They were all too worn out.

Nellie thought she'd try to stay awake until everyone else seemed to be sleeping, but it was a vain effort. Her eyelids drooped as soon as she settled into her bedroll. There was no fighting it.

Well, dad gum. Guess I'll just have to count on him making some kinda noise to wake me up. That or maybe the mares will whicker again.

Sure enough, at an hour Nellie judged to be not far past midnight, the mares in the corral began to move around and a few anxious muffled whinnies and whickers sounded. They really didn't make a lot of noise, but it was enough to penetrate her dreams. They were delicious dreams, too, in which she was riding that wild red horse and flying over the desert only to have him change into a man when they reached a hidden campsite and... She woke with a guilty flush at the memory of some of the things he'd been suggesting they do.

Nellie lay still for a few seconds, long enough to determine it was the restless movements and noises of the corralled herd that had wakened her. No question. She slipped out of the blankets and felt around for her boots. There, under the tarp on the right. She'd stuck them in there, where no passing snake was likely to slither in and they wouldn't be quite so cold when she had to pull them on. She was grateful for that now as she had taken her socks off, too, and didn't bother to hunt for them, feeling an urgent need to get on down to the corral.

This time she went to the main gate first. It was already open. Then she saw a shadowy, man-shaped figure near the inner gate. She trotted over to join him. He turned to glance her way at once. Tonight he wore a little more, some kind of britches and a robe or blanket slung over his shoulders. Well, the thin breeze out of the northeast did carry a definite chill.

"What're you fixing to do?" Nellie asked her anxious question in a whisper.

"I'm opening the gate, human filly. What do you think? No stampede, though. I've told the mares they need to come out quietly, one or two at a time and form into a row. Mollie, the old gray, can lead them. She's a shifter, too, but I think she has almost forgotten how to turn human. I'll bring up the rear, and make sure there are no stragglers. We've got a long run ahead of us."

"Where are you going to take the herd?"

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"I was thinking about maybe going along."

He snorted, a very equine sound. "Don't be foolish! How can you keep up? What will you do when we reach the hidden canyon in the mountains? There's nothing there for humankind."

Nellie shook her head, digging her boot toe into the ground. "I don't want to stay here. Pa is never going to rest until he catches you. I don't think you can hide good enough that he won't find you sooner or later. He's mad as a wet hen already, and tomorrow, when he sees the gates are open and the herd gone... Oh, hell's bells, he'll be fit to be tied. He'll get Tracker Jack, who's half Indian, to scout out your trail, and they'll find you. All them mares and colts can't travel without leaving some sign. You know that."

He shook his head. "What can you do to stop that by tagging along?"

Nellie thought desperately. "I...I'm not sure, but between us we ought to be able to think of something. Anyway, if I am right there with you, Pa might not shoot at least. He'd be scared of hitting me."

They stepped aside as he finished unlatching the heavy gate and swung it open. Obediently the herd formed up, the old sway-backed gray leading and the rest falling into line behind her. They shuffled off through the red dust with hardly a sound.

"I told you last night, you have a good heart, and, as a woman, you're very pretty. If I had time, I'd like to get to know you, but time is the one thing I do not have. I've got to change now, so I can keep up with the herd. Once they're out of earshot of the camp, they'll break into a steady trot and keep it up all night."

Nellie felt like something was cracking inside of her. Would she ever see him again, as either man or horse? She couldn't bear it if she didn't, and yet, if she did, it would probably mean he'd been captured. She blinked hard against the sudden tears.

Just then, a colt that had gotten separated from his mother in exiting the corral gave a shrill, fearful whinny. The mare answered. Someone in camp heard the sound, heard and recognized that it wasn't coming from quite the right place. Within a few instants, the camp came to life, cowboys scrambling out of bedrolls, rifles grabbed, lanterns lit.

The man-horse spoke one harsh, crude word, laden with fury. Then in a shimmer of red light, he disappeared, the chestnut stallion emerging in his place.

"Run, run swiftly!" She made a shooing motion at him as he hesitated beside her. "Go. Now! I'll figure some way to delay them, give you more of a start. It'll take them a bit to get organized enough to try and follow. By then you can be well away. Run."

With hardly a sound, he leaped and vanished at once into the darkness.

Nellie ran back toward the camp. "I heard a noise and came out to check. When I got close, I saw a man, maybe an Indian. He opened the gates and let them out. I was going to try and stop him, but there was no time. He jumped on one of the mares as they ran by and took off."

Pa skidded to a halt in front of her. "What crazy stuff you talking, girl? Why didn't you wake me up instead of coming out here by

yourself? That was a damn-fool stunt to pull."

"I didn't know anything was wrong, just heard the mares milling around. I figured maybe the stud had showed up, but it could've been a puma or a wolf. I was just going to see before I got everyone up."

"Well, it's too late now. We gotta try and see which way they went and start trailing 'em."

It took a surprisingly short time to get several horses saddled. Then, carrying lanterns, several of the younger hands, with Jack Campbell in the lead, headed off down the canyon. They all carried rifles and were cussing up a storm. None of it boded well for the horses–or the Indian Nellie claimed to have seen.

Oh, my Lord, don't let them find him! Please, God, let him get away! But that herd is going to leave a trail a blind man could follow. Oh, mercy, what can I do now?

It was a sign just how upset Pa was that he went off and left Nellie there with a bunch of the cowboys. Normally he wouldn't dream of doing that. But that oversight meant she had at least a few minutes to figure out what to do. She trotted back to her bedroll, got her socks on and found her jacket and hat. She was hesitating, trying to decide whether to saddle a horse and follow the men when a sound spun her around to stare into the darkness. Then she saw the darker shape of a horse, silhouetted against the sky.

::Do you still want to go?::

"Get out of here, you crazy horse. They might turn around and come back. Yes, I want to go, but not at the risk of letting you get caught! Go on, catch up with your herd."

Nellie started to slap the stud on the rump as she would a regular horse. He shied aside and bumped against her.

::Grab my mane and jump up.::

She didn't really hear the words, but the thought came clearly to her mind.

:: You wanted to go, so jump on .::

Somehow she managed to grab a double handful of the flowing burnished copper mane. He seemed to dip just enough in mid-stride. She made a wild leap and flopped across his back on her stomach, then swung a leg up and got a heel hooked over his back. From there, she dug and scrambled and clawed her way up until she sat astride the sleek powerful body.

He hit the canyon running and was out of it onto the open sagebrush flats in the blink of an eye. Then they were flying over the desert, just as she had dreamed. Within a few moments, they caught up with the tail end of the herd, strung out and running hard. In just a few heartbeats, they veered off to the northeast, toward the *malapai* badlands and the rugged mountains beyond.

The *malapai* badlands had a treacherous reputation. Nellie knew few cowboys would risk a horse in there. They all said there were too many hidden holes and crevasses to trip on or fall into, while the harsh rock would cut a horse's legs to ribbons and rasp their hooves down to the quick in no time. If a cow wandered off in there, like as not, no one ever saw it again. Rumor had it there was little water and what there was had a poison in it.

She sent a desperate thought to her unlikely mount. :: Are you sure you know where you're going? In just a few miles we'll be in the malapai. None of the mares and colts have shoes. You don't either, do you? How are they all going to manage?::

He answered readily, no hint of being winded by the mad gallop. Of course, she had to remind herself, he wasn't actually speaking.

::There are hidden paths. Mollie knows them. The Indians know some of them. With only a short way to go over the rocks, then we can be in easy footing on sand. By morning we can be in a hidden valley with sweet water and good graze. We'll rest there a couple of days. I don't know what you're going to eat, though.::

Nellie thought a minute. :: I might be able to snare a rabbit or something, and I know what plants are good to eat. We have a Paiute woman back at the ranch, Mary Red Squirrel. She cooks and takes care of the house. I've learned a lot of stuff from her. Pa figured I was safe being as she's a woman and all. Well, little did he know!::

The horse's chuckle rumbled through his big hot body, shaking her. ::You're a wily one, aren't you?::

Nellie bent over to get as close as she could to the heat radiating from red horse's solid strength. The night wind had developed a real nip. She was grateful she had at least gotten her socks and a jacket. Her hat had whipped back, dangling from the cord until it nigh strangled her. She tugged it around and clutched it with one hand, the other still firmly clenched in Red's thick mane. No question she was getting the ride of a lifetime. She meant to enjoy it for all it was worth, even if she was near freezing cold.

