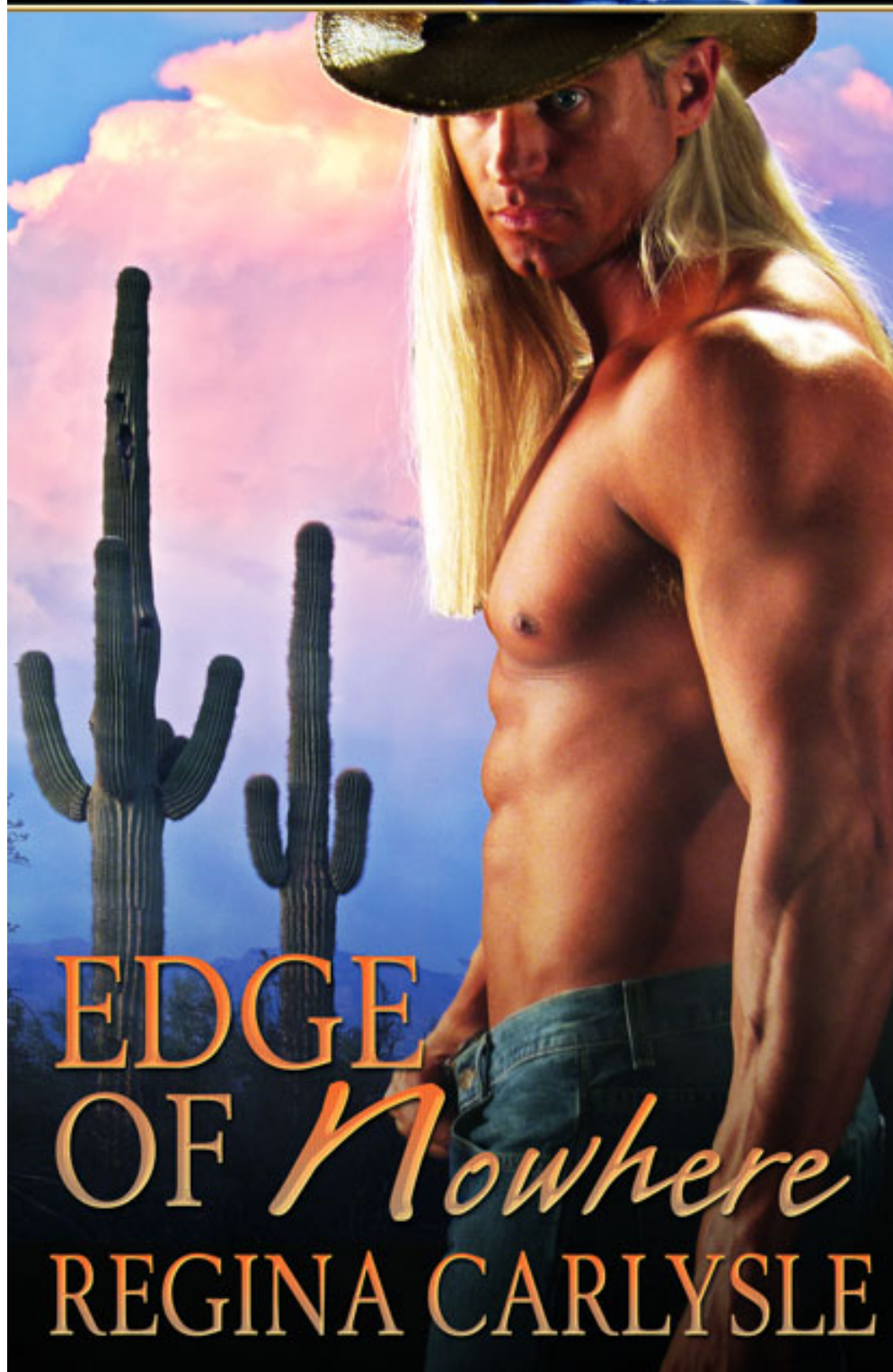


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



EDGE
OF *Nowhere*
REGINA CARLYSLE

Edge of Nowhere

Regina Carlisle

Book 4 in the High Plains Shifters series.

From the moment Cactus Mackey rescues Sara Farmer from outlaw wolves, he knows she belongs to him—and he's more than ready to mess up some sheets with the sassy female. But she has secrets and wants to run. Infuriating woman! He might have to tie her to his bed but he's not about to give up until she belongs to him, body and soul.

As danger chases her, Sara knows it's a huge mistake to fall head over heels for the sexy lycan cowboy from Wolf Creek Ranch. A single touch from this shockingly seductive man melts her like butter under the hot Texas sun, and has her yearning for impossible things. The man is big trouble to her heart and running may no longer be an option.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Edge of Nowhere

ISBN 9781419926662

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Edge of Nowhere Copyright © 2009 Regina Carlysle

Edited by Helen Woodall

Cover art by

Electronic book publication December 2009

The terms Romantica® and Quickies® are registered trademarks of Ellora's Cave Publishing.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

EDGE OF NOWHERE

Regina Carlisle

Dedication

Interesting, loyal, intelligent and funny friends don't walk into a life every day so I'm damn glad Barbara Huffert walked into mine. So this one is for you, Barb! Thanks for listening and for the fun. I "heart" you.

Author Note

Although *Edge of Nowhere* is a stand-alone story, to better understand this world and the characters who inhabit, it's recommended that you read the other books in this series.

Chapter One

“Don’t let me go.”

Cactus went still at the whispered demand. The woman’s lips moved against his throat and just that simple touch had sensation rocketing through his body to settle in his cock. She’d been traumatized enough and he hated like hell that holding her this way made him hard enough to hammer nails but it couldn’t be helped. He’d been semi-erect since the moment he’d first clapped eyes on her. The instant attraction caught him off guard but then, was a man ever really prepared for the first moment he met the she-wolf who was destined to be his mate?

Probably not.

He settled his cheek against her tousled blonde curls and instinctively tightened his arm around her. Her name was Sara and he and others from the Wolf Creek Pack of Cloverfield, Texas had just saved her and her sister, along with Rayne Poteet, from a gang of rogue lycans. The sorry fucks made it their business to steal unmated she-wolves from the safety of their homes.

Except this woman, Sara, didn’t have a home.

Hell if she didn’t. Her home was with him.

“I won’t, darlin’. Not in this lifetime.”

Cactus sat in the backseat of the big duely double cab truck with his charge safely curled on his lap. He lifted his head from Sara’s hair and spoke over the roar of the engine. “How much longer until we’re home, Gabe?”

Cloverfield’s sheriff, who was driving them home, caught his eye in the rearview mirror. The big lycan was steering with one hand and holding Sara’s sister, Kate, close to his side. Cactus watched the big, gruff wolf’s hand stroke comfortingly over Kate’s

body as she huddled against him. "About half an hour or so," he murmured. "Almost there."

Following behind them on the narrow stretch of twisted highway was a van full of the criminal lycans and their leader, Selena. Tonight full pack justice would be handed out to the lot of them. There would be little chance of escape for this bunch and the bloodthirsty half of his nature, his beast, would relish the chance to end their reign of terror.

Cactus returned his attention to the woman in his arms. Earlier, he'd lifted her up and carried her from the maze of old RVs and mobile homes where the captives had been held and settled her in the backseat of the truck. No one had questioned him but then, no one would dare. He wasn't the kind of man who put up with interference from others. Cactus Mackey was a two-hundred-year-old lycan and old enough to handle his own affairs just fine. He settled back to look at the woman who he knew was his mate.

"How are you feeling?"

Her answering sigh almost broke his heart. She gave him a single look from eyes the color of Texas bluebonnets then closed them. Lowering her cheek to his chest, she settled her hand there too. Her fingers moved restlessly against his pecs and Cactus caught his breath. "I don't know."

"Don't worry about it. We'll get you home soon. I'll tuck you in nice and tight and make sure you rest up."

"Sounds nice," she whispered. "Tell me your name."

"Cactus. Cactus Mackey."

Again, that little sigh. "Funny name."

He smiled. "What'd you expect? I'm a Texan."

Sara shifted in his lap and his cock tightened. Gods! She had to feel the damn thing prodding her sweet, nicely plump ass. His balls went hard. Fighting off the powerful urge to fuck her right here in front of the gods and everybody was suddenly the hardest

challenge he'd ever faced. Literally. But Cactus wasn't a man who took advantage of wounded creatures and Sara was wounded, for sure. Downright shocky. Whatever had possessed him to drag her into his lap that way? Damn it! She'd been hurt, traumatized and emotionally battered. He'd felt the trembling of her body and needed to comfort her so he didn't think twice about pulling her into his lap. She'd needed to know he represented safety and that she and her sister would be cared for in this town he called home.

"I'm Sara Farmer."

Cactus tightened his hold and breathed in her scent. It wrapped around him like a benediction. *Mine. Mine. Mine.* The words whispered through his mind and he wondered if she felt it too.

"You banged up a bit?"

"I was but I heal pretty quickly for being unmated."

Among their kind unmated females were slower to heal injuries than a full-fledged lycan. Until she consummated things with her mate and finally released her wolf, it would be that way. He didn't respond but glanced out the window of the truck and watched the miles of desert flash by as they motored their way deep into west Texas. Some might not find the country pretty but to him, the flat prairie with its buttes and plateaus was heaven. His kind had fought the Comanche and Apache Indians generations ago claiming the land as theirs. They'd built their homes, ranches and businesses with sweat and hard work and had won Texas independence from Mexico. Cactus had been one of many of Cloverfield's lycans to fight side by side with others to build Texas into a force in this burgeoning country.

"She asleep?" The rumbling question came from Gabe and Cactus glanced down at his charge.

"Yeah."

"So is Kate. Poor little thing." The comment seemed strange coming from the burly lycan who wore an air of suppressed violence around him like an aura. "Figure we should take them to the ranch."

Cactus swallowed the denial that rushed to his lips. He wanted Sara with him but knew Gabe was right about that. Quinn, their *lupa* and wife of their alpha, Joe McKinnon would take care of them for the time being until it was decided what was to be done with the kidnapped sisters. They needed the care that only a woman could offer. Gods knew, he didn't know shit about that stuff. Both Sara and Kate had said they hadn't been assaulted but maybe they didn't want to speak the truth to a bunch of rough-looking men.

His belly knotted.

If any of those rogues had laid a finger on Sara there would be hell to pay. No doubt about it.

"So what do you think, Cactus?" Gabe prodded, catching his gaze once again in the rearview mirror.

Cactus nodded. "Yep, I reckon that would be best."

Later he spotted the familiar landscape that included lines of fence that days before he'd been repairing along with Dusty, another Wolf Creek cowboy. The spread was huge, dominating most of the area around Cloverfield. The only ranch that came close belonged to Rayne's dad, Angus Poteet, and these days he farmed windmills more than he raised cattle.

Almost home.

Huge limestone pillars rose up in the distance signaling their approach to the ranch. They sat on opposite sides of the entry road, like sentinels. Gabe took a left through the gates and satisfaction sank tender claws into his heart as he thought of his modest brick house where a nice hot shower and fresh coffee were waiting. He glanced down at the still sleeping Sara and wondered what she'd think of the home he'd built. Hell, who

was he kidding? His decorating skills were sadly lacking. In fact, the last woman who'd been in his place admitted with a sniff that he decorated like a *man*.

Sara shifted on his lap and Cactus studied her features in repose. Her face was a neat, pretty little oval, her lips were full and her nose was small with an obstinate little tilt at the very end. If this had been a better time, he might've kissed her there or traced the line of barely visible freckles that marched across the bridge. He already knew she was soft and curvy since most of those lush curves were pressed intimately against his own body.

He wanted inside this woman so much he could practically taste it.

