

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



LONE STAR  
*Lycan*  
REGINA CARLYSLE

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Lone Star Lycan

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# *LONE STAR LYCAN*

**Regina Carlisle**

### *Dedication*

For critique partners old and new. Where would I be without you? And to my very patient and supportive family, I love you guys.

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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## **Chapter One**

Quinn Harlow tightened her hands on the steering wheel and squinted behind the lenses of her Walmart sunglasses. Nerves skittered along her spine and despite the blast of the air conditioner in her little compact car, sweat beaded along her forehead. Reaching into the one really good, black leather bag she owned, she grabbed a tissue and dabbed at the wetness gathering along her hairline. The big limestone archway stretching across the dusty road featured an iron-worked sign that read Wolf Creek Ranch. Yep. This was it. She pulled to a stop and stared at it as the implications set in.

The father she'd never known was being buried today.

A nagging sadness balled tightly in her chest. How she'd longed for a father who actually loved and wanted her. Instead she'd suffered the cruelties of Decker Harlow, who'd never failed to remind her she was something to be tolerated but never loved. Now, at age thirty-two, she'd finally learned the identity of her real father and that he'd wanted her all along. But now it was too late. He was dead and she'd never know what kind of man he was or be accepted as a daughter.

Tears burned behind her eyes but she blinked hard, refusing to let them fall. Self-pity wasn't her way. Time to pull up the big girl panties and play the cards she'd been dealt. One hand at a time. That was her motto and right now she had to face the unpleasantness of death and its aftereffects on those left behind.

Dealing with a bunch of strangers would be her mission for the foreseeable future. She wasn't the kind of woman who liked being thrust into the spotlight this way and there was no doubt in her mind that those attending the service of Bartholomew Fitzpatrick would wonder just who the hell she was. They'd try to figure out why she was there. They'd speculate and stare. No, she wasn't a coward but being gawked at had never been her idea of fun. For the millionth time since leaving her little town in

east Texas, she wished Graham were with her. Her best friend and sometime lover would have her laughing at something dumb and forgetting that today she was facing a part of her mother's past she'd known zero about.

Putting off the inevitable, Quinn reached up and flipped the car mirror to check her make-up. It was fine. She smoothed the skirt of her black linen halter dress hoping it wasn't too wrinkled from the long drive. A hard seven-hour drive with only two or three stops. Yeah, she had more stamina than just about anyone she knew but this was ridiculous.

When the phone rang, she reached into a cup holder and snatched up the cell. It was Graham. She sighed and pressed the button. "Hey! How'd you know I'd need to hear a friendly voice right about now?"

"Hell, honey, I know you. Don't be nervous okay? You there yet?"

Quinn blew out a breath, knowing she had to keep this conversation short and sweet. "Yeah, just now. I wish you could've come with me."

"Sorry. Too much work," he said. "I'll come out next week though if you want. I'm due some time off. I know your father's attorney said you should plan to stay for a while. They'll be reading a will. Hm. Think the old man might've left you something?"

"This isn't about money, Graham, though lord knows with me about to lose my business, it would sure come in handy. No, the big thing is that I never even knew about this man. I Googled him the other night. Did I tell you?"

She heard the whinny of a horse and realized he was probably doing something in the barn. Graham Jones was the ranch foreman at one of the biggest ranches in the piney woods. A real man's man. It was unfortunate they'd been friends too long for anything other than an occasional weekend of recreational sex. "I already told you, darlin', Wolf Creek is a pretty well-known ranch. A nice big spread from what I've heard. Wonder why Miss Virginia never told you about him?"

Quinn leaned back and closed her eyes. She and her mom had always been close and it was hard to believe her mother had never said much about the man who'd

fathered her. Every time she'd asked, she would note the look of pain that would cross her sweet mother's face and finally she'd stopped with the questions. Virginia Harlow had died over a year ago and Quinn had long ago been through all the papers and there was nothing there to indicate the identity of the man who'd fathered her. "Well, she must've had her reasons but I swear, I'll never understand. Now everything's coming down around my ears and I don't know how I'll get through the next week without you."

Graham chuckled. "You will. You're a tough little cuss."

"Little? Surely you jest."

"With you? Always."

"Gotta go, sugar. Wish me luck."

"You know it," he said before disconnecting.

Now that her lifeline was off the phone, she drew in a deep breath and started the car again. She had no clue what was facing her, what animosity she might feel from the ranch hands or other friends and neighbors. She was a stranger, an outsider and an intruder. At least that's how it felt. Driving down the dusty ranch road, she saw a clearing off to the right and headed down the well-worn trail. The funeral would be over by now but she'd planned it that way. She'd never been a coward but the idea of coming of grips with the death of the father she'd never known wasn't something she wanted to face while in the midst of a crowd.

Quinn squinted behind the lenses of her sunglasses and spotted the private cemetery on a rise sheltered by the shade of several huge cottonwood trees. A lone cowboy stood there, a mountain of a man, his shoulder length, russet-colored hair snapping in the breeze. He wasn't wearing a suit but his posture was one of mourning. He stood with his head slightly bent in front of a flower-covered grave. With it's newly turned earth, she was pretty sure her father rested there. The giant wore faded jeans and a long-sleeved black shirt rolled up along his sturdy forearms, perhaps his idea of funeral clothes. A black Stetson dangled from one massive hand.

Alarm bells flashed in her brain and she sucked in a breath. The weird intuition she'd always possessed cried out at the waves of fury and grief that surrounded him.

When she drew closer, his head went up and he turned. Savage, fierce beauty marked his rough-hewn face as looked her, giving her an eyeful of his heavily muscled chest and shoulders. Wavy hair that she'd thought was a simple brown was liberally streaked by shades of gold around his deeply tanned face.

She sucked in a breath and stopped the car, wondering at the sudden pounding of her heart, the rapid acceleration of her pulse. Never once did the cowboy move, but he continued to watch her. A shiver that had nothing to do with the air conditioning in the car whipped over her suddenly clammy skin.

As a feeling of destiny held her in its grip, she faced it like she'd faced everything else in her life...with grim determination accompanied by a healthy dose of fear.

Turning off the ignition, she stared through the windshield at this hotter-than-hell man and removed her sunglasses. Though she didn't think he was dangerous, there was a predatory air about him that put her senses on alert. She'd greet this stranger head-on without hiding behind the cheap plastic lenses. Quinn tossed the sunglasses into the passenger seat and grabbed up a bouquet of yellow daisies she'd picked up at a small floral shop in the tiny town of Cloverfield before she'd headed out to the ranch.

Clutching her meager offering to the dead, she opened the car door and stepped out into the flat grassy field.

"Hi, I'm—"

"Quinn. Bart's daughter." The low-growling baritone voice didn't surprise her coming from such a big man. Unsmiling, he nodded once, placed the battered black Stetson on his head and shoved the brim back.

"Um, yeah. That's what they tell me."

"I'm Joe McKinnon, ranch foreman here at Wolf Creek. I've been waiting for you."

"I'm sorry about missing the service."



He shook his head and she noticed that with the brim of his cowboy hat tilted back that way she had a great glimpse of his interesting gold-colored eyes. "Don't worry about it. Bart wouldn't have given a damn. A funeral is just a show, after all. I wasn't there either. Don't like crowds."

Figured. Finally, she smiled and offered her hand. "Something we have in common, cowboy. Nice to meet you." She took a step toward him but the heel of her black patent pumps hit the bottom of a hole in the ground. Crying out, she stumbled. Her knee started to buckle but before she could even blink, Joe had an arm around her and was effortlessly holding her upright.

How had that happened? He'd stood several yards away and she hadn't seen anything but a blur before he'd saved her from falling on her butt. Maybe the heat was getting to her. Quinn shook her head. "Sorry. Clumsy."

"Doubt there's a clumsy bone in your body considering who you're related to, darlin'," he murmured. His breath was warm against her ear as his arm tightened incrementally around her waist. He smelled like sunshine and heat. Utterly delicious.

She glanced up, surprised to see his gaze focused on her lips. Realization hit her like a punch and the flash of lust that whipped through her body was beyond inappropriate considering where they were but she just couldn't help it. Heat seeped into her core, drenching her panties. She clutched the rapidly wilting daisies close to her chest wondering briefly what the hell she'd gotten herself into. "Thank you."

"Careful now," he said. "This land isn't meant for ladies wearin' high heels. We'll just take it slow." Joe didn't give a damn what she might think about him wrapping his arm around her waist to hold her close. Minutes before she'd arrived, he could smell her in the wind, taste her in the air. Her nearness taunted him with what awaited. She was the future of his clan. The survival of their species.

With purely animal senses, carefully honed as he'd grown into his place in the Wolf Creek Clan, Joe McKinnon lifted his face to the sunlight as they walked to the grave. He

was the foreman here where they all lived and hunted together. A trio of tumbleweeds dipped and rolled through the hot, dusty breeze to finally bounce and settle along the aged tombstones in the family cemetery.

When they reached it, he finally let her go and watched as she bent to place her offering among the other flowers. Giving her space to pay her respects, he stepped back and drank in the sight of her. A whole helluva lot of woman! Bart's daughter and his destined *lupa*, stood at well over six feet in the dumb high heels, and she had curves. Lots and lots of curves. Damn, but he wanted to sink his fingers into the flesh of her nice ass and run them over her belly and generous breasts. Lust and heat flared to life in his gut and despite the current situation and the fact they were standing at her father's grave, his cock twitched and grew. She was a pretty thing and the kind of woman who made his blood heat to dangerous levels. Whoever said a stick-skinny woman was the model of female perfection ought to be fucking shot.

The midafternoon sunlight caught and reflected on her streaked golden blonde hair. She wore it back at the nape of her neck in some kind of twist but it was thick, heavy stuff. Her cheekbones were high, her mouth lush and kissable and those piercing aqua-colored eyes could drop a man at twenty paces. What a woman like her could do to a man like him sent a blast of vivid imagery through his brain. His gums tingled and the hair on his arms stood at attention. His cock throbbed.

She was the best kind of comfort for a lonely man.

Finally she turned, brushed back a few strands of hair that whipped around her face and Joe caught his breath at the knowledge he saw in her eyes. Nervously, she sank her teeth in her bottom lip and he watched her focus on his chest. Yeah, he was a helluva big man and he scared women silly, for the most part but it wasn't fear he sensed or smelled. It was lust. Heat. Passion.

His body responded violently until his cock thickened. A low growl hummed in his throat but he caught himself in time. She didn't yet realize she was dealing with someone who was more beast than man. Soon. "Finished?"

"Yeah. I think so," she looked back at the grave, her expression suddenly sad and a little lost. "I wish I'd known him. I hope he'd –"

"Be proud?"

She looked back, her eyes went soft with that look that women get when emotion is riding hard and deep. "You understand a lot, don't you?"

Since he wanted to grab her up, he shoved his thumbs in the back pockets of his jeans. "I knew Bart. Man raised me from the time I was a pup. He didn't know about you."

"That's what I figured."

"Wasn't going to stop looking until he found you but by the time he did and sent the private investigator to contact you, he was gone."

"The lawyer, um...Mr. Mann, told me it was sudden."

Joe went still as the memory of blood and death whipped through his mind. A single shot to the head would kill any one of them. Despite the length of a wolf's life and their natural healing abilities, a shot to the heart or a headshot was too much even for those of their species. "Yeah."

Waves of grief mixed with anger hit him hard.

Suddenly Quinn gasped softly and went to him. One hand went fearlessly to his cheek and the warmth of that touch threatened to bring him to his knees. "You're hurting," she whispered. "I can feel it."

If he hadn't known she was his destined mate before, he knew it now. Her empathic abilities would've been minimal until now and would only become full-blown when she met her true mate. Joe's heart pounded at his newfound knowledge. A rush of acknowledgment tore through his system as he settled his face in the palm of her hand. He smelled her compassion blended wildly with lust and sucked in a breath at how damn good it felt to have her hands on him.

Too soon. Couldn't risk freaking her out and sending her running back to east Texas before he'd mated with her, made her his. And she was. She just didn't know it yet.

Joe's eyes connected with hers and without warning the air changed. Energy whipped and popped like a current between them. He was a man. But he was also a wolf. He'd take what was his. Quinn's pupils dilated, her gaze focused sharply. "I don't un—"

"You don't have to understand." The words came out raw and rough but she didn't flinch. "Not now. Just feel it, Quinn. Do you? Feel it?"

"Yeah. Yes, Joe."

Her hand left his face to thread up through his hair. His battered, banged up Stetson fell from his head but he didn't give a shit. All he wanted was more of her touch, the balm of her compassion, tenderness mixed with sexual hunger. With a low sound, he reached out, grabbed her close. Standing before Bart's grave, he wanted to howl at the seductive pleasure of her breasts pressing against his chest. Her nipples had gone hard and they stabbed against him. Her breath, sweet and warm, brushed against his throat and then she looked up, knowledge as old as time, branded there.

As his blood roared he took her face and kissed her, savored her, taking what should have been a simple thing to another level. His tongue swept the recesses of her mouth as he tasted her fully, hungrily. And she returned each stroke. It was like a homecoming, a joining like he'd never experienced in his whole fucking long life. He drew her closer as his hands took a journey over her soft ass and he did what he'd wanted to do from the moment he'd seen her bending over that damn grave.

He sank his fingers deep and worked her flesh, bringing her closer to his hard cock. Growling, he jerked her against him. Her pussy, pressed close against the denim fly of his jeans, was hotter than the fires of hell. The scent of her instant arousal teased him, made him wild to take her. Right out here in the middle of the damn prairie. With the sun beating down. With the wind moaning in tandem with the sounds they made.

Using his preternatural strength, he lifted her, raking his erection over the notch between her gorgeous long legs and growling when Quinn's breathing accelerated. Lust held her as surely as it gripped him. Again and again, he dragged his cock over her pussy, feeling her heat, loving her passionate response as she twisted to get closer.

Joe buried his face against her hair as she clung. "Damn, woman."

His hand dipped below the hem of her dress to touch warm flesh. She wore a thong. Yes. He sank his fingers...three of them, into her clasping cunt. God, she was slick and steamy and wet. Quinn trembled in his arms and sent one leg around his hip to bring him closer. Every inch of her curvy body thrilled him.

"This is wrong."

"Uh-uh. Sex like this is right anyway you look at it, darlin'."

"Joe."

He finger-fucked her delicious pussy and felt those sweet, little muscles squeeze against the invasion. He flicked her clit with his thumb and heard her gasp. So close. Damn, she was close. He could feel it and he didn't give a hot fuck when they were or that they'd just met. The power of the connection was impossible to deny.

Suddenly, he stiffened as another scent hit his nostrils. It was predatory and male. Joe drew his fingers from her dripping body, smoothed the dress over her butt and turned his head, ignoring the startled sound she made. "Company," he murmured. "Hang on."

While Quinn buried her face against his throat, he looked over to find Ringo Ramóné leaning casually against a tree on the other side of the graveyard.

"Shoulda made your presence known sooner, Ringo," he said. "What do you need?"

Ringo quirked his lips in a one-sided semblance of a smile and straightened his lean, rangy body. His black eyes narrowed and his nostril flared as he scented Quinn's

arousal. Joe's low growl must've alerted him to danger because he looked away. Joe didn't want to fight one of his men over a female, at least not today.

Ringo pulled his battered cowboy hat low over his brow, effectively hiding those spooky-as-hell eyes and shrugged. "Thought you'd want to know the company all left the house. You'll be safe to head on over there, if you want."

After the dark, dangerous wolf ambled off, Joe sighed, wishing for a second he could've spared Quinn any embarrassment. But then, he remembered how good the silky-wet petals of her pussy felt against his hand, how sweet her kisses were and how right she was in his arms, and every regret dissolved.

Joe knew he was a bear of a man and he wasn't known to have a tender emotion but as carefully as if she were made of glass, he pressed his mouth to her hair and removed her leg from around his hip. When she looked up, he noted the high color on her cheeks and felt sorry for it. But more than that, he wanted to comfort when that wasn't in his nature at all. Holding her gaze, he lifted his drenched fingers to his mouth and drew his tongue slowly over them. "We're not finished with this, darlin'. Not by a long shot. Still, we've got a lot to talk about."

He cupped the sides of her head, kissed her, long and slowly, gently devouring, then pulled away. "You okay?"

Quinn's laugh was a little shaky. "Um. Not sure about that right at the moment."

"We'll make it all better soon. I promise. How about you give me a ride to the house in that little bitty car of yours, Quinn, and we'll work on getting to know each other better?"

## **Chapter Two**

Quinn couldn't stop shaking, her panties were wet with her arousal and every nerve she possessed sat up and screamed at the need for sexual fulfillment. Lord, she needed to come and it was all Joe's fault. Sitting in an overstuffed leather chair in the massive office at the ranch house, she hid her need to squirm by crossing her legs and trying to concentrate. The lawyer from town, Tobias Mann, was shuffling papers next to her. Odd that he didn't sit behind the desk to read the will but no, Joe sat there, leaning forward, his massive forearms crossed, his fierce golden eyes studying her with an intensity that was alarming.

Everything about this place stirred something primitive deep inside her. They'd arrived at the house in record time. A strange sort of power...yeah, that was it, power, had filled her small car. Further words hadn't been spoken except for the occasional directions and before long they were pulling up in front of the monstrously huge limestone house. History was stamped on it. From the rocks, a weathered pale gray, to the big windows and the old-fashioned balcony the ran along the front and sides of the building, it screamed "old Texas" and Quinn suspected this house had been here long before statehood. The Lone Star flag, suspended from a high pole, snapped in the breeze when they'd stepped from the car and gone inside.

Men were everywhere and, wow, did they ever make 'em huge in West Texas. Graham was a big guy but there was something vastly different about this group of cowboys. There was a wildness about them, an untamed quality as they lounged around the place and watched her with greedy eyes. The scent of food was heavy in the air and off in the distance she heard the sounds of clanging pots and pans and quiet conversation.

Joe didn't give her time to investigate and allowed no delay for introductions but swept her into a massive study. If she had been a meek sort of woman, she might have found the room intimidating in its overt masculinity. Framed oils of wolves on the hunt and other western scenes splashed the buttery walls with color and over a giant stone fireplace mantel was a framed portrait of her father. She didn't have to be told it was him. The family resemblance was too strong. Quinn had never looked a thing like her dainty mother but the proof of her paternity stared back at her from the painting, those laser-sharp blue eyes presenting the knowledge like a gift from the hereafter.

Now she sat here waiting for answers to the millions of questions running roughshod through her brain. A feeling of anticipation raced at warp-speed, making her heart pound as her gaze clashed with Joe's. There was a stillness about him, an aura of strength and Quinn knew he was much more than a simple ranch foreman. Next to her, Tobias Mann cleared his throat.

"Let's get started here, Quinn," he said, as he leaned back and studied her. Damn. but he looked like no lawyer she'd ever seen before. His sandy-blond hair was thick and worn longer than the norm. His mossy green eyes were sharp with intelligence. Like the others she'd seen today, he was big and lean, a sharp-featured man whose only claim to any kind of softness seemed to be in the lines of his sensual lips. "I'm sure you have a lot of questions."

She laughed a little. "Only about a million. Our conversation was so short after my...um, my dad died, and the private investigator didn't really tell me anything except that he'd been looking for me for awhile."

Tobias looked at Joe, who made a husky sound and leaned back in his chair. "Bart didn't know he had a daughter until recently. It was purely by accident, he stumbled across the information that a woman he'd been involved with had died and had a daughter. Another man was listed as her husband so he assumed Decker Harlow was your father."

Quinn stiffened. "That man was no kind of father."



She watched a muscle work in Joe's strong jaw and sensed his anger. How much did he know about her? Probably everything from the flash of heat she saw in his eyes. "Yep. That's what we all figured. Understand he met a violent end."

All?

Before she could ask him to clarify the strange wording, Tobias spoke quietly, watching her so carefully she wanted to squirm. "He was beaten by unidentified thugs outside a bar in Pleasant Creek. Found later in the woods, torn to pieces by coyotes."

"That's what the police said," she whispered. "I hated him but no one should have to die like that."

"He died like the animal he was, Quinn," Joe snapped.

She jerked, giving him a sharp look. "How do you know? How do you know he was an animal?"

He went still. "Nothing specific. The private investigator told us, your father and I, that he had a violent temper, that he was a drunk and, well, basically an asshole."

"Good PI."

"We only hire the best. After your mom died, it was rumored he harassed you. Bothered you."

Quinn looked away, anywhere but at the knowing glint in his eyes. Tobias had gone quiet but chimed in finally, his words rough with emotion. "Bottom line, Quinn, he lived like an animal and he died like one."