Finally they slowed to a trot and then a walk, and after that, the herd climbed over one rocky spur of a ridge that nudged out into the desert from the main mass of the *malapai*.

By the light of a thin sliver of moon, Nellie could see a faint trail, just a double hoof-width gap where the harsh stone seemed to be worn a little smoother.

Unerringly, the herd found and followed that trace. She'd bet there was not one wisp of hair left on the jagged edges of stone on either side. They were that careful, that perfectly in step, one behind the next, even the foals. The chill wind nibbled at every bit of exposed skin, leaching the heat from her bones. She shivered and buried her face in Red's thick mane.

It's good the wind is blowing tonight. Maybe it'll erase our tracks in the desert, or at least make them much more difficult to follow. Unless they get lucky and find this trace into the badlands, it will seem that we have vanished into thin air. Nellie sighed. To believe they had successfully gotten away was almost too good to be true. How had the band of cowboys missed them?

::Some of the mares without babies went another way, making a clear trail to lead the cowboys astray. They'll double back by a way we know, cross some bare rock and catch up with us later.::

The horse's assuring thought brought more comfort, even if it was disconcerting how he seemed to read her mind. No wonder everyone thought he was supernatural. A horse that thought like both a horse and a human had distinct advantages.

Sometime in the coldest and darkest of the pre-dawn hours, she must have dozed off. When Nellie awoke, her hands were numb where she had them tangled in the red stud's mane, but at least she hadn't slipped off his back. The herd was winding along a narrow gully between two close-placed ridges of dark *malapai*. Overhead the sky was going the palest pink with the first hint of dawn, while all but the brightest stars had winked out.

There was no wind here, but the air was brisk. She sat up, feeling stiff and weary but still elated. The herd had made their getaway and danged if she hadn't, too! They trailed the herd, slowing to accommodate the pace of mares and foals weary from the long run and the still longer trek into the badlands. Thankfully the going was now easy, a layer of soft sand underfoot but not so deep as to force a struggle to wade through it.

Just as the man-horse had said, they reached a wider area floored with green grass as the sun crested the mountains to the east. A stream rambled down the center of the vale, crystal clear water babbling gently over black stone worn smooth by the centuries. The herd strung out along the creek to drink and then fell to cropping the grass. Foals folded down on their long legs after a quick breakfast from their dams.

Nellie slid to the ground, only to find herself clutching desperately at Red's mane to keep her feet. Her legs felt like overcooked egg noodles. His big body shook with a chuckle that mixed horse sound with human. :: I thought you were used to riding, human filly. What is wrong with you?::

"I guess not bareback and not at a dead run for miles and then a pounding trot for more of them. I'll be okay after I rest a little bit."

::Very well. Get a drink and then sleep a while. I'm going to check the back trail and make sure we're not being followed. Mollie will stand guard. She'll wake you if there is any danger. If she comes and nudges you, get up and get on her to ride to safety. I'll return as soon as I can.::

Nellie glanced at the bony, old, gray mare with some misgivings. Sitting astride that backbone would be like trying to ride a buzz saw. *Let's hope that doesn't become necessary*. When she turned back to tell him to be careful, Red had already vanished.

She shrugged. That's some kind of a horse. Man alive, I still think I'm dreaming all this.

With a sigh, she knelt by the stream and cupped up the sparkling water in her hands. It tasted pure and clean as fresh snow and was only slightly less cold. Still, it refreshed her. She splashed a little on her face and slicked her hair back where the wind had dislodged it from her braid. She was just too tired to do more right now.

Then, as the sun rose higher and spread its warmth into the little valley, she found a soft grassy spot against a big stone and curled up to sleep, pillowing her head on her suede jacket.

CHAPTER 3

She awoke to a hand on her shoulder, shaking her gently. For a moment she was completely disoriented. It took her a few seconds to realize the man who knelt beside her was her man-horse. It was the first time she had seen him as a human in daylight. He was definitely worth a real good look.

He was back to the breechclout again, which didn't leave much to her imagination. His legs were long and sleekly muscled, tawny from exposure to the sun. His chest was muscled and wide, a thin furring of coppery hair dusting from a tee-bar between tan nipples down to disappear behind the breechclout just below his belly button. His arms matched his legs, sleek and powerful looking. A beautiful horse, he was an equally beautiful man.

He smiled down at her, revealing even white teeth between two full curving lips, just a shade darker than his tanned skin. His nose was straight and cleanly drawn with flaring nostrils. On either side of the high bridge of that nose, his eyes were large and bright, a rich goldenbrown color, fringed with long, dark lashes, tipped with red. Those eyes sparkled with intelligence and humor. If she wasn't mistaken, he was looking at her with as much appreciation as she regarded him.

Still his words were totally matter-of-fact. "You're getting sunburned," he said. "Even if you're an outdoor lady, you can't take too much sun. I expect your skin is very fair where the sun has seldom touched it. You need to cool off. Come, there is a nice pool down the stream a short distance. It'll wash off the trail dust and lower your body temperature. Right now you look as if you have a fever." He laid a hand against her cheek, the touch light as a butterfly's wing, but she still felt it clear to her toes.

His palm was slightly rough, just enough to create a hint of abrasion. A vision of that hand and the other stroking, smoothing, seeking every hidden nook and cranny of her body sent her temperature soaring far beyond what the sun had done.

All that heat made her feel weak and shaky. She sat up slowly, her head reeling as if she'd drunk too much or spun around like a top as she had done years ago, when she was just a nipper. The idea of trying to stand was completely intimidating.

He laughed, standing in a single, smooth motion. Then he stooped and scooped her up, as easily as she would pick up a small child.

"You're as weak as a newborn foal. I could see that when you started to move. Never mind. I may not move as fast, but I can still carry you, even without shifting back to my horse form."

Nellie looped one arm around his neck, telling herself it was necessary to maintain a sense of balance. Perhaps it was, but he carried her with little effort. As he'd said, there was a beautiful pool, just a hundred yards or so down the stream. The water bubbled down over a ledge in a little cataract, which had cut away the rock to form a basin. It was not a large pool, but big enough for a bit of a swim, maybe six or eight feet deep, about that wide and perhaps twelve or fifteen feet long.

He halted, one foot resting on a rock, with Nellie perched on his thigh. He tipped his head a bit and looked at her, a hint of a smile playing around his lips. "You don't want to wash your clothes, too, do you? It would be best if you take at least most of them off."

Nellie felt her face heat with a blush, in spite of the sunburn. "Er, yes, I guess I should. Can you put me down?"

"I am able, yes. The question is, do I want to? You are very comfortable to hold."

Pinned by the heated intensity of his gaze, Nellie felt an urgent need to change the subject, at least until she found her composure again. "Do you have a name? I can't just call you Red or Rogue. I'm still confused about this, but I guess I accept that you can be both a horse and a human, changing at will. I'm wondering how you got that way, or learned how to do it, though."

He smiled as he eased her gently to the ground. Perhaps he had sensed her growing discomfort. "I'll make as short a tale of it as I can. The trait comes down from my great-grandfather. He was a Frenchman, from the Camargue region, where there are many great horsemen. It is said he inherited the shifting gift from a Mongol ancestor, one of the followers of Genghis Khan, down through the Rom or gypsy line. I believe among every people who live closely with their horses, at least a few shifters may be found. Some call us were-horses."

Nellie's mouth fell open in amazement. He spoke so calmly about it, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world. Yet, if that were true, how had she never heard of this before? She had read every book she could find since childhood and come to know many odd things, but this was certainly the most amazing yet!

"There are shifters among the Indians too," he continued. "Like Mollie and several other mares in the herd. Anyway, Great-Grandfather got in trouble in France, killing a rival over a woman. He fled to the New World to escape hanging, and here he became an explorer, a mountain man. Eventually he took as wife a woman of the Lakota people. She was of a shifter line as well, so that strengthened the trait in my grandfather and my father.