The truck pulled to a stop in front of the ranch house, a huge two-story limestone structure that had been built years before the battle of Texas Independence, and saw Quinn McKinnon and their housekeeper, Maria, standing on the porch. The pack's *lupa* was a beautiful woman, tall, blonde and curvy enough to make a wolf's mouth water. She was also intelligent and funny. Joe adored her and so did the pack. As she marched across the front yard toward them, he noted the look of worry on her face.

Just then, Sara blinked up at him.

"We're home," he said.

Little lines formed between her brows as she frowned. "Home?"

"My home. Yours too, I reckon."

Her hands went to her face for a quick rub before she pushed her tangled hair back. She glanced out the window and Cactus felt the fine tremor that swept her body. Tenderly, he pulled the blanket closer around her and smiled. "It'll be okay. Quinn has been waiting for you."

"Quinn?"

"Your *lupa*."

More alert, she looked frantically toward the front seat "Katie? Katie, are you okay?"

Silence fell. Finally Gabe spoke up. He'd stepped from the cab of the truck and was reaching in for Sara's sister. "She'll be okay. Don't you worry. She's just in shock." He lifted her blanket-covered body and tucked her against him. "Figure she'll talk when she's ready."

Cactus got out of the truck prepared to lift Sara into his arms but she drew back and looked at him. "I can walk."

"Honey, you're barefoot. I don't want you to hurt yourself."

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not." He wasn't about to stand there arguing so he lifted her up, despite her protests. Quinn and Maria began to fuss as they followed him and Gabe up the steps and into the house. The instant they were inside, Sara wiggled to get free. Reluctantly, Cactus set her on her dirty, bare feet grabbing her shoulder to steady her as she staggered a bit. When she'd regained her footing she raced across the room and went to her knees before her sister, whom Gabe had settled on a big leather sofa.

Sara reached for her hands and stared into her face. Cactus noted that despite a slight variation in the shades of blonde in their hair, the sisters were almost identical. For the first time in awhile, he felt a flash of alarm at the vacant expression on Katie's face. Gabe stood nearby, a muscle working in his strong jaw.

"Kati-did, talk to me," Sara encouraged. "You've been so strong. Don't leave me now. Come on."

Still Katie didn't speak. She looked out on the world with a vacant stare and Cactus watched in horror as tears fell from Sara's eyes to roll slowly down her cheeks. "It has all been too much, hasn't it?" she whispered. "You've been so strong. I've been so proud of you. We handled the problem with Dad, didn't we? We got away. You and me. We did it together. This other thing was nothing after that." Sara choked and drew her sister into her arms. Turning her face into Katie's hair, she whispered a savage command. "Stop it! Don't go away! I mean it, Katalin!"

Questions coalesced in Cactus' mind. *What the fuck was going on?* The urge to protect Sara and her sister held him in its grip and, for the first time in over a century, he felt utterly helpless. He hated it.

He stepped forward wanting to do something, wanting to discover what the hell she meant by her little speech but Quinn caught his gaze and shook her head. His *lupa* went to the pair and she gave Gabe a look.

"Cactus!" Gabe's voice broke the spell.

Understanding, he gently drew Sara to her feet and pulled her against him as Gabe lifted Kate and followed Quinn and Maria up the stairs.

When they were alone, Sara stepped away and turned to face him. Waves of grief rolled from her to him. A tsunami of pain flashed through his system along with an unmistakable electrical charge that sizzled along his flesh.

"Gods!" She choked on the word as her hands went over her mouth. Tears pooled in her beautiful eyes and he couldn't stand it another fucking minute. He went to her and cupped her face to press kisses on her forehead, her cheeks. Her salty tears dampened his lips and needing to comfort more than he needed his next breath, he settled his mouth on hers. She tasted of tragedy and passion and loss and Cactus drank each emotion, each fear as if he could draw them into himself and save her from feeling them. The blanket had fallen from her shoulders when she'd gone to comfort her sister and now she wore only an oversized tee shirt. Both women had been stolen from their beds so there was nothing unusual in that.

Cactus sent his tongue deep into her mouth, stroking the walls of her cheeks as he tasted her slowly. Drinking her gasping breath, he drew back to nip her bottom lip with his teeth. "You're safe," he whispered, shocked at the gruff sound of his own voice. "I won't let anything happen to either of you. Trust me."

"I do. I shouldn't but I do. What is happening between us, Cactus?"

Bending, he pressed his mouth to the slender column of her throat as his hands took a journey over her back. Finally he answered her, his lips moving on her tender flesh. "You're mine."

"I am. At least, I think so. Gods! I shouldn't be feeling this way after all that's happened."

"What are you feeling? Tell me."

Sara hands moved restlessly over his back and his cock tightened, throbbing behind the fly of his jeans.

"I can't."

"Tell me."

"Damn it!" Her fingers flexed over his sides then slid past the muscles of his belly. Lust poured over him in an uncontrollable blast. "I want to climb up your big body and impale myself on your cock. I want to feel better. I need to feel safe and gods help me, I want you, right now, Cactus Mackey. What the hell is wrong with me? Why do I want you when I know I can't stay?"

Chapter Two

Sara opened her eyes, noting the darkness and the occasional shadow playing across the unfamiliar furnishings in the room. The feel of freshly washed sheets, clean-smelling with a slight floral fragrance, was pure heaven after days of being pushed and shoved, bound and gagged. She rolled to her back and slid her eyes around the big guestroom she'd been given by Joe and Quinn McKinnon. Their hospitality was so welcome. Tears burned behind her eyes but she blinked them back and swallowed the lump that formed in her throat. She was just done with that but it had been so long since she'd felt cared for that she didn't know quite how to act. She'd known very little of kindness growing up, especially from men. For her, she'd gotten love and affection from her twin sister, Katalin and from her mom.

Damn!

She couldn't think about Mom now or she'd completely lose it. Sitting up in bed, she shoved shaky fingers through her mussed hair. Sara needed to be strong now, especially for Kate. If her sister didn't recover from whatever the hell was wrong, she didn't know what she'd do. Of the two of them, she was the oldest, if only by minutes and for most of her life she'd watched over the people she loved even when she was in desperate need of care herself.

Cactus Mackey's face materialized in her mind and Sara caught her breath. Sheltered, protected. Those words came to mind when she recalled how he'd held her in his arms for hours while they traveled here to the Wolf Creek Ranch. It wasn't like her to show weakness to anyone but, gods, it was wonderful to just relax and know she was safe. That Kate was safe too.

She didn't feel so alone when she was with him and if the housekeeper, Maria, hadn't come downstairs to fetch her earlier, there was no telling what might have

happened between them. The very air between them shivered with expectation leaving her feeling a little lost when she'd been led away and shown to her room.

The feeling of not being alone anymore filled her up but she knew it couldn't last. Though she suspected Cactus was fashioned by the gods just for her, it would never happen. Her first duty was to protect her sister. The future of many depended on it! She might not be cursed by special powers but Sara was a woman who knew her heart. She was born to be Kate's protector. She was devised to see that her sister came to no harm.

But the image of Cactus Mackey wouldn't leave her.

Had the gods made him just for her? Had they fashioned their inevitable mating in the stars or planted it in the earth?

She knew it was true. Her skin practically sizzled when he touched her. All that warrior brawn and bronzed flesh was hers for the taking if she wanted and, oh yeah, she wanted! Nothing would suit her better than to climb up that big body, wrap her legs around him and just settle in for a wild ride. His long hair made her fingers itch to touch and the depth of emotion in his mysterious hazel eyes had her longing to tell her secrets, to share them finally with another. Sexual need roared to life in her untried body as she imagined settling her teeth on his lips, licking the sensual lines and tasting him as she knew she was meant to do.

Sara tossed back the covers and padded barefoot across the room and opened one of the big double doors that led to a second-story balcony. For just a moment she leaned against the rail pausing to gaze out over the vast prairie. The thin layer of west Texas dust hovering in the air brought with it the scent of cattle and prairie grass. A pale half moon threw its light over a giant butte in the distance and a series of wolf howls drifted skyward as if to meet the moon glow as it descended to earth. The place already felt kind of like home but she knew they couldn't remain here. She and her sister never stayed in one place very long. That's the way it had to be as long as her father searched for them and she knew Anton would never stop until he had his slimy paws on Katalin.

Sighing, wishing things were different, she went back inside, slipped into the pair of stretchy shorts that Quinn had loaned her along with a pair of flip-flops. Thinking a walk around the property might ease her troubled thoughts, she walked to the wide set of stairs leading to ground level and went down them. She couldn't think of anything better than a walk to ease her restlessness. Though she knew she and Kate were safe here, how long could it possibly last when the two of them were in so much danger?

Don't think about that now!

She'd think about it later when she had to face her new alpha, Joe McKinnon and Cactus and the others.

Setting off for her solitary walk, she noted the ranch outbuildings and the corral. A horse whinnied from the barn. She continued on spotting modest brick houses here and there. Wolf Creek Ranch was like its own small town and, despite knowing that she must eventually leave this place it already felt a little like home.

A whip of wind ruffled her hair and restlessly she pushed the blonde curls from her eyes. She went still, a sound, perhaps more of a presence filled her mind and she turned her head toward the barn. Wanting to run as was her custom, she cursed the flip-flops and walked toward the big structure. A single light illuminated the double doors and Sara reached out and gave a push until she was inside. The scent of hay and horses and something distinctly male made her widen her eyes fractionally.

A dim bulb hung from the high barn ceiling casting a weak glow over the rows of stalls, shelves filled with assorted bottles and jars, and bridles and harnesses hung from gleaming hooks along the walls. She didn't know a thing about horses but she was impressed by the orderly state of things in the cavernous barn.

"Sara! What the hell?"

She spun her head at the sound of the heavy male voice that had colored her dreams tonight and spotted his warrior's body limmed in shadow at the end of the corridor. Before she had time to draw a breath, he was there gripping her arms, his head

bending low over hers. His long, long dark blond hair was damp from a recent shower and the warmth of his breath on her face sent her senses reeling.

"You okay? Why aren't you sleeping?" His hands swept the flesh of her arms and the electricity born in his touch caused every nerve in her body to stand at attention. Cactus made a rough sound. His nostrils flared. His beautiful hazel eyes narrowed.

"Restless. That's all. Just couldn't sleep," she whispered quickly hoping to chase away the worry on his face. Her heart sped. "I should be asking you the same thing. It's really late, cowboy."

She noted relief in his body as he seemed to relax a bit. He sent his arms around her and drew her close before settling his lips in her hair. "Trying to get sassy with me, honey?"

She had to smile. "Been known to be sassy on occasion. Ornery too."

Cactus laughed, his deep baritone sending a shiver of unexpected lust straight to her pussy. The man was as dangerous as hell for a woman with no plans to stay. "I like ornery women."

"Good to know." Without a thought, as naturally as daybreak, she rested her cheek against his bare chest and rubbed against the firm, muscular mounds. Then she caught herself and pulled back to look at him. "What are you doing here?"

Cactus frowned and she could've sworn a shadow passed behind his eyes. A muscle worked in his jaw. "Had some pack business earlier. Guess I was a little restless too. Thought I'd check on the horses and maybe grab a shower before I headed back to my place."

"Your place?"

"My house isn't far from here. It's not much but it's home."

So many questions. Sara watched that muscle flex in his jaw and before she could stop herself reached out a hand to stroke him there. "I heard the wolves tonight."

"Figured you would."

"I suspect Selena and the rogue lycans are no longer among us."

Cactus stepped back and nodded sharply.

No further explanation was necessary. She and her sister hadn't been raised in the loving embrace of a pack of their own but she'd heard the stories. She knew that crimes such as kidnapping weren't tolerated among their kind.

Pack justice!

Tonight, as one, the pack had shifted into their wolves and had given chase to the outlaws. Chances were minimal at best that any of them survived the lethal hunt.