"Death is pretty fucking violent, darlin', no matter how you look at it," Joe said gruffly. "Most of us aren't lucky enough to die in our sleep."

Sucking in a breath, she looked at the two men. "You're right about that, I guess. Birth and death, two of the most violent things there is."

"Bart would've been proud of you." Tobias gave her a smile and she sensed it was something he didn't do very often.

She clasped her hands to stop their trembling. Would he have been proud as these men insisted? Pain gripped her hard. "How did he die?"

Joe blew out a breath. "Hunting accident."

"He was shot?"

"Through the head. His death was instantaneous, Quinn, he didn't suffer."

"Was-was he alone?"

Tobias shifted, the soft whine of the overhead fan, the only sound in the room. "Yes, he was alone. He often went into the woods on the property late at night. Liked communing with nature. We figure hunters were trespassing and he was hit by a stray bullet."

"Thank you for telling me," she said.

Tobias leaned forward to pat her arm and Quinn smiled. A sound, like a low growl hummed in the air but surely it was her imagination. Tobias sat back abruptly and cleared his throat. "Sorry. You are part of us now, Quinn, and I know you have a lot of questions but the most important thing for you to know now is that you, along with Joe, have inherited the responsibility of this place. The ranch and all that comes with it is yours and Joe's equally. To be shared."

Stunned, she blinked at the lawyer and then looked at Joe, who watched quietly. This ranch had to be worth a fortune and yes, Bart Fitzgerald was her father but he'd never known her. This was unbelievable. "But what if I don't want this place? I have a life. I have a business to run. Granted, it's nothing big but it's mine. It's something I've worked hard to maintain. I can't just change my life at the drop of a hat."

"You can and you will, Quinn." Joe made the stark pronouncement. He stood and walked to a big window where he leaned against the frame. The late afternoon sunlight reflected on the stark masculinity of his face and sent flashes of color through his golden eyes. "Leave us, Tobias. I'll finish this with Quinn."

"Yes, lord."

Lord?

Okay. Had she landed in an alternate dimension? Was she caught in some weird time warp where people addressed other as lord?

But she didn't have time to dwell on that now. Joe expected her to drop everything, leave her life, her home and live out here in the damn wilderness. Well, nobody told her what to do and that was a fact. At the sound of Tobias leaving and the door snapping closed, she stood and glared at Joe.

"I know I let you get a little friendly out there at the cemetery. Too damn friendly." She rolled her eyes. "Jeez, talk about an understatement. I don't know what possessed me. A moment of madness I reckon, but I won't be dictated to by you or by my dead father. Got that, Joe?"

Joe turned more fully toward her and for the first time she saw a hint of humor gentle the lines of his lips. "I know what possessed you, darlin'. Pure and simple, it was lust, sexual power. A need to be fucked long and hard by a man who understands you. You felt the connection between us and you can try all damn day to deny it but it was there."

She wanted to refute it, spit it out at him, tell him he was wrong but he advanced, rounded the desk in two long strides to jerk her into his arms and it was as if the very breath was sucked from her lungs. His big hands roamed the surface of her bare arms and all that heat tore through her like a blast as he took her mouth. Silenced. Submissive. She'd never felt that way before. A woman who spoke her mind and dominated those around her with the force of her size and personality, she was suddenly new. Brand new.

His tongue swept with devastating precision into the cavern of her mouth, leaving Quinn to drink his breath, taste the wild flavor of this stranger. But he didn't feel like a stranger, as his tongue tangled with hers. The feel of his massive chest pressed against her breasts seemed predestined, something she'd known before and had ached to explore in her naughtiest dreams. Quinn's nipples tightened sharply. Joe must've felt it

too because he broke the kiss, sucked in a breath and buried his face against the curve of her shoulder.

Lost. She was lost in sensation to the point she hardly noticed when the edge of the giant walnut desk nudged her butt. Joe made a sound of frustration, half-growl, half-groan and Quinn felt him touch the nape of her neck and fumble with the big button that held up the halter of the black linen dress. She couldn't think. Couldn't muster a protest, when the fabric loosened and he latched onto a diamond-hard nipple with his hungry mouth.

He sucked hard sending a zip of energy through that pleasure point where it arrowed sharply downward to curl low in her belly. A gush of moisture rained from her pussy, further dampening her sorry excuse for panties. Joe drew back to give her a molten stare, full of promise and heat, before he lowered his eyes to take in her bare breasts. "Damn, woman. You're the sweetest thing I've even seen."

He moved in, pressed closer and she felt his rock-hard erection nudge against her. The gasp he called from her sounded more like a whimper to her ears and then she couldn't think at all as he took her nipples between his fingers to pluck and pull.

"Can't wait. Can't play. Damn."

Joe bent his head, stroked an aching nipple with his tongue. "Sweet," he rumbled in that low baritone and Quinn swore she could feel the vibrations of the sound echo through her body like heavy, rumbling thunder. He drew hard, then softer, scraping tender flesh with his teeth. Quinn shook. Trembled. Then suddenly Joe grabbed her waist and lifted her until she was planted firmly on the desk. He yanked her legs open and moved between them, fumbling with the skirt of her dress until it was lifted high and out of the way. The cooler air in the room met the melting heat of her pussy and her clit throbbed with a sweet ache. With unerring accuracy, he reached for the swollen knot of nerves and plucked gently, rubbed tenderly. "Fuck, you're wet. Hot and wet. I'm gonna eat this pussy, suck your gorgeous clit until you scream. That okay with you?"

“God!”

Dizzily caught up in the passion of the moment, she watched him looking at her with a fierce intensity. His gaze was riveted on her mound covered in the scrap of silky black. Then suddenly his hands moved and he whipped the panties from her body, down her legs and tossed them aside. He jerked off her sensible pumps and dropped them too.

“Fuck.” He said the word low but didn’t touch her. The hesitation caused a strange little thrill to zip through her bloodstream. His gaze whipped up then down again and finally, hell yes, finally he touched her. Featherlight, the stroke ran the length of her slit to circle her clit, never touching where she needed it most.

The sound of frustrated hunger she made eventually formed a word. “Yes.”

Two words. “Please, Joe.”

Then again, that faint trembling voice. “Yesyesyes. Touch me.”

Her dress was bunched around her waist but other than that, she was naked, willing, a suppliant to whatever this big man wanted.

And he wanted everything.

She knew it with every soft panting sound she made, every blast of sexual hunger that ran through her like a swiftly running current. Settling her palms on the desk, she leaned back on her arms and widened her legs. When had the slut-gene become so dominant? The whimsical thought died as he groaned and stroked her wet pussy. Joe plucked her clit and she cried out at the pleasure. The feral intensity etched on his face made her ache for more, made her wish she knew his thoughts.

Then, like lightning striking, she did.

She felt him.

Impossible!

It was like that moment in the cemetery when she’d felt his loneliness and pain. The sorrow. But this time the emotion she felt from him was different. Blasts of hunger tore

through her, stole her breath. Loneliness, a lingering ache, was there too and then Joe sank his fingers deep into her channel. Had a man ever wanted her so much? She didn't think so.

"Ah, yeah, that's a sweet little cunt. Squeeze your pussy on my fingers, darlin'. Yeah, like that. Again. Need to come, don't you?"

Quinn couldn't muster an answer as he finger-fucked her, long and slow. Every nerve ending sat up and howled. Her head dropped back. She wanted to come quick and sharp but the thought of losing the moment was terrifying.

Suddenly, he withdrew his fingers and she whimpered at the loss.

"Shh, honey. Let's get you fixed up."

Joe reached behind her and swiped his arm across the desk sending paper, pens and a small, bronze wolf sculpture to settle on the carpet with a muted thud. He laid her back, spread her out like a sacrifice on the desk. Grabbing her legs and lifting, he settled her bare feet flat on the surface. Quinn looked at the ceiling noting the huge fan circling slowly overhead. The sun was waning now giving a soft glow to the room. She looked at Joe standing over her, studying her with that quiet stillness that was so damn sexy. His callused hands ran the length of her legs from ankle to knee and then he opened her fully to his gaze. His fingers trailed her inner thighs and rambled upward until the base of his palm rubbed the layered-flesh of her pussy.

Quinn gasped. Tension tightened her belly and her legs quivered.

He plunged his fingers deep and she saw his head disappear between her thighs. Holy shit! His hungry mouth took her pussy, lapping slowly, dipping deep. He sucked her clit, drew slowly, repeatedly as his fingers burrowed in and out of her body. She'd always enjoyed sex and taken it when she wanted it but this was different. Joe was different. He affected her until her bones ached and pleasure swamped her and he was a stranger. But not. How could it be real? This feeling of knowing him? She'd just met him hours ago but the connection was strong, powerful.

Then her mind shut down, her body took over. His mouth ate her, sucked at her, brought her pleasure that curled tighter and tighter.

"Come for me, Quinn. Now, darlin'." Joe's voice echoed through her aching flesh. Her fingers clawed at the surface of the desk. Her toes curled and her back bowed as she sought more of his mouth. As the pleasure deepened, tightening like a spring, drawing inward, Quinn's muscles clenched unbearably until the surge broke free with a giant blast. Her mouth opened on a soundless cry as Joe ate her out, sending delight to sing through her blood.

Before she could come down from the towering height, he was looming, ripping into a small package and covering himself. From her sprawled position, she couldn't see his cock but damn, she wanted to. And then he was there, pressed to her opening. Joe looked at her and he must've seen the flicker of shame she felt at having wild monkey sex with a stranger.

"Don't think like that, darlin'. Don't do it." He transferred his gaze down and she felt the swollen head of his erection drag through her folds. He was big. She could tell it and she caught her breath in suspense until, finally, God yes, finally, he inched in a bit at a time.

"Oh. Joe. Yes."

He thrust so slowly she wanted to scream but there was no breath left in her lungs and then he was there, seated to the hilt and all she wanted was movement. Frantic, fast, hot fucking.

"Ready?"

Quinn opened her eyes to see him braced on his arms over her, his hands fisted on the desk. Sweat beaded his forehead, dampening his hair and she couldn't resist bringing her hands up to brush the gold-colored lengths of back with her fingers. This was crazy. All of it. But she wanted it and him and everything he could give her. "Oh yeah."

He blew out a breath. "Thank God."

On his first withdrawal, she cried out, frantic to hold him deep. Her body pulsed around him and she felt everything, from the broad head of his cock to the ripples of heat and the way the notched tip raked every erotic nerve ending. Then he was back, giving her more, taking it harder. His breath blew hot against her bare breasts as he let his head drop forward and fucked her like there was no tomorrow. Faster, faster, then slow and deep.

“Fuck, yeah, Quinn. So good.”

He raked his teeth over her nipple and she felt her body tighten hard around his cock. When he rotated against her clit, she cried out.

Without warning, Joe cursed, lifted her up into his arms and her legs went around his waist. Where did the wall come from? Suddenly her back was pressed against it as he pounded into her drenched, claspings flesh. Bending his knees he thrust harder and deeper, giving her no chance to catch her breath. He held her up with one arm beneath her ass though it seemed impossible. She was not a tiny, wispy sort of woman. Her bones were big. She had boobs and a good-sized ass and yeah, Joe was the biggest man she’d ever seen but how was it possible that for the first time in her life she felt dainty, small even.

But it didn’t matter.

As heat flashed through her veins and the pleasure expanded in ever-tightening waves, he bit down into the notch of her neck and she crashed. Crashed and sobbed. The explosive orgasm shook her bones and had her gasping as she came. Within seconds, big Joe McKinnon stilled, groaned and followed her.

He stayed locked tightly to her as they both came down from the intoxicating pleasure. Intoxicating. Good word. He’d made her drunk on sex and she didn’t like losing control with a total stranger this way. When he finally withdrew and lowered her feet to the floor, she pulled out of his arms. Turning her back to him, she drew up the bodice of her dress and fastened the button at the nape of her neck. Embarrassed to her toes and utterly shocked at her fast and loose behavior, she refused to even glance his



way while she searched for her panties. She found them on the floor and they were a worthless, sopping mess. With a grimace of distaste she stuffed them in her pocket and, gathering her last ounce of courage, turned to face him.

"This doesn't change a damn thing, Joe. I meant what I said." She watched him look up from tucking his shirttails into his jeans. His hotter-than-hell eyes narrowed. "I'm not staying here, Joe. Don't give a damn what I've inherited. I don't want it and I'm leaving soon."

She lifted her chin and dared him to argue but he didn't say a word just continued to watch her as she jammed her feet into her heels, grabbed her purse and stalked to the door. Finally, she looked back and shook her head. "Why, Joe? Why did you come at me like that? You were so determined to take what you wanted."

Joe went utterly still. "I had to, Quinn. I had my reasons for fucking you now instead of later."

"What? What reasons? You don't know me."

He shook his head and something that might have been sorrow flashed in the depths of his eyes. He sighed. "I didn't have time, Quinn and you're wrong, I know you better than you think."

"I don't understand you at all."

"Soon you will, Quinn. Soon you'll understand everything."

She wanted nothing more at that moment than to get to her car and drive home but knew she couldn't until everything was settled. When she shut the office door behind her, she leaned her forehead against the wood and closed her eyes. "What the hell just happened in there?" she whispered, still struggling to catch her breath.

Female laughter struck her like a blow. Her eyes whipped open and she spun around. A beautiful woman tossed her black hair and stared her down with a smirk. "I'd say you just got good and fucked by our alpha, *chica*. No sense running from him. He's a man who keeps what he wants and it looks like he wants you. Doesn't it boys?"

Quinn sucked in a sharp breath as she looked past the sultry Latina and into at least a dozen hungry male eyes. They knew what she'd done with Joe. The evidence was there on their faces and in the stillness of their bodies. Could her shame get any worse?

Yeah, she knew it could.

## **Chapter Three**

Goddammit! Joe snarled into the sudden silence in the room and fucking hated himself. He'd taken her like an animal on a desk, no less. He'd used his raw power and ruthlessly seduced her but it had to be done. Those men out there in the living room would smell her, want her, die to possess those outrageous curves and taste her heat. With him just assuming the mantle of Alpha of the Wolf Creek Clan, the last thing he needed was to fight one of his men and that's the way it would've gone down if he hadn't marked her as his.

Even with the door shut soundly between them, he could smell her and his body reacted violently with the urge to fuck her again, further branding her as his mate.

Joe stomped to the door and flung it open, surprised when Quinn almost fell back into his arms. No one ever said he was a dumbass. He caught her up and wrapped his arms around her middle as she stood motionless in the face of the crowd who had assembled in the enormous living room. The heat of her body betrayed her discomfort. The scent of the sex they'd shared was ripe on her skin.

He looked around the room at the half dozen wolves who wore signs of their lust stamped on sharp-featured faces. Manuel Montoya and Ringo Ramón were propped against either side of the huge fireplace looking as if they'd fuck anything that moved. Tall, rugged Manuel's nostrils flared at the smell of sex and desire, and despite his negligent stance, every rock-hard muscle in his body was tightly coiled. Ringo wore his ever-present sardonic smirk but he was equally affected. Lean and rangy, wildly savage, Ringo was no man to mess with and he suspected Selena would reap the benefits of his raging lust later tonight.

Nate Saulter, Cactus Mackey and Ben Nighthawk were sprawled on leather couches and chairs trying for all they were worth to look like they hadn't heard the wild fuck-

fest or smelled the arousal, the coming, the passion. Their narrowed, hot eyes were the only evidence they knew what had happened between him and Quinn. And in the middle of it all was Selena Lopez, who'd been his lover until recently.

The Latina beauty flashed a cocky, knowing smile but Joe sensed the snarling hatred behind it. She'd envisioned herself his *lupa* but he'd known better. It would never work. The woman he'd choose must possess strength, passion and most of all heart, a delicate balance to offset his own harsh manner and he'd known from his study of Quinn's life and what she'd endured that she was his destined mate. She carried the genes, the blood of Bart Fitzgerald, who'd been the best of men. Yes, Quinn was the one and he'd known it from the moment he'd set eyes on her.

While it was true Selena was tough and passionate, she could also be cruel. That was her greatest flaw.

Now he stared her down as she tossed back her long black hair, giving Quinn a once over that was almost obscene.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Selena?"

She flicked that black gaze over Quinn's body then dismissed her before looking at him. "What the hell is wrong with you, *querido*? Fucking this cow? Screwing her right after her father is buried? You would do better with me, Joe. Bastard!"

Joe felt her temper as if it were a living thing. His first, no make that second, task as alpha. "Shut your mouth, Selena!" he said into the ensuing silence. The cutting words reverberated off the walls. The men moved restlessly. Joe saw Manuel and Ringo straighten, alert to danger. He knew they would subdue Selena if she came at him. "Quinn is Bart's daughter and will be treated with respect. Got it? Now get your ass back into the kitchen and do your damn job. Then get the hell out and go home. Cool off."

The sass, the rage, drained instantly and her voice turned cajoling. "Joe. Please. Take me, not her. Do not make me beg, for I could not forgive you if you did."

Sighing, feeling suddenly tired and more alone than he'd ever felt before, he hugged Quinn close and splayed his hand across her belly. The gesture wasn't missed by anyone in the room, he knew. "Go on, Selena. This is beneath you. You will not taunt Quinn. Just stay the hell away from her."

Spinning on her heels, she sniffed and sashayed from the room leaving a deafening silence in her wake.

Tobias, who stood out of the way near the doublewide front doors, finally cleared his throat. "I'll get back to you on the will. I'll need to get signatures, that sort of thing. It was nice meeting you, Quinn."

Quinn stepped out of his arms and Joe felt the immediate loss of her warmth. As if the prior bullshit had never happened, she walked to Tobias and extended her hand as gracefully as any queen. Joe noted the slight tremble of her fingers and admired her courage. "Great meeting you too, Tobias. Um, thank you."

When the blond wolf left, she turned to the others and lifted her chin as if daring the remaining men to deliver a follow-up of Selena's nasty comments. The men shifted and looked his way. Joe didn't hesitate. He went to her and despite her instant stiffening, he put his arm around her. "Men. This is Quinn, Bart's daughter. She is one of us and under my protection. Treat her with the respect she is due."

One by one, they came forward and nodded, observed the common courtesies until finally they all left. In the distance, he heard the sounds of Selena fooling around in the kitchen. Occasionally a cabinet door would slam, threatening to splinter wood. Once she was finished with her job, he wanted her gone too.

Finally he looked down at Quinn, who seemed lost in thought and more than a little shaken. Her full bottom lip was tucked neatly between her teeth. It was obvious she had a million questions. She gave him a questioning look. "What the hell is going on around here, Joe? I feel like I've stepped into an alternate dimension or something."

She wasn't ready to hear the truth. Not yet. Instead of saying what needed said, he took her arm and ushered her toward the stairs. "Come on."

Together they went up the stairs to the second floor and he led her to the master bedroom.

"This was my father's room?"

Quinn's words were suddenly soft and appealing. Was she thinking regretfully of the man she would never know? Joe wasn't a much of a talker but he promised himself, he'd talk a blue streak about Bart if it could help her feel closer to her dad and take the sad look from her pretty eyes. A knot tightened in his throat. He swallowed hard thinking of the little girl she'd been, suffering the emotional abuse of Decker Harlow. A flash of satisfaction rocked him. He was glad they'd dealt with the man.

"Yeah. Bart would've wanted you here. Is it a problem?"

He watched her walk across the soft rugs scattered along the old hardwood floor, run her fingers over the multicolored Indian print cover on the bed. Huge windows were everywhere, along with double doors that led to the balcony overlooking the ranch property. Soft, late afternoon sunlight sifted through the windows catching a length of dark blonde hair and turning it golden. Finally she turned to face him.

"Where do you stay, Joe?"

He stiffened. "Not here. If you think I'm going to jump your bones every few minutes, you can rest easy. I'm not a begging kind of man."

She shook her head. "No. It's not that, Joe. I just wondered. You seem very much in charge around here."

"I am."

"So?"

"So what?"

She walked to the bed and fingered the handle of one of her suitcases. Ringo had carried them into the house earlier. "Don't be obtuse, Joe. I'm wondering why, if you are in charge, you haven't moved in. "

Joe huffed a breath and shoved his hands in the back pockets of his jeans. "Look. I'm not moving in here until you give me the okay. I want you to be comfortable. But I won't stay away from you completely. Not after today."

Quinn gave him a look and walked up to stand inches from him. The sexual vibes she gave off burned him like fire and Joe stilled as sexual hunger rolled through him like thunder. She reached out and ran one finger down the pearl snaps on his black western-cut shirt then gave him a look. "Don't make the mistake of thinking I'm easy, Joe."

"Doubt there's a damn thing easy about you, darlin'."