"The ability to shift normally does not come until one is an adult. Often it takes some dire necessity or catastrophe to trigger it. Mine came when my family was attacked and killed by outlaws after the war. We were living in west Texas where there was no law for a time, just renegades fleeing either the encroaching Yankees or the gradual spread of what passed for civilization."

Nellie listened, struggling to keep her jaw from hanging open. This was the most fantastic tale she had ever heard. The crazy thing was that she believed it—well, almost anyway. He made it sound completely rational.

"I came home from being away in school and had missed the attack, but found my parents and my five younger siblings all dead and everything of value stolen from our ranch. I think I went mad with grief. I became a horse to track those savages, managing to kill three of them. Then I stayed thus to survive. That life was more to my liking than being a human anyway. I wanted no kinship or similarity to the beasts that had destroyed my family. I've spent many years as a horse, only changing back when a need arises." He shook his head, a melancholy expression shadowing his face.

Nellie felt tears flood her eyes as she imagined the horror of finding all of one's folks brutally killed, everything dear and precious to you destroyed. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "Sorry I asked, too, since it must grieve you even to think of it."

He shook his head. "No, it's all right. You have a right to know, and probably a need to understand. It's important that you believe what your eyes have shown but your mind is trying to deny, especially if you are going to stay with me and the herd for a while." "Do you reckon I could learn to shift?"

He shrugged. "I doubt it. If there were shifters in your family, surely you would know of it. Someone would have mentioned it, don't you think?"

"I'm Irish and Scots, so most of my ancestors lived far away. The Irish are great horsemen, you know. Aren't there shifters among them, too?"

"Although I do not know of any personally, I guess it's likely. We may try someday, but you need to be rested and safe, far away from danger and worries the first time, if you should happen to succeed. Otherwise you might never be able to change back."

"But you said..."

"For me, it was different. I knew of my shifter blood, knew I would be able to in time."

With a hand not quite steady, she began to unbutton the row of buttons down the front of her shirt. It felt strange, but also exciting, to be doing this under his watchful eyes. "You still did not tell me your name," she said.

"I forgot that, didn't I? Once I was known as Etienne DeJean. Then my father changed the family name to Johns. He said we were Americans now so that was only proper. In English, Etienne would be Steven. In the dialect of some family friends who tried to help me after the tragedy, Comanche people, I was called a name that would translate as Goldfire, I think because of the color of my hair. Where the red came from I have no idea because most of the family was dark."

He gazed off at nothing for a moment, as if lost in thoughts or memories. A frown creased his brow. "It seems I may have had black or dark brown hair once myself, but as a horse I have always been a chestnut, as if the splattered blood of my kin was in my mind and effected the color I became. That's a time that's very confusing, much I cannot recall clearly. It is as if I lost a number of years before things again become clear." After he shook his head, his worried expression faded. "You may call me Steven or whatever you wish. It really doesn't matter to me. I know they call you Nellie, but is that your true name?"

His use of the phrase "true name" puzzled her for an instant. "I was christened Lenore, which was my mother's name. She died when I was quite young. I hardly remember her, except that I see her as very beautiful, very much the lady. Certainly not a wild hoyden like me. Nellie seems a more fitting name for me than Lenore. It's much too dainty, too genteel."

Her shirt was totally undone now, revealing her chemise. She rarely wore a corset. They were too binding when one was working cattle or around the ranch, and she scarcely needed the support anyway. Her breasts had always been small and firm from their initial appearance when she was about fourteen.

Transfixed by the power of Steven's gaze, she paused, unable to shrug the shirt off while he watched her. She wanted to be bold and wanton, to make him desire her and suggest the exciting, dangerous delights he had spoken of in her dream, but dreaming and doing was not the same thing.

A bit of the fierce, wild look faded from his eyes. When he spoke, his tone was gentle. "You're no wild hoyden, Lenore. You're very lovely—even in my horse-form I could recognize that. I've seen you riding, watched you helping your father and the cowhands with the work. Doing what is needful does not make you less a lady, less feminine and desirable. "

"But I'm twenty-two, almost an old maid now. Pa won't let anyone within thirty yards of me, so how am I ever to find a beau, to learn about love?" She was shocked to hear herself blurt this confession, but it burst out before she could check her tongue.

"I can remedy that. In fact, I must. If you are to stay with me and be part of my herd, whether a shifter or not, you need to be clearly marked as one of mine, so no one will dare bother or harm you. There are other wild stallions with harems of mares in the desert and the badlands, and some of them are also shifters. So long as you are a free filly, you're fair game to steal away. Then there are Indians where we're going, in the mountains. Young men among them fancy white girls just because they are different."

He reached then with both hands and caught the sides of her shirt, peeling it back off her shoulders. The cloth slipped away easily. He set the garment aside. At that moment she remembered her jacket was still back at the spot she'd slept, where she'd made a pillow of it. Well, she had no need for it right now. He rested his hands on her bare shoulders, the touch gentle and yet possessive. Then he smoothed his hands down her arms to the wrists and back up again, a sensuous slither of skin on skin that made her tremble.

"Don't be afraid, Lenore. I promise I will not hurt you. You're past the age to know the joys of the flesh, the magic of two bodies becoming one. Let me teach you."

Her heart was slamming against her ribs in a racing beat that drove blood surging through her whole body. Her breasts ached, thrusting against the light restraint of her chemise, the nipples almost burning where they brushed the soft fabric.

Cupping her shoulders, he drew her closer, then wrapped his arms around her, pressing her to the smooth heat of his chest. With her eyes closed, she could almost imagine the solid comforting power of his equine form, how she had huddled close last night during their wild flight. Her head, too heavy for her neck, drooped until her cheek rested against him, pillowed in the hollow of his shoulder. The sweet scent of grass and clover seemed to cling to him, along with a hint of sweat, but not stale and sour, just the rich hot odor of male, both horse and human. The scent was intoxicating, drugging her with every breath. She gave a little moan. "Lift your head, little one, and look at me."

She knew he spoke, but the words were more felt than heard. Slowly she lifted her head, tipped it back to look up into his face. That face seemed very close, the brilliant energy of his eyes, the lure of his lips, almost close enough to touch. Would they feel and taste as enticing as they looked? "Please."

Only after she heard the breathy word did she realize she had spoken.

"Please what, little Lenore?"

"Please k-k-kiss me."

"Oh, I shall. Every enticing inch of you. Should I start with your sweet, innocent mouth? If we were in horse form, I would be snorting in your flanks, maybe nipping your neck, just in front of the withers. But I still remember how it is done between humans. Like this."

His lips brushed across hers, as light as the petals of a sago lily, the wings of a butterfly.

Brushed, slipped away and returned, pressing just the slightest bit more firmly.

"Ooooohh." The sound escaped her in a sigh, one which opened her lips. He took advantage of that at once, nibbling and searching, slipping his tongue into the opening and trailing it along her teeth, touching the inner surfaces of her lips in teasing licks.

She locked her arms around his bare waist, holding on with all her might lest the ground slip right out from under her. Timidly at first, but growing swiftly bolder, she sent her own tongue out to play with his, twirling around his in an erotic dance, exchanging thrust for thrust. Finally he pulled back, after he had trailed kisses down her throat, nibbled at her ears, brushed feathery kisses across her eyelids and then back for one swift, hard kiss against her lips.

"You are still overdressed," he said. He set her back just enough that he could deal with the buckle of her belt and then the buttons down one side of her suede divided riding skirt. Finally, pulled by its own weight, the garment slipped off her hips and pooled around her booted feet. To free her, he simply caught her by the waist and lifted her away from it. Even with her boots on, the flared legs were wide enough to fall right off.

Her pantalets were sturdily made, stitched of a heavy flannel to protect her skin from the harsher leather. Still they felt thin and insubstantial, as if the breeze could pass right through, as if they were transparent to the power of his eyes. They would not come off over her boots as easily either.

"I'll take my boots off," she offered. "If you'll let me sit down somewhere, I can pull them off. I don't want to get them in the water, for sure."

"No, we wouldn't want that." He answered her very gravely, as if he had not just kissed her silly and made her whole body tingle and burn with a mixture of anxiety and longing.