"Are you all right, Cactus?"

He reached out for her again and fisted his hands in her hair. Tenderly he drew her head back and moved closer. His breath fanned her cheeks. His lips lowered close enough to her own that she could practically feel his mouth on hers. But not yet. Anticipation caused her pulse to race and a rain of moisture to seep from her core to drench her panties.

"I am now."

A lupine growl met her sigh as he took her mouth with the slow precision of a man who seldom heard the word no. His lips brushed hers, his teeth gently nipped before he sent his tongue deep into the warmth of her mouth. His fingers clutched her head to hold her still for the devastating plunder as his tongue swept over hers, teasing along the insides of her cheeks, across her teeth. Cactus changed the angle of his kiss and began all over again and Sara was stunned to find her arms wrapped around his waist. Gripping the firm, warm flesh, she gasped when this big sturdy lycan sank his fingers into the flesh of her butt to drag her against the hard cock he kept hidden behind the fly of his jeans.

Emotion zipped through her system with a force that simmered along every nerve ending. Sizzling sensation hit with tsunami force making her jerk in his arms. Unable to focus on anything but need she lifted her leg and wrapped it around his hips. She

pressed her pussy to his erect cock, writhing against it until a gasp was wrung from her mouth.

“Too fast. It’s too fast,” she choked.

“Not fast enough. Damn it!” Cactus reached beneath her ass and yanked her up in his arms. Sara could do nothing but hold on with both legs tucked around his waist as he turned and pressed her to the door of the nearest stall. “Gods, I want you. I don’t want to push but damn it.” Breath burst from her lips in staccato puffs as his big hands gathered up the hem of her tee shirt and pushed it up to expose her breasts to his hot gaze. His erection rubbed in slow precision, dragging over and over the quivering flesh of her pussy. “Got to taste you, Sara. So pretty,” he murmured in a rough whisper before he bent his head to her nipple.

Sara gasped at the soft tug and pull, the feel of his breath so very warm on her skin. A low moan burst free as his teeth gently scraped. His fingers flexed and released on her butt as he sucked her diamond-hard nipple. Shafts of wicked pleasure arrowed from breast to belly to settle deep in her core and helplessly she writhed against the long length of his cock, cursing the fabric that kept flesh from touching flesh. Cactus switched to the other breast, tenderly devouring her.

“Cactus. Yes.” The whispered command for more escaped before she could muster more rational thought. Her fingers were splayed over his upper back as he dry-fucked her. His skin was so warm and silky. She wanted to taste him there, lick where she touched and send her mouth on a journey over every bit of him. Sensation pulsed through her as Cactus continued the delicious attack on her breasts. When his hand reached for her distended clit, she gasped. He pinched lightly, then harder, then lightly again. Her heart thudded in her chest and her mouth opened as she drew breath to scream. Cactus planted his lips on her, swallowing her wild cry as she flew apart under his masterful touch.

Though he was breathing hard, his muscles tight from the strain of unspent passion, he unwound her legs from around his hips until she slid to the ground. He kept his touch gentle despite the fact that it was against his nature to be so. Cactus drew her against him loving the feel of her gasping breath, blowing hot against his bare chest. His world was violent, harsh and rugged yet with her he only wanted to dispense the softest of touches. He hardly knew her. Yet he did. This mating business didn't make a lick of sense but he wasn't stupid. Finding his mate was a miracle he wasn't prepared to back away from. Pulling her close, he settled his lips against the top of her head.

"Are you all right, darlin'? Did I move too fast?"

She shook her head but kept her face hidden. "No. Um, yeah, maybe." Sara blew out a breath and finally lifted her head. The signs of spent passion slowly faded from her expression. "This is happening too soon and I just can't deal with this right now. My sister is lying up there, a shell of what she once was and I don't know how to fix her. I've met you and every instinct I possess tells me we are meant to be together but I just can't."

"Can't what? Talk to me."

"I can't get involved and I can't explain." She withdrew from his arms and moved around him as she shoved shaky fingers through her hair. Finally she faced him. Cactus saw her stubborn chin firm. "I need you to stay away from me until I figure this out."

"Stay away from you?"

Impossible!

"Nope. Not going to happen," he said, certainty ringing in his voice. "Not after what happened between us. You went off like a firecracker in my arms and you can't deny it."

Silence fell.

He watched Sara suck in a slow breath. She pulled her kiss-swollen bottom lip between her teeth, then released it. She looked at him and sighed. "No, I can't. I've never been a liar, Cactus and I'm not about to start now but things are going on in my

life that you can't be a part of. At least not yet. I can't use a man in my life right now. Destiny be damned. I just can't."

Stunned at her words, he held his tongue as she turned and walked from the barn. What the hell was she talking about? Mystery surrounded her as surely as she'd come apart in his arms but, damn it, if she thought he'd just let her walk out of his life without a backward glance, she was utterly mistaken. Cactus had let down his guard once before and lost someone precious because of it. He wasn't about to let that happen again.

Shoving painful memories to the back of his mind, he headed toward the small bedroom that occupied the back of the stable. It was kept fully stocked for Wolf Creek cowboys who spent time nursing sick or birthing horses and this was where he'd retreated tonight after the hunt.

The hunt. Pack justice.

Selena and the rogues were gone now. Destroyed in a blink by lycans who didn't give a rat's ass who you were. You break pack law. You die. Simple as that.

He'd come to the barn for a quick shower and a change of clothes because he didn't plan to go back to his place tonight. Sara might need him in the night and it was now his duty to protect her above all others. She wouldn't understand the need to protect that had shaped his life, but after a time she would come to accept that he wasn't the kind of wolf to leave his mate unattended. He'd been down that road and that way led to pain. He shrugged into a tee shirt he'd tossed on the bed and walked down the row of stalls when he heard a scream.

Sara!

Every muscle in his body tensed. Releasing a feral growl, he ripped off his clothing and took off at a lope, shifting as he ran.

Chapter Three

Shaken from the hot encounter with a man she already knew she'd never forget, Sara stopped halfway between the house and the barn and looked up. She dragged in a cleansing breath and tried to slow her rapidly beating heart.

Impossible situation.

A woman on the run had no time to deal with a mate. She had to figure out a way to get Katalin and herself to another town, maybe in another state. Anton would find them for sure if they settled in one place for very long. The air she sucked into her lungs didn't help a bit. Sara had to get Kate better. She had to do something to prod her sister into some semblance of the woman she'd been before this business with Selena had happened.

Her mind gone tumultuous, she went up the double-wide stairs leading from ground level to the balcony and paused outside her sister's bedroom door. Maybe if she could just sit with her sister, hold her hand as she slept, it would calm her sister enough that she might rejoin the world. As it was, Katalin seemed lost somewhere, lost in some ether-world where no one could enter.

She reached for the handle and froze as the door slowly swung inward. Awareness tingled along her scalp. She sucked in a breath and prepared to fight whatever was in her sister's room. From the corner of her eye, a shadow moved and another shiver rocked her. No time for fear now. They'd already survived too much to be taken again.

Sara burst through the door and rushed into the darkened bedroom calling upon the speed of her kind. She might be unmated and not fully in possession of her lycan powers but she was pretty damn fast. Katalin lay huddled beneath a mountain of white bed linens. Unmoving, silent.

Had the feeling of another presence been a figment of her imagination? Had the premonition of danger been ridiculous folly?

"Katie?" She whispered her sister's name as she slowly approached only to stop in her tracks at the sound of a low growl.

Before she could consider the consequences, she screamed, the sound loud and sharp.

Then she went still.

Motionless, she watched in shock as a huge dark wolf leaped from a corner of the room to land in the center of Katie's bed. He snarled at her. She held up a hand in self-defense and started to back away when he snapped feral lupine teeth. Dear gods!

Kate lay unmoving as the wolf stood over her on the bed and for the first time in a long time, Sara wished she were a consummated female, fully wolf. Protective instincts that had been part of her nature since her birth, sent her fear scampering away. Fisting her hands, she advanced on the snarling lycan but then another feral growl swept the darkened room and Sara spun to see a large pale wolf bound through the open balcony door.

Instant recognition blasted through her.

Cactus!

The huge sandy colored wolf, crouched low, snapping his huge teeth. His ruff bristled as he faced the dark beast that hovered over her sister. Sara made a sound and backed away from the combatants. Silence, heavily laced with energy, lingered in the air and then, she watched Cactus morph from beast to man until he stood naked in the middle of the floor. He stood in a crouched position, his shoulders slightly lowered as if prepared to fight. She noted the recognition in his eyes and turned her head to see the sheriff, Gabe, crouched in human form over her sister's inert body.

The huge, burly man seemed to shake himself and finally moved to stand naked beside Kate's bed. "Sorry, my brother," he said in a gravelly voice. "Took the job just a little too far." He scrubbed his hands over his face then blew out a breath.

Cactus drew himself up to his full six and a half feet of brawn and muscle and nodded his head. "Looks like we've both taken our jobs just a little too far. No harm, no foul."

"What do you mean? No harm? No foul?" Sara stared at the naked, beautifully formed sheriff and pointed her finger at him. "What the hell are you doing in my sister's room?"

She felt Cactus' arm wrap around her from behind, his broad forearm pressing her belly as he drew her against him protectively.

"Easy." He whispered the word against her ear making her shiver.

Without warning the door burst open and a naked Joe McKinnon advanced into the room with Quinn following closely behind. Obviously they'd been awakened by all the ruckus, including that moment of insanity when she'd actually screamed. Though the pack's alpha was bare-assed naked, Quinn was not. She wore a dark blue satiny robe. Her hair was mussed.

"What the hell is going on here?" Joe roared.

The occupants of the room went still and silence fell.

Then to everyone's absolute amazement, a heavy crystal vase filled with summer flowers lifted itself from a table and flew across the room to smash into a wall. Shards splintered and fell, water dripped and the flowers landed in a misshapen tangle on the hardwood floor. Before anyone could move, a painting on the wall rattled its discontent and began to bang and thump loudly. The ceiling fan, which had been moving in slow, lazy circles, picked up speed, spinning frantically, its low hum of sound changing into a the rapid whip whip whip of helicopter propellers.

"Dear gods!" Sara broke free from Cactus' hold and launched herself onto the bed. Taking Katalin into her arms, she crooned soothing words against her hair and slowly stroked her. "Shh. Settle down. Everything is okay. I promise. Shh. Katalin, I'm here."

As quickly as it had begun, the ceiling fan paused its wild spinning.

Katie lay in her arms, her eyes closed, unmoving.

Sara knew what was going on. Her gaze lifted to the sheriff who looked at her sister with a stunned expression. He was the one! She tightened her hold on her sister for a single moment then let go. After brushing the hair from Katie's eyes and pressing a kiss to her forehead she sent her gaze around the room. Tension rose to a quivering, live thing as everyone stared.

At some point Quinn had moved to the foot of the bed where she now sat watching the two of them. "Care to explain what just happened here?"

Though she'd asked the question calmly, Sara saw the turmoil swirling in Quinn's blue eyes. Where to start? What could she say that wouldn't sound crazy? Struggling under the heavy stares and unsure how to begin, she moved away from her sister and stood. Cactus gently took her shoulders and turned her until she faced him. She saw compassion and concern in his eyes. "Take a breath, honey. It's all right. Let's just start slow. I'm with you and I promise you that everything will be fine. Just let me help you."

Everything suddenly became too much. Her world, the world she'd carefully built in order to protect her sister, was falling apart before her eyes. Tears burned and threatened to fall. Katalin was coming into her power. She'd met her mate and now here Sara was, in a position of having to share this awful secret. "I can't," she whispered. "Not now."