Suddenly she stepped back and dropped her hand. "Where do you live? There are men roaming around all over the place. Where do they stay? If this is my place now and yours of course, I should know."

"Come on." Joe led her to the heavy doors and led her into the late Texas afternoon. Together they looked out over the flat land broken intermittently with buttes and plateaus. A wooded area surrounding a creek lay further beyond. White-faced Herefords grazed contentedly in the distance. A red, well-maintained barn was a beehive of activity as several hands worked with the horses in the corral. Joe pointed to a big brick house past the barn. "See that house? That's mine. If you need anything at all, that's where you'll find me."

Quinn laughed, surprising him. "Anything at all? Now that's a loaded statement considering what happened today."

For the first time in days, Joe felt his lips twitch. "Yeah. Anything at all."

She gave him a glance. "Don't press your luck. Do people around here actually let you get by with this?"

"Yeah. All the time."

"Hm. Things will be changing around here, I reckon."

A flare of hope lit low in his belly. Would she stay? Could she accept who and what she was?

A door slammed from down below and they both looked out to see Selena stomping across the yard toward the barn. Joe had a pretty good idea where and to whom, she was going.

"What is that woman to you, Joe? I take it she's your lover?"

"Was. Long time ago."

"She wants you." Quinn gripped the sturdy post that ran the length of the balcony and watched the other woman with measuring eyes.

"It's been over with us for awhile now."

"Not my business."

He gave her a steady look. "More your business than you might think considering what happened between us on that desk in the study."

Quinn turned to face him, fire snapping to life in her eyes. "Let's not go there, Joe. It was a mistake that won't be repeated."

Feisty.

Joe liked that about Quinn Harlow. Liked it a lot.

Stepping forward, ignoring the way she stiffened defensively, he cupped the sides of her head and looked at her. "Fight it, fight me all you want, woman but it's not gonna work and we both know it. We've gone too far to back out now."

He bent and took her lips, tasting the sigh she released into his mouth. He sent his tongue deep, further claiming her, chaining her to him. The quick, savage tasting wasn't enough for him but when he felt her curvy body sinking closer, felt her tightly drawn nipples prod his chest, he finally broke the kiss and studied the sexy slant of her swollen lips. "Yeah, we'll be doing this again, Quinn," he breathed against them. "No sense fighting it, honey."



Joe released her and stepped away. "Make yourself at home here and if you need anything, let me know. Be aware the men make themselves free with the main house because that's the way your dad liked it. This is their home just as it is yours now. Just be warned about that but if something happens around here you don't like, speak up. No one here will give you a hard time."

"What about Selena?" Quinn wrapped her arms around her middle and leaned back against the railing. "She's already done it. Something tells me she's not giving you up. The way she figures it, I'm the enemy."

"You're a strong woman. You can handle her and anything else that comes your way."

She huffed a breath and rolled her eyes and once again Joe fought the urge to smile. "Yeah, well, didn't handle you all that good, did I Joe?"

Finally, he gave up and laughed. "You handled me just fine, sweetheart. I'll see you tonight." With humor curling deep, he backed off and left her alone with her thoughts. Plenty of time later to get more of what he craved.

Quinn turned away, facing the yard and closed her eyes when the bedroom door snapped closed. "What the hell am I doing here?" she mumbled below her breath. In the distance she eyed her car and briefly entertained the idea of grabbing up her luggage and heading back home where she belonged. But did she really belong there anymore? Sure, she had friends and something of a life in the stagnant little town where she grew up but her business was in the toilet and her only solid connection was with Graham. One day, he'd meet a woman he loved. He'd marry and raise a family. Where did that leave her? Considering she was a "friend with benefits", whomever he took up with would resent the hell out of her. The bottom line was, she had very little to go home to and now, here she stood looking out over this vast ranch that, through an accident of birth, was hers. Well, partly hers. And Joe's.

She looked toward the barn where Selena had vanished and then saw Joe stop halfway between the barn and the house. He looked up at her and even from this distance he looked so big and capable. The black Stetson was settled over his streaked hair and she sucked in a breath as he studied her solemnly and tipped the brim of his hat in acknowledgment. Finally, he turned and walked away, eating up the ground with long strides. At first, she thought he'd follow Selena into the barn but it didn't happen. He veered off in another direction and she watched him go through the front door of his mid-sized brick house.

She had nothing but questions that had all been shoved to the back of her mind. Confusion swamped her and sent her back into the relative coolness of the bedroom where she sank upon the bed and buried her face in her hands.

What the hell had she been thinking letting Joe take her like that on the desk? Was she nuts?

She'd been half crazy from the minute she'd laid eyes on the overpowering man. He was a stranger but he affected her as no one she'd ever met before. Her skin practically hummed at the memory of his touch at the remembrance of the way his thick cock had plunged deep into her body offering a relief she'd never known she needed. But it was more than simple sexual pleasure. It was as if she knew him in some cosmic way and that scared the hell out of her. Common sense told her it took awhile to understand the measure of a man but his strength, honor and his ultimate loneliness had practically reached out and grabbed her.

She pulled off her pumps and tossed them aside before flopping onto the bed to consider her options. There was no option. She'd always been a curious woman and this was a place of mystery she was fully ready to explore. Adventure—and a little bit of fear—might be healthy, she thought as she closed her eyes. The atmosphere here was full of an energy that she couldn't begin to understand. She eyed the luggage sitting at the foot of the bed and sighed. Nope. She wasn't going to grab the bag and run out the door. It just wasn't her way. Something very strange was going on around here and

until she had more answers than questions, she was staying put. Once the decision was made, a strange acceptance filled her. She stood and went to the luggage and began to unpack.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ringo Ramóné lounged back among the hay bales and watched the gorgeous she-wolf stomp through the barn door and glare into the dim interior. On the other side of the area, Manuel, a very careful wolf, crooned to one of the horses, running his big hand over the animal's glossy mane, all the time carefully shielding his predatory nature from the beast. Instantly alerted to her presence, he looked up and frowned.

Ringo knew that Manuel too, smelled her heat, her need for sex. It was always that way with the hot Latina. Anger made her hot and heat meant sex. There was never one emotion without the other. The presence of the gorgeous curvy blonde who'd laid claim to their alpha had torn Selena's plans to bits. She'd thought Joe would take her as his *lupa* but each man here knew better. Selena was too hotheaded to rule, too vain to care about anyone but herself. She was a whole lot of uncontrollable woman whose passions would misdirect her at every turn.

He watched her breasts heave beneath the cotton of her shirt. Tears of anger filled her dark eyes. She felt lost, he knew, defeated even. For the first time in her long life, she felt like an outsider. Well, hell, he'd been down that road too and though he wasn't a man who pitied anyone, he couldn't help feeling just a little bit sorry for her.

He knew how it felt to be an outsider. It had been that way for him since he'd been a wet-behind-the-ears pup and his own father had been meted out pack justice that had cost him his life and left Ringo an orphan. Years ago Ringo's father had challenged Bart Fitzgerald for leadership of the pack and his subsequent death had been violent. Days later, his mother, unable to bear the grief of losing her mate had taken her own life.

Selfish woman!

After one hundred years he'd never been able to forgive her for submitting to this ultimate act of cruelty heaped upon the head of her only child. The pack had pitied the child he was and taken over his care, but Ringo never forgot for a moment that he was an outsider here.

"Gotta hand it to ya, darlin'. You sure know how to cause a scene," he drawled. "Not the best way to get Joe back, you know. Big mistake."

"That woman, Quinn, she's the one who made a mistake! *Put a!*" Selena practically spat the curse.

Manuel left the horse he'd been stroking and advanced, his hands fisted at his side. "Stop it! She's Bart's daughter and one of us. You must know what her being here means. There may be others with our rare genetic makeup out there. We are skinny on women and her very presence gives us hope."

A sly smile curled her lips as she sauntered up to Manuel and looped her arms around his neck. "What?" she whispered. "Am I not enough woman for the two of you?"

Manuel scowled but kissed her anyway. Ringo felt his own body respond to the scene. Wolves were over-the-top sexual creatures and he wasn't the kind to turn down a few hours of easy sex. He and Manuel often shared Selena so he didn't hesitate. Moving toward the two of them, he came up behind her and settled his lips at the side of her neck. "You know you are, darlin', but only until we find mates of our own."

"I hate you," she whispered as the kiss was broken. She rubbed her ass against the fly of his jeans. "I hate you but I'll have you. I'll have you both until I figure out a way to get Joe back."

The invitation she presented was too damn delicious to resist. Ringo looked over her shoulder at Manuel and reached for the hem of her tee shirt. Yanking it over her head, he tossed it aside and nipped her bared shoulder. He reached around to fill his hands with her breasts, thumbing nipples that were diamond-hard. Selena hadn't worn a bra today. Good. Suited him just fine.

“Ah, *querido*. That feels so good. Pinch them,” she whispered as she rested her head back on his shoulder. “Harder.”

Happy to oblige, he treated her to a rough touch while Manuel, worked the snap and zipper on her jeans. Ringo saw her shoes get tossed one way and then another.

When she was naked and Manuel stood holding her jeans and panties in one hand, he buried his fingers in her pussy. “You’re wet and ready, *chica*,” he said. Manuel’s eyes were at half-mast and Ringo watched his friend work her over until his hands were glistening from her cream.

“Let’s take this to the back room.” Ringo stepped away from Selena and took her hand. They followed Manuel to a small bedroom that was maintained for those occasions when a horse was sick and needed constant care. Handy. Manuel and Ringo had used the big bed for more than sleeping over the years. Especially when it came to entertaining Selena.

Selena released his hand and flashed them both a saucy smile before crawling naked into the center of the bed. Lying on her back, a sultry smile blooming on her face, she splayed her legs wide. Her naked pussy was shiny and her lower lips were swollen. Ringo’s cock got harder with every second he spent looking at her bawdy display.

She might be a bitch with a capital “B” but she was as sexy as hell.

“You want it, don’t you, Ringo?” Selena practically purred the question. “You want me more than that blonde bitch, Quinn.” She slid her gaze to Manuel and swept her hands over her breasts and torso before plunging her fingers into her cunt. “Come and get it, Manuel. You know you are dying to fuck me.”

“That I am. But not before you show us more. Make yourself come for us,” Manuel said.

Selena closed her eyes and shoved busy fingers in and out of her pussy. Moisture coated them. “Get the clamps,” she whispered. A fine misting of sweat beaded on her forehead as she drew her bottom lip between her teeth and writhed. Ringo reached into a drawer of the small bedside table and got the nipple clamps. They were connected by

a thin chain. He tossed it on the bed and quickly stripped. Manuel did the same and sprawled next to Selena. They bent their heads to her nipples and started to suck until Selena cried out. Ringo sent his hand to Selena's pussy and let his fingers entwine with hers. Sliding them through the tender flesh felt so damn good. He flicked her clit and pinched it lightly.

"Harder, *querido!*"

Ringo obliged and looked over to see that Manuel had attached a clamp to the nipple he'd been sucking. He released her nipple from his mouth, removed his fingers from her cunt and did the same. While Manuel kissed and sucked at Selena's skin, Ringo gently tugged the small chain. Selena gasped, and then cried out as she came.

They'd played this game before and working in tandem, Ringo moved down the bed until he had Selena's legs draped over his shoulders. Manuel straddled her shoulders and while she took his cock deep into her mouth to suck, Ringo ate at her dripping pussy. Slowly at first, gentling her, he drank her juices and rested his tongue at her pulsing clit. Before long she was writhing against his mouth. Ringo sucked her clit lightly and buried three fingers deep inside her.

Above him, Manuel's hips moved as Selena sucked him off. "Ah yeah, *chica*, that's good. Harder. Play with my balls." Ringo's gaze took in the sight of Selena's hands working Manuel's sac and then Manuel stiffened and came with a low growl.

Ringo continued to work her pussy with his mouth but he knew Manuel was going for the lube they kept in the drawer. When Selena came in a quick rush, he looked up to see Manuel was hard again.

*Oh hell yeah. It was good to be a lycan.*

They could fuck all night and all day if they wanted.

Ringo moved up the bed and pulled Selena over his body. "We're gonna fuck you now. Your pussy and your ass. You ready, darlin'?"

"Hell yes. Do it."

With Selena on her knees straddling his body, he dragged his aching cock through the creamy flesh of her pussy. Fuck! There might not be a single nice thing to be said for her but she had the sweetest cunt. He dipped the broad head of his cock into her opening and then out again, just to make her crazy.

*"Bastardo!"*

A crack sounded and Selena jerked.

Ringo grinned. Leave it to Manuel! His friend stood next to the bed and held a small leather crop in one hand. He swung it again and Selena stiffened.

*"Fuck my cock, woman. Take it all."*

Once her silky folds closed over him, Ringo sighed in relief. Lifting his hands, he removed the clamps and tossed them aside, then tenderly massaged the swollen nubs. Ringo drew her down until her breasts were pressed against his chest, the nipples hard and delicious. He reached down and grabbed the backs of her thighs and opened her more fully just before Manuel began to methodically whip her ass.

Selena began to writhe against him and if he hadn't been made of stronger stuff, he would be coming long and hard right about now. Finally Ringo looked behind Selena and saw that Manuel was in position behind her. Manuel poured lube into his hand, covered his cock with it and gave Ringo a meaningful nod.

*"Up on your knees,"* he whispered. *"Let's get that beautiful ass ready."*

Selena went still while Manuel spread the lube over her. She was fully impaled on his cock and Ringo felt every sensation as Manuel breached her ass. When he was seated to the hilt, both men began to move in perfect counterpoint. Selena's cries echoed in the room as the orgasms hit her, one after the other. Ringo felt his balls draw up tight against his body and tingles zip over his ass and spine.

*"Now, amigo,"* he said with a groan. *"Now."*

Manuel increased the pace of his thrusts and he did the same. When both men came and then relaxed in a tangle, Ringo wasn't surprised to hear Selena practically purring in contentment.

That contentment wouldn't last long, he knew. She didn't know how to get happy and stay that way. It wasn't in her nature. Yes, he realized, they had much in common.



## **Chapter Four**

Three nights later, Quinn sat on the back patio of the house and looked out over the inky shadows that seemed to float over the prairie beyond. In the distance she heard the sounds of cattle and the occasional coyote. Not unusual sounds considering this place was in the middle of nowhere. She'd always lived in town. Yeah, a little town but there were noises associated with people all around her. It was different here, the quiet almost like a voice of its own.

She loved it.

It was hard to imagine that this rough land with its desolate, lonely beauty belonged to her. Tonight the moon was full, hanging like a jewel suspended over the flat terrain. Still hot tonight. Quinn held a glass of sweet tea and rolled it across her chest loving the feel of the condensation on her warm skin. She wore a white tank and a pair of jersey cotton shorts. Her legs were stretched out in front of her as she lounged back and breathed in the night air. In the distance, a wild howling went up disturbing the peaceful moment and she stilled, still clutching the cold glass against her chest.

But then it stopped and a shiver raced over her flesh.

The image of Joe flashed through her mind. Big, strong Joe. Though he made her more than a little nervous, she wished he was with her right now. Yeah, she was spooked.

Over the past few days, she'd been surprised by his absence. After what had happened between them, she'd expected something different. Joe McKinnon was a man who went after what he wanted and she'd thought he wanted her. Maybe she'd been wrong about that. She'd seen him from a distance, usually riding out on a big chestnut mare or driving his double cab truck down the road kicking up wings of dust as he headed off somewhere.

The ranch was busy during the day with ranch hands working the place, dealing with chores and cattle and horses and she'd been left on her own pretty much. She'd seen Selena slinking about but didn't believe she lived here on the property as most of the men did. The fridge and the pantry were stocked with food, the house was clean and she'd mainly just explored and fended for herself while acclimating herself to the place.

The house was beautiful and rustic, probably built sometime in the mid-1800s and yet, despite its historical charm, it was modern in every way. Even now, she looked out over a backyard pool that was landscaped with lush green plants and colorful hibiscus. She set the glass down on a patio table and briefly considering jumping in to cool off, but in the end, went through the back door into the kitchen. Making her way upstairs in the dim light she wondered if she'd see Joe tomorrow.

Damn. She needed to stop thinking about him. Tonight she'd looked across the way to his house and saw no lights. Was he in town at Cloverfield's only honky tonk? Maybe Selena had gotten her way and even now, they were together. Quinn shook her head as she walked into the master bedroom and flipped on a lamp that sat on a table by the door. Being downright stupid about a man, any man, wasn't like her so she gave herself a mental kick in the butt. Glancing across the room, she frowned, noting the door to the balcony was open.

Huh?

She kept it shut during the heat of the day so the cool air in the house wouldn't escape. Her heart thumped hard in her chest as a feeling of expectation, that sensation of being watched took her over. Slowly she crossed the dimly lit room and shut the door but then spun quickly when she heard a noise at the far side of the room.

Her mouth opened on a soundless scream and she stiffened when a big dark dog padded out from the shadows. Quinn shook her head. No, not a dog.

A wolf.

Terrified, afraid to move a muscle she stared at the great shaggy beast but she sensed nothing intimidating about him. Easily the size of a Mastiff, with a dark brown coat, he cocked his head and looked at her through intelligent, golden eyes. Streaks of a beautiful caramel color framed his eyes and snout. She was unable to look away from the beautiful wild animal who didn't, at this moment, seem wild at all. Yeah. She was obviously losing her mind because everybody knew wolves were dangerous.

Suddenly the wolf whined and lay down to rest his face on his forelegs as he continued to watch her. Quinn let out the breath she was holding but didn't move.

"Shh. Shh. Please don't eat me," she whispered.

The wolf lifted his massive head and she could've sworn he rolled his eyes. Something deep inside her shifted and settled. How cool was it to have a wolf just trot into her room like this and practically lay down at her feet? Obviously he'd climbed the steps the led from the ground to the wraparound balcony and had just padded in and made himself right at home.

She wanted to touch him so badly her fingers twitched. "Will you bite my fingers off if I touch you? You won't, will you, boy?"

The wolf chuffed a sound and settled his face down again and continued to look at her. Finally she gathered her courage and slowly advanced. Once she was several feet away, she did the bravest thing she'd ever done before and went to her knees. "Here now, boy. Here now," she murmured. Gingerly she held out her hand and laughed a little when the wolf lifted his head and gave them a sniff. His rough tongue flicked out and stroked the back of her hand. Quinn could've sworn the dark beast grinned.

Obviously, he was a pet. Someone, probably one of the ranch hands or maybe even Joe, had tamed him. Maybe someone had raised him from a pup to come to a human's hand. Who knew? She was enchanted. Staring into the animal's eyes she gasped at the warmth that emanated from that golden gaze. The image of Joe's eyes flashed through her mind. They were almost the same. Wow. Okay, not going there despite the weird way she was comfortable with this predatory beast. That just wasn't normal. But just as

she had the thought, the wolf rose to his full height and moved in. Unable to believe it, thrilled to pieces, she wrapped her arms around his sturdy neck and buried her face in his neck. He smelled musky and carried the scent of forest and trees, of fresh evening air. "You're beautiful," she whispered, stroking her hands over his coat, nuzzling his ruff. "The most gorgeous guy I've ever seen." She sat back on her heels, keeping her hand buried in his fur. "Well, almost. Almost as gorgeous as Joe."

The wolf whimpered, making Quinn smile.

Until now, she hadn't realized how lonely she'd been over the past few days. Basically she'd been ignored and left to her own devices. "You gonna keep me company?"

She stood and looked down at him suddenly grateful for the company. Turning away she went into the bathroom and turned on the faucet in the big tub. She'd made herself right at home since arriving. Her makeup bag, a hairbrush, toothpaste and all her other little things were arranged neatly on the doublewide bathroom sink. While the tub filled, she took down her ponytail and ran a brush through her hair several times before heading back into the bedroom.

The wolf was still there, watching her. Comfort stole through her and she sighed. "Mm. Glad you're keeping me company. Guess Joe's got better things to do now that he's already fucked me stupid on his desk." She blew out a breath and went to the mirrored dresser. Pulling out an oversized Texas Tech Red Raiders football jersey, she set it aside and drew the flimsy tank over her head then reached for the bra snap between her breasts. When the lingerie drifted down her arms and she set it on the dresser, the wolf whined. Quinn turned, smiling at him and pushed her shorts and panties down her legs. Catching the garments with one foot, she kicked them away. "What, wolf? You've never seen a striptease before?" she laughed. "Very sexy, huh?"