He turned toward the pool. "I'll let you decide what else you remove. Then you can join me in the water. There's a chill at first, but soon you become used to it." With that he dove into the pool, a clean, knifing shallow dive that hardly stirred a splash.

It took Nellie a moment to realize he'd dived right out of his breech cloth. The leather strip lay in a neat pile right where his feet had been a few instants before. That meant he didn't have a stitch on. Resolutely not sneaking a peek, she sat down on a smooth boulder and tugged her boots off, then her socks. Then the dilemma—did she go into the water with her pantalets and chemise on or not?

Suddenly she thought about how clammy and cold they'd be, wet and clinging to her body. No, she didn't want that. As swiftly as she could, she undid the drawstring waist of the pantalets, kicked them off and dragged the chemise over her head. Bare as the day she was born, she dove in, not nearly as smoothly as he had, but at least without a belly flop.

CHAPTER 4

"Oh, my God, and little green apples!" The water felt so cold she thought her skin was going to pucker into inch-high goose bumps or her lungs were going to collapse. She treaded water for a bit trying to catch her breath. "I-i-i-t's s-o-o-o c-c-c-old!"

To her left, he laughed. "But it feels good, doesn't it? After a minute the chill eases and it feels very good."

"I'm not so sure about that, but I'm sure not overheated anymore." Then more grudgingly, "I guess the wetness does feel good. My skin was dry, dusty and itching, burned by the wind and the sun. The wetness helps that, but I don't think I'll ever be hot again."

"Oh, we can warm you back up after our swim. When we get out and lie on the grass in the sun, you'll be warm in no time."

He came up behind her and pulled the tie off her braid. Nimble fingers loosened the plait until her hair fanned out around her shoulders. Then he pushed her down enough to wet it, and taking a bit

of yucca root, he washed her hair, working the suds gently through the yard-long, honey-blonde strands until every lock was squeaky clean. By then she wasn't sure if she was still cold or not. Her scalp tingled from the kneading strength of his fingers as he rinsed away the last bit of soap weed. She floated, supported by the water after he laid her back to finish the rinsing. Part of her was above the surface and warmed by the sun. That did feel good. With her eyes shut, she didn't have to think about that sun touching skin it had never known, or how much of her was revealed to his gaze, should he choose to look.

But was he looking? Did he find her pleasing? Her nipples pebbled at the contrast between the water and the limpid air, then chilled with a passing breeze. Probably that triangle of coppery gold curls at the base of her belly was visible, too. Was he looking? Didn't she feel the pressure of his gaze almost as keenly as a touch? She gave a tiny shiver and went tense. As soon as she no longer lay relaxed in the water, her body starting to sink. She flailed a bit, bringing her shoulders up as her legs went down.

He slipped an arm around her, stabilizing her.

"There, does that not feel better? I knew your hair was dusty and matted from all the riding, especially when your father put you in the rear. That was not kind at all!"

"I think he wishes I'd been born a boy, and sometimes forgets I'm not, although he guards my chastity with everything at his disposal."

Steven laughed. "But no longer. All his efforts will be for naught now."

What a shocking yet thrilling notion that was. No more virginity to protect. *Very soon now...*

He led her to the shallow end, where he lifted her out of the water. The black sand felt silky beneath her feet, but that sensation was soon lost in others as he waded out to stand at her side. Droplets of water gleamed on his smooth bronze skin. He shook his head, almost like a horse, and water flew out of his hair. With both hands he scooped it back off his face and plastered it sleek to his skull. Wet, it was almost black, yet still held the fiery highlights.

Her gaze was drawn irresistibly downward to the only part of him she really hadn't seen yet. As she visually measured the length and girth of his cock, she gasped. Even at rest and nestled in the dark bronze tangle at his groin, it was impressive. So were his balls, plastered with wet curls.

Oh, my! I've seen purebred studs that would gladly trade for that! And this is his man-form. I don't think we're going to make this work!

She'd seen enough horses and cattle mating to know what happened, but still, applying it to herself—herself and this amazing man—the act was nearly impossible to picture. Would he take her down on hands and knees to come at her from the rear? Mary Red Squirrel had told her there were other ways for people to do it also, but she hadn't been very specific.

Before fear could really take hold, he caught her hand and led her a few feet to a thick patch of emerald green. The grass was fine-bladed and as even as if it had been cropped carefully with scissors. Before she quite realized what had happened, she was flat on her back in that grass with him at her side, stretched out as relaxed as a fine gentleman in an elegant bed. Sure enough, any lingering chill vanished in a trice. The sun was not the only cause of the heat flowing through her whole body either.

He placed one hand flat on her torso, just below the arch of her ribs. One finger traced around the hollow of her navel. "I may snort in your flanks yet. They're very nice flanks."

The twinkle in his eyes told her he was teasing, very gently easing her uncertainty about a situation totally unfamiliar to her.

"I think that would tickle," she admitted. "I'd prob'ly giggle my fool head off."

"I didn't take you for the giggly type. You always seemed very serious, very business-like, and hardly even coy."

His hand drifted slowly, down along her side to her hip bone, across her lower belly and back up the other side, pausing just short of the under swell of her breast. Her skin, her whole being quickened to that touch.

She sucked in a swift breath. "I don't much, not really. Oh, I used to when I went to school in Elko. I stayed with Aunt Mary Ellen while I went to school. She's Pa's sister. Me and my best friend Sadie Smithers giggled all the time until the teacher got mad at us. That was years ago, though. I guess I haven't giggled much lately."

Finally, when she didn't think she could stand it another minute, that roving hand slipped up and cupped her breast. He teased the nipple with thumb and forefinger, tugging at it just enough to create a pull that ran clear through her, centering down in the depths of her belly. Below, in the vee of her thighs, she felt a slick wetness start to spread.

Then he bent forward and settled his mouth over the other breast. The sensation was so intense she felt like she was going to fly off the ground. His tongue swirled around the nipple, then his lips tugged, just as his fingers continued to do on the other side. Warm and soft as melted butter, she lay limp in the grass, caught in a delicious, boneless laziness. Part of her didn't want to move, yet an itchy, burning urgency filled her, making her need and want a great deal more. Strands of his hair had dried and a whisper of breeze brushed them across her body. That feathery, tickling sensation stirred her almost as much as the magic of his mouth and fingers.

"Please, I need ... "

"What do you need, lovely Lenore?"

"You. More. Everything!"

His laugh flowed across her, warm as a caress. "Such a hotblooded, little filly. Good! I've wanted one like you for so very long.

It's been years since I loved as a human. It's different as a horse, more a compulsion than a seduction. Surely you've seen horses mate?"

Nellie nodded, remembering the squeals, the milling around, the dust flying. Sometimes the mare kicked and fought, even though it was clear she had a strong need to take the stud. Finally she'd submit when he clamped his teeth on her neck and reared over her, seizing her with his forelegs in a vice-tight grip. The mare would shiver and roll her eyes, but she'd stand then, tail canted away to allow his entrance.

"I don't think the mare enjoys it much. The stud just subdues her until she stands for him."

"Yes, it's often so. I do not plan to subdue you though, so do not worry. They say humans are the only beasts to engage in sex simply for pleasure. I found that marvelous, don't you? What a gift we have been given, and yet too many make it a sin, vile and somehow degrading. They have it all wrong!"

As Steven spoke, his hand left her breast to slide downward, rubbing gentle spirals of fire along her skin. She had to move then, just a slithery wiggle of utter delight. "Mmmmm," she murmured. "Yes, so wrong."

He brushed across the triangle of curls at the bottom of her belly, rocking his hand against the ridge of her mons. She gave another wriggle, her hips lifting slightly without her conscious effort. Then he slipped a forefinger down through the thicket of curls into the moist, hidden space they guarded. Her body bowed in shock, in surprise, in delight. Her legs went limp, parting of their own accord to allow access to her private, secret places. His touch was invasive and yet not uncomfortable, not unwelcome. New and strange, but delicious.

For a moment she recalled how that most tender part of her had pressed against his muscled back last night, the heat of him flowing upward into her to stave off the bite of the night wind. She'd felt a tingle, a subtle tension of muscles deep within her body even then, but had thought little of it, too caught up in the exhilaration of their mad run, the incredible escape.