Cactus' expression went heartbreakingly gentle. He reached out and wiped at her cheek with his thumb. When had those traitorous tears begun to fall? He drew her against his chest and needing comfort more than her next breath, settled her cheek against the mounded muscle. His grip tightened.

"Can we talk about this tomorrow, Joe?" Cactus' voice was gruff. "Sara has been through a lot over the past few days."

Sara closed her eyes and sank into Cactus feeling the security of his arms go around her like a warm blanket.

"It's a good idea," Quinn said into the sudden tense quiet. "There is plenty of time to get to the bottom of this tomorrow. And obviously we have a lot of questions about what just happened here."

Sara heard Joe expel a breath. "Yeah, you're right. Gabe you stay here with Kate or Katalin or whoever she is." Sara stiffened, prepared to protest but Cactus squeezed her slightly, halting her words. "Cactus, my brother, stay with Sara and, for the gods' sake, keep her out of trouble until we talk tomorrow. My study. Two p.m. Got it?"

"Yeah, Joe," Cactus said before he ushered her away and guided her into her bedroom.

By the time the two of them were shrouded in the darkness of her room, Sara regained her tongue. "I can't just leave her there."

"You can and you will." His hands settled on her shoulders and he leaned close to stare deeply into her eyes. "Don't you get it? Whatever powers your practically comatose sister has, have surfaced because of Gabriel. He's her mate just as you are mine."

"Doesn't she have free choice? Whatever happened to that, huh? I mean, she doesn't know what's going on."

"You don't know that. Not for sure and Sara, we don't have a choice when it comes to mates. It just is. It's a fact of nature for our people. The moment I saw you huddled with your sister in that damn filthy trailer out in the middle of nowhere, I knew. Then I touched you. Energy sizzled on my skin, burning me. Hell sweetheart, I've been hard enough to pound stone since the minute I clapped eyes on you."

Oh yeah. She got that.

Just the touch of his hands on her shoulder threatened to overwhelm her with the urge to tumble with him on her big bed and have her naughty way. Resisting the urge, she stepped back. "It has been a long day, Cactus. I think I'll take a shower and try to calm down. I'm just so tired suddenly." She kicked off her flip-flops and looked around. "Um, where are you going to sleep?"

His low, sexy laugh had her turning to glance at him. The rumbling sound caused pleasure, lust and passion to curl low in her belly. "In the bed," he said, his teeth flashing white in the darkness. "With you."

"Oh boy! Am I ever in trouble." Shaking her head she escaped into the bathroom after grabbing a clean tee shirt and fresh panties from a top drawer of the dresser. The hot water felt like heaven and worked its magic. By the time she'd toweled off and shrugged into the tee and panties, exhaustion took hold. The outline of the bed showed her that Cactus had already made himself at home. She'd never slept with a man before but she was oddly calm as she approached and looked down at him. His long blond hair fell in waves onto the pillow as he propped himself up on an elbow. His other shoulder, big and bronze, was bare. What would he do if she pressed her lips there on that exposed bit of skin?

A fine trembling shook her.

"Cold?"

"Um. Not really."

Cactus pulled back the covers invitingly and she crawled between the crisp, cool sheets. Just for safety's sake, she rolled onto her side, facing away from him and inched as close to the edge as possible. Lying next to a naked man in her vulnerable state made her as nervous as hell. His dark, husky laughter curled around her like a wicked caress.

He sent his arm around her middle and drew her close against his front. He raised up a little and whispered in her ear. "You tryin' to get away from me, darlin? Give it up. I'm the big bad wolf, remember? You don't stand a chance."

"Hm. And all you wanna do is eat me up."

He laughed again and nipped her earlobe. "Got that right. With a spoon. But not tonight. I want you to rest now. Just sleep. There will be plenty of time later to get down to what we both want."

His hold tightened allowing her to feel the lines of his utterly perfect chest and belly. His erection prodded her butt and she knew it wouldn't take long for him to take them from zero to fifty in a race to completion.

Cactus slipped his hand beneath her tee shirt and settled his palm on her flesh as if he'd known her forever. When she only sighed, his hand went higher until he finally held her left breast in his hand. He gently manipulated her then stopped. "Sleep," he whispered. "Just sleep, honey. I'll be right here if you need me." The last thing she felt or knew as she slipped into slumber was the feel of his hand on her breast and his breath in her hair.

In the darkest hour before dawn, Cactus opened his eyes and breathed in the scent of the woman who was destined by the gods to be his mate. She mumbled something against his chest and carefully, protectively he tightened his arms around her. Yeah, he had to admit things were moving faster than a runaway train but then he'd never been a man to shy away from a little excitement despite the slowness of his stride or the drawl of his speech. He didn't love her yet but it would come he knew. For both of them. He didn't know what revelations would pour from those sexy, pouty lips of hers but he did know he wanted to touch her more than he wanted his next breath.

He slid his hand down the contours of her curvy body. Sometime during the night their sheets had become a tangled mess that now lay in a heap near the foot of the bed. Lycans were a hot species. Warm to the touch. When their women reached the age of consummation, heat radiated from their bodies. Sara displayed all the symptoms of a woman who was ready to accept her beast. That suited Cactus just fine. Indeed it did.

In the gray of predawn, he feasted his eyes on the strip of her belly that was laid bare between the hem of her borrowed tee shirt and the tiny, colorful panties that shielded her sexiest secrets. Impossibly, his cock gained in proportion, his morning wood growing harder, tighter. He dragged in a breath and said a quick prayer for patience as he indulged himself by setting his lips on that delectable swath of pale flesh.

Setting his teeth gently on her warm skin, he bit lightly. He licked the spot with his tongue. From above him, he heard her whimper softly in her sleep. The soft scent of her, delicious enough to make him suddenly starved for a taste, swept through his head. Drawing little bits of her into his mouth, he sucked and teased until she shifted restlessly beneath him. Cactus looked up and stared into her lambent gaze. Her tongue swept out to lick her bottom lip.

"Cactus?"

"Mornin'."

"Um...what are you..."

The question faded as he moved his tender tasting over the curves of her torso. He grabbed the rumpled hem of her faded pink tee shirt and sent it high enough that her beautiful breasts were bare. Unable to resist, he focused on the passionate haze that filled her blue eyes and lifted the soft cotton over her head. He sent it sailing to the floor before feasting his eyes on her pink, tightly drawn nipples.

The spit dried in his mouth as hunger curled in his belly.

"You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"Cactus."

"I have to taste you. Tell me you'll let me take you in my mouth."

She paused and studied his face. He saw her breathing kick up a notch before she nodded. "Yes. Yes, do it. I want you to." She shivered and Cactus knew it was from the heat and energy that flowed between them.

Bending over her, he took a nipple in his mouth to suck. Pulling and releasing the tightly budded morsel, he teased with his tongue, nipped the spot before moving to the other. Her hands sank into his hair, holding him closer as if she couldn't get enough. Below him, her body writhed so he took his tasting lower and lower. When he reached the lacy edge of her panties, he breathed in the scent of her before dragging the slim

scrap of material over her hips and down her long legs. He tossed them aside and feasted on the sight of her. Like all women of their kind, she had no body hair.

Focusing totally on her, he saw the wet sheen on the lips of her pussy and the tiny flash of pink flesh between them. Cactus drew one finger down the slit, gathering moisture as he went. He zeroed in on Sara.

“You are so damn beautiful. I have to taste you, honey.”

He didn't wait for a yes or no and hell, he was a gentleman but there was nothing of a gentleman in the way he felt. No, he was feeling downright savage. Bending over her, he took her thighs in his hands to spread her out. Sara went still at the first swipe of his tongue and he hummed low in his throat.

She was delicious. And his for the taking.

Lightly, he prodded her opening, before sliding his tongue higher. He carefully spread the lips of her labia with his thumbs exposing the swollen bud of her clit. Circling with his tongue, stabbing the tender spot, he finally took it in his mouth. Gently he sucked. Sara whimpered softly, lifting her hips to meet each hungry pull and tug. He slid one finger, then two, deep into her channel loving how wet she was, feeling the squeeze of vaginal muscles, the tug of her flesh as she climbed toward climax.

He ached for her.

Dying to ease the throbbing in his cock, he rubbed himself against the mattress as he ate her out. Her soft moans and whimpers, the whispered encouragement, mixed with the energy generated by them both. Heat swept his skin as he felt her go still. Moving his fingers deep, he fed on her clit, focusing on her pleasure. With a low cry, Sara flew apart, arching her back against the mattress, fisting her hands in his hair.

Sara went still.

In the aftermath, he gentled her with his tongue then came up to his knees. Grabbing his cock, dragging his hand over his pulsing flesh, he looked at her.

“Let me in, Sara.”

She blinked at him still gasping for breath.

"Yes," she choked.

A low rumble crawled through his chest as his beast practically howled his satisfaction. Cactus drew the head of his erection over her wet pussy, down then up again. She was so soft, so wet. Thank the gods no condom was needed. His kind was immune to disease and Sara couldn't become pregnant until she'd been consummated and went through her first shift.

This wasn't consummation.

It was fucking.

Hot, wicked fucking that would give them both the relief they craved. This was the beginning, he knew, to bringing them closer to the time when she would allow him to claim her forever.

Cactus plied her, nudged her pussy until the head of his cock was coated with cream. He plucked her clit until she shivered beneath him.

"Cactus!"

"Hell, yes!"

Cactus buried his cock to the hilt. Deep. Gods! Silky, vaginal walls clasped him in a viselike grip, pulsing around his length. He tingled everywhere and knew instantly, Sara was different from any other woman. Stiffening his legs, he plunged deep, high and hard, in and out, one slow increment at a time. She squeezed him, flexed over his cock with each pass. His scalp tingled and the sensation spread to his neck, his shoulders, down to the base of his spine.

Sara's legs went around his hips and he felt the dig of her heels on his ass. Her lower body moved in tandem with his, seeking more. Cactus knew he would never get enough of her. Never. His gaze connected with hers and he was lost in her beauty. Her full lips were slack with passion. Cactus nipped her there, then swept his tongue over her bottom lip briefly before lowering his head to the bend of her neck. Setting his teeth

lightly on her flesh he pounded deep and hard careful not to unleash the full power of his lycan nature. She wasn't yet ready for that but soon, damn it, soon. Just thinking about consummating with her, tightening inside her until his flesh was locked with hers, sent him teetering on the edge. Thrusting rapidly now, rotating his pelvis against her clit with each pass, he fucked her. A low groan curled past his lips as he sucked the sweet flesh of her neck between his teeth.

"Cactus!"

"Gods yes!"

Letting go, he blasted his seed deep inside her clasping body. Her cries filled the quiet of the room as her pussy milked his pulsing cock. Cactus gritted his teeth settling his forehead on her heaving chest. Lust spiraled then flew apart as they climbed together then dropped over passion's sharp edge.

Chapter Four

"I can't thank you enough, Quinn, for all you've done," Sara said as she speared a chunky piece of lettuce from her salad and popped it into her mouth. It was roughly an hour before she was to meet with Joe, Cactus and gods knew who else to spill her guts about a secret she'd kept for far too long. She set her fork aside and lifted a glass of lemonade to her lips before speaking again. She shook her head. "The clothes are great and it was so nice of you to pick these things up for me."

Quinn smiled and lifted her own glass. "No problem. I'm just glad the jeans, tees and shoes all fit. When you're feeling up to it, we'll head into Cloverfield together, okay? I think you'll see that Rayne keeps a nice, up-to-date supply of things at Poteet's on the Prairie."

They were seated at a glass-topped patio table near the backyard pool. In the distance cowboys came and went either on foot, by truck or on horseback. The summer sun beat down on them all but she and Quinn were nicely shaded by a giant dark blue umbrella affixed to the center of the table. "Once things settle down, I'd love it." She sighed as she traced beads of condensation on her glass. "I didn't really have a chance to get to know Rayne when we were held captive by the rogue lycans. We were taped up pretty much the entire time. It's damn hard to talk through electrical tape. Then later we were separated. I do know she is very brave."