Turning back to the mirror, she took her breasts in her hands, thumbing the nipples into sharp little peaks. "Wonder what he'd think if he saw me like this, boy? Not very skinny, huh? I never was built like the other girls." Quinn sent her hands down her

torso and settled one on the slight bump of her tummy. "Little fuller, maybe. I've never worried about stuff like that before but I'm sure thinking about it now."

Behind her, the wolf growled low and deep causing her to look back over her shoulder. She smiled. "Hey! What's up with you?"

Quinn bent and stroked her hand over the wolf's head before heading into the bathroom to turn off the water. She'd left her cell phone on the bathroom counter and it rang just as she dipped a toe in the warm water. "Damn."

She checked the number and smiled before answering. "Hey, Graham. What's up?"

"Haven't talked with you in a few days. Thought I'd give you a call."

"I was just getting into the bath. Let me put you on speaker."

Quinn pressed the speaker button and set the phone safely away from the tub before stepping into the water and sinking down with a sigh. "Ah, that's better. What's up, sugar?" The wolf sat on the floor beside the tub, watching.

"Been missing you. You still want me to come up next week?"

She sighed and leaned her head back against the tub but reached down with a wet hand. The wolf promptly ran his long tongue over it making her smile. "No, um, I don't think so, Graham. Something happened to me here and this might not be the best time."

"Oh yeah? What's up? You sound funny."

"Probably just sound confused."

"Confused? You've never been confused a day in your life. You're the most take-charge woman I know."

"Ha. You give me too much credit. No, I've gotten myself in a little mess here." She heard the sounds of Graham's television in the background and pictured him sprawled on his couch with a bottle of beer in his hand.

"What happened?"

"Remember me telling you about the ranch foreman? Joe?"

"Yeah."

"Well I did something that's probably really stupid but, I swear, it didn't feel stupid at the time," she said, sitting up in the water to reach for a bottle of liquid soap and a sponge. "We had sex."

She heard Graham laugh. "Is that all?"

"No, that's not all. It was the best sex I've ever had and that includes you. It was so good and so raunchy, I thought my head was gonna explode." From the side of the tub, the wolf growled and Quinn frowned at him. "Thing is, it was impulsive and that's not like me. I'm not an impulsive woman but things just went kind of crazy and suddenly we were fucking on this big desk. Damn, Graham. It was so good." She heard silence on the other end and went quiet too, before she finally spoke again. "Hey, I have to ask you something. You'll think it's dumb but do you believe in love at first sight?"

"No, I don't, Quinn but it's pretty obvious to me you're fixated on this guy."

"Hm. Fixated. Yeah, I guess I am. Thing is, since it happened, he's avoided me. Maybe he was disappointed but I would've sworn he was as blown away as I was."

"Be careful, honey," Graham said.

"Oh, I will. Still have a lot to figure out but I really like this place. It's mine and I'm not ready to leave it yet. Maybe never."

Graham's voice lowered. "Are you sure you don't want me to come to you?"

The wolf growled louder and Quinn swore the animal bristled as if in outrage. He snapped and snarled, making her gasp and then he lunged for the cell phone sitting on the ledge of the tub.

"Hey!"

The wolf tossed his massive head and the phone smashed into the wall, landing in a nearby wastebasket. She rose naked from the bath and he snarled. "What the hell? You'd better not have broken my phone! Damn it!"

The beast backed to the door of the bathroom and looked at her, his body tense and suddenly still. He snapped once then turned and ran from the room leaving Quinn

bewildered. Shakily, she reached for the towel and retrieved the phone. By the time she'd disconnected from Graham and dried her wet body, she was feeling calmer but then she wondered about the wolf and what had set him off that way.

Dumb.

She felt his loss and wondered at it. Silly. She was just feeling lonely and confused. But her confusion grew to immense proportions when she glanced across the room at the balcony door. Quinn sucked in a startled breath and held it. The wolf was gone and the door was still shut. How had the wolf left the room? Oh my god! What the hell was going on?

By the time she crawled between the cool, crisp linens of her bed, she was more restless than ever before. There was a mystery here in this desolate place and she wasn't the kind of woman who liked unanswered questions. Maybe the appearance of the wolf had amplified everything for her but now she wondered about what had happened with Joe that day and where he was. He'd been almost savage with the way he'd taken her. Possessive even. And there was the confrontation with Selena and all those men, eyeing her in that weird predatory way. Things had been said that she didn't understand. This place brought her senses alive and an intuition had been born inside her from the moment she'd spotted Joe at her father's graveside.

Quinn knew what she had to do. She had to find answers and starting tomorrow she would stop hiding out. Maybe it was time to face Joe and talk with others who lived here. It was obvious they all knew something she didn't and she'd always believed knowledge was power. Well, she was damn sick of being in the dark.

Once the decision was made, she closed her eyes as weariness settled over her like a cozy blanket. Tomorrow was soon enough to find out what the hell was going on around here.

\* \* \* \* \*

Joe shifted as he ran. Anger, along with a healthy dose of over-the-top lust, rode him hard. He'd never experienced such a feeling in his entire life! Frustration, pain, passion. Violent reaction ripped through him as he remembered the desire in the other man's voice. God help the man if he had the balls to show up here. He didn't know who he was messing with. Eating up the distance to his house with long strides, he fumed and then he recalled the way she'd looked standing in front of that fucking mirror without a stitch on. When she'd taken her plump nipples between her fingers and played with them, he'd almost shifted then and there. Damn! It was too soon. Joe had wanted to place his lips along her sweet belly and then nip the spot with his teeth before moving lower to taste her deeply. His cock throbbed and grew thick. How could she ever in a million years think he'd prefer a skinny woman? He hadn't been able to keep his hands off her since the moment she'd stepped from her car that day at the cemetery.

Something had to give. Quinn had no idea that she was half wolf. She didn't know that she was his destined mate and the queen of their pack. Once he got past his anger, he knew he'd have to tell her and he dreaded it. She would be confused. Damn it, she might even cry. What would he do then? He didn't want to cause her any pain but he knew it was coming faster than a runaway train.

He'd never known a female who turned him on more. She was the kind of woman a man like him dreamed of, wished for. To think she was here, at the ranch and all too real was a miracle to him. Tomorrow he'd make his move, ease her into the truth of her place here at the ranch and in his life.

Joe had almost made it to his front door when a large black wolf moved from the shadows. Recognition stopped him dead in his tracks as Selena shifted and stood naked to glare at him. "What are you doing here? Why aren't you out with the others?"

Brazenly, she looked him over slowly pausing at the erection that rose high over his belly. Selena licked her lips then caught his gaze. "Why aren't you?"

"Not that it's any of your business but I had other things to do."



She laughed huskily. "Well, I know you haven't been fucking that blonde, *querido*. That's fairly obvious."

Joe moved close, scenting her lust. Some things never changed. "Move out of my way. Now."

The smirk left her lips and her voice lowered. "Let me make you feel better, Joe. Please."

"Begging doesn't suit you, Selena. Go back to the hunt and leave me alone." Joe stepped around her and continued on, finally turning back. Selena looked like a dejected child and he almost felt sorry for her. He forced himself to soften his voice. "She is my mate, Selena."

The she-wolf gasped, her eyes widened. "No. It can't be."

"Believe it. She can feel my emotions and I feel hers too. You know what that means with our kind."

"A true mating."

Joe nodded. "Whether you like it or not, you have to accept it. Quinn is my *lupa* and you will show her respect."

Selena recovered from her shock and anger took its place. Her dark eyes fairly snapped with outrage. "Never," she spat. "I'll never give my allegiance to that woman."

Joe stared her down. "You will or you'll leave. Got that?"

She opened her mouth to speak but then seemed to think better of it. Immediately she shifted back into her wolf form and ran toward the sounds of the hunt.

Dragging in a deep breath to calm himself, he went through his front door and then leaned against it. Bart had told him many times over the past one hundred years that ruling was a bitch and he was right about that. But he'd also told Joe that he was a born leader, an alpha through and through and that he could take charge when the time came. Only a few days into this mess and he was already sick of it. Maybe once Quinn

became accustomed to what she was and learned to accept it, she could help him with these responsibilities. She was a tough woman.

But she was also soft.

With a low groan, Joe walked to his living room couch and flopped down. He reached for the lamp on the end table and switched it on. Soft light bathed the room. He sighed and leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Yeah, soft. Quinn was all woman. Real and infinitely loveable. Fuckable. He'd only known her a few days but the connection between them was strong.

Joe reached down and took his aching cock in one fist. Slowly he moved his fist up and down, squeezing, flexing. He dragged his thumb over the fat end of it, feeling the moisture that beaded there. Pitiful. Sitting here alone, jerking off, while the woman he wanted was a heartbeat away. And what a woman she was too. Seeing those lush curves tonight made him want to howl his need for her. Her hips were full. Some might say she had a plump ass but damn if he didn't love plump. He was a big man, way bigger than most and she was perfect for him. Her legs were long and shapely, her breasts full enough to almost overflow his hands. She dipped and curved in all the right places. He wanted to sink his fingers into her thick, pale hair and devour those lush lips, drink her every sigh, drive his cock into her pussy until she begged for release.

Joe closed his eyes and slowly pumped his shaft as he imagined Quinn's hands there, working him. In the distance, he heard the howls of the pack, knowing he should be with them but he didn't have the hunger for it. Until he had his mate in his bed, that's the way it was gonna be.

## **Chapter Five**

Several mornings later, Quinn sat at the table in the enormous ranch kitchen, nursing her second cup of coffee. It had become a ritual of sorts, to run into Selena as the other woman prepared heaps of eggs, bacon and homemade biscuits. The scent of breakfast was heavy in the air and already most of the men had stopped by to shovel down plates of food and gulp cups of hot coffee. Selena had already loaded the dishwasher and flounced from the house, and Quinn knew she wouldn't return until sometime before the noon meal. Thank God! The surly woman was wearing on her last nerve with her cutting looks. Negative energy snapped in the air whenever Selena was around.

Now, blissfully alone with her thoughts, she took up her cell phone and punched out a familiar number. "Darcy? Hey, it's Quinn. How's everything going at the shop? Any problems?"

"Hey! How's it going in no-man's-land?"

"Mm. Okay, I guess. Heading into town today to sign some papers at the lawyer's office." Quinn sighed. "I'm ready to get home, I think. I mean, I like it here. For such a barren place there's something so beautiful and rugged about it but...well, I don't know how to say this but I'm lonely."

"Are they being mean to you, honey? You want me to come out there and kick some cowboy butt?"

Quinn laughed picturing the petite brunette with her "dukes up". "Nah, that won't be necessary. I'll be out of here soon enough. How's business?"

On the other end of the phone, she heard her friend and employee sigh. "Slow. Really slow. I'm sorry but I think we only had three sales all day yesterday and they were just small items."

Quinn's little gift shop was on shaky ground and she knew it. The bad economy had hit her small town like a sledgehammer. People were leaving the area to find higher paying jobs in cities like Dallas or San Antonio. If she had a lick of sense, she would do the same. Standing, she carried her empty cup to the sink and then braced her forearm on it. This morning she had her hair pulled back with a big clip but some came undone to fall in her eyes. She pushed it back, surprised to see her fingers were trembling. "I'm going to have to think of closing up, Darcy."

"I'm sorry, hon." Sympathy laced Darcy's voice. "Maybe Christmas will pull us through."

Quinn shook her head. "Maybe but I doubt it."

Suddenly the air in the room changed. A chill prickled over her skin. She glanced up to see Joe filling the space in the doorway. He wore a pair of worn jeans that hugged his hips. A black tee shirt was tucked into the waistband and he clutched a battered cowboy hat in one huge fist. Releasing her breath, she ended the call and straightened. "Mornin', Joe."

"You're upset."

"A little. Nothing for you to worry about."

"Tell me what's wrong and I'll try to fix it." He moved further into the room, dominating it with his presence. "Did one of the men say something? Selena?"

She shook her head and dragged her gaze from the sudden anger in his eyes. Needing something to do with her hands, wanting to look away, she reached into a cupboard and took down a mug. "Coffee?"

"Trying to change the subject, Quinn?" He sighed. "Okay. Coffee would be good. Black."

As she poured coffee into the mug, she heard the sound of his boots on the floor and the scrape of a chair.

"The men have been polite but they're not really a talkative bunch are they? They're downright primitive. And Selena? She's just Selena. I try to stay out of her way." She laughed a little to hide her nervousness and turned to see him seated at the table, his elbows propped on it. Morning sunlight streamed through the kitchen window to catch the golden streaks in his brown hair. The sudden urge to run her fingers through the messy length caught her by surprise. She set the mug in front of him on the table but when she started to move her hand away, he caught it with his own.

"You know you can tell me what's bothering you."

"Can I, Joe?" Anger whipped up hard and fast. "I've hardly seen you since that day in the office. I tend to avoid guys like you."

He scowled. "Guys like me?"

Quinn crossed her arms over her chest and glared back. "Yeah. Guys who take advantage of a woman and screw her silly then ignore her as if she's unimportant."

Joe opened his mouth then clamped it shut before raking his fingers through his hair. "Christ! Is that what you think?"

"I'm right."

"You couldn't be more wrong. Sit down, Quinn. Let me explain."

Eyeing him cautiously, she sat and looked at him. He reached out and took her hand and she tried to pull back to no avail. He leaned closer and something in his expression made her give up the fight.

"I'm listening."

"I'm not good at this stuff, Quinn. You need to know that."

"Okay." Quinn finally managed to take back her hand. She wasn't going to sit here and let him coddle her while he talked away his absence. She shouldn't care. She shouldn't. She should just hop in her car and go home. To hell with the ranch and to hell with Joe McKinnon.

"I'm not good with women."

She rolled her eyes. "Gee, ya think?"

"Fuck!" Joe stood and walked a few steps away before turning to face her. He stalked back and spun her chair, with her in it, to face him. Grabbing onto the sides, effectively caging her in, he leaned close. "I've never wanted a woman the way I want you, Quinn. Do you hear me? If I had my way, I'd carry you up those stairs and spread you out beneath me but that would just scare you off."

Quinn wasn't easily manipulated but damn, if she wouldn't mind being manipulated by him in the bedroom. Dominance rolled from the man in giant waves of heat, scorching her. She caught her breath and focused on him. "You think I scare easily, cowboy?"

Silence fell until one corner of his mouth kicked up. "Doubt there's much you can't handle. I really like that about you."

She started to deliver another feisty retort when he moved in and took her lips in a swift, hot kiss. His tongue swept deep inside, tasting her. Breathless, she drew back wanting more but knowing this was dangerous to her composure. "You tryin' to make up, Big Joe McKinnon?"

"Is it working?" He whispered the question against her lips.

"Not hardly."

Joe kissed her again, drawing her bottom lip into the heat of his mouth to suck and then he planted his lips against her forehead. "I want you to stay. This is your place and my moving in on you like some kind of animal wasn't gonna do the trick."

"Why is this so important to you? Why do you want me to stay?" She leaned her head back and looked at him. "You could buy me out, Joe. Lord knows I could use the money."

Joe's hands went to her shoulders where his fingers did a slow massage. "The ranch belongs to both of us. Together. It's what your father wanted until the day he died. I aim to see it happen. Don't give up your claim to this place. Give it a chance. Give me a chance. What do you have to lose?"

"Dangerous question, Joe. What do you have in mind?" she whispered, feeling the heat of his body as he invaded her space.

"Ah, honey, I have a lot of things in mind but for now, how about you join me for a tour of the ranch, maybe a picnic out by the creek? At dusk."

How could she say no?

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time late afternoon rolled around, Quinn had worked herself into a frenzy and her last nerve was worn razor thin. What the hell had possessed her to make plans with this man when she had every intention of leaving the handsome cowboy and hightailing it home before long? Throughout the day she'd tried to work off the worry that she was making the biggest mistake of her life but it hadn't helped. She'd cleaned until the huge house was sparkling. In the end, she'd taken a long hot bath and primped, all the while thinking about how hot Joe had looked this morning when he'd leaned over and tasted her mouth. He was so different from the men she'd known before. There was something so...well, powerful about this man. Intensity radiated from him. It left her melting, drenched, needy in a way she'd never been before. Yep. He was dangerous but she'd be a fool to let pass the once-in-a-lifetime chance to know him better before she headed back to her dreary life.

By the time she got downstairs, Joe was waiting in the kitchen for her and Quinn's heartbeat kicked up in her chest. Leaning against the counter in a lazy stance, he gave her a slow up and down. "You look beautiful, Quinn."

Nervously, she smoothed her hands over the short, sassy shirt she wore and laughed a little. "What? This old thing? Thanks."

"Not talking about the clothes, sweetheart. I'm speaking of the woman wearing them."

*Ah, damn. What was a girl supposed to say to that?*

"Um. Thanks."

How could she not fall head over heels for a man like this? She swallowed, realizing her mouth had gone dry.

Joe wore his trademark faded jeans and a dark blue tee. Nothing fancy for sure but he looked absolutely edible. His thick wavy hair was slightly damp as if he'd just showered. He straightened from the counter and in two seconds flat had her wrapped in his arms. Bending his head, he took her mouth in a lazy kiss that threatened to knock her on her butt.

"You're welcome," he whispered, before going for her lips again, dragging his tongue along her bottom lip then going deep for a fuller tasting. His arms tightened as he aligned his body to hers, letting her feel the press of denim between her thighs. He was hard and as his hands settled on her butt, he raked his erection over her. Pleasure rolled through her pussy and her knees went weak. "Been thinking about this all day, Quinn."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Been thinking about the way you fit so good in my arms. About the way your pretty breasts feel against my chest."

As if to emphasize the point, he rubbed his muscles against her aching breasts and she almost whimpered. Somewhere during the tender assault her nipples had gone as hard as diamonds and, oh lordy, they ached.

But before she could say another word, he let her go and stepped back. For the first time, Quinn noticed the large wicker basket on the table and smelled something delicious. Fried chicken.

She went to the basket and peeked inside. Yep. Sure enough there was a small white box that said Dixie's Deli in red script. She also spotted a container of potato salad. A small bag was stuffed with delicate baby carrots, celery sticks and black olives. Along with that were two plastic plates, utensils and a long-stemmed wine glass. "You went to a lot of trouble here. It smells great."

"No big deal. I had to run into town anyway so I just picked this stuff up."



The yummy scent of the food made Quinn realize she had hardly eaten all day and her tummy rumbled in reaction. Joe laughed and grabbed the basket from the center of the table and took her elbow. "I heard that. Come on. Let's get you fed."

Within a few minutes, she was seated in his big, black doublewide truck and watched him get behind the wheel. The sun was lowering, throwing streamers of blue and orange across the horizon in a breathtaking display but she knew she couldn't appreciate the scenery as she should with Joe sitting beside her. Nerves danced beneath the surface of her skin and she forced herself to try to at least appear calm. He'd be on her in a flash if he knew what the close proximity did to her composure.

His presence filled the cab of the truck and he brought with him the scent of the outdoors and the subtle spice of his cologne. A Tim McGraw song blasted from the radio and Joe immediately reached out to turn down the volume. "You dance?"

The question caught her off guard and she turned to see him smiling faintly. "Yeah. I love to dance. How about you?"

"Hell no. But for you I might give it a shot. Cloverfield has a nice little honky tonk if you'd care to check it out with me."

She arched her brow as everything female deep inside her grew warm. "Are you asking me out on a date? Another one?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah. I'm sick of dicking around, Quinn. I want you to stay but I want you more. I figure ladies like that kind of thing."

"You mean, as opposed to a quick good time on a desk?"

He shot her a sharp look. "Yeah. As opposed to that, although it was great."

Emotions rolled from Joe into her and she suddenly felt his worry about overstepping where she was concerned. But more than that, she felt his need and her skin pickled with awareness of him. Unable to stop herself, she reached out and sifted her fingers through the long hair that brushed his shoulders, heard his sharp intake of breath. "It was great, Joe. Hot and powerful. But it was also really quick considering we

were, still are, complete strangers. I'm not the kind of woman who falls so easily into sex with a man."

"Don't you think I know that, Quinn? Too damn ornery to be easy."

"I'm glad you know. As to the date? Yeah, I'd love it. Sounds fun."

She felt the relief that swept him and focused her gaze on the miles of landscape that stretched out before her as they left the main road and drove the well worn trails that traced paths over the ground. In the distance, two cowboys were repairing a fence and both stopped to offer a wave. She recognized them from that embarrassing first day and had seen them a couple of times as she'd come into the kitchen to get her morning coffee. But Joe kept driving until they approached a mossy green creek that was dappled with shade in spots and sparkled in other places as it caught the waning light of the sun and threw the reflection back. Huge oaks and cottonwoods lined the area then continued on into a densely wooded area. Where most of the land was beaten brown by the summer heat, here thick patches of grass formed a lush carpet.