I will soon ride again, yet it will be different this time. Humming excitement burned along her nerves at that thought, curiosity overcoming the shadow of fear and uncertainty. What will it feel like? Will it hurt? He's so big.

Now his finger was sliding into that exact spot where she didn't think his cock would fit. One digit entered easily, in and out again, a slow, rhythmic thrust and withdrawal. After a moment, he added a second finger. It felt strange but good, very good. Then his thumb found the little nub at the forward end of her slit, and stroked across it once, twice. It took all she could do not to shriek out loud. How could a sensation be as keen and sharp as pain yet feel so blessed wonderful?

"Ohhhh. Oh, my!"

"Do you like that, little Lenore?"

"Better than chocolate!"

Laughing, he leaned down to press a warm, wet kiss just above her belly button. His hair spilled across her body, the strands tickling, sending little darts of pleasure zinging through her. With a moist tongue, he began to paint spirals and swirls on her tingling skin. The whisper of a breeze dried the dampness quickly, leaving trails of icy fire behind. Lenore shivered and quivered, she twitched and whimpered. All the while his fingers kept up the magic dance in her slit, the thumb skipping around the little aching nub, only touching it enough to tease.

"I'm going to fall apart, blow up like a ton of TNT! What are you doing to me?"

He chuckled, that homely, horsy sound he made. "You're learning the very first steps in the ways of love, the ways for a man and a woman to find the pinnacles of delight. It comes back to me quickly, all these little things that can be done." Lenore gasped in much-needed air. "But what of you? Are there not things I need to be doing for you?"

"In time, little filly. Be patient. This part is just for you, the first part, to let you see how splendid it can be."

He shifted to take one of her nipples in his mouth again, drawing on it as a foal would suckle a mare. The pull shot down through her body to make her inner muscles draw up against his fingers. His thumb returned to the bud and stroked it, circled and stroked. She drew her legs up, knees apart, hips lifting from the grass. It was too unbearable much.

I'm going to die, any minute I'm going to die!

Something gathered inside her, the feeling of energy and explosive power like the wind before an especially violent summer storm. Any minute lightning would strike, opening the clouds to hail and pounding rain. When it happened, she did shriek, a piercing scream. The sound rose and fell with the shuddering contractions from her womb outward. She was turning inside out. She was shattering like glass falling on stone. She was dying and being born all over again in a single heartbeat.

The pulses faded at last. Too spent and shocked to move, she lay limply quiescent.

While she was too weak and wasted to do anything he moved again, shifting to kneel between her still-bent knees. His cock bobbed gently with his heartbeat, reaching toward her as if seeking her warmth. He leaned forward to rest a hand on each side of her head. His hair tented them in a veil of auburn, fired by the lowering sun.

"What I am going to do next is going to hurt. I've done all I can to prepare you, but it will still hurt. I can do it fast and hard, an instant's sharp tearing or I can stretch it out, a lesser pain but longer. Which do you prefer?"

"Over with fast," Lenore replied. "I can stand pain. I've known it

often enough-blisters and cuts and kicks and falls..."

"It will not be a pain like those. I have been told it was like the single worst one of the birthing pangs, but sooner over."

As he lowered his body, his cock found and pressed into her pussy. At first there was a sensation of stretching, then a sting. She tightened involuntarily against the shock. He kissed her mouth, nibbling and sucking at her lips until they parted. Then he thrust his tongue full into her mouth, swirling it around hers, darting it in and out.

She relaxed. With a sharp rock of his hips, he plunged into her. As he'd said, for a long breath there was a sharp, tearing pain, keen as the cut of a fine-bladed knife. Just when she thought she would have to scream, this time from the agony rather than the unbearable pleasure, it ceased. Something had parted. She was opened, making way for him.

Impossible as it seemed, he was inside her. She was filled, completed, utterly joined with him. She couldn't tell his heartbeat from hers, which breath belonged to whom. They were a single living being, merged and united.

"Wrap your legs around me," he said. "That will open and relax you more. Soon there will be not pain but just pleasant sensations, I promise." He slid in and back, encouraging her body to produce more slick moisture to ease their movements.

It was different this time, not as intense but deeper, a complete response from her depths. There were two bodies involved, responding each to each, and yet it still seemed only one set of responses. She squeezed and he shuddered, he thrust and she trembled. Sensation coiled, tightened and tangled, until finally a dam seemed to burst and let them all crash out at once. She felt his seed shooting into her, sensed her contractions milk and extract from him every bit of it, almost as if she was feeling what he felt.

How can two become so close to being one?

He trembled now, his whole powerful body wracked with the

intensity of their mutual climax. Before his weight collapsed on her, he rolled aside, taking her with him. They stopped, lying face to face. She was wrapped in his arms, pressed to him from head to feet. Never in her whole life had she felt closer to anyone, almost as if he had absorbed her. It was scary in a way, yet completely wonderful.

"All of Pa's efforts wasted in a flash." She laughed aloud. "I almost understand why he wanted to keep me from this. It's part of the way we live, how we're taught, but more elemental than that. Until now I was Pa's girl, only his. Now I'm not anymore, never will be again."

He pressed a gentle kiss on her brow. "That's true. Now you're mine. You carry my scent and my seed. Proof of my possession is all over you. There'll be no doubt of this wherever we go, even if you go alone. It had to be, as I told you. A part of my keeping you safe requires that you must be utterly mine."

At that moment the hushed sound of hooves in the sand penetrated their private silence. Mollie approached, deferential and hesitant, yet clearly anxious.

Nellie was surprised when she "heard" the gray mare's words in the same manner she heard Steven's when he was in his horse form. Already something had changed within her. She might not yet be a shifter, but she was closer to the horse-forms they could take.

::Someone comes, my chieftain. They're still some distance away, but we must be off, out of this place ere the sun falls beyond the western mountains. I let you and the new filly have as much time as I could.::

CHAPTER 5

::Good, Mollie. I thank you for that. Gather the herd. We'll be there before you're ready to move out. We'll go the hidden way, through the slot canyon to the east. The floor of it is swept clean of sand by the summer's floods, so we'll leave no tracks. Thank the gods there is no rain now, not a cloud in sight, so it'll be dry while we pass through.::

He rolled to his feet and shook himself to get rid of the bits of grass and sand clinging to his skin. She could almost see him change before her, although he still stood as a man. The leader, the savage stallion, was there again. He reverted from the tender lover to the fearless, fiercely wild creature that she had so admired, the one she had given herself up to save.

"Up, Lenore. We must go. Dress yourself quickly and come back to where you slept. I'll wait for you there to carry you out of the valley. Perhaps you were right and your father will not cease to follow us."

With that, he strode away, following Mollie around the bend in the

valley and out of sight. Nellie gathered her clothes and struggled into them, not even taking time to wash the sweat and stickiness from her body. Little good the bath had done. She giggled at that. Still, her skin was not dry and dusty anymore.

As soon as she tugged her boots on, she hastened back to the big boulder. There she snatched up and donned her jacket and hat, folding the leather breech cloth Steven had left behind. He stood waiting for her, impatient to be off. His gaze followed the line of mares and foals moving off up the valley toward a shadowy bend perhaps a half mile away. As she watched, he shifted in an instant, a russet haze shimmering briefly where the man had stood before the horse appeared.

He bent his left foreleg, bowing so she could get on his back without a struggle. She tossed the soft leather strip across his back, then swung her leg over him. He surged up to his full height, some sixteen hands, Nellie estimated. As soon as she settled her weight evenly just behind his withers, he broke into a canter. She grabbed a handful of mane and leaned down close to his neck as the wind clutched at her. *Oh, my, but he can move!*

Almost before she could blink, they caught up with the herd. Even though she was looking for it, Nellie almost missed the gap, the narrow opening of the slot canyon into the valley. It was choked, nearly hidden by a thicket of willows. Around their bases, there was a heap of sand and rock that had been driven out by the summer's floods. The herd plunged over and through that barrier in a file. Nellie drew her legs up high and lay flat over Steven's strong neck, clinging to the flying mane. He cleared the stone and sand in a single leap, ducking into the narrow canyon.