"That she is. One of the bravest among us and now," Quinn lifted her glass and tapped Sara's glass with it, "she is a fully consummated lycan. I had a nice long talk with her this morning and she and Ringo couldn't be happier. I swear, she was glowing."

Sara's smile widened. "I'm so happy for them both."

"Looks like it will be happening for you very soon."

She shook her head. "No, I don't think so despite what you all might think. Katalin is my first priority. She has to be."

Sara thought of the past night and the hot, down and dirty sex she'd shared with Cactus and felt her mouth go dry. Afterward, he'd kissed her, promised to see her soon and slipped through her bedroom door and into the gray and shadowy morning. For a woman who'd been as socially isolated as herself, an earthquake wouldn't have rattled her more than the way Cactus had touched her aching body. The question for her wasn't whether she could see herself with this strong lycan. She could. True, she didn't know him but the very air around them was electrically charged, savage, elemental. She'd never been a woman who lied to herself and she wasn't about to start now. He rocked her world! She felt his emotional need of her. His passion. His lust. On another day, in another time, she would be over the moon about meeting a man like Cactus who was so obviously intended just for her.

"We'll take care of her. Joe called Dee Santos this morning before he headed out."

Sara went still. "What do you mean? Who is Dee Santos?"

"A psychiatrist in Dallas. A lycan psychiatrist. She lives among humans and has a good reputation in dealing with both human and lycan. We might be supernatural but everyone needs help on occasion."

"Why would he do such a thing without talking to me?" Sara snapped the question and instantly regretted it when Quinn shot her a hard look from those sharp blue eyes. "I'm sorry, Quinn," she added hastily. "It just caught me by surprise."

Quinn reached out and took her hand, giving it a little squeeze. "You aren't used to being in a pack are you, honey? You must know that since Joe has taken you and Katalin under his protection, he'll move heaven and earth to see you have everything you need."

Help.

Caring.

Those things had been foreign throughout her isolated life. Tears burned behind her eyes and she blinked rapidly to keep them at bay. Unable to bear Quinn's careful scrutiny, she looked away. "I must thank him."

"Don't thank him yet, Sara, we don't know if even Dr. Santos can bring her back. I'm sorry if that hurts you but it has to be said."

Sara considered everything that Katalin had gone through while they'd been on the run from Anton, their rat bastard father and had to agree that seeing her sister return to them was an iffy proposition. Sorrow burned straight to her soul. "I just don't know —"

"Well, speaking of the man of the hour! There's Cactus."

Sara jerked. She looked up as a frisson of pleasure shook her all the way down to her brand new panties. Her well-loved pussy reacted instantly as she gazed across the way and saw him walking down the dirt drive between the main house and the barn, flanked by two other cowboys.

Damn but the man filled out a pair of jeans in all the best ways.

Her fingers gripped the edge of the table as she took in his commanding form wearing the aforementioned worn denims with a pair of dusty boots, a black tee shirt and a straw cowboy hat that looked as if it had been stomped by a horse or two. He wore his long, dark blond hair tied at the nape of his neck. He laughed at something one of the other men said. His teeth flashed strong and white and Sara was stunned by the instant memory of the way those teeth had nipped her swollen, pulsing nipples just hours ago.

Then suddenly he stopped. As the other men continued on, he looked over. His nostrils flared as if he'd scented her on the dusty wind. Sara's breath stilled.

Cactus' smile faded as he slowly reached up and tipped his hat.

"Ah, gotta love a cowboy," Quinn whispered. "Honey, he's got it bad. Um. If the look on your face is any indication, I'd say you have the big-time hots for him too."

Sara watched him walk away and finally enter the barn. Yes, she was fixated but she forced herself to drag her gaze away from his oh-so-fine body and bring herself back into the present. Heat burned her cheeks. "Heck, I hardly know him."

Quinn laughed and lifted her glass. "Looks like the two of you are well on your way to changing that, honey. All I'm gonna say is why fight it? It's as inevitable as the wind."

* * * * *

The time for the appointed meeting came and went and ranch life interfered so Sara prepared herself for an evening meeting with her pack alpha. She stood in front of the mirror, almost unable to bear the bout of nerves that fluttered like a gazillion butterflies in her belly. Feeling like a beggar in her brand new clothes, she nipped her bottom lip and took in the way she looked in the outfit she wore. Yes, it was casual and to quote Quinn, "cuter than hell" on her. She adored the sexy black tee and flouncy miniskirt that featured a row of ruffles at the hem. The tiny white dots on the skirt seemed so utterly frivolous in light of her current situation. She slipped her feet into a pair of flat, black patent leather sandals. Cactus would be there tonight as she spilled her guts. Hating herself for even thinking it, she wondered if he would like what he saw. Vain. Yes, she was completely vain wasn't she, for considering such a thing when the lives of herself and her sister were in such jeopardy.

Sara gave herself another quick look then jerked as a light knock sounded on the bedroom door. Maria, Joe and Quinn's housekeeper, poked her head inside. Smiling a welcome, Sara motioned her inside. The housekeeper, a tall, statuesque Hispanic beauty who wore the silver streaks in her hair with the grace of a queen, made herself right at home and sat at the foot of Sara's bed. She gave her a long look and nodded her approval.

"Looks to me like you are ready for a big evening. I love the outfit."

"Quinn talked me into it. Is it too much?"

"No, Sara. It's perfect. I'm sure Cactus will love it."

"Not wearing this for Cactus. I'm wearing it to please myself. I assume that's okay with everyone?" She glanced over at Maria who just grinned at her.

"Whatever you say, chica, but don't think you can pull the wool over my eyes. Lots of things happen here at Wolf Creek and in the town of Cloverfield and I know most of them. And what I don't know, I figure out pretty quickly."

Sara laughed. "Yeah, I bet you do." Walking over to lean against a post on the four poster bed, she studied Maria. Over the past few years, Sara had been careful about whom to trust but in Maria she sensed a strong woman who would shoot straight with her. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure. What do you need to know, honey?"

She blew out a breath. "What do you know about Cactus? I mean, has he always lived here?"

"Oh yes. For as long as I can remember. The only times he ever went away was to fight for his country. Except of course, when he fought for Texas Independence. That, he did right here."

"I didn't realize but it makes a lot of sense."

"Of course, it does. Cactus is a strong man but made even stronger by his sense of justice and honor."

Sara thought of what she knew of him and realized sadly that it wasn't much. The only thing she knew for a certainty was how he made her feel. When he looked at her, it was as if he got her, as if he knew her. He made her feel not only cherished but eager to know more. He was an enigma. "Does he have other family? Besides the pack, of course."

Maria shook her head and her dark eyes turned sad. "No. None that I knew of except for his little sister."

"He has a sister?"

"Si, Oralee but she died just before the Texicans took on Generalissimo de Santa Anna." Maria sighed. "Cactus was a young lycan who was charged with her care when their parents died tragically. One day, he was off with a young lady doing what couples often do and his little sister wandered off. She was taken by Comanches and killed."

"Oh my gods!"

"The poor boy never forgave himself. He'd let her down and lived his life for many years as if he must restore his honor. Do not let his slow smiles and gentle manner fool you. The man can be as savage as they come. He is one of the fiercest of warriors in the pack and more protective of women than any man I have ever known."

"Do I look like a woman who needs protecting?" Sara asked the question seriously and with no animosity. "Do I, Maria?"

Maria reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. She smiled. "Yes, you do, Sara. Though you would argue that, I believe you do." When Maria released her hand, she stood and walked to the bedroom door and opened it. "Will you come down now, querida?"

She nodded and followed Maria down the stairs noting the place was oddly quiet. Uncomfortable, she cleared her throat. "I checked on Katie a bit ago," she said as she descended.

"Yes, poor girl. So did I. Just so you can rest easy, I wanted you to know that I will sit with her tonight." Marie laughed softly. "Assuming Señor Gabriel will allow it."

"Hm. Good luck with that. He never leaves her side." It was true. The burly lycan was fixated on Kate who couldn't speak, couldn't respond. She was a shadow of her former self yet he stayed like a faithful hound or, in this case, a wolf. He never spoke, just sat motionless in a big chair in the corner of the room and watched her as if willing her to come back. They were mates. It was as indisputable as she and...no, she wasn't going there. Pressure built up inside her chest as she got to the bottom of the stairs and made her way into the massive study where she expected to meet the force of the Wolf

Creek pack. Swallowing, her hand on the doorknob, she looked back to find that Maria had disappeared.

Sara drew in a long breath and entered the room.

Silence reigned supreme in the dimly lit study. At least until she caught the hint of sound, leather softly shifting as Cactus rose from his seat behind the huge mahogany desk.

"Cactus!"

He tucked his thumbs in the front pocket of his jeans and nodded. "Sara."

There was an air of restrained violence surrounding him, an energy perhaps, that reached out to wrap her up in waves of heat. She acknowledged his passion, restraint, worry. She knew they were his feelings and the notion that she could feel this big man's emotions rocked her to her toes. It was the strangest thing!

Cactus moved around the desk and walked toward her. Along with the jeans, he wore a pearl-snap western style shirt and a western belt with a buckle bigger than her fist. His boots snapped smartly on the hardwood floor. Reaching out, he cupped the side of her face in his palm. His gaze zeroed in on her lips. "You look as pretty as can be, honey. You okay?"

"Um, yeah. I'm okay I guess but confused." When he released her and stepped back, she looked around the empty room. "Where is everyone?"

Cactus took her hand. "Had a talk with Joe and Quinn this afternoon. Everyone figured it would be easier for you to talk with me than to a crowd considering everything you've been through lately."

The nerves that she'd fought all afternoon and evening tightened in her belly. Yes, she'd been worried about this meeting but a one on one with Cactus? Somehow that was worse. How on earth was she to resist him? All that Texas swagger and Southern charm would be her undoing. She mustered a smile. "Very considerate."

He grinned suddenly and she saw the hint of a dimple in his cheek. Odd that she'd never noticed it before. "That's me. The soul of thoughtfulness. Come on. I've made plans for us."

"Just bet you have."

His eyes widened slightly and then he laughed as he led her from the study and to the front door of the house. "Hell, honey, the way you say that makes me think you don't trust me."

"Not a bit, handsome. Where are we going?" By the time they were on the front porch night had fallen. A big black truck was parked in the circle drive underneath the Lone Star flag that flapped from its perch atop a tall, tall pole. She eyed the gleaming truck with more than a little admiration. This shiny, big, brawny thing suited him. "Is this your ride?"

"When I'm not on horseback, yeah." He led her down the steps and turned her, pressed her to the side of the truck and took her lips with quick, hot, savage intensity. Energy zipped and popped around them as he sank his tongue deep into her mouth where he, no doubt, tasted her worry and her lust. She rubbed her tongue against his, returning the kiss with an abandon she knew for sure she'd never displayed with any other man. His taste was addictive. When his hands skimmed her body to cup her breasts, she almost swooned.

Swooned? Yeah. There was no other word for it.

His cock pressed her weeping pussy making her despise the clothing that kept them from touching flesh to flesh. In a flash, he had her primed and ready for his taking but then he surprised her by breaking the kiss. Without another word he opened the passenger-side door and helped her inside. The touch of his hand on her back made her flesh tingle but then he released her to lope around the front and take his place behind the steering wheel. The air conditioner and a Rascal Flatts song blasted her simultaneously when he turned the ignition and the big truck roared to life. "We're going to my place. Hope that's okay with you."

“Hm. Have a feeling we’d be going there whether I wanted it or not.”