It was beautiful. Private. Strangely stirring.

She helped Joe fetch the hamper and a brightly colored quilt and had to smile as he reached into the bed of the truck to pull out a small ice chest. When he set the basket and ice chest on the ground, she couldn't resist a peek. A bottle of chardonnay and three longnecks were nestled, chilling, in the ice along with a corkscrew. "My, my," she murmured, looking at the sight with a grin. "You've thought of everything. I'm impressed."

And she was, she realized, as she helped him smooth the quilt on the grass and unpack the goodies. Feeling more at ease than she had in days, she kicked off her shoes and helped Joe with his boots. When she served up the food and they started to eat, she asked questions about the ranch. She didn't want to get into the subject of her long-lost dad or her mom and she figured he sensed it because conversation was light, interspersed with the chirping of crickets and the occasional drone of a dragonfly hovering over the water.

Near dark, the stars began to pop out in the sky overhead and Quinn noted the single remaining drumstick sitting in the box. Smiling, she plucked it up and held it out to Joe who shook his head. "You eat it."

Quinn laughed. "I don't dare. One is my limit. Any more will go straight to my ass."

Joe grinned, seeming lighter of heart than she'd ever seen him. He leaned close, bridging the space between them. "And such a nice ass it is too."

"Ah, you say the sweetest things. Still trying to get me to stay, aren't you?" She chuckled as she grabbed the last long-necked bottle of beer from the chest, twisted the cap and handed it to him.

"Yeah but I'm not lying about your great ass. It was the first thing I noticed about you."

Feeling light and happy and wondering if the two glasses of wine she'd drunk were making her giddy, she poured a teensy bit more into her glass. Just a sip. Then she looked up and grinned. "Liar. I was coming toward you, remember?"

"All right. I noticed your very nice breasts and then I noticed your ass."

Quinn was still smiling when she heard the low growl of a wolf and she froze. Beside her Joe went still too and they looked toward the sound to see the great black beast on the other side of the creek, snarling loudly at them. Two other wolves ran toward it, nudged and circled and snapped their teeth. With a yip of sound, the black wolf took off at a run into the woods leaving the other two to follow.

"What the hell?" Quinn whispered. Suddenly Joe's arms were around her. *Damn, the man moved fast.*

"Shh. Don't be afraid."

Her cheek was pressed against his sturdy chest and his arms were strong. *Fear? What fear?* "I'm not. I can't believe it but I'm not." She looked up at him noting the

concern in his eyes. She mustered up a smile. "Maybe your pet has taught me to not fear wolves."

Joe studied her. His brow lifted. "My pet?"

Quinn straightened. "Yeah, your wolf. He spends time with me every night in my room. He's gorgeous, Joe. He does belong to you, doesn't he?"

Joe huffed a breath. "I'm not sure he belongs to anyone." Reaching out, he tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, then traced his thumb down the side of her face. "At least not yet. Tell me something, Quinn."

"Yeah?"

"Why aren't you afraid?"

She'd actually wondered the same thing. Drawing away, she stood and walked to near the edge of the creek bank. Sighing, she leaned against the bark of an aged oak and looked off into the direction the wolves had gone. A lone howl ripped through the quiet of the night. She shook her head, feeling Joe's presence behind her. "Crazy, huh? Honestly, I don't know but I'm not afraid. I feel a connection with their wildness that I can't explain."

"Like wild things, do you?"

Her body hummed with awareness as she caught the hungry glint in his eyes. "Thinkin' I must. I do."

They both knew she wasn't talking about the wolves now. She was talking about Joe, this place, this whole new world and the endless possibilities that lay before her. Joe made a low sound and faster than she could blink he'd grabbed her hands holding them together, high against the tree. His gaze dropped to her lips then locked on her eyes. "That's damn good to hear, darlin', cause we're about to get wild together. What do you say to that?"

He'd whispered the words against her lips, letting her feel the press of his hard body against her. She gasped a sharp breath and absorbed the heat of him. Her

response rose fast and sweet as heady lust sank into her bones. "It's about damn time. Tired of fighting you, Joe. I'm tired of fighting this."

Energy sparked around them making the cool night air practically sizzle. Her skin tingled with pleasure and she felt her mind expand to lock with Joe's. She felt his lust, his need, the power of him. It was like that first day at the cemetery when the world had compressed to just the two of them. And then there were no more words as his mouth took hers in a kiss hotter than a Texas summer.

Finally. Yeah, finally she was going to take what she wanted and she was damn sick of all this pussyfooting around.

## **Chapter Six**

Carefully, Joe lowered his shields feeling Quinn's latent power hovering on the precipice where it would linger until he coaxed it to the surface with his passion. He was burning with need for her and the memory of watching her in various states of undress only fueled the fires that threatened to rage out of control. Yeah, he'd been an ass to spy on her in his wolf form but, damn it, he'd wanted to be close to her. It had been the only way.

But now the time for waiting was over. He held her hands over her head against the bark of the tree and felt her delicious curves go all soft against his body, a perfect counterpoint to his hardness. "You ready for me, wild thing?" he whispered against the golden coolness of her hair. "You ready to burn, darlin'? Because I swear to God, if you tell me no, I don't think I could stand it."

He lowered his lips to hers and took the kiss deep, dipping his tongue into her mouth, tasting her surrender. Her breath mingled with his and when he drew back, he caught the brilliant shine of her eyes. Their melding powers made them glow like laser lights in the darkness.

Joe knew his eyes were glowing too. Carefully, he buried his face at the curve of her neck. He drew his tongue along her throat. He sucked the tender flesh and heard her gasp. He nipped the spot and his gums tingled as he fought the need to bite harder. When he palmed one abundant breast, he wanted to howl at the feel of it. Her nipple had gone hard and he teased it with his fingers, dragging a groan from Quinn's lips.

"More, Quinn. Gimme more."

"Yes."

Scraping his thumbnail against her puckered nipple, he quickly replaced it with his teeth, wishing the thin cotton of her top gone. Ignoring her swift intake of breath, he

sucked her through the fabric, feeling the diamond hardness against his tongue but it wasn't enough. Violent urges to take had him gripping the hem of the flimsy top and pulling it up over her head. He tossed it aside and within seconds, he'd unhooked the center snap of her lacy bra. When he parted the sides, his mouth went bone-dry. "Beautiful," he murmured before taking one white mound in his hand. Squeezing, flexing his fingers over her lush flesh, he thought he'd never seen anything prettier. He bent to tease with his tongue, trailing it around the pale pink color before drawing the tender nipple into his mouth to suck. While he played, her fingers speared through his hair to hold him closer. The soft sounds she made as he sucked the morsel spurred him on and as he switched his attentions to the other breast, he sent his hand beneath the sorry excuse for a skirt to find her center with deadly accuracy.

Quinn's inner thighs were damp. His hand swept over that soft flesh, loving the way she trembled. He felt her need, smelled the desire in her, as he trailed a finger over her silky wet panties. They clung to her layers, outlining what he most wanted. Her clit was a distended little bump against the fabric and he took it in his fingers, tugged, squeezed, plied her there. "Yes, oh Joe."

Her lower body pushed against the invasion, the single touch and he made a low sound, releasing her nipple with a soft pop. "So wet, Quinn. Gonna take you here. That sound good?"

She didn't answer but that was fine with him. They were beyond simple words and he knew it. He reached for the waist of her skirt and wanted to howl his impatience until Quinn said, "Button. Zipper."

There it was. He found the oversized button, then the zipper and lowered the garment down her beautiful, long legs. It pooled around her ankles so he lifted one foot, then the other and freed her of it leaving her wearing only the utterly useless panties.

Joe stood back to take her in and she didn't flinch away or try to cover her body. He damn sure liked that about Quinn Harlow. She was fearless. Pride in her surged high as he jerked his tee shirt over his head and tossed it to the pile of discarded clothes.

“Touch me.”

He moved in as she reached out. He watched her draw her bottom lip between her teeth as she sent her hands over his chest in long leisurely strokes. Tenderly she stroked her thumbs over his nipples and he caught his breath. Closing his eyes, gritting his teeth, he realized this was the first time a woman had touched him this way. She didn’t want anything from him. She didn’t know who or what he was. To Quinn, he was just a simple man. She-wolves like Selena saw power and glory, a means to a higher station when they touched him this way.

With Quinn everything was new and real.

Her hands swept his belly and lingered over the muscles there. Joe sucked in a breath. She was so close to the waist of his jeans. His cock thrummed with impatience, aching, needing the warmth of her touch. Why in the hell had he waited so long to move in on her?

But then she was unsnapping his jeans and he opened his eyes to watch her. She glanced up once and their eyes locked. “Do it,” he said, his voice grown sharp with need.

He heard the rasp of the zipper as the crickets chirped around them and the dragonflies droned. His cock sprang free from the awful imprisonment, throbbing, needing her touch. Impatient with the slow stripping, he drew away long enough to yank his boots off and throw them aside. The jeans were pushed down and discarded too until he stood there as naked as she.

Well, except for the panties. They were goners.

With a savage growl, he tore the worthless scrap of silk at the sides and settled his hand over her pussy. “God, you’re wet. Soaked. Damn it, Quinn, I love this.”

Quinn made a whimpering sound as she sank back against the tree. He stroked her, dipping his fingers into her wet flesh. Reaching out she took his cock in her hand and moved it down, then up his length. He wanted to bawl like a baby as the intensity of the simple touch threatened to unman him.



He looked into her eyes and felt the power of her lust meet his own with a smack of certainty. "I'm gonna fuck you, Quinn. Hard."

"Yes, Joe. Oh, please."

"Don't move."

She obeyed as he grabbed up the jeans and fished out a condom. He tucked it in his teeth. Ignoring her gasp, he picked her up and carried her to the back of his truck which was parked close by. He released the latch with one hand and lowered the door to the bed of the truck then set Quinn on her feet. He set the condom aside. He didn't need it yet.

"What..."

"Turn around Quinn. Put your hands here." He placed her hands on the lowered door and stepped back to look at her. "Spread your legs."

His voice had gone hard and he hoped he didn't sound as scary as he felt. He sent his eyes on a slow study of the long lines of her flawless back and over her luscious ass. Unable to stop himself, he let his hands stroke over her warm skin. He teased the curve of her waist and squeezed the globes of her mighty fine backside. "Spread 'em more, darlin'."

Quinn widened her stance. Placing a hand between her shoulder blades, he gently pushed. "Bend over."

"Joe?"

"Come on, honey."

When she complied, he stepped back to look. The petals of her pussy were pink, glistening with moisture and impossible to resist. He dipped his fingers over the heat of her, gathering the wetness. Spreading the globes of her ass, he trailed one wet finger up through the shadowy cleft to press the puckered rosette before sending his finger into her. "Easy," he whispered, when he felt her stiffen, go still. "Relax and let me feel you here."

He heard her sigh as he slowly drew that single finger in and out. "I'm going to take you here but not now, darlin'. I'll save it for later." He withdrew his finger and sent another finger to her drenched pussy to plunge deep.

Quinn cried out and a surge of savage possession filled him up. Bending low, he tasted the flesh of her back, rained kisses down her spine and dipped his tongue into the dimples above her ass. He set his teeth in the soft mounds, over and over, biting only lightly at first, then harder as Quinn squirmed beneath him.

Joe went to his knees, heard her gasp, as he gripped her thighs and buried his face against the steamy, layers of her pussy. Again and again he tasted her there, sweeping his tongue over her softness. He released her thighs and tenderly parted her labia with his fingers. Her sweet little clit throbbed against his tongue and he drew it into his mouth to suck. The wild scent of her lust threatened to send him over the edge and he hadn't even started fucking her yet.

He knew she needed to come. Joe released her clit then speared his tongue deep into her channel. Quinn's inner muscles flexed around it as if she'd keep him there. His fingers found her pulsing clit and he pressed it repeatedly as he stabbed in and out with his tongue. He felt her body stiffen, then let go as she came apart with a soft cry.

Satisfaction rose, along with the primitive urge to claim as he reached out for the condom. Quinn's breathing was heavy. Almost frantic, he tore the package open with his teeth and, standing behind her, covered himself. Taking himself in hand, he dragged the head of his cock through the wet flesh of her pussy. Sliding slowly through her moist heat was the hardest thing he'd ever done. He wanted fast and wild. But he didn't dare terrify her with the awful lust that churned through his belly.

Gritting his teeth, he continued the torment until he circled the head of his erection at the entrance to her body. *God, this was torture.* It was killing him. And then Quinn pushed back against him and it was enough. With a low sound, he entered her, just the head of him.

"Please, Joe. Please."

“Ah, hell, honey.” He pushed hard, fighting through the tight sheath, until he was seated to the hilt. His balls pressed flush against her cunt and he rotated his hips, loving how tightly their bodies fitted together. Her inner muscles grabbed hold of his cock and he started to move, slowly at first.

Quinn’s fingers were spread out against the bed of the truck, flexing and clawing as he pounded deep and hard. Reaching for the front of her thighs, Joe lifted her until her toes left the ground. He spread her out and thrust deeper, harder, holding her body exactly where he needed it to be.

She came again with a scream and then he withdrew and flipped her to her back. The bed of the truck was high off the ground but he was a giant of a man and for him her pussy was at just the right angle. Joe grabbed her knees, spread her up and out and entered her again.

Her pussy was still pulsing from the hard orgasm as he continued his slow, hot, fucking. With each thrust, her breasts moved. Her hair was spread out like a fan of light against the darkness of the truck. But when she settled her laser-bright gaze on him and he saw her eyes shining in the night, he lost his hard-won control. Faster and faster he speared through her, feeling sensation whip hard through his belly. It crawled up his spine and over his scalp as he pounded and thrust. The slap of their bodies was like sensual music and it caught him up. Quinn moved in perfect counterpoint and Joe felt his balls draw tighter.

Like dry-lightning flashing over the prairie, he came and as if from a distance, he heard Quinn’s resounding cry. Possession and need balled together and released like a million tiny fireflies buzzing through his body. And as he sank against her and drew her up, he felt as if he’d finally come home.

\* \* \* \* \*

As they lay together beneath the wide expanse of Texas sky, Quinn curled against him and let her fingers drift over Joe’s washboard abs and upward to tease and play in

the hair on her chest. A contentment such as she'd never felt before settled around her heart. Joe had fetched a light blanket from the back of the truck and tucked it around them both. His arms were wrapped around her, his muscular legs twined with hers. His body heat drew her as she settled her nose against his chest and just breathed him in.

Joe threaded his fingers through her hair and pressed her even closer as he bent to press a kiss to her forehead. "Does this mean you aren't mad at me for ignoring you for three days?"

"I'm still a little ticked off, cowboy," she said, as she gently yanked a bit of his chest hair. "After the thing in the office, what was I supposed to think? Hm?"

He sighed and hugged her tighter. "I'm sorry about that. You kind of had me all twisted up inside, Quinn. You were talking about leaving and I just didn't want that to happen. Thought if I backed off and left you alone, you wouldn't feel so pushed."

She leaned back a little and looked up at him. "I felt ignored and tossed aside, Joe. You blew me off."

"I'm an ass."

"Not arguing about that."

Joe laughed and reached down to give her butt a smack. "Sassy woman."

"Ow!" When she jerked, her bare pussy rubbed seductively against his thigh. "You're bad."

"You have no idea." Joe rolled with her until she was pinned beneath him. He looked down at her, grinning wickedly. "So have I convinced you?"

"To stay?" she sighed. "It's tempting Joe. Since Mom died I've only had my business to keep me tied there and frankly, business sucks. I'd been planning to hang on until after Christmas but I don't think it'll help."

He frowned. "It means a lot to you?"

Suddenly she realized that it didn't, not anymore. "Maybe once. Losing Mom was hard and I guess, more than anything, I wanted something that belonged just to me."

"Now you have the ranch."

"Yes. I'd be crazy not to consider taking what my father wanted me to have but I still have so many questions. Why did Mom run away from him and never tell him he had a daughter?" She shook her head. "I need to know everything before I make any decisions."

Joe went solemn then nodded. "Okay. Think I can help you with that. How about we head back and we'll settle in for a long talk." He seemed to hesitate and added. "You taking me to your bed tonight, darlin'? Because this shaky little peace we have now will be blown to hell and gone if you say no."

A feeling of lightness and belonging swept her. She grinned. "I wouldn't dream of saying no."

"Good. I want to hold you all night, Quinn. I want to wake up beside you in the morning and sink into you again."

"Ah, man. Oh, Joe. You do have a lovely way with words."

Minutes later, they headed back to the ranch and he stopped his truck next to the back door of the ranch house. When he kept the motor running, Quinn gave him a questioning look. "Aren't you coming?"

"In a minute. I need to stop by the house and get some more rubbers."

Happiness bubbled up as she grinned. "Get plenty, big guy. We're gonna need 'em."

Joe was still chuckling as she hopped out of the truck and made her way into the house. Quickly, she refrigerated the remains of their picnic and headed through the living room. A table at the base of the stairs, held a small lamp that served as a night light. With a quick flick of her fingers, she turned the knob sending a soft, muted glow through the room. Then she headed upstairs in a rush.

Kicking off her sandals, she ran into the bathroom and turned on the shower. She wanted to be squeaky clean for Joe. Beautiful too. She didn't have much in the way of

sexy undies with her but she'd figure out something. She turned to face her reflection in the mirror and laughed when she got a good look at herself. Her little top was inside out and her skirt was zipped but not buttoned. Pitiful.

Feeling light of heart, she stripped down and stepped into the shower, carefully soaping every nook and cranny. She trailed the soapy sponge over her sensitized breasts and belly. She drew it between her legs. The scent of vanilla and lavender proved soothing to her nerves as warm water and steam cruised a path over her skin.

Every inch of her felt alive and brand spanking new.

Knowing Joe would be coming soon, she finished the shower, dried herself and smoothed a fresh smelling lotion over her skin. Next, she gave her hair dryer a workout and when that was finished, she brushed her hair and stepped into the bedroom wearing only a fluffy white towel.

The dim night-light she'd turned on earlier gave a cozy look to the room that had once belonged to her father. Funny how it suddenly felt hers. She felt no ghosts lurking to arch a ghostly brow. She felt no condemnation. Just acceptance. Since her dad had seen fit to leave the ranch to both Joe and her, together, he must've had something up his sleeve. Maybe this had been his hope all along. She liked to think so.

Heading to the dresser drawers across the room, she rummaged through her undies but found nothing suitable for seduction. Then she laughed. Seduction wasn't necessary with this man. He was the kind of guy who didn't need a bit of sexy lace to turn him on. All Joe needed was smooth, clean skin and acceptance. She had plenty of both.

Giving up she padded back toward the bed, intending to drop the towel and slip naked between the sheets. A blast of wind whipped through the room and frowning, she looked up to see the balcony doors were open like they'd been that first night when the wolf had visited her. She started to go to close them but in the end, decided against it. She knew the beast belonged to Joe and he might come looking for his master, assuming such an animal could ever be mastered.

Smiling a little, she turned back toward the bed as her heartbeat accelerated to a rapid pace. Anticipation hummed in her blood. Quinn reached down and grabbed the bedspread along with the top sheet to fold it back invitingly when she heard a sound. She jerked. The rattling noise reached her again and just as she started to move back, she froze.

The rattler coiled in the middle of her bed stared her straight in the eye, flashing its fangs. Several inches of rattle shook behind it.

*Jesus! God! Jesus! God!*

Quinn opened her mouth on a soundless scream as the snake launched itself at her head and sank its fangs into her throat.

## **Chapter Seven**

For a second or two, Joe considered packing a small bag but he didn't want to get his hopes up that Quinn would ask him to stay longer. If he had his way, he'd clear out the contents of his small house and move lock, stock and barrel into the Big House which, after all, belonged to him.

*Careful.*

Tonight with Quinn was a breakthrough and he was smart enough to know he had to go slowly. He still didn't know how she would take the news that she was half werewolf and belonged to him. He took a quick shower and shoved his damp hair back from his forehead then shrugged into a fresh pair of jeans. After he pulled on a clean tee shirt, he stuffed a handful of condoms in his back pocket. Nerves, sexual anticipation, rocked him back on his heels. Immediately hard just at the thought of taking her again, he stepped through the front door.

A scream rent the air.

*Quinn!*

A chill along with hotter-than-hell rage, swept over his skin and his gums throbbed with the need to kill, to protect. With the athleticism of his kind burning through his veins, he sped barefoot across the lawn and up the balcony stairs. Fear riding him hard, he stopped in the open doorway to Quinn's room and froze.