Once all were inside, they quickly slowed their headlong pace from gallop to lope to trot to walk. There was no way to hurry now. The canyon turned this way and that, sometimes so sharply it felt as if they were doubling back. In some spots, the polished stone floor was as slick as glass. The walls were so high and so close that only the narrowest ribbon of blue showed above them. There were places where Nellie had to draw her legs up and tuck them in front of Steven's shoulders because his sides brushed the stone. The largest of the horses, he barely fit through the tightest spots.

It seemed to take them a long time to emerge from the canyon. Nellie would have sworn the last part was a tunnel, although how, she had no idea. Still it was very dark and the hollow echo of hoof beats rang in her ears until they emerged. The sun had set, leaving a glow of fiery colors splashed along the western horizon.

They came out of the darkness into a meadow, clearly a good deal higher than the valley they had left. Here they were above and beyond the *malapai*, at the edge of a forest of pine trees. The meadow looked grassy and inviting, a narrow streamlet meandering down through the center.

The herd came to a halt, some going to drink at the stream and others sniffing the cool breeze blowing down off the mountains beyond. Nellie was not sure how far they had traveled, but much of it had been uphill. That slot canyon was a really peculiar place. At least the herd was not nearly as worn as they'd been from last night's mad flight. Most of the mares and foals soon settled down to graze.

It would be colder here, even without any wind. Nellie hesitated, reluctant to leave the comforting warmth of Steven's solid back. Finally, with a sigh, she slid off and stood beside him. He didn't change back into man-shape as she'd half-expected he would.

:: I'd shift you to horse-form if I could, Lenore. You'll be hungry and cold. Maybe one of the mares can go to a Paiute village not too far from here and get some food for you. When night comes, you can sleep between two of us for the warmth and shelter. Tonight I can do no more than that for you, although I wish I could.::

Nellie sighed again. "I'm going to be a nuisance, aren't I? I guess

you were wise and right to say I shouldn't come with you. I'm sorry."

::No, do not speak so. I'm not sorry. It was time for me to remember my humanity, and you have given that back to me. Also, you have knowledge of your father and the others who may hunt us, which could save us yet. I'll find some way to obtain the things you need because you're now in my care. I'm responsible for all in my herd.::

He called a young paint mare to them. She had no foal at her side, but appeared wiry and strong. He spoke to her in a language Nellie could not understand. She sensed an exchange between them, but it was only a faint hum, nothing she could follow. The mare flashed a sharp glance at Nellie before she trotted off, disappearing quickly into the trees at the edge of the meadow.

::Pinta is a shifter, a granddaughter of Mollie. She can go into the village and shift, speak to some of her kin to get food and bring it back for you, perhaps even a blanket. I would go, but I need to be here with the herd. We're in the territory of a cougar, one with a taste for horse flesh. If he dares to hunt here tonight, I'll have to kill him.::

Nellie shivered, this time more from fear than cold. "I wish I had my rifle. I'm a good shot. I should've grabbed it, but I don't think I could've held it on our wild ride last night. I have to admit I'm not used to riding bareback that way. A saddle makes things feel much more secure."

Again his rumble of a chuckle sounded. :: I will not wear a saddle, Lenore, not even for you. You'll have to learn to enjoy riding bareback or find another to carry you. For now it's best for me to do it because I'm the strongest. Not that one of the mares would be unable, but most are with foal now or still nursing, and that taxes them.::

It wasn't long before the paint mare returned. A bundle was tied around her neck, wrapped in a blanket. Inside there was a clay *olla*. A snug lid fit into the neck of the *olla* and kept the contents warm and secure. After she untied the package, Nellie tried to think her thanks to the mare, sensing the other resented her presence. :: *Thank you for your errand to help me. I'm sorry to be a burden. Somehow I'll try to make myself useful to the herd.::*

The mare gave a sniff, but some of the stiffness went out of her posture. She turned away to get a drink, then began to graze. Still in his horse form, Steven watched her go.

::That was well done, Lenore. Yes, she is a bit jealous of you. She left a young warrior who wanted her as his wife to come and run with the herd after the first time she shifted. She's still not sure which life she wants to live. It would be best for her to find a shifter for her mate, I think, so she can exist in both worlds.::

::But not you.:: The idea of sharing Steven with another already galled, especially one who was a shifter as he was, a young and good-looking shifter. She didn't bite back the thought quickly enough.

:: Of course not me. She might be my daughter.::

::And it would be best for me to find a human perhaps.:: Nellie regretted that thought even before it was formed. No, she didn't want that at all. After the afternoon with Steven, she knew no other male would ever suit her completely. She was spoiled for any lesser being. ::Reckon I'd best learn to like riding bareback.::

Nellie took up the blanket and draped it around her shoulders like a shawl. She sat down on a log, opened the *olla* and began to eat the rich, delicious stew, using a crusty bit of fry bread for a spoon. Steven stood near by, still in his horse form. Flaring nostrils and the constant twitch of his ears revealed his alertness. Any cougar that might try to sneak up to snatch a straying foal would be in for a wicked surprise.

* * *

The herd rested for three days in the meadow. Twice more, the paint mare went to fetch victuals for Nellie. After the first time, she didn't seem to mind. Mollie finally conveyed to Nellie a message from

Pinta.

::Pinta has decided to return to the village before winter comes. She has learned one of the young warriors there recently shifted for the first time, one she always fancied a bit. That will be best for everyone. She says she thanks you for the chance that let her learn of this news.::

"I'm glad helping me has given her something good as well. Please, tell her I'm happy for her, and very grateful for her service to me."

After that exchange, Nellie sensed no more animosity from any member of the herd. She might be different, but she accepted them and they, in turn, accepted her.

Each night, Nellie slept between two mares, who lay down back to back to shelter her with their warm bodies. Wrapped in the blanket, she was quite comfortable. She couldn't have been snugger between two pot-bellied stoves in the bunk house. She'd have preferred to spend the night in Steven's embrace, but she knew he had his responsibilities. He would never put them second to any personal wish.

In fact, during those three days, she didn't see a great deal of Steven. He patrolled all night to guard against the cougar or any other night-stalking dangers. In the day, he roamed about, checking the back trail and perhaps scouting where they would go next. She never once saw him in anything but his horse form.

Thus he was away when a mare Nellie had not seen before came trotting into the meadow near midday on their fourth day there. A dark bay, she went directly to Mollie. They seemed to carry on an earnest discussion. Nellie watched, but could not make out what information was shared. After a little while the strange mare left, going back the way she had come.

Mollie ambled over to Nellie. :: Do you know where the chief is?::

Nellie shook her head. "No, I haven't seen him since briefly this morning. Something about the way he acted makes me think he's getting restless and feels we need to move on."

::That is so,:: Mollie answered, ::but that mare from another herd brought news. She says there is a badly injured human down a trail leading from this mesa to the desert. His horse fell with him. The horse rolled to his death when the trail gave way. The rider got clear in time, but he's hurt and cannot go back. Somehow she knew there was a human with our herd, and she felt you should know of this.::

"There are other shifter herds?" This surprised Nellie, until she recalled vaguely that Steven had mentioned it once.

::Yes, two of the colts the chief has sired are also shifters. They were driven off to go on their own. One herd cannot have more than one stallion! Their bands are small still and haven't attracted the attention of the hunters. Night Wind is another of my granddaughters, a shifter as well, and she chose to go with one of the young stallions.::

Although this news was a bit of a jolt, Nellie's thoughts soon returned to the plight of the injured human. Could it be her father or one of the cowboys? Although she was still angry about the way they had treated Steven and his herd, she couldn't allow a fellow human to suffer and die if there was anything she could do, particularly not one she knew.

"Mollie, do you know of this place where the accident happened? Could you take me there?"

:: I could, but I dare not do so without the chief's knowledge and permission. It could bring danger to the herd, so he must make the decision of what will be done. That is why I wondered if you know where he is. We can call him. Normally I only do this when there is danger, but this is almost the same thing.::

As if he had somehow read their thoughts or heard their conversation, Steven appeared within a few minutes. He cantered into the meadow and came directly to where Nellie stood at Mollie's side.