“Hey now,” he said with a look of affront. “When have I ever bullied you into anything? You know I only have your comfort at heart.”

Ooh. A little bit more than comfort came to mind when she thought of him and the way he’d touched her. Just the memory of his hands and mouth on her body added to the close proximity they now shared caused her blood to heat. Her heartbeat kicked up a notch.

“What?” He gave her a long sexy look. “No sassy comments?”

She sighed and gave him a smile. “Reckon I’m all out of sassy comments right about now.”

He reached across the width of the seat and took her hand. “Rest easy, darlin’. I don’t bite. At least not unless you want me to.”

The comment was teasing but his tone was not. A shiver that had nothing to do with the air conditioning rocked her. Looking at him at that moment was a big mistake. His eyes were soft and gentle but lit with a hungry glow that was unmistakable. He wanted her. The big problem remained, did she want him enough to finally stop running?

Chapter Five

He felt like a dumbass for being so damn nervous but he couldn't help it. Swallowing to relieve the sudden dryness in his throat he watched her stand on the front porch of his simple adobe-style house and take it all in. No, it wasn't huge, not like the main house but to him, it was home. If he were very lucky, this place would belong to her too. He hadn't realized until this moment how important was her approval.

She leaned over and brushed her fingertips over the petals of some colorful flowers he'd planted in terra cotta urns near the front door. She turned, her eyes sparkling in the shadowy night and smiled. "I love your house."

He shifted, shrugged. "Don't be too hasty, darlin'. You haven't even seen the inside yet. Come on. I'll show you around."

Before he'd left the house to pick her up, he'd remembered to turn on a lamp in the living room. The soft light reflected off the terrazzo tiles on the floor and caught the myriad colors of the tightly woven Navajo rug that dominated much of the room. Sara strolled around his space, her fine little ass swaying provocatively beneath that short black skirt.

Nope. His mouth was no longer dry. He was practically drooling.

"I love this furniture. It's so you," she said as she ran her hands over the rich brown leather of the couch. The frame was rugged, big and yeah, he reckoned it suited him. Mainly he'd bought it for comfort. She took in the rounded fireplace and stopped at an iron-worked bookcase on one side of it. He had a few old books tucked away there but he had lots of pictures too. She picked one up and turned to look at him. "This is your family?"

Cactus walked up and studied the old tintype that he'd placed in a carved wood frame many years ago. "Yeah."

"Nice-looking people. You haven't changed much."

He studied the picture of himself during happier days and realized she was right. But there was an innocence in his eyes then that he'd lost a long time ago. His sister's gap-toothed grin caught his attention and absently, he rubbed his fist over his chest to relieve the ache. "Pretty isn't she? That's Oralea, my little sister."

"Cute as a button."

Cactus took the frame from her hand and gently settled it in its place on the shelf. "She was killed by Comanches when she was ten."

Sara turned to face him fully and shocked the hell out of him by cupping his face. She went up on her tiptoes and kissed his mouth. The contact sizzled through his veins but then she broke the connection and stared into his eyes. "I'm sorry. Family is important and I'm sorry you lost yours. Very sorry."

Unable to resist, he sank his fingers in her pale curls and bent close enough to breathe in the subtle hint of her perfume. "And you know all about family and about protecting them, don't you? Gotta say, I love that about you. Almost as much as I love the way you taste." He lowered his lips to hers, swallowed her quick, stunned breath and sent his tongue on a deep tasting of her sweet mouth. A low growl curled up in his chest before it crawled its way up his throat to burst against her lips. His cock hardened, aching and needy, behind the fly of his jeans. He moved in and caught her up in his arms. Her nipples beaded tightly, harder than gems, against his chest. As his tongue explored her, he rubbed against her breasts until she whimpered softly.

Feeling savage, needy, Cactus shoved his aching physical desire onto some internal shelf to save for later. "I want to fuck you more than I want to draw my next breath," he whispered against her lips. "But I know I'll need all night for what I have in mind."

"That l-long?" The words exploded from her mouth to brush against his lips.

"Yeah. Maybe longer. I could fuck you for years and it would never be enough." He kissed her again, angling his face to take her with tender ferocity, just once more, before he finally pulled away.

Reluctantly stepping back, he watched as she leaned against the wall seeking support. Her fingers trembled as she shoved them through her hair before finally looking at him. Sara bit then released her swollen bottom lip. "Oh, boy! I'm in big trouble."

"Let's just say, I like keeping you on your toes."

"And the man is a smartass too."

Cactus laughed growing more enchanted with her by the moment. He held out his hand. "Come on. Let's see what I can rustle up in the kitchen."

"Hot kisses and food too," she said as he took his hand and followed him from the living room, through the adjoining dining area and straight into the kitchen. The thing he'd always liked about his home was the fact everything was pretty much all together. One room flowing into the next with no doors or walls. Simple and uncomplicated. What you saw was what you got at his place. On one side of the house was his enormous master bedroom. The opposite side featured two smaller bedrooms connected by an adjoining bath that served just fine for guests. He planned to show it all to her later. For now, it was paramount that she trust him enough to share her secrets and maybe let him know her a little better.

In the end, that's what he wanted most. It was impossible to deny the physical attraction that occurred naturally between mates but he wanted more. He wanted her trust, her admiration and, hell yeah, he wanted her to love him.

It wasn't too much to ask was it? He might have spent most of his life as a loner but he wanted so much more. He always had. The family of his blood was long gone and it wasn't until meeting her that he'd begun to hope he could have that again. With her, he finally had a chance to really live and he didn't plan on letting her go until she was ready to give herself to him body and soul.

As she took in the kitchen doodads, he walked to the fridge and took out a platter of steaks he'd prepared earlier. They were seasoned and ready to put on the grill as soon as the charcoal was ready. When he turned, he watched her reach up to gently

touch the shiny copper pots and pans hanging over a brightly tiled island that dominated the center of the room. She turned and smiled. "I really like your place. It's so homey."

"Did you have a place like this growing up?"

The smile instantly faded.

Damn! Not what he'd wanted.

"No," she said with finality. "Not hardly."

"I'm sorry."

Sara shook her head. "Forget it, Cactus. It's not your fault. Can I get the door?"

She'd followed him to the sliding glass patio doors and when he nodded, she slid them open. "Oh, I love this! It's beautiful."

"Have to admit I'm kinda proud of it." He walked over to the freestanding stone barbecue pit and went to work lighting up the charcoal. When he turned it was to the sight of her admiring the square, tile-topped table. He reached above the grill to fetch a box of matches and lit a fat citronella candle that he kept in the center of the table and watched her gingerly touch the tiny peppers of an ornamental pepper plant. "Rayne sent that to me when I did renovations on this place a few months ago."

"That was nice of her. This is beautiful," she said. "Can I help?"

He could think of plenty of ways she could help him at the moment but he wasn't about to jump her sweet bones like a horny teenager. Instead, he slid open the patio door and stood back to let her precede him back inside. "I have some stuff to fetch in here. Also figured a good host might offer something to drink."

Within a few minutes they were digging into steaks, baked potatoes and salad while she sipped a glass of red wine. For himself, he'd chosen a long-necked bottle of beer. Nursing the cold brew, he bit back a smile as he watched her dig into a steak the size of Texas. For a little, bitty thing, she didn't hesitate about enjoying her meal. Like

most lycans, she had a serious love affair with rare steak. Good. He'd feed it to her forever if she'd just agree to be his.

Yeah, he'd work on that. He wasn't an idiot. He knew damn good and well that mates didn't come along every day. Even now, energy sizzled in the cool, night air. She looked up nervously when she caught him staring.

She cleared her throat and took a sip of her wine. "So, the entire town of Cloverfield is made up of our people. I find the idea of it all just fascinating. No hiding who you really are. Family around. People who care on every corner."

"Every now and then a human family will buy a house here but they don't stay long."

"What? You big bad wolves scare them all away?" Her quick grin was like sunshine.

He laughed, feeling free and young again. "Something like that. No, I suspect they pick up on vibes or something. The last human who lived here became the mate of our Supreme. Martha was converted and now she lives with Silas MacAdam in Scotland."

Sara continued to ply him with questions, conversation free and easy until dinner was finished. "This was a great meal, Cactus. The best I've had in a long time." She stood and began to gather up the plates. He touched her hand and she looked up at him.

"Leave it to me. You're my guest."

"That's silly. Come on, big guy, we'll do it together."

Cactus didn't argue and they gathered up the dishes. While he put things away, she ran water in the sink. By the time her arms were elbow-deep in suds, she'd gone quiet as she absently gazed through the kitchen window to look out into the night. Wanting to share the stillness with her and knowing full well she was nervous about the talk they must have, he walked up behind her. He gathered her soft, pale curls in one hand and settled his lips against the slender column of her neck. He drew his tongue along

that soft spot and nipped it gently. "Talk to me, Sara. How did Katie cause things to fly around the room like that?"

"Ever hear of telekinesis?"

"Yeah. It's the ability to move objects with your mind."

"She has a gene, just like the Wolf Creek cowboys with your ability to shield your wolf-self from other animals. She was born with it but lately, since coming here, her powers are stronger despite her current emotional state."

Cactus turned the revelation over in his mind then reached for a towel and took her hands from the sudsy water. Backing up, he turned her, dried her and led her to the living room. Together, they sat on the plush oversized sofa. Unable to bear any distance between them, he gently pulled her into his lap. As she settled her cheek against his chest, his arms tightened around her. "Talk to me."

"My real name is Safina Petrova and Katie is my twin sister, Katalin. We are on the run from my father, Anton Petrov."

He swept his hand over the lines of her back offering the comfort he sensed she needed. "Can you tell me why?"

She tilted her head back and sighed. "My family line originates in eastern Europe. When many of us migrated to America, most settled in the big cities. New York, Philadelphia, or Boston."

"You grew up on the East Coast?"

"No." Sara blew out a breath. "Anton was a lone wolf and he just didn't deal with others well. He's not a nice guy, Cactus."

A shiver raced through her body. Cactus tightened his hold on her.

"Where did you settle?"

"He bought us to Arkansas. We grew up in the woods, in a cabin out in the middle of nowhere. I believe, at first, Anton's hope was that no one would ever know about the special powers Katalin or I might possess."

“What about your mom? Did she have powers?”

A million questions rolled through his mind but then tears floated suddenly across the surface of her eyes. Cactus caught an errant tear with the tip of his thumb then pressed his lips to her forehead. “Tell me, Sara. It’s okay, honey, I’ve got you.”

“My mother was Anya.”

Was. She’d said was and his heart tightened at the waves of grief that poured from her to him. “It’s okay, darlin’. I’m here.”

Sara sucked in a shaky breath. “Any powers Katalin was born with came from Mama’s line. She was a Hungarian wolf. She never talked much about the powers inbred by her line of lycans. Anton forced a consummation on her when she was very young. I think he believed she would have powers of prophecy, telekinesis, strength...one or all of those. She didn’t. Later she explained that powers from her line always skipped a generation. She never knew why. It just was.”

Forcing a consummation was tantamount to rape and a sin that carried a death penalty among his, or any other, pack. Fury rose up inside him as he imagined the young Anya being forced to live a lifetime with a lycan not of her choosing. Only a brute or a bastard would force a woman.

Sara continued speaking, her voice shaky. “When we were young, Anton watched us so closely, always hovering nearby for signs that we might have inherited something he could use to improve his station. When Dad wasn’t around, Mama would tell us to be careful, to be quiet and still in his presence. We learned fast. Mama took the brunt of his anger and frustration. He was a beast in every way. Too big and mean for Mom to fight.”

“He hurt her? Physically?”

A low sound broke from Sara’s lips. She shuddered violently.

Fuck!

“Just let it out.”