Blood ran from a wound in Quinn's throat as a rattler coiled on the bed preparing to strike again. Its ominous hiss was terrifying. Electricity snapped and sizzled in the air as, unbelievably, Quinn shifted wildly from human to wolf. He hadn't known until that moment that she would be a half-breed who could actually shift into beast form. Many like Quinn, with a purely human parent, couldn't unless they'd been mated in a consummation. Joe shifted instantly, leaping to the bed to head off the deadly reptile.



Catching it in his teeth, he flung it to the floor and followed it down biting it in half with a snap of his jaws.

Turning to Quinn who lay on the floor, naked and still bleeding from the bite, he padded over and sniffed, before licking the wound and gazing into her panic-stricken eyes. They were wild with pain and shock. Instantly, Joe shifted and gathered her up in his arms. She lay limply in his arms until he settled her in the middle of the bed.

"Ah, darlin'," he whispered. "Hang on. You'll be okay. I promise." He glanced at the twin fang marks and watched the wounds bubble as powers she didn't know she possessed pushed the venom from her system. Immediately, the holes closed, leaving Quinn shaking and gasping for breath. His heart went out to her and if he could've, he would have kicked his own ass for keeping her identity secret for so long. "Let me help you, honey. I'll be right back."

Joe went into the bathroom, wet a soft terry washcloth with warm water and came back to sprawl on the bed beside her. Whispering to her, he dragged the cloth over her face in soothing motions before cleaning blood and dried venom from her throat. He tossed it to a bedside table and leaned over her again. Her eyes were swimming with tears and he thought as sure as hell his heart was going to break. "You're safe. The snake is dead and your natural ability worked just fine. The poison is gone and the wounds are closed."

"What the fuck? Oh. God."

"Shh. Shh. Gonna be all right. It's okay."

Her eyes went wide as she reached for him, digging her fingers into his shoulders. "What the hell are you talking about? Nothing's okay. Nothing. What happened here?"

She was trembling all over, reaction setting in, so he did the only thing he could. Joe moved up beside her and dragged her against him. God, he was shaking too. Someone had put the damn rattler in her bed and he had a pretty good idea who would do something like this. He'd kill the fucking she-wolf if he ever got his hands on her.

Lying against him, Quinn shook like a leaf, clinging and he knew that she didn't know whether to scream or cry. Cussing worked. She'd done a little of that. Whatever. He held her close and trailed his hands over her naked back.

He didn't know how long she clung to him but finally, she drew back and looked at him. She was as pissed as hell, yet tears leaked steadily from her eyes. "Start t-talkin', Joe. You know what happened to me, don't you? My body did something weird."

"You shifted," he said simply.

"Shifted?"

"Yeah."

Quinn blinked at him and wiped the tears from her face with the backs of her hands. "You'd better explain right now before I s-slug you."

He wanted to smile but he didn't. Instead, he did the only thing he could. Rolling out of the bed, he stalked to the middle of the room and dropped his shields. He prodded her mind and her eyes widened. When finally she opened to him, firmly connected, he shifted into his wolf. Mentally he shared with her the physical experience of the shift, filled her mind with images of hunting with the pack. Through the beast's eyes, he saw her look of amazement. For a second or two she sat completely still and then slowly, she went to her elbows and knees and literally crawled toward the foot of the bed. When she reached the end, she stretched her arm toward him.

"Unbelievable," she whispered. Joe padded over to her and closed his eyes as her fingers sank into his fur. "This happened to me?"

Her confusion reached out to him, her fear. Immediately he shifted back until he sat on the floor looking up at her. "Yes, Quinn. You are half wolf."

Yanking back her arm as if she'd been burned, she glared at him. "This can't be real. Are you telling me I'm some kind of werewolf? There is no such thing."

"We call ourselves lycan and yes, you are as lycan as me or as your father was."

She shook her head wildly. "My father was a wolf man?"

Joe stood, focusing in on her, practically willing her to believe the impossible. The dead rattler lay near his feet, so he reached down and picked it up, carried it to the balcony outside and tossed it over. When he turned back, she watched him steadily. He could practically feel the wheels turning in her mind, putting everything together.

"This is why my mother kept me from him. This is why she left when she found out she was pregnant with me."

"Yeah."

Joe walked over to the nightstand, giving her time to reason things out and picked up the soiled cloth. Taking it into the bathroom, he dumped it into a hamper and washed his hands. When he finished, he stopped in the doorway and leaned there, wondering what she was thinking. Her mind was carefully shut away from him but he could only imagine the questions, the turmoil.

Finally, he couldn't take her silence a second more. "You are half lycan. Bart wasn't mated to your mother but he cared for her. Believe me, if he'd suspected she was pregnant, he wouldn't have let her leave. Maybe that's why she never told him and tried to pass you off as Decker Harlow's daughter." He walked further into the room until he sat beside her on the bed. "Bart didn't know about you until recently. He sent out the private investigator and had just learned of your whereabouts when he was killed."

Quinn reached out and drew the sheets over her nakedness as if they would shield her from the truth. Absently, she plucked at the cotton covering her thighs. "I used to read books about weres and vampires but I thought it was all fantasy."

"No."

She looked up, seeming calmer now. "I'm ready to hear it all. I think. Did I shift into a wolf when I saw the snake?"

"Yeah. Some half-bloods never shift but if they are capable of it, it happens in times of extreme trauma or intense sexual pleasure."

"Then why didn't I turn into a wolf tonight out by the creek? That was pretty intense."

Joe laughed a little and took her hand. So soft. He trailed his thumb over the pad of her palm. "Pretty damn intense all right but not enough to bring the change. That usually comes from our mating consummation. The male bites the female while they have sex. Let's say we had a consummation." He watched for her reaction to that but she didn't move so he said it again. "We have a mating consummation. My cock would get bigger at the base while I'm inside you. I would be bigger than I've ever been before. We would be locked together for some time. Now that's intense fucking. Enough to bring the female to shift sometime later."

She was so quiet he thought she wouldn't speak. She sent her tongue across her bottom lip and looked at him. "Have you ever done it before?"

"A mating consummation?" He shook his head. "No. I'm technically unmated."

An expression washed across her face. Was it relief? "Um...what do you mean by 'technically'?"

Ah, they needed to get into this. Joe smiled and stretched out on the bed beside her and with a little coaxing drew her down next to him. Heat radiated from her body but she didn't move to touch him so he trailed his fingertips down her arm. He wanted to be as gentle as possible. It would scare the hell out of him if she locked him out now. "I don't want to scare you, Quinn, but the minute you stepped from your car that day at the cemetery, I felt a connection. And after I touched you, it was all over for me. You know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

She focused intently and moistened her lips again. "Are you talking about the energy? About the way I could feel your emotions?"

"Yes. It explains why we suddenly got hot and heavy out there in the middle of nowhere. We couldn't help ourselves."

Quinn surprised him by laughing a little. "Ah and here I was thinking I was acting like a complete slut."

Joe kissed her then. He'd never been the kind to believe in love but what he felt for her went way beyond that. When he pulled away, he settled his hand in her hair to play with the golden strands. "Never. We couldn't help ourselves. This is how our kind find their mates and you are mine, Quinn. Whether you can accept it or not, it's a fact."

She closed her eyes and lay back against his shoulder. "I have to think."

"Take all the time you need. I know this is a shock."

Several minutes passed. "So, this is why the ranch was left to both of us? When my father died you took his place as leader."

"Alpha."

"Yeah, right. Alpha."

"And this is why Selena hates me? She wanted to be your mate and be a big shot. Right?"

"Mm. Pretty much. She doesn't love me," he said. "I'm not really sure she has it in her to love anyone. That day in the office, I had to fuck you. I know you don't understand it now but there were wolves at the door. My men. I didn't want to fight them for you after just becoming their alpha. Until I'd laid a physical claim, they would've been after you. Couldn't have that. Selena had to be dealt with too."

"Damn! I knew all those men knew what we were doing. I'm so embarrassed."

He laughed and pressed a soft kiss to her petulant lips. "Don't be. They were all as jealous as hell. They knew it was 'hands off' after that and that's just the way I wanted it. You are my mate, Quinn. Better get used to the idea."

A blonde brow winged up over on eye. "And if I don't?"

"Then it'll be my job to convince you." Joe's mouth settled on hers and he'd meant to be gentle, damn if he didn't, but when she sighed and opened to him, he just couldn't help himself. He took the kiss deeper, sweeping his tongue deep for a fuller tasting. Her response was like an aphrodisiac. His cock hardened, thrummed and when he drew her closer, it rose high along her belly. Quinn's leg went around his hips to clasp him

tighter. Her tightly pearled nipples stabbed erotically against his chest. The need to claim her in the consummation whipped through him with a fierce urgency he'd never felt before.

Too soon.

Backing off from the kiss, he stared into her pretty face and stroked the sharp blade of her cheekbone with a finger. "You sure about this, honey? You've been through a lot tonight but I'll be damned if I don't want you more than my next breath."

"Will this be a consummation deal? Not sure about that just yet, Joe."

He shook his head. "Not unless you want it. The commitment to link with me and with our people is unbreakable. Big decision. I won't have it said I pushed you into it."

"And to think, for a few days there, I thought you were a complete ass." She surprised him with a grin. Sensing her need to be light and playful for just once this evening, he stroked her butt with the palm of his hand.

"Such a big, bad wolf, aren't you, Joe?"

Returning her lazy smile, he squeezed the warm globe, nipped her bottom lip then dipped his fingers into the shadowy crevice. "I want to fuck you here, Quinn. Wanna fuck you everywhere."

Her eyes widened then focused on his lips. "Sounds like a plan, Joe." She went still. "What is it about you that just takes my breath away?" she whispered.

"Like I said, we're meant to be. You might not love me yet but I'm gonna work on it, on you, until I convince you we belong together."

"Right now, I just have about a gazillion questions."

He sighed. "Yeah. I know. "He swept his fingers through her hair and finally cupped her cheek. "There'll be plenty of time for that tomorrow, honey, because I'm moving in. That okay with you?"

Quinn gave him an achingly soft smile making his heart thump hard in his chest. "Yeah, Joe, that's more than okay with me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that night, Joe woke up to find Quinn gone. Panic seared his blood as he reached to feel her pillow had gone cold. Naked, he got out of bed and checked around. Nope, not in the bathroom. Sniffing the air, he headed downstairs to find Quinn slumped over the kitchen table stuffing food in her mouth as if she hadn't eaten in days. A plate of cold fried chicken, two cold biscuits and a gallon of milk sat in front of her along with a pan of blackberry cobbler.

"Quinn?"

She looked up, startled. The dim light over the stove cast the room in shadow but he could see well enough to note the widening of her eyes as she quickly chewed and swallowed. "Oh my God! Joe! You scared me to death!"

He laughed and pulled out a chair next to her. "After everything that happened tonight, I'm surprised anything could scare you."

Frowning at the food on the table, she looked back up at him. "I'm a pig." A soft little whine entered her voice. "I woke up and I was just so hungry. I don't think I've ever been more starved in my life. Grrrr."

Joe couldn't help it. She looked so cute when she was pissed off at herself. He grinned at her. "Don't get your britches in a twist, darlin'. Being hungry after shifting is natural. You'll get used to it."

"I'm going to get huge if I keep this up, Joe."

That little whine again. He loved it. But to satisfy her, he shook his head. "No, you'll learn your body demands fuel after shifting. You'll burn it up. I promise."

"Promise?" She looked so hopeful. Damn. He couldn't resist. Leaning in, he pressed a kiss to her pouting lips. "Pass that pan of blackberry cobbler over here, sugar."

Quinn scooted the pan toward him and picked up a spoon to dip up a hefty portion of the golden crust and juicy berries. She held it up to his lips. "Open up, wolf man."

Joe's taste buds sat up and hollered. He let her feed him a few more bites before he took the spoon from her hand and set it aside. "Come 'ere, sweet thing."

He'd restrained himself long enough. Everything about her made his body heat to dangerous levels. Earlier, when she'd shifted for the first time and been traumatized by that fucking Selena, he couldn't take her. No way in hell. Not when her world had suddenly rotated on its axis. Now was different and he wasn't going to waste another second in claiming her. When he settled his lips on hers, drank her heavy sigh, he sent his tongue deep into her mouth. She tasted warm and sweet, like berries and woman. He knew he'd never get enough. Quinn made a low husky sound as she returned his kiss. Joe drew her to her feet and settled his arm beneath her ass and lifted.

"Joe! I'm too heavy."

"Uh-uh. That won't fly."

Quinn's long legs went up high around his waist and Joe groaned aloud when her soft pussy settled flush against his throbbing cock. He knew he'd never get enough of the feel of her. Her bare ass pressed against his forearm and the oversized football jersey she'd shrugged on earlier was bunched around her middle.

In two long strides, he carried her to the granite countertop and sat her on it. He focused on her slumberous eyes. Her chest rose and fell beneath her shirt, her nipples poking hard against the soft jersey. "You ready for me, Quinn?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm ready."

"Good." Joe was tired of fucking around. He grabbed fistfuls of the red jersey and whipped it over her head before tossing it to the floor. In the shadows, Quinn was pale and beautiful. Her abundant curves made his damn fingers itch. "Sick of waiting. Have to fuck you or I'm gonna die."

"Can't have that," she murmured as he put his hands on her knees and spread her open. Joe went still. He knew he'd never get tired of looking at her and knowing she belonged to him. The petals of her pussy were dewy. He trailed his hands up the length of her thighs marveling at the contrast between her pale skin and his much darker



tones. Moisture dampened her inner thighs and unable to resist, he bent his head and dragged his tongue over her warm flesh. Her gasp told him how much she liked it. Breathing deeply, he drew the scent of her into his lungs.

He needed her now not later. Knowing he was on the trembling edge of having what he craved, he ran his broad thumb along her slit gathering moisture as he went. She was drenched. Hot. He wanted more. He wanted to fuck so badly he thought the top of his head would just spin off. He needed to come like he needed his next breath. But not any woman would do.

"You're so pretty here," he said, shocked at the rough sound of his voice. Pretty? What a lame ass! Pretty didn't begin to describe her. But then he thrust his fingers, two of them, deep in her gorgeous pussy and began to finger-fuck her. Quinn's breath broke and when he looked up, he saw her head had dropped back against the cabinet. She brought her arms up and back until they were settled against the heavy walnut of the cabinets.

"Joe? Joe, suck my nipples. They ache."

"Yeah." An invitation he couldn't refuse. While his fingers thrust deep into her clenching heat, he raked his teeth over one rock-hard nipple. Again. Then again. Scraping that tender flesh until she began to squirm against his fingers. Quinn made a low whimpering sound and he drew the morsel deep into the warmth of his mouth, sucking hard. Suddenly her fingers were in his hair, holding him close. Joe switched to the other breast and her creamy center quivered around his plunging fingers. She was close. So close and damn it, he wanted to be inside her when he came.

Joe removed his fingers and stepped between her thighs. He grabbed the flesh of her hips and squeezed as he drew his cock along her drenched heat. Quinn reached between them, running her hands over him, pressing him closer. Frantic fingers reached for his balls, to play and tease.

"Jesus, honey. You're killin' me here."

"Good. We're in this together, Joe, and I want you as much as you want me. We've gotta be equal or this thing will never work."

"Hell yeah," he breathed. "I'm all about equality. I love the feel of your hands on me. Keep playing with my balls. Yeah, like that. It's good."

Finally he'd had enough. His breath puffed from his lungs like he was a thoroughbred approaching the finish line with finish being the operative word. He wanted in and he wanted in now. "Ready for me?"

"Yes. Oh yeah."

Joe fisted his hand around the base of his cock and placed the head at the silky entrance to her body. Instantly he was coated in her hot cream and he groaned in reaction.

"Um, Joe? Condom?"

He went still and saw the uncertainty in her eyes. "Been meaning to tell you something."

"Now?"

Wanting to smile at the bit of outrage in her voice, he dropped another bit of information. "Don't need a condom. Never did, honey. Our kind doesn't carry disease. That's the reason you never got sick when you were a little girl."

"Okay," she whispered. "That's a good thing to know. I'm on the Pill so..."

Joe plunged deep. High and hard. Gritting his teeth against the pleasure, he plummeted inside the melting flesh of her pussy. Quinn's legs went around his waist, pulling him closer but it still wasn't enough. Impulsively, he wrapped her up, lifted her butt from the countertop and carried her to the closest wall. The urge to hit her with the full blast of his power overwhelmed him and he knew he could now that she'd shifted. Opening his mind to her, prodding, he whispered the words in her mind.

*Can you feel me? Inside your mind? Everywhere?*

*Yes! Oh, God! Yes, I hear you, Joe. This is wicked.*

*I'll show you wicked.*

Joe had never in his long life used his inborn sexual powers. They could kill a human woman and were too intense for most she-wolves. But for his mate? Oh, yeah. Without a doubt, she was his and he would fuck her the way he'd always dreamed of taking his mate. Gathering his emotions, his strength and his power, he thrust it through Quinn's body until she screamed and shook in his arms. Her pussy convulsed repeatedly over his shaft as she flew apart crying his name. It wasn't enough and greed caught him up.

*Again.*

*Holy shit.*

*Come on, Quinn. Come.*

Quinn shivered and shook and Joe felt the energy surge then ebb only to rise up again. Sensations zipped like busy fireflies over his skin and he knew she felt it too. She stiffened, huffed a breath then screamed again. At once he joined her, coming hard inside her quivering pussy.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later, as they lay entwined on the big bed, Joe sighed against her hair and knew with everything in him that he loved Quinn. It was a hell of a revelation for a man who'd spent most of his life utterly alone. She was more than his mate, she was his life. He tightened his arms around her, praying that one day she'd come to feel the same.

"Joe?"

"Shh. Sleep."

"Uh-uh. Have to ask you something."

"Okay, shoot."

He looked into her eyes and saw worry swimming there. "What happens if I decide not to do the consummation, Joe? What if I go back to the piney woods and leave here? What will happen to you?"

Then quite suddenly he knew his hopes and dreams were the kind of stupid stuff a kid might dream up. It would never happen for them despite what his dumb heart wanted. He was so quiet she finally asked her question again.

“What will happen to you if I leave, Joe?”

“I’ll be alone, Quinn. That’s all.”

“Can you...um...find another mate?”

He shook his head. “Nope. That doesn’t happen to us. We mate for life. Reckon if you decide to leave, I’ll stay here and lead the pack. Alone.” Since he didn’t want to sound like a pitiful whipped pup, he leaned down and smiled at her. “But don’t you worry about that, darlin’, I’m not planning to let you go.”

## **Chapter Eight**

"So. You're Bart's daughter. I've been so curious about you. Think all of us have been."

Rayne Poteet, owner of Poteet's on the Prairie in the small town of Cloverfield, leaned her elbows on the counter, as the morning sun filtering through the storefront windows turned her hair the color of an autumn sunset. She was fun and friendly and from the looks of her neat little shop, she had a nice business.

Quinn smiled. "No more curious than I've been about you since I've found out that I'm a big bad wolf."

This morning, Joe dropped another bombshell. The entire town of Cloverfield was populated by lycans. On any other day she'd be terrified about that but not now. She was one of them and, though she was just coming to grips with it all, she had to admit there was something comforting about knowing she wasn't alone.

Rayne laughed brightly and leaned closer. "Ah, honey, you aren't so bad." Then suddenly, she went serious and reached for Quinn's hand. "You've been through a lot especially finding out about yourself the way you did. Selena should be shot. I've never liked that woman."

Quinn squeezed back. "Joe and the others looked for her first thing this morning. Guess she took off after the thing with the snake."

"She won't get far. These men are the best hunters around. Pack justice will catch up with Selena. But I don't want to talk about her. She just makes me want to spit nails. Come on. I'll pour us some coffee and we'll talk. Okay?"

"Sounds good."

Rayne had a nice little seating area in the center of her place complete with a rug of Native American design and several comfortable chairs. When she and Joe and driven

into town earlier, they'd stopped at Tobias' office to sign some papers dealing with the probate of the will and then they'd headed here. Joe wanted her to get to know the townspeople and had said Rayne was especially nice. Once Joe had introduced them and they'd begun to chat, he excused himself to run some errands while they were in town. Quinn agreed that Rayne was very nice and after meeting her, believed that if she stayed, they could become friends.

If she stayed.

The more the facts of her existence sank into her brain, the more she realized that she could never go back to her home in the piney woods. Impossible. What if she changed and was shot by hunters? What if someone found out she was more beast than woman? Made her shudder to think about it. She was still trying to wrap her brain around it all and what better place than here to find answers?

Rayne took a sip of her coffee and eyed her steadily over the rim. "Are you afraid?"

"Terrified."

"Are you scared of changing? Scared of hunting with the pack?"