:: I sense you have troubling news. What is it?::

Mollie sent the message to him faster than Nellie could speak.

His gaze shifted to her in the next instant, though. ::Do you think this is some of those who hunt us?::

Nellie shrugged. "I have no way to know, but I think it's likely. It may even be my father. I know he's very determined, you might even say hard-headed. No doubt he was very upset to find me gone, too. Why he would choose to come this way, I don't know, but he may be able to sense where I am, at least in a general way. Blood ties can be very strong, and I'm his only child."

::We'll go then and find out. If it is a trap...:: Although he left the thought unfinished, it was enough to send a frisson of fear down Nellie's back.

"We don't have to go if you think it unwise."

::Nay, we must. If you later learned it was your father, you'd hate yourself and me as well. Far be it from me to deny family duty. Although you're now mine, he is still your father. We will go. Get on.::

Nellie swung up and grabbed her usual handful of mane. Steven issued some quick orders to Mollie. Then they were off, galloping across the meadow, only slowing to a trot just before they reached the rim of the mesa, where the ground sloped off sharply to the desert far below.

With a sure familiarity, he found the gap where the trail descended through a break in the cliffs along the rim. The slope was so steep it took all Nellie could do not to slide right up onto his neck. Then, once clear of the cliff, the path turned to traverse along the hillside at a gentler angle. She didn't quite relax, but the riding became easier.

In spite of the rough terrain, they made good time. Nellie guessed little more than an hour had passed when they approached the fresh slide where the trail had given way. Many yards down the slope, she saw the mangled remains of the dark horse that had fallen. The sight made her feel ill. *What a horrible way to die.*

But where was the injured rider? Steven halted, sniffing the air. ::I

smell fear and pain, human fear. He's beyond that fall of rock. Get down. I think I should shift. It'll be easier to get across this place in human form. My weight as a horse could start another slide.::

Nellie slid down on the uphill side. In the now-familiar flash of red haze, the stallion vanished and the man appeared. It seemed he could materialize whatever clothing he wanted when he shifted to human form. This time he was dressed in denim trousers and a heavy plaid shirt, but wore moccasins like the Indians used.

"Let me go ahead, Lenore. If it is your father, it may be upsetting for you to see him."

Nellie shook her head vehemently. "No! I'll go with you. I've come this far and it's only right I be there with you."

He looked at her steadily for a long moment, one eyebrow lifted in a questioning arch. Finally, he exhaled sharply. "All right. If that's what you prefer."

Together they started out across the treacherous ground, where any step might trigger another slide. Each foothold had to be tested, while every move was made with caution. The slide was only hours old and the ground had not yet fully settled. Nellie knew she should be scared spitless, but after the last few days, it seemed she had moved past the ability to fear.

Eventually they scrambled around the largest boulder that had been blocking their view. Just as Steven had guessed, there lay the injured man. He had one leg bent under his body at a completely unnatural angle. Body bruised and scratched all over, his trousers and shirt were in tatters. His hat was gone and one boot missing. Still, Nellie recognized him instantly. She hurried to his side and knelt on the rough ground.

"Pa! Pa, can you hear me?"

For a moment it seemed he couldn't, that he was unconscious or dead. Then he turned his head, not much, but enough to show he was

alive and aware.

"Nellie? No, it can't be. I gotta be dreaming or dead. You can't be here."

"But I am, Pa. We're going to try to get you out of here."

"Who is this we?"

"Me and Steven, my-uh, my friend."

At that, Steven leaned down into Jack Campbell's line of vision. "I'm Steven."

Jack squinted up, puzzlement clear in his face, along with the pain and stress of his injuries. "You're Steven? That don't tell me much."

"My name is Steven Johns. I'm going to marry your daughter, but first we have to get you down off the mountain and home so you can heal."

Jack shook his head. "Reckon I'm delirious. None of this makes any sense, but I'm not in a place to tell anybody what they can or can't do, or to refuse help."

Steven turned to Nellie. His declaration he was going to marry her had given her a jolt. She looked up at him, confused and concerned.

"Solid ground is much closer if we go on instead of back. If we can splint his leg, maybe we can carry him off the slide without causing further injury. You stay here with him while I see if I can find some sticks to bind to his leg."

Nellie nodded, turning back to Jack. "I wish I had a canteen, Pa. Reckon you're thirsty, but I don't. We heard that a man and his horse had fallen and came in a hurry."

"It's all right, girl. I won't die for want of water for a while yet."

Steven was back in a few minutes with a couple of straight, sturdy oak limbs. They used Nellie's much-abused bandana and one of the lacings from her belt to bind Jack's leg. He passed out when Steven pulled it straight, which was probably a blessing. Once that was done, they contemplated the next step. "He's not a small man," Nellie said, anxiously. "Do you think we can carry him and still get over these rocks and not start another slide?"

"Do we have a choice?"

She had to admit they didn't. There was nothing to do but try. So they picked up Jack and started toward the solid ground beyond the slide area. She knew Steven bore most of the weight. He also broke the trail, picking his footing with care. She hauled her dad's legs, both the broken one and the other, and that was almost more than she could manage.

It seemed like it took them all afternoon, but the sun was still well up when they reached solid ground, a couple hundred yards from the site of the accident. They laid Jack on the ground so they could rest for a few minutes.

"What do we do now?" Nellie had to ask.

Steven looked first at Nellie, then at her father, apparently still out cold. "If we go the most direct way, it's not that far back to your ranch. I can travel the distance in six or eight hours. If we can get your father on my back and you up behind to hold him, I think I can get us there before morning."

Nellie's eyes went wide. "Pa weighs close to two hundred pounds, and I'm no feather. That's a lot to carry, 'specially when the ground isn't level or smooth. Lots of steep hills between here and home."

Steven shrugged one shoulder, as if it were of no matter. "I can judge my own strength, Lenore. If I say I can do it, I can. There's no time to waste."

In an instant he had shifted. He then folded his legs and got down, right beside Jack's still form. :: I can't help you much now, but see if you can lift your father's good leg over my back. Then get his arm over my neck. I'll turn and nudge him with my head to help as much as I can.::

It was a heck of a struggle. Nellie was wringing wet and shaking

with fatigue when she finally had her father semi-straddling Steven's back, slumped over his neck. She eased to a seat behind him and locked her arms around his body. There was no way now that she could hold Steven's mane. She'd just have to grip hard with her legs and try to keep her balance. There would be no galloping this time.

As smoothly as the sun slipped up over the mountains, Steven got to his feet. ::Hold on tight, Lenore. I will go as easily as I can, pick the best ways. I know it'll be hard, but do your best to keep him from slipping off. I'll do mine to stay under the two of you.::

She muttered a prayer before she put her trust in her new lover. If the task is possible, he'll do it. She was sure that shifters had special powers in both their human and their animal forms. This once she would do exactly as she was told, too. After this, maybe Pa will be willing to forget his vendetta against the red stallion 'cause he'll owe Steven his very life.

CHAPTER 6

Two months later

It's my wedding day. Man alive, I never thought I'd see it. Just weeks ago I had no idea.

Nellie stood patiently while Mary Red Squirrel laced up the corset, then slipped the ivory satin gown over her head and settled the rustling folds in place. In just a few minutes she would go downstairs. There the circuit riding preacher waited, along with all the folks from miles around who'd come to witness the event of the decade. Jack Campbell's wild daughter is getting hitched. Out of all that gathering, there was only one she really wanted to see.

Elegant in a tailored suit of fine English wool, Steven Johns would be waiting. His beautiful face and form would stand out like a lantern amid guttering candles. She knew his gaze would be only on her as soon as she came into view. Then, in a few more minutes, she'd be Mrs. Lenore Johns.

She still wasn't sure how much Pa understood about what all had happened. He knew she and Steven had rescued him and brought him home after the accident. He seemed to understand there was some connection between Steven and the rogue stallion, but she didn't think he'd ever fully believe the two were one and the same.

He'd be in no shape to go chasing across the country, though, not for a long time...if ever.