“Um. Not, not yet,” she choked. “A couple of years ago, Anton was in a particularly foul mood. He is a big, big man, Cactus. Huge. Hamfisted. He came down hard on Mom over some perceived failure and Katalin and I just lost it. I’ll never forget it. We’d always been told that when we met our mates, any power we might have buried deep inside us would come bursting free. But the power was too strong in Katie. Anton hit Mom and Katalin screamed. The sound of it. Gods! Sharp and brittle. Dishes flew from the supper table, launching themselves at Anton like weapons. Kat practically vibrated from the force of her power but then it suddenly stopped. Dishes lay broken all over the floor of the cabin and Katie fell to her knees in the middle of them, limp, exhausted.”

He’d seen Katie up close. She was reed slim, almost delicate in appearance. Much different from the curvier Sara. The scene unfolded in his mind and he knew instinctively, he was picking up on Sara’s own memories. Even without the strength of the consummation ceremony, he just knew. Dread tightened like a ball deep in his gut.

“What did Anton do?” Despite the tenderness in his voice, Sara shuddered.

“He grabbed a shotgun from a rack over the fireplace and shot Mom in the chest. The look on his face! I’ll never forget the hatred stamped on it. He turned the gun on me and Katalin and forced us outside. It was dark and we were barefoot. It was wintertime and I remember the trees looked like bones. They rattled like skeletons that were backlit by the moon. My mind was screaming with pain. Our sweet mother was gone. Just gone in a blink. I’ve never felt so helpless. I never want to feel that way again.”

Finally it was too much.

Sara choked on a sob and Cactus thought his heart would break at the sound of it.

“Shh,” he whispered, gathering her close. “Shh, sweetheart, I’ve got you.”

Cactus knew there was more but he wasn’t a heartless bastard. His lady was in pain, hurting and it was up to him to soothe her, to make it better if he could. He stood with her wrapped tightly in his arms and carried her straight to his bed.

Chapter Six

The feel of his arms around her was like heaven, like a warm, comfortable blanket. Sara clung to him, vaguely realizing he carried her. A few seconds later, he slid her down his body until she was standing on wobbly legs beside his bed. She knew without being told she was in his room. The shadowy space smelled faintly of eucalyptus, a scent she often smelled on Cactus' skin and hair.

"I'm not good at this emotional stuff," she managed.

Cactus wrapped one arm around her body and cupped her face, encouraging her to meet his tender gaze. "You don't have to be good at a fucking thing, Sara. Not with me. Not ever. You've been holding things in for a long time, haven't you?"

"There was no time to cry. There wasn't time to grieve or do anything but run."

"Don't talk about it now, honey. Plenty of time to talk things out later. We have forever, if you want."

Before she could draw another breath, he gripped the hem of her tee shirt and pulled it over her head. He tossed it aside. Her skirt soon followed. Cactus pressed her to sit so he could remove her sandals and before she knew it she was lying back in the center of his big bed with only her bra and panties shielding her nudity. Through eyes bleary with tears, she watched him quickly remove his boots and shirt. Earlier she'd imagined giving the fabric a yank until the pearly snaps came undone exposing his muscular chest to her gaze. It wasn't to be. Not tonight.

It didn't make him any less beautiful.

She heard the soft clink of his belt buckle and the slight rasp of his zipper as he went about the task of discarding his jeans. He wore no underwear and his cock rose thick and hard from his groin. Cactus' long golden hair hung over one shoulder coyly covering a sexy nipple. Despite her distress, she licked her lips wanting more than

anything to draw her tongue over every hot inch of his flesh. But despite the longing that whipped like a prairie fire through her system each time she looked at him, her tears, unspent for the past few years, continued to fall.

Before she could blink, he was on the bed gathering her in his arms. "Aw, woman, you're breakin' my heart," he whispered, his voice gone dark with emotion. For such a big, rugged man, his touch was nothing but gentle as he unsnapped the front closure of her bra and swept it from her body. Instantly one breast was captured and held, her nipple, hard as a gem, pulsing against the palm of his hand as his lips found the tears on her cheeks. She felt his tongue there, his soft kisses before he tenderly nipped her bottom lip and took his kiss deeper.

Sighing, breathing him in, she responded with a wild abandon, a need for comfort that she realized she'd buried in the deepest, darkest regions of her heart. She clung to him, returned his kiss, loving his hot, wild taste. His thumb repeatedly swept her areola causing her nipples to ache with delicious expectation and when he finally lightly pinched, she gasped and arched against him. Sensation rocketed from the taut pleasure point to curl through her belly. The tiny scrap of her panties was instantly soaked as her body readied itself for more of anything he wanted to give.

Restlessly, she moved her body closer to the warmth he radiated. His cock pressed hard and alive against her belly and unable to turn off the need that raced through her body, she reached between them to take the heavy length in her hand. Exploring his strength, the silken feel of his flesh, she sent her fist down then up again. Cactus made a rough sound and bent to take her nipple in his mouth to suck. Harder, then softer, then harder again, the pulsing little tugs blasted through her body to settle deep in her pussy.

Needing more, a closer contact, she released his stiff erection and filled her palm with his ass as she looped a leg over his rock-hard thigh. Pressing closer, frantic with need, she struggled to press her drenched pussy against his cock. "Cactus," she whispered. "I need —"

"Yes." Cactus growled the word and shifted until he was over her, dragging his length over the surface of her silky wet panties. "Hell, yeah. Damn, Sara."

She laid splayed open beneath his powerful body, gasping out at each pass of his cock over her swollen, throbbing clit. She met each thrust, quivering with the need to have him buried deep inside her channel. Over and over he rubbed against the wet silk until with a rough sound, he reared up and ripped the sides of her panties and tossed the ruined material aside.

Looming over her, his eyes narrowed with hunger, he reached out to run his fingers over the column of her throat. Stunned by the tenderness of his actions, Sara went still. Anticipation swamped her. He cupped and teased her breasts, her nipples, then sent his hands on a slow exploration of every curve of her torso. He circled her navel, dipping the tip of his finger there before stroking her inner thighs, gathering her flowing cream on his hands. "You are the prettiest thing I've ever seen, the sweetest damn thing I've ever known. You humble me. You make me want to be better than I am."

"Cactus. I—"

"No, let me touch you. Forget everything but how much I need you. Think about nothing but how badly I want to claim you. Gods, your pussy is delicious."

Stunned by the emotion ringing in his voice, she watched him part her labia. With an arrested expression, he drew his finger down her slit from top to bottom, where he slowly sent it deep into her vagina. He added another finger and the sense of fullness, the feeling of heat, sent her pulse into overdrive. Her body arched from the bed as he strummed her clit and her shocked cry broke the sudden silence, tore through the shadowy stillness of the room like a sharply honed knife. She rocked on that seductive edge until he bent to suck her clit in his mouth. The gentle tugs, the hungry licks whipped through her system until her body seized like a ball of flame and then flew apart. Her scream shot up and out and then, just as she wanted, his cock plunged deep, whipping in and out, with a preternatural speed that sent her world rocking again.

"Is the power...too much," he gasped as he pistoned deep and withdrew, each hard stroke making her vaginal walls clench to hold him closer.

"No. More. Yes, more, more."

He gripped her ass as he pounded deeper, harder. Stretched to capacity she could do nothing but hold her body still as he fucked her like the savage he truly was. This was sex. This was passion at its ultimate. It had to be yet she knew the consummation, should she choose to accept him, would be even more intense.

Gods! Could her heart survive it? Was her love strong enough to hold it? Was she capable of giving to him what he so freely gave to her?

And then the questions flew from her mind like so much pixie dust as her body clenched, tightened impossibly. Still teetering on the fine sharp edge of pleasure, her body finally relinquished its passionate fight and she tumbled off into oblivion. Vaguely, she felt the stiffening of Cactus' body and the jerking of his deeply buried cock as it spurted his semen deep in her womb. His fingers flexed on her butt, tightened, then went lax as he came down over her to take her mouth.

Sara closed her eyes, felt his lips move to her cheeks where he drank more tears. She hadn't known she cried but realized instinctively they were tears of passion rather than tears of sadness. Moved, overwhelmed, she wrapped this big man in her arms and fell just a little bit deeper in love.

Later, Sara wondered how such a seemingly simple house could feature such an opulent bath. Obviously, Cactus liked his creature comforts and one of them was the giant oval hot tub in his bathroom. She leaned back against the firm mounds of his chest, sighing with pleasure at the feel of his sturdy arms around her. Though guilt at such decadence hovered at the perimeters of her mind, she ruthlessly chased it away. In her whole life, she couldn't recall a single moment that had been lived expressly for her own pleasure. Always there was worry about when her mother would once more suffer the brunt of Anton's violence. For as long as she could remember, there had been the

fear that her father would turn that anger and brutality upon her sister. In the back of her mind, she'd recreated scenarios of what she would do when Katalin would be threatened by the feel of Anton's fists.

Sighing deeply, she laid her head back and cherished the comfort of the big strong lycan who gave her such tender care. His arms were around her beneath the warm, bubbling water, one hand drawing lazy circles on her naked belly.

She would take this moment in time and hold it close knowing this snippet of life would belong to her alone.

"How did you get away from Anton, sweetheart?"

"Ah," she breathed, resigned. "Time to talk turkey, huh?"

"Yeah. We need to get it out of the way." He settled his mouth against her hair and the feel of his breath, warm and soothing, sent a rush of pleasure over her flesh. "I have to keep you safe. You and your sister. From the moment I carried you out of that rundown trailer in Mexico you became my responsibility. You know that, don't you?"

"I'm a responsibility?"

"More than that and you know it, darlin'. You could never be just a chore that I have to deal with. Enough stalling now. Tell me so I can help you. Don't you think it's way past time you let someone else carry the burden?"

He was right.

Suddenly tired to her bones, she turned slightly in his arms and settled her head back against his shoulder. Sara looked up, feeling a certain comfort that she was finally unburdening herself. "We were in shock really, from the moment he put us in his truck. Mama was dead, killed before our eyes and our own father had done this awful thing," she said. "He rambled on and on about a group of eastern European lycans who'd settled in a remote area on the Texas-Louisiana border. Anton called them the Hellfire Club."

"Who the fuck are these people?"

She shook her head, feeling his curiosity and anger. Their empathic connection was growing stronger by the moment. "They are a group of lycans who believe humans are weak and these wolves no longer want to hide their existence. They are all about power and conquest."

"Dangerous."

"Yes. From what Anton said they are. When my father met these lycans, he quickly realized that gifted daughters might make him a wealthy and powerful man. He wanted money and he made a deal with them. Essentially he sold us."

"What the fuck?" Cactus' eyes narrowed. His body tensed and a muscle worked in his jaw.

She closed her eyes so she could continue speaking through the rage she felt coming from a man who'd shown her nothing but gentleness. The truth was simple. To her father, his daughters were like so much cattle. It was so damn painful to bear. "He planned to sell us, well, at least Katalin, to them. One of the lycans, I don't know who, would force a consummation and take her, use her for the group's ends."

"Fucker. I'll find him, honey. I promise. I will find the bastard and kill him for what he has done." His arms tightened around her. "Do you have powers too, Sara?"

She sighed. "I honestly don't know. Mama told us that we would come into our powers, if we had them, in much the same way we would finally embrace our wolf selves." All lycans knew that extreme physical trauma or the experience of ultra powerful sex brought about the change in their women. "I was always very strong, very fast, even as a child and Mama suspected that once I came into my own, I might possess the strength of any three lycan males." She shook her head and sent her gaze to Cactus, hoping to gauge his response to such a declaration. But she saw only a solemn acceptance that his mate might very well be a freak of nature.

"How did you get away from him when he took you?"

"We stopped at a cheap motel that first night. Somewhere around Texarkana, I think. We waited until he had fallen asleep and Katalin used what little bit of power she possessed to move the locks he'd hammered into place to keep us from escaping."