Quinn set her own cup on a little coffee table as she considered the question. "I've never been afraid of a thing in my life except my stepfather when he'd had too much to drink. After a few years of that, I was just done with fear and started to fight back. But this? Terrifying." She shook her head. "It's like something from a horror movie, ya know? This isn't supposed to be real."

"But it is. Listen to me, Quinn! We are good people. Really." Rayne rolled her eyes. "Well, except for Selena. Bitch. We just want to live our lives without humans questioning our habits or why we don't seem to age. We're safe here to live our lives."

"I get that." Quinn sighed and shook her head. "I was always bigger and stronger than the other kids. Never got sick. Funny. I never thought anything about it until now. Joe said I shifted last night because of the terror I felt at seeing that rattler coiled up in my bed. Is shifting always like that? So violent?"

Rayne went still and looked away. "Well...um...I don't know. I haven't shifted yet."

This was news. Quinn sat up straighter. "You haven't?"

"No. I haven't come into my time yet. I'm a young lycan. Our males change in puberty but we women are slower."

"Any ideas about when this will happen?"

Rayne shook her head. "Not really but soon for me, I think. I hope. My mate is out there somewhere and when the time is right, we'll make a connection. Just like you and Joe did."

Quinn felt her face heat as she recalled the instantaneous reaction she'd had the moment Joe had touched her out in the cemetery that day. And God! She couldn't get last night off her mind. The heat. The sex. The power. Just thinking about it made her want to hunt Joe McKinnon down and jump his lovely bones. "Does everyone in town know about us?"

"Pretty much. We might be lycan but this is still a small town. Word gets around."

"Damn."

Rayne laughed but then they both turned at the sound of the giant cowbell over the front door jangling. Joe seemed to instantly fill up every space in the room with his presence. Quinn's belly fluttered at the sight of him. No one filled out a pair of jeans like Joe. He tipped back the brim of his battered straw cowboy hat and sent his gaze over her body. His nostrils flared as if he could smell her reaction to him. Then he looked at Rayne and smiled. "You ladies getting acquainted?"

"We sure are," Rayne answered, smiling. "We're gonna be good friends."

"I really like your store," Quinn said as she stood.

"Understand you have a store too."

Quinn sighed. "Yeah, I'm proud of it. I don't stock as much clothing as you do but I carry some cute little tees and lots of accessories. My shop is strictly girly stuff."

"I'd love to hear all about it."

"Not much to tell really. The economy in the piney woods is really suffering. Sales are abysmal right now." She shook her head. "Wish I could predict the future but I honestly don't know how much longer I'll be in business. Maybe someday I'll come back into town and we can talk shop," Quinn said as she moved to Joe's side. Instantly his arm went around her, heavy and warm and without examining her actions, she leaned into him. "It was great meeting you."

"Same here, Quinn. Next time you're in town, we'll have lunch, okay?"

"Sure thing."

When they got to Joe's duel-cab truck, she noticed a lot of things in the bed of the truck. Dozens of paper bags carried the logo of the local grocery store. There were cases of beer and soft drinks and more bags of charcoal than she could count. Curious, she hopped into the truck and watched Joe as he turned the key in the ignition. Once the truck roared to life and they were headed out of town, she decided to appease her curiosity.

"You sure have a lot of stuff back there. I know you feed the hands at the house but this is a little much, isn't it?"

"Nah." He looked over at her. "We're having a big barbecue in a couple of days and I needed to stock up. This isn't all of it but the store will make a delivery tomorrow. Needed steaks and stuff for burgers and the fixins'."

"A barbecue? Really? That sounds fun."

"Glad you think so since the shindig is in your honor. Taking you into every business in town will take more time away from the ranch than I can afford to spend. Figured it was easier to just have the town come to you. Everyone wants to meet you."

A warmth, a feeling of belonging that she'd never known before, climbed into her heart and expanded. She honestly didn't know what to say. "That's so sweet, Joe. You don't have to do this."



Joe reached out and turned the air conditioner up a notch sending a blast of cool air into the cab. "Sure I do, darlin'. You're Bart's daughter and if I have my way about it you will be my *lupa*."

"*Lupa?*"

He pierced her with a glance of those spooky golden eyes then settled that gaze square on her lips. "Yeah. My mate. My wife."

"I thought you weren't going to pressure me, Joe?"

"Sorry. Still planning to work on you."

She had to smile. "And just how do you plan on doing that?"

"Give you one guess."

"Pushy man."

"Yep. That's me." As the flat landscape rolled out around them and they left the city limits, he glanced at her. "You know I'm just playing with you, Quinn. Meant what I said last night about working on you but I won't force you. In the end, I think you'll figure out that you belong here. What if you go home and you shift? Imagine what would happen with no support from the pack. It could be dangerous for you."

She looked out the window and sighed. "I've been thinking about that but you have to realize this is all so new to me."

Quinn jumped a little when Joe reached across the expanse of the cab and took her hand. The gentle expression on his face was almost her undoing. Tears burned behind her eyes. "Ah, darlin'. I understand. It'll work out. I promise. You'll figure it all out and when you do, I'll be right here. Not going anywhere."

*Who couldn't love a man like this?*

When they finally pulled up at the house, she saw several cowboys lope out to the truck and start moving stuff from the bed of the truck under the direction of a Mexican woman she'd never met. She stood well over six feet tall and wore her long dark hair loose and flowing. The streak of silver in it curved along her face and served to soften

her rather austere features. Then she smiled at the two of them and Quinn was struck by her beauty.

The woman approached the truck as they got out and Joe introduced her. "Quinn, this is Maria Lejas. She'll be taking care of the housekeeping and cooking now that Selena is gone."

"Hi, Quinn. It's a pleasure to meet Bart's beautiful daughter."

Quinn smiled. "Thank you. Nice to meet you too."

Maria looked at Joe. "I have a big pot of chili on the stove and the cornbread is still hot. The men have already eaten but I made sure they didn't get it all."

Joe nodded. "Sounds great, Maria. I knew you'd do a great job."

"Anything for you, Joe."

As the day wore on, it became more and more obvious to Quinn the amount of respect these people had for their alpha. Joe was the kind of man who demanded it. He wore the mantle of leadership as if he'd been born to it.

After lunch, Joe left to do what ranchers do, leaving her and the new housekeeper to chat. There was something so comforting about meeting other women who were like her, carried the same genetic makeup. First Rayne and now Maria. Quinn gathered the dirty dishes from the kitchen table and carried them to the sink over Maria's protests.

"Don't even go there," Quinn said, smiling. "I've never been some pampered princess and I'm not about to start now."

Together they chatted and put away the remains of the noon meal and finally Quinn's curiosity got the better of her. "Been meaning to ask Joe about something but I bet you'd know the answer."

Maria turned in the act of wiping her damp hands on a dish towel. "You might be right about that. Shoot."

Quinn poured them both tall glasses of sweet tea and sank back into a chair. "How is it these guys can work around cattle and horses all day? I mean, wouldn't the animals sense the predatory nature of a wolf?"

The other woman sat and took a drink, leaning back with a sigh. "Our pack is different from most lycans. We have an inherent gene that allows us to shield our true natures. For most of us, working in town and such, it's not that big a deal. We're teachers, shopkeepers, store clerks. You name it. But it's extra important for the cowboys to be able to shield. It's a gift. "

"Fascinating." She shook her head. "Will I ever learn everything I need to know?"

"Do you want to?"

Quinn saw the seriousness in Maria's expression, the solemn question in her eyes. "Yeah. I think so. Joe's just like a steamroller and I can't seem to resist him when I know I should."

"It's impossible."

"What?"

"Resisting him, honey. You are mated." Maria smiled. "It's inevitable and you might as well come to grips with the fact that your entire life has changed. Best listen to me, Quinn, your future was written for you the moment you two clapped eyes on each other and there is no sense fighting it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Quinn was terrified.

She stood with Joe in the center of the bedroom and watched him remove his clothes. "What the hell are you talking about? Now? You want me to shift now?"

For one mad instant she considered making a run for it. Yeah, she could zip down the stairs, hop in her car and pretend this whole experience had never happened. The memory of her violent shifting just a few nights ago still had the ability to terrorize her

but then she looked at Joe and noted the patience in his eyes as he looked at her. He was stoic, stronger and more beautiful than any man she'd ever known.

He stood there for several quiet moments then padded over to the balcony doors, throwing them wide open. Moonlight washed the room in shadow and light. Then he went back to her and calmly took her hands. "Do you want to be alone when you shift, Quinn?"

"No," she whispered.

"Wouldn't you feel more comfortable if you could learn to shift with someone who cares for you?"

Firming her jaw, she gave him a nod. "Okay," she said with finality as she blew out a breath. "Tell me what I need to do, Joe. I want to be able to control this thing."

"This thing is who you are. After the first time or two, it'll be as natural to you as breathing. It might work best if you remove your clothes."

"Wow. Okay."

Feeling Joe's steady gaze on her, she purposely shoved lingering bits of modesty to the back of her mind. It was dumb. He'd seen her naked. He'd fucked her until her eyes had rolled back in her head. Yes, he was a swoon-inducing lover who'd stroked every inch of her body with his hands and tongue. No need to be embarrassed, right? Before she lost her nerve, she reached for the hem of her tee shirt and soon tossed it aside. She slid her soft, jersey shorts down her legs and finally stood there in nothing but her bra and panties.

Even in the dim lighting of the room, she saw his eyes darken as he looked at her. "Take 'em off, honey."

Her mouth went dry and despite the sultry heat of the night, a shiver rushed over her skin. She swallowed, then facing him squarely, unhooked the front snap of her bra and removed her panties. A primitive feeling, a stark desire moved between them as they stood naked together, bathed in moonlight.

Joe moved close and reached out for her. "Hold on to me. Open your mind."

Quinn did as instructed and the warmth of Joe's big hands engulfed hers. Immediately a sense of peace and inevitability filled her up. His voice rolled through her mind.

*Can you hear me?*

*Yes.*

*Close your eyes, darlin'. I won't let anything happen to you.*

*Will it be like last time, Joe? I'm scared.*

*No. Trauma is the worst way to shift. This time it'll be different. Easier. And I'm here to help you. Now relax.*

In the act of obeying him, she closed her eyes and a feeling of peace settled low in her belly. The scent of the earth filled her head, along with the tangy smell of new grass. The air she breathed held an under layer of the dust that was so predominate in the area. The first brush of fur swept through her middle. The beast, her beast, was inside her, moving until it seemed they were no longer separate things but the same.

Energy came alive all around her. She knew it was always there but now she recognized it. It became real for the first time.

*Picture the wolf in your mind.*

Joe's voice. She heard it in her mind.

*Let go, Quinn. Just let go.*

A low, warm ache grew inside her. She felt it from belly to toes to fingertips. The ache grew into something indescribable that stretched and filled her. The air sizzled and popped.

Quinn opened her eyes and looked up at Joe. Up and up. The presence of her wolf filled her and the world was different and new. Before her eyes, Joe smiled then shifted. Amazing thing. Shifting. A euphoric feeling caught her up as Joe came up and dragged

his long tongue over her muzzle. He buried his nose against the fur of her neck then without hesitation he trotted to the open balcony door and turned back to look at her.

Joy, abandon, swept her up and together they raced down the steps, across the yard and out into the night.

She was a wolf and, for the first time in her life, was utterly free.

## **Chapter Nine**

Joe dismounted from his horse, a gorgeous three-year-old mare named Little Britches and handed her off to a stable hand for a rubdown. As Manuel and Ringo did the same, the three men leaned against the corral fence, disgust written on their faces.

"We'll find her, Joe," Manuel said as he snatched a red bandana from his pocket and mopped his face. "Ringo and I can head back out in a while and keep looking."

"Don't bother," Joe said as he tipped the brim of his straw hat back with his thumb. "For all we know, she's long gone from these parts. Wonder if she's hooked up with that pack of rogue lycans who've been killing off our cattle?"

Over the past several weeks, cowboys from the Wolf Creek Ranch had come across the remains of cattle. The scent of wolf had been all over the carcasses so it didn't take a genius to figure out that news of Bart's death would trickle out through their world. Joe knew there was every possibility he'd be challenged as alpha of the pack. The ranch and the town was prosperous, the land was rich and fertile. It was only a matter of time before another pack tried to encroach.

Ringo scowled and settled his forearms along the top of the wooden fence. "This is my fault. I knew she was up to something. Manuel and I both did but we let it go. Chalked it up to her being pissed about losing you."

Joe snorted. "Losing me? She never had me. I told her over and over there was no future for us. For me, there's only Quinn."

The men went quiet and exchanged glances.

"What? Spit it out."

Ringo looked off into the distance. "Been wondering if she's staying. Not any of our business but things still seem to be unresolved for you two."

"You overstepping your bounds here, Ringo?"

"Yep. Reckon I am."

Joe let out a breath. Yeah, he was alpha but these were not only his closest lieutenants but friends. "All right. What's on your minds?"

Manuel cleared his throat. "The longer the consummation remains undone, Joe, the more danger Quinn is in. Have you thought of that?"

"Hell yes, I've thought of that. The biggest attack against me and my authority would be if a consummation was 'forced' on Quinn by another lycan. I would not only lose my predestined mate but I would be seen as weak by any wolf eager to take my place."

"Not a weak bone in your body," Ringo said. "Still, you need to get it done."

Anger swept him. Frustration too. "You telling me what to do, brother?"

Ringo's eyes narrowed as he gave him a look. "Nope. Just a suggestion."

Joe blew out a breath. "Look. Forget it. I'm just edgy."

"Bet I know what would take that edge off." This from Manuel, who backed away with a slow grin. "Think I'll head over and help the men clean up the barbecue pit."

"Yeah, you do that before I kick your ass," Joe hollered, smiling. He turned back to see Ringo eyeing him steadily. "What?"

"The safety of the pack depends on this consummation."

"I know. I'm working on her."

Ringo prodded the ground with the toe of his worn cowboy boot. "She loves you. It's plain to see. She might not admit it but we all know it's just a matter of time."

He nodded and turned back toward the house. "See you tonight at the barbecue."

Heading across the wide expanse of ground separating the stock area from the house, he took in the tables set up everywhere, their blue and white checked tablecloths snapping in the breeze. Off in the distance, he saw Manuel join several other men as they tended the giant rock structure where tonight they'd grill steaks and burgers. It



had been years since they'd done anything like this at the ranch and he figured it was long overdue.

Maria was standing at the kitchen sink when he stepped through the back door and tossed his hat on top of the kitchen table. "Where's Quinn?"

She turned smiling and grabbed up a huge container of potato salad and set it in the fridge. "I made her go upstairs to rest. She's been helping me set things up all morning and most of the afternoon. The woman works her butt off. Told her she'd done enough. Time to get pretty for the party."

"Good." Joe turned to go to Quinn but paused in the doorway. "I'm glad you're here, Maria. You're doing a great job."

"No thanks necessary, Joe. You know I'll do anything for my alpha and his mate."

His mate.

As he went up the stairs, his heart thumping hard in his chest, he recalled the way Quinn looked last night as they'd raced together through the woods. She'd been the prettiest thing he'd ever seen, a rare white wolf with aqua eyes that threatened to knock him flat on his ass. Her joy had reached out to him, affirming what he already knew. He loved her and her place was here on the ranch. With him.

He opened the bedroom door and saw Quinn curled up in an overstuffed chair. She was wearing a white terrycloth bathrobe and her hair was still damp from a shower. Though her cell phone was pressed to her ear, she paused to smile at him. Joe didn't hesitate but closed the door and crossed the room to her. Pressing a kiss to her forehead, he pointed toward the bathroom indicating he'd be showering too. Now he was completely moved into the ranch house and he knew it was exactly where he belonged. In all his many years, he'd never lived with a woman but there was something comforting about seeing his clothes hanging in the huge walk-in closet next to hers.

The place felt like home.

Joe stripped out of his dusty clothes and turned to see Quinn eying him. Her brilliant eyes were at half-mast as they skimmed his body and his cock hardened in

response. He watched her tongue sweep her bottom tip, saw her swallow. No doubt she was remembering what they'd done together in that big bed just the night before. God knew he did.

"Oh sorry," she said into the phone. "What was that?"

Joe laughed and headed into the shower thinking he'd better make it quick because he had plans for what remained of the day before company starting arriving. Ten minutes later, he emerged from the steamy bathroom and stopped dead in his tracks. Fury whipped through him. Jealousy dug steel spurs deep in his belly when he heard her words.

"I'm happy for you, Graham."

Graham. The lover who waited for her. Yeah, she'd said he was just a friend but Joe wanted to kill him.

His thoughts must have registered on his face because Quinn held up a hand, shook her head. "She sounds like a nice woman. The new high school principal? You know I'll always wish you happiness. You're my best friend."

Joe let out a breath and got his emotions under control as he sat at the foot of the bed and listened to her end of the conversation.

Quinn looked at him as she continued to speak. She let out a heavy breath and plucked nervously at the fabric of her robe. "Listen, Graham. I need to tell you something too. I've...um...I've met someone. Just like you have. Could you contact a realtor for me? Kind of oversee getting the house sold?"

Joe went still.

"Um...yeah. I'm sure. I'm closing the store too." She paused. "Yes, I'm sure. Business sucks. Just hanging on by a thread so I'm ditching it. I called the local lawyer here in Cloverfield and he's going to handle the details. Life goes on and I've just realized that my life is here, on the ranch, with this man I've met."

Joe's entire world went reeling as she disconnected and set the phone down. His breath went still as she unfolded herself from the chair and walked up to him. Her hands went to the belt on her robe. She loosened it and let the cloth slide from her shoulders.

"Do you mean it, Quinn?"

She nodded and smiled at him. Joe's breath expelled in a hot rush as he grabbed her hips and drew her between his spread thighs. He planted an open-mouthed kiss on her bare belly, nipping the spot then dragging his tongue over it. Her hands went into his damp hair to hold him closer.

"Yeah, I mean it." Bending a little, she settled her mouth on the top of his head. "I knew it last night after I got to know my wolf and yours. I've never felt this way about anyone. I love you, Joe. I'll mate with you. I belong here. On this ranch. With you."

Incredulous, he looked up, relief and joy evident on his face as he yanked her onto his lap. Her legs straddled his hips, his erection towered, hard and throbbing, between their bodies. "Do you mean it? Don't you know you've been driving me crazy, woman?"

Her face lit up like the sun was shining behind her eyes.

"Maybe, but I can't help what I feel, Joe. I'm ready to take hold of my future and who I am. Will you help me?"

Shocked to see his hands were trembling, he took her face and kissed her hungrily. "You don't have to ask. I'm here. I'll always be here."

His tongue stroked deep and she answered his passion with her own fire. Joe clasped the back of her neck, then swept his hands over her back. He clutched her ass and pulled her close enough that her melting heat dampened his cock. Thrusting through the silken layers, he broke the kiss and buried his mouth against her throat. "Been waiting for you to come to your senses, to believe that you belong here with me."

"Where else would I go, Joe? I am who I am. I'm a wolf and I'm yours. I knew it last night. The world was so clear and new and I belonged to it."

Growling low, he nipped her sweet flesh and drew her skin into his mouth to suck as she writhed against him. "Just like you belong to me."

"Like we belong to each other."

"Don't you forget it. Fuck me, darlin'. I'm dyin' here."

Quinn came up on her knees and positioned herself over the head of his cock and he thought he might come that instant. Energy and power practically sizzled from her body to his as she rotated her pussy over the head. The globes of her ass still filled his hands and he squeezed and tormented her firm flesh. Her nipple brushed his lips.

"Suck me, Joe. Suck my nipple."

Joe wasn't about to ignore her. He drew his tongue in circles around her nipple until she whimpered for deeper contact and as he pulled the hard bud into his mouth she sank down over his throbbing cock.

*Yes.*

*So good.*

Joe groaned around her tight little nipple, drew harder as she lifted slowly and then lowered herself again. Her pussy contracted around his erection with the most delicious pressure. Planting his feet firmly on the floor, he pushed up, sending his cock higher into her milky depths. Quinn's head dropped back. She writhed there, circled, then rose again only to plummet back down. When she went still in his arms, he felt her body gather for orgasm and plunged high again. She quivered for a moment then cried out as she began to come hard, suddenly gasping.

"Joe!"

He held her through the crisis, wrapping her up and when she'd settled he stood with her and laid her in the middle of the bed. Crawling between her sprawled thighs, he ran his hands over her legs, collected the dampness between them on his fingertips. Fascination with her body swept through him like wildfire but then he focused on the expression on her face and was lost. Her eyes sparkled like gems.

"Let's consummate this, Joe. I'm ready," she whispered. "Are you?"