Anyway, when the stolen mares had begun to return to the ranches from which they'd been taken, the urgency to capture the wild stud faded. No one was anxious to go see if there were some mustangs and Indian mares hiding in the hills somewhere with the red stallion leading them. Almost overnight, the rogue stallion slipped into the realm of legend, no longer a threat or a hazard, but merely the subject of campfire stories.

Things were changing on the Campbell ranch, too. Already the sign out at the main gate had been modified to read Campbell-Johns Land and Cattle Company, and the official brand was now the Bar Lazy CJ.

Jack's cast had come off two days ago. The doctor pronounced him healed, but admitted it might be quite a while before the aging rancher would do much rough riding. Anyway, the black gelding, his favorite mount, was gone. Jack had already begun to turn over the management of the ranch to his future son-in-law and the daughter he had trained for twenty-some years to be a top hand and a real rancher. He said he was about ready to retire and start taking things easier. He might even move into Elko and maybe run a stable or find work as a livestock broker.

Nellie took a quick look at herself in the cheval mirror her mother had brought from Ireland. She hardly recognized herself. Gussied up this way, she could almost pass for a real Lenore. Her hair was piled in a fancy heap on her head, with curls spiraling down from one side. It hadn't been so clean since the first time Steven washed it for her. It shone with fiery golden highlights, like a certain sorrel horse.

She was still browned from the sun, but somehow the ivory of her gown softened that tan. Her eyes looked huge and very bright. *Oh, my, I look like a fairy tale princess. I kinda feel like one, too. 'N' I sure enough got me a prince charming to marry. Am I a lucky girl or what?*

With that, she marched downstairs. Pa waited at the foot of the staircase. She slipped her hand through his arm. "Ready, Pa?"

He looked at her, his eyes shining with moisture. "You look just like your ma, Nellie. She'd be so proud to see you today. I am, too. And you got yourself a good man. I'm not going to ask how and where. Reckon it really don't matter none, but your Steven is a good man. I'm anxious to see the crop of foals you two produce. Time I had some grandchildren."

He grinned and winked then, leaving Nellie to wonder if somehow he knew more about the real situation than she had guessed. She slowed her pace to match his, for he still walked with a bit of a limp, but he'd been adamant no one else was going to take his place to give his daughter away.

They rounded the corner to the big parlor and Nellie could see nothing except Steven. She had never seen anything so splendid in all her life. It was likely she never would again—except she'd be waking up beside him every morning. Still, he wouldn't be all dressed up like a prince or some diplomat. *Lordy, but he's magnificent!*

The rest of the day passed in a blur. They exchanged vows and rings, Nellie got her first kiss as a wife, and the celebration kicked into high gear. Finally the dining and dancing and all the rest was over with. Together they climbed the stairs to Nellie's room. In the morning they'd be headed off to San Francisco for their honeymoon, but tonight, they'd be here.

Since his accident Pa had bedded down in a small room off the parlor, which suited her just fine tonight. It had been almost two weeks

since she'd enjoyed Steven's ardent attentions. That meant she was likely to be a little noisy tonight and she'd just as soon Pa wasn't right across the hall to listen.

Closing the door to secure their privacy, Steven turned to look at her, a wide smile brightening his handsome face. "Don't ever try to tell me you're too much of a hoyden to be a Lenore. I know better. If you looked in the mirror today, you do, too."

She nodded slowly. "Yes, I know. I did. I still think I like me better as Nellie, but Lenore is real fine for special occasions. Right now, though, I just want to be the favorite filly of one rogue stallion."

With his rumbling chuckle, Steven stepped closer. He applied deft hands to the task of unfastening many buttons, untying laces and releasing draw strings, until the whole mass of elegant clothing fell into a silky pool around her feet. He lifted her free of the heap and plopped her down smack in the middle of the new, big feather mattress on the new brass bedstead in the center of the room. She sank into the fluffy bed, bare as the day she was born, and unabashed about it.

Nellie looked up at Steven, a grin stretching her face. "Now who's overdressed?"

"That'll be remedied very soon," he replied, already divesting himself of garments, which were flung here and there in haste. Within moments he stood beside the bed, clad only in his glowing tawny skin and a hungry-looking smile.

Before she could do a thing, he bent forward smoothly and nuzzled her side, making a snorting noise as he did it. Then he bent a little farther and repeated the action on her other side. Settling onto one knee, he reached down and flipped her over onto her stomach. The next instant she felt the warmth and weight of his body pressing against her back. He buried his face in the tangle of loosening hair at the back of her neck, pushing it aside with his nose and chin. Then he nipped once, twice, three times, first where her left shoulder flowed upward to her neck, then the same spot on the right side and finally over the little bone that would be her withers if she were a mare.

Weak with giggles, yet blazing with lusty, urgent hunger, she bounced and wriggled beneath him. "Dang you, you just had to do it, didn't you?"

"Do what?" His voice was all innocence, as if he had no idea what she was talking about.

"Snort in my flanks and bite my neck! Is that how it's going to be now that we're married?"

"That and much, much more, my sweet, hot filly. I've given up the best of my herd, sending all those mares home, so we have to get busy making some new foals to grow it again."

She could feel his powerful cock swelling and pushing against her butt. She wanted to get up on her knees and open to him, but she couldn't lift against his weight. She bounced again, hoping he'd get the idea.

He did. No one could ever accuse Steven of being slow. He reared back, up onto his knees and lifting her at the same time. With a firm grip on either side of her waist, he held her, arse in the air and nudged her knees wider with one of his. She was dripping wet and burning, aching for the feel of him inside her.

"Come on, my rogue! Cover this filly before she goes up in flames!"

The next instant, he thrust into her. There were no barriers to break now. He fucked her, hard and fast, like they both wanted. She let out a whoop as the smashing climax hit, clenching her pussy in a series of spasms. She felt him come, a hot spurt deep inside her. They both collapsed, weak with pleasure.

After a few minutes, Steven rolled onto his back. Nellie twisted around to sit up at his side. She reached for the massive shaft that gave her such delight. It didn't take long to have him erect again, just a few strokes and licks did the job. Before he could do anything about it, she shifted to straddle him.

"I've decided I do like to ride bareback," she announced as she settled herself over him, twisting her hips in slow circles until she was completely impaled on him, her plump cheeks resting against his balls. "I like it a whole lot."

"Well, sugar, you just ride to your heart's content. I'm right here beneath you."

There was no question about it—Nellie had captured the rogue stallion. She wasn't ever going to let him get away either.

DEIRDRE O'DARE

Deirdre O'Dare, who also writes milder (roughly PG-13 rated) romance as Gwynn Morgan, has loved reading and writing since early childhood. Writing came naturally to Deirdre/Gwynn, who scribed her first simple verse at age eight. An avid reader, she devoured hundreds of books while growing up and later as an adult. Somewhere along the way she found romance and then romance with more explicit and detailed love scenes. "Ah ha," said she, "I think I have found my niche!" In the last decade after leaving her "day job" as a civilian employee of the U. S. Army, she finally settled into romantic fiction writing as a second career. Deirdre has a growing number of shorts and novellas, all published by Amber Heat.

With Irish and Welsh ancestry on both sides of her family, Deirdre has always been enthralled by the history and customs of the Celtic peoples as they have come down to us. The Mother Goddess idea particularly resonates with her as well as the notion that physical expressions of love between consenting couples are both a divine gift and a sacred duty to honor the Mother. Deirdre admits her favorite heroes are cops, cowboys and Celts.

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Don't miss Doggone Love, by Deirdre O'Dare, available at AmberHeat.com!

Solitary rancher Damon Carhart expects to spend the rest of his life alone. Then an injury to a beloved stock dog sends him to the nearest veterinary clinic for help. His crusty old veterinarian friend is away and in his place is a young doctor in whom Damon initially has no faith. Once he entrusts his canine friend to Eric Vann's care, everything begins to change. And once desire gets a bite on him, what can he do but go along for the wild ride?

Eric Vann has loved animals all his life, following in an uncle's footsteps to become a veterinarian. He knows that if he ever finds a soul mate, it will be another male. When Damon comes in, fierce in defense of his favorite dog, Eric is immediately captivated. Can he overcome the other man's instinctive resistance to the powerful attraction that begins almost at once?

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