They had roughly three hours before guests would begin to show up and he wanted nothing more than to introduce her as his *lupa*. His true mate. "Yeah. More than ready." Gripping her behind her knees, he lifted her up and out until she was spread before him like a feast for a starving man. "After today, you'll belong to me. You'll also belong to the pack. Be sure, darlin'."

"Yes. Take me, Joe. Fuck me. Do whatever you have to do."

Bending low, he dragged his tongue over the damp folds of her pussy, prodded her opening. Quinn whimpered and arched to meet his mouth. Her fingers gripped the white sheets as he took his time tasting her. His body was on fire to sample everything. Leaving her on the very edge, he leaned over and opened a drawer in the nightstand. He grabbed a bottle of lube he'd placed there earlier and looked at her.

Joe trailed his fingers over her pussy to find her drenched. He sank two fingers deep and worked her until soft little whimpers broke from her lips. Withdrawing them, he moved them deep between her ass cheeks until he found her tightly drawn rosette. He circled his finger around her opening before sliding it in to the first joint. "Wanna fuck you here."

"Yes. I want it. I want you everywhere, filling me up."

It was enough. Tenderly, he flipped her to her stomach and shoved a soft pillow under her belly before lifting her to her knees. Taking up the bottle of lube, he poured some on his fingers. He pressed his mouth to her spine, to her lower back and nipped at her ample hips. God! He loved her ass. His cock throbbed in a steady rhythm. He didn't want to hurt her and he was a big man so he covered her liberally with the lube before sending one finger deep.

"So tight. Give me a minute."

Joe slowly added another finger and gently scissored them both to stretch her.

Quinn went still when he began to slowly plunge and withdraw. He played with her pussy too, circling her clit and dipping his fingers deep into her channel. She was so

wet, dripping. Finger-fucking her thoroughly, he finally withdrew and covered his cock with the lube.

When he settled the head of his erection there, he paused.

Quinn made a small sound. "Is this the consummation?"

"No. This is just for us."

"Ah, do it, Joe."

Going slowly he breached her, pushing past the tight ring of muscle, then stopped to give her time to adjust.

"So big."

"Tell me the truth, Quinn. Is it too much?"

"God, no! Keep going."

Joe went deeper, then deeper, until finally he was seated to the hilt. Gently he stroked her lower back. "Just relax. Breathe."

Reaching down, he plucked her clit, rolled it between his thumb and forefinger and finally, Quinn started to move. Breath expelled from his lungs at her acceptance and unable to stop, he began to plunge slowly in and out of her body until she started to quiver.

"Joe. Oh yes."

The give and take continued with her backing against him, demanding more and at last she stiffened and came. He released her clit and gently stroked her flesh before withdrawing from her body. It wasn't time for him to come yet. He had to save himself for the rigorous consummation.

Hell!

He hoped they lived through it.

The intensity of their sex was so strong already he wondered now, how they would handle the constant eroticism of the consummation. Now it was time to find out. He pulled away. "Don't move. I'll be right back."

Quinn muttered something unintelligible and he had to smile. He'd hoped she'd be so out of it by the time he finished with her that she wouldn't have time to think about the coming consummation. Looks like the plan worked.

He went to the bathroom and, after cleaning himself up, came back with a warm, damp cloth. Sitting next to her, trying for all he was worth to ignore the erection which demanded release, he moved the cloth in soothing motions over her body. He held it for several long moments between her thighs and stroked it over her ass. When he removed the pillow and turned her to her back, he was surprised at the silly grin on her face. "You take good care of me, Joe."

"About time someone did."

Instantly her eyes filled with tears and she laughed a little. "Yeah, long overdue."

He didn't want the memory of her years with the hate-filled Decker Harlow to mar the occasion of their consummation, so he kissed her. "I'll take care of you and you'll take care of me. How does that sound?"

"Perfect. Take me, Joe. Let's do this thing."

Relief whipped through him as he tossed the cloth aside and went to work enjoying her delicious body. He started at her toes and worked his way up, pausing for a tantalizing moment at her pussy. Joe nipped her belly and her breasts, sent his fingers gently over the pink layers of her cunt.

When Quinn reached out for his cock and slid her hands up and down, tightening her fist over his hot flesh, he almost came. "I can't wait anymore."

"I know," she whispered.

Joe settled between her thighs and drew her legs up high to hang over his shoulders. He wanted it deep and wanted it now. Fisting his hand at the base of his cock, he dragged it repeatedly over her hot pussy. She was wet again. Wet and warm. He sank deep, seated fully and felt her inner walls clench around him. Gritting his teeth against the pleasure, he pumped into her repeatedly. His balls swelled, going hard and they pressed against her with each downward thrust further adding to his pleasure.

"Fuck, Quinn."

Beneath him, she made a low sound. She gasped. Her back bowed as she struggled to get closer. He moved her legs from his shoulders until they were draped through the notch in his elbows. The kiss he gave her went deep as he drank her whispered sigh. He nipped her chin and felt his gums tingle as his lupine teeth grew. Settling his mouth against her ear, he groaned a command. "Drop your shields. Open your mind and let me in."

Instantly she obeyed and he filled her mind with the pleasure she gave him. He sent his emotions, his thoughts, his love for her down a personal path that no one else could ever enter.

"Joe, I love you. I'm coming. Oh God."

The second the climax hit her, he sank his teeth into the soft flesh of her shoulder. The base of his cock grew larger and larger until he couldn't move. They were locked together in a joining as old as time. Climax rocked him and he growled through the blasting, wicked release. Quinn gasped and murmured incoherently as she shook in his arms. "Again, Quinn. Again."

Unbelievably he was still hard, his cock still firmly stuck inside her so he rode it out, fucked her through the pleasure. Quinn came repeatedly, quick bursts of energy and pleasure, that took him under with her.

She was his. He was hers.

It would always be enough.



## **Chapter Ten**

As laughter and chaos ensued all around her, Quinn looked out at the boisterous crowd and felt she suddenly belonged. She'd never felt that way before. Sure, her mom had loved her but Quinn had always sensed an underlying fear of her too. She'd never understood it before. But after learning of her heritage, she now realized that to her mom, she would always be part beast. And Decker? He'd simply hated her guts. His cruelty had been beyond anything a little kid should have to endure. Thank God she'd grown up and learned how to fight back.

But here in this yard full of rowdy, laughing lycans, she was home.

Joe sat next to her at one of the tables quietly talking with one of the Wolf Creek cowboys, giving her plenty of time to take it all in. The scent of grilled steaks filled the air and off in a distant field a group of young boys wearing footballs jerseys with the words Cloverfield Lobos written on them tossed a football around. Typical of this kind of scene, several young girls stood around in clusters, laughing as they watched the boys. To anyone, it would seem so ordinary but Quinn knew they were wolves. She knew most of these boys actually hunted with the pack while the girls knew they would have to age a little longer before they could join the hunt.

As she thought of who here might be unmated females, Rayne strolled up wearing a broad smile and sat down across from her.

"Hey, Quinn. You guys sure throw a great party." She settled back and sighed as she took in the crowd. "It's been a long time since we've had a reason to celebrate."

"Celebrate?"

Rayne's quick grin was disarming. "Why your upcoming consummation, of course."

Upcoming was no longer the operative word.

She turned to see Joe had heard the comment. He reached for Quinn's hand and nodded as if he'd made a decision. "Hang out here for a minute, Rayne. I'll get her back to you in just a second. Have to take care of some business," he said, as he drew Quinn from her chair.

"You look pretty as a picture tonight."

She laughed. "What? This old thing?"

Tonight she'd dressed with special care. She might not have had a typical white wedding but she was married just the same. Considering the casualness of a barbecue she wasn't about to go over the top but the silky aqua tee and matching denim mini skirt was colorful, sunny and suited her mood.

Joe returned her smile and led her through the crowd of people until he reached an area very near the barn where Harley and the Moondoggies were entertaining the party-goers with country music.

"What are you up to?"

He grinned down at her and once again she caught her breath. She still couldn't believe this hotter than hot man belonged to her. "Shh. You'll see."

When the song was over, Joe nodded to Harley, the lead singer and asked for the microphone.

Harley, a long, lanky wolf with a mop of reddish hair, acknowledged him and spoke into the microphone. "Our alpha surprised me tonight. Says he wants to talk. The man never says two words and now he wants to talk."

The crowd which gathered around laughed, some clapped. One man yelled out. "Go, Joe."

Joe took her hand. He led her up to the microphone and spoke into it. "I'll deal with Harley later."

Everyone laughed at the joke. "First off, thanks for comin' out tonight. Some of you have met Quinn already. I'd planned to introduce her as Bart's daughter and, well, I

was hoping you'd all make her welcome considering who her father was." Joe cleared his throat and looked at her. The love that warmed his eyes sent a shiver racing over her skin and she squeezed his hand. "Anyway, now I get to introduce her as my consummated mate and my *lupa*."

Laughter and applause raced through the crowd like a wave. Someone shouted, "It's about damn time!" and others crowed out a chorus of "woo-hoo's" and "happy consummation". Quinn felt their love and acceptance reach out and take hold of her heart. She'd never been an emotional woman but tears burned, several fell and through it all Joe hugged her close to his side. He cleared his throat again. "Placed a call today to Silas MacAdam, our Supreme Alpha. Needed to fill him in on my news. He offered congratulations from himself and his mate, Martha. He has invited any of us who plan to travel to Scotland this winter for the general meeting to a fancy Consummation Ball in our honor." A buzz went through the crowd. "Now, I don't know much about fancy balls. We call 'em dances around here but I thought I'd let you know about the invitation so you can make plans if you want to travel to the Highlands."

Joe went quiet and looked at her. "You want to say something, darlin'?"

"Don't know if I can talk right now." She'd meant to speak only to Joe but her words carried out loudly over the crowd. Several laughed and others shouted encouragement so she leaned close to the microphone. "I...um...never met my dad and my people. I'm sorry about that but ya'll have been so nice to me and accepted me. Thanks for that. I feel like I've finally come home."

The crowd went wild and when Joe led her off the makeshift stage she was enfolded in bear hugs and kissed by so many people, she lost track. Breathlessly, she got back to her table and flopped into her chair. Rayne was still sitting there and Quinn might've been invisible for all the notice she got. Rayne's beautiful sherry-colored eyes were wide and unfocused and her breathing was choppy.

"Rayne! What's wrong, honey?"

Rayne's eyes filled as she seemed to be suddenly aware of her surroundings. "Um...think I just made a connection with my mate. Oh Quinn! I dreamed of him and hoped it would be him."

"Who? Who is it?"

Quinn saw Rayne's gaze move to where Ringo stood leaning against a tree as if he hadn't a care in the world. Ringo? There was something about the lean wolf that scared her to death. He seemed so cold and menacing. She looked closer. Despite the lazy stance and go-to-hell appearance, his nostrils flared as he dragged air into his lungs.

Her gaze zipped to Rayne who couldn't seem to take her eyes from him.

Quinn grabbed her hand. "Tell me. Are you sure?"

"Hell yes, I'm sure. I never knew how it would feel. I only imagined but there's no mistaking it. He is my destined mate."

"Oh, honey –"

Suddenly Joe leaned down. He held a cell phone in his hand. "Something has come up."

Then he surprised her by walking back toward the band. He held up a hand interrupting the song in progress and grabbed the microphone again. "Listen up. Just got a call from Dusty. He was driving past the south pasture on his way here and found carcasses. Spotted that rogue wolf pack." Low mumbles rushed through the assembled group. "Think we'd better go after 'em."

Quinn watched in amazement as men started stripping out of their clothing where they stood. Several began to shift. "I want the mated females to stay here to protect the unmated females. They'd be a helluva trophy for rogue wolves. Do what you must to keep them safe. You younger males need to stay too. I want you to do your part. There will be other hunts." A groan went up from the younger males who'd been throwing the football earlier. They looked so disappointed. Joe softened his voice. "I need you men here. Got me? Some of you have unmated sisters. I can't think of a more important job than keeping them safe."

If she hadn't already loved Joe beyond reason, she would've fallen head over heels at that moment.

Joe walked up to her as chaos broke out. He grabbed her close and kissed her hungrily. "I'll be back for you later."

"Be careful, Joe."

He yanked his tee shirt over his head and looked at her. "If you need me, open your mind and holler out. Now that we're consummated the connection will be stronger than ever."

Before she could reassure him, he stripped to the skin and shifted. The fur on Joe's necked bristled and he snarled low as the pack came to heel. As a unit, the wolves ran from the yard and raced into the night.

Quinn looked around and saw the anxiety and some anger written on the women's faces. Obviously some wanted to join in the hunt while others wished safety for their mates. There was nothing to be done now but wait.

For roughly forty-five minutes all was quiet and women gathered together in small groups or pitched in to help clean up the mess from the evening's get together. The young males behaved like typical teens and, once realizing they wouldn't be having an adventure that night, headed into the house to play video games.

She and Rayne carried armloads of carefully folded tablecloths and handed them off to Maria who marched them through the kitchen door. "Wow, what a night," Quinn said as she turned to Rayne who seemed to freeze as she looked off into the distance. "What?"

Quinn froze too at the sight of several huge wolves walking into the yard surrounded by Selena. She was naked as if she'd just shifted. Stopping before the group of women she sneered and focused in on Quinn. Tossing back her black hair, she settled her hands on her hips. Every wolf but one, began to circle the women.

"I hear a celebration is going on here tonight." Selena stuck out her bottom lip in a mock pout. "I'm crushed. Why wasn't I invited?"

Quinn stepped forward and the other she-wolves parted for her. Selena didn't scare her and it was about time she let her know it. "Got any more rattlers on you?" Quinn sent her eyes down and then up before curling her lip. "Guess not."

"Shut up, *puta*."

The dark wolf who stood beside her, his tongue lolling from his muzzle, suddenly shifted into the form of a huge naked man. Selena instantly sidled up to him and he wrapped his arm around her waist. "This is Zavalos. He will be your new alpha once Joe is dead."

"What are you talking about?" Quinn wanted to keep her talking as she sent out a cry for help to Joe.

*Joe? Joe, it's a trap. There's trouble.*

*Are you all right?*

*Yes. Hurry.*

*On my way.*

"You are a smart little *chica*. Surely you've figured out that it was I who killed your father."

Quinn gasped. A weird stillness fell over the group of women. "You killed my dad?"

Selena tossed her hair and lifted her chin in defiance. "Joe was second in line and we were fucking on a regular basis. With Bart gone, I would be *lupa* here. But then you showed up and ruined everything. Joe made his choice and now I have made mine. Zavalos will kill Joe and I will kill you." Zavalos, the would-be alpha, released Selena and walked into the crowd of women behind her.

Fury threatened to blur her vision as she looked at the murderous bitch. As if from a distance, she heard the sounds of scuffles and cries. Near her, clothes were tossed around haphazardly and she knew the mated females were shifting. She reached for the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head.

Wearing a defiance of her own, she stared at Selena and watched her eyes settle on the marks on her shoulder. The sign of her consummation with Joe. A low growl rose up from Selena. "You are dead, bitch. Zavalos and his men are collecting the unmated females. They will be needed in our pack. Of course, I know each one of them."

A scream went up behind her.

Rayne.

She watched in stunned disbelief as a naked man ran from the yard with her friend tossed over his shoulder. Another young girl was carried off too. Several she-wolves gave chase as the young male wolves ran from the house to be quickly overpowered by the older men.

Quinn turned back to the she-wolf and narrowed her eyes. "I don't think so, Selena."

"I'll kill you."

"Try it." Quinn practically tore the remaining clothing from her body as vengeance rode her hard. But it wasn't only vengeance. It was about protection too. She visualized her wolf in her mind, felt her presence and quicker than she would've thought possible, shifted. Growling low, she watched Selena's eyes go wide just seconds before she shifted into her black wolf. They circled each other, growling and snapping and suddenly Quinn was sick to death of the games. She lunged, sinking her teeth into Selena's side. Her own side received an answering bite but she didn't feel pain. All she felt was the need to kill, to destroy.

They backed away and circled again.

She was vaguely aware that other she-wolves were circling the two of them. Oh yeah, they had her back and she knew it. Zavalos was nowhere to be seen.

A low howl rose up and the two female wolves stopped long enough to watch the Cloverfield wolves rush into the fray. A bloody melee ensued and Quinn immediately spotted Joe in deadly battle with Zavalos who had yet to shift into his wolf. As a man he

was far more vulnerable and Joe lunged at his throat with deadly accuracy, taking him down.

Then it was Quinn's turn, again under attack, as Selena rushed her and sank her teeth into Quinn's throat. But then suddenly the heavy weight of the she-wolf lifted from her body and she raised her lupine head to see over half a dozen of her new friends, she-wolves all, fall upon the downed Selena. Snapping and snarling, they tore into her. Breathing hard, Quinn shifted and sat naked in the middle of the yard. Immediately she looked for Joe. When she spotted him, she saw he was no longer wolf but man. A rifle was poised at his shoulder.

"Give it up, Zavalos!"

The leader of the rogue lycans shifted into his wolf. He crouched low and snarled, his lethal teeth snapping and then he leaped at Joe, seeming focused on his throat. A shot rang out!

Zavalos fell to the ground with a hole blasted not-so-neatly between his eyes. Quinn shuddered in the aftermath of all the violence and struggled to catch her breath. A low roar broke out among the others and Quinn saw them scatter to run off in different directions. Something was happening but all she could think of was getting to Joe.

Handing off the rifle to Manuel, Joe pulled her up and into his arms. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. I'm already healing. I'm good."

She saw the worry in his eyes but there was no time to reassure him. Turning in his arms she looked around her. The women were absently pulling on their clothes and Maria rushed up. She was clothed in the embroidered Mexican dress she'd worn earlier. "They took Rayne Poteet and two others. Very young ones. *Madre de Dios!*"

"Damn!" Joe turned to his men. "Small group. We're going back out."

Ringo stepped forward and Quinn saw more emotion on the wolf's face than she'd ever seen before. "Rayne is my responsibility. I'm going alone. I will bring her back. I will bring them all back."



Joe went still. "Since when has Rayne been your responsibility?"

"Since I learned she is my mate."

"Then go. Alone if you think it's best."

Ringo nodded. "I do." Immediately, he shifted and raced off into the night.

Quinn turned to the spot where Selena had been downed by the Wolf Creek she-wolves and blinked. "Selena!"

"What?"

Quinn looked up at Joe as a chill swept her. "She's gone."

Joe surveyed the area, finally releasing a breath. He tightened his arms around her. "Looks like it. She's a powerful wolf and because of that, she heals quickly. But like a bad penny, she'll show up again. Right now, she's wounded and can't hurt anyone. We'll find her. Some day."

\* \* \* \* \*

"It seems so weird, Joe," she said hours later. They were curled naked together in the big bed but neither had been able to sleep.

He pressed a kiss to her head. "What, honey?"

"How quiet the world seems when we should be howling our outrage."

"They weren't harmed. That's the main thing."

The younger girls, sisters, who were teenagers, were home now. Several wolves, including the young girls' father took off after Ringo and together they'd managed to save the stolen ones and return them to the safety of the pack. Unfortunately, the wolf who had taken Rayne had gotten away.

The others left Ringo to rescue his mate.

"We ache when any one of us is in danger." Joe leaned back and looked at her. With moonlight filtering through the open balcony windows, his fierce golden eyes seemed softer and if possible, even more beautiful. "There are still rogue wolves out there,

darlin'. And Selena. Ringo will find Rayne. The rest of us must care for those who weren't taken but are still vulnerable."

"He'll find her," Quinn said with finally, wishing with everything in her for it to be true. "Did you see the look on his face when he learned Rayne was taken?"

"Yeah. Poor bastard. I would kill anyone who took you from me."

Joe looked so shaken at the thought, she took pity on him and moved over him to straddle his hips. His cock lay heavy between them and she moved against it. Smiling, she leaned down and kissed him. "You'll never have to worry about that, sweetheart," she whispered. "Don't think I'll ever let you out of my sight. Never again."

"Promise?" His voice went low and raspy.

"Oh yeah," she breathed as she lifted and then lowered her body over his hard erection. She loved him and saw her future with him on the dusty plains spread out before them like a wish fulfilled. "It's a promise I intend to keep. Forever."

## **About the Author**

Regina Carlisle is an award-winning, multi-published author. She likes writing that is hot, edgy and often humorous, and puts this trademark stamp on all of her stories. Regina lives in west Texas with her husband of 25 years and counting, and is a doting, fawning, over-indulgent mother to her two kids. When she's not penning steamy erotic tales or hot contemporary stories, she's indulging in long chats with friends who help her stay sane and keep her laughing.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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