"Bet that pissed him off."

"Yeah, I reckon it did but we didn't wait to find out." Cactus sent his hand on a comforting sweep of her damp arm as she settled one of her own on his ribs. In that moment it seemed they'd known each other forever. "There was a gas station nearby. We sneaked into the back of an eighteen-wheeler and got the hell out of there. That was two years ago." She blew out a breath. "Gods! It seems like yesterday. I swear the entire thing is seared into my brain."

Cactus pressed another kiss to her temple and rubbed a finger absently over her nipple. "But you managed to avoid him, didn't you? Such a smart woman I have for a mate."

"I like to think I'm nobody's fool. We existed at the edge of nowhere, moving from town to town, doing odd jobs and basically hiding out. But I know he's still out there, Cactus. He doesn't know if I have powers but he does know about Katie. It's been my mission to protect her at all costs. Anton would hand her over to these animals in a heartbeat."

"Any idea who they are? Do you have names of any of the members of this Hellfire Club?"

"No. Not a clue. I wish I did though. I'd hunt them down and take them out."

"Fierce aren't you, for a little bitty thing?"

Finally she laughed, feeling suddenly light with her unburdening. "Little? Surely you jest?"

"You are little to me."

"Yeah but you're huge, Cactus!" She waggled her brows. "In every way. In all the best ways."

Cactus laughed and turned her until she kneeled in the water between his legs. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"By all means." Feeling free and sexy in every way, she reached beneath the surface of the water to capture his cock in her hands. "Know what I want to do? Give you three guesses."

His cocky grin was full of knowledge and sexual heat. "Please say you want to lick every inch of my body. I'm beggin' ya, darlin'."

She leaned in and brushed his lips with hers. His eyes darkened with an underlying hunger than was irresistible. "Aw, don't think you'll have to beg for it, big guy. Figure I've been waiting my whole life for just one taste of you."

A low growl curled in Cactus' chest so she did what she wanted and straddled his thighs. She sank down over him and settled her mouth on his chest to drink the drops of water that shimmered there like tiny diamonds. His cock rose up high and hard between her legs and helplessly, she moved against it as she dragged her thumb lightly over the dark, silky head. Cactus arched under her light caress and the shaft of his cock moved through her folds, brushing her clit with each pass. Sitting on him this way opened her fully. The contrast of the warm water and cooler air caused her nipples to furl tightly. A sigh of relief, of need broke the plane of her lips when he caught one in his mouth to suck. The hard tug sent pleasure to arrow through her center, settling in her pussy. Savage need, hunger for more tore through her like a blast. Gripping his head, she held him to her breast. She whispered his name.

"Tasting later," he breathed against her throbbing nipple. "Ride me, Sara. Ride me, darlin'."

"The floor! We'll make a mess!"

"Fuck the floor. Come on, Sara. Now."

Needing no further encouragement, she lifted to her knees but stilled when Cactus drew the head of his cock through her tender folds. Frozen in place, expectation, anticipation, the need for more had her gasping for breath. He circled her clit until she

was practically writhing. Finally she slid down over his hardness, one tiny increment at time until he was seated to the hilt deep inside her aching pussy. Together they made a singular low sound before Sara began to slide her body up and down his hard shaft.

Cactus gripped her ass, sucked her nipples, first one and then the other. Sliding his fingers deep into the shadowy crevice, he circled the bud of her anus. "I want to fuck you here."

Mindless with need, she gasped. "Yes. I want everything."

"Remember you said that."

"I will. Please, Cactus, fuck me."

He slid his finger slowly inside and she went completely still. His cock was buried so deep, the sense of fullness threatened to undo her. When he removed his finger from her ass, she began to move. Power filled her up, propelled her over him with a whirlwind of motion. Cactus set his teeth gently on a nipple adding an element of pleasure-pain to their wild joining. Then, without warning, her belly tightened and she went still as her body gathered in on itself. Her release, sudden and wild, rocked her body. Cactus' teeth flashed, strong and white, as he gritted them. His low, raw growl of completion whipped over her skin like a lash.

When she at last sank down only to be wrapped in his strong arms, she sighed against his chest. Contentment filled her for the first time in her life. Acceptance, love and caring caught her up to the point she knew, she could easily spend the rest of her life right here in this place, with this man.

Chapter Seven

Early the next morning, Cactus pulled up at the back of main house with Sara sitting quietly next to him. Her lips were swollen and hell, she looked like a woman who'd been well and truly fucked. Satisfaction curled deep in his belly when he thought about it. There had been not one complaint but he suspected she might be a little nervous about facing anyone at the moment. He wished he'd thought to at least get her home before ranch activity began to buzz.

The instant he stopped the truck and they got out, Joe walked through kitchen door and Cactus watched color flash bright across her fair cheeks. Personally, he didn't give a damn if the whole world knew they were a couple but this kind of stuff was new to Sara and he didn't want her to feel embarrassed that they'd spent the night together. Instinctively, he moved close enough to put his arm around her.

"Mornin', Joe."

Joe tipped his hat at Sara and gave her a look from his intense golden eyes. "How ya doin', Sara? Everything go okay?"

"I-I think so," she said. Cactus hoped she wasn't thinking about the fact she was bare-assed under her pretty little skirt. He'd ripped her panties off her body last night in his haste to bury himself deep and there was nothing to be done about the situation now.

Cactus flexed his fingers over Sara's waist in a lame attempt at comfort and spoke directly to Joe. "We'll need to get together soon and discuss Sara and Katie's situation, Joe. We may just have a battle on our hands."

Joe's slow smile hinted of wickedness. "Never was one to back away from a good fight." Then the smile faded and he took a step closer to give Sara a sharp look. "Don't doubt that, whatever your story is, we are your pack. We're here for you, you're safe."

Not only do you have us but you now have your mate. Your sister has hers too, from the looks of things. Our sheriff hasn't left her side. He's a good man."

"Thanks, Joe," she said finally. "I appreciate your support more than you know. Um, guess I'd better head inside and check on her. I feel badly that I was away last night. I hope it wasn't a problem."

Joe shot Cactus a look that spoke volumes and Cactus went still. His alpha removed his hat and tapped it lightly against his thigh. "Well, as to that, I reckon you might as well know that while you were out with Cactus last night, Dr. Santos arrived. She and Gabriel have moved her to another location."

Energy filled the air as Sara went still. "What the hell are you talking about?" Raw power surged around his soon-to-be-mate and she practically quivered with rage.

"Just settle down, Sara," Joe said. "Dr. Santos needed space to be alone with Katie without interference. Late last night we moved her out to Martha MacAdam's old cabin. She's safe. Gabriel is with her."

"She's my sister." Sara spat out. "How dare you?"

Joe drew up to his full height and faced her fury. "I am your alpha. You will do what I say."

A low, lupine growl burst from Sara's throat as she spun to face Cactus. "You! You knew about this!"

Cactus knew he was in big trouble with her. He needed her to calm down and listen to reason but he sensed that would be futile. All he could do was tell the truth. "No, honey, I didn't."

"Liar!" The word shook with ferocity as she reached out with both hands and pushed against his chest. Cactus caught his breath as he went flying through the air to smash up hard against the side of his truck. The power of her shove had literally lifted him up and tossed him like a rag doll and there hadn't been a damn thing he could do about it.

"Fuck!"

Sara's hands went up over her face as her eyes rounded in horror. Rushing up, she went to her knees. "Oh my gods! Cactus! What did I just do? Oh, honey! I'm so sorry."

"I'm okay. Really, calm down, Sara. It takes a lot more than that to hurt me."

It was the truth. He was a big lycan but he had to admit the feel of this small female sending him flying was more than a little bothersome. He saw the anger on her face had faded to be replaced with dawning revelation. She had come into her powers. With no more than one night of hot sex between them, her abilities were drifting to the surface and Cactus knew she would never be the same again. Before he could reassure her, Joe thrust his hand down to pull Cactus to his feet and then Cactus helped Sara to hers.

"We need to have a little talk, my sister and brother," Joe said.

Cactus hauled Sara close to his side. She was trembling from head to toe. "Bottom line, Joe is that Sara and Kate are two very powerful lycan females. Katie has the gift of telekinesis. That's what we saw the other night in her bedroom when things started flying around the room. Sara is a force of strength who is just beginning to come into her full power. Once she has consummated with me, she will be able to outrun or outfight any one of us. Their father is a murderous bastard who deserves what we're gonna give him if he dares show up around here."

Joe's expression went rock-hard, his eyes filled with menace. He nodded. "I agree with that. I'm sensing there's more to the story."

"There is and I'm ready to tell it but first, I'd like to run Sara out to Martha's old place so she can check on Kate."

"Do it and then report back to me. ASAP."

After Sara went into the house and returned looking freshly showered and wearing jeans, a blue tee shirt and tennis shoes, they got back in the truck and drove through the countryside to Martha's old place. Sara sat staring out the window and he was a little

worried about her. Part of being a good friend, lover and mate, he believed was giving a partner space and that's just what he did as his truck kicked up a cloud of dust while driving on the dirt roads leading to the cabin where Sara would reunite with her sister.

Finally, she turned and for the first time, he noted the weariness in her gaze. "I'm sorry, Cactus."

"Don't apologize to me. You were upset."

"I don't know what came over me." She blew out a breath and Cactus reached across the expanse of the seat and took her hand.

"Come here, sweetheart."

Sara slid across the leather and when he wrapped an arm around her, she settled in against him. "I should've known you wouldn't keep something like Katie's removal from the house from me."

He swept his hand comfortingly down her arm. "I know what she means to you and how important it is to you that you are around to protect her. No, I'd never lie to you, Sara. But I have to tell you something."

She looked up and frowned. "What?"

"Katie is no longer yours to protect."

"I don't understand. She's my sister, my blood." Her voice rose an octave and Cactus cursed his own lack of good sense.

"Shh. Settle down, honey. I don't mean she stops being your sister. That is a bond that will always be with you. I know something about that. There isn't a day that goes by I don't miss Oralea and wish I'd been more responsible. She'd be alive today, living among the pack, if I hadn't failed her."

"Cactus, don't."

He shook his head. He hadn't meant to go down that path. "The thing is, with us, the bond between mates is even stronger than blood ties. Gabriel Dunham is her mate. He hasn't left her side for a minute and he's not about to let anything happen to her."

"I won't either."

Cactus let it drop. It was good that she loved her sister but she needed to take care of herself too. Her father terrified her. She would never, ever shake the memory of the night he'd killed her mom. A chill swept her, almost paralyzing in its intensity. Until she consummated with Cactus and her wolf appeared, she was vulnerable, despite her newly emerged strength.

If that bastard Anton ever found her and learned of her power, he wouldn't stop hunting her.

When they pulled up in front of the cabin, they were greeted by a tall, curvy Latina beauty. Had to be Dr. Santos. Damn, she looked young, he thought, as he helped Sara from the truck.

"Hola!" Deanna Santos moved down the front steps and met them halfway in the front yard. She extended a hand, which Cactus immediately took. Her smile was wide, white and full of confidence. "I'm Dr. Santos but my friends call me Dee. You must be Sara."

"Yes. I want to thank you for coming."

"My distinct pleasure," she said. Her dark intelligent gaze studied Sara. "How are you holding up?"

"I've seen better times, that's for sure. I just want Katalin to get better."

The doctor smiled. "Then I have good news for you. Your sister spoke just a few moments ago. Already a breakthrough but I can't take any responsibility at all for it. I understand there was an, um, episode with her the other night?"

Cactus finally spoke up. "Yes. Her powers of telekinesis decided to show up and they showed up with a bang."

Dr. Santos nodded. "This is what Señor Dunham told me."

"Is the sheriff with my sister?" Sara asked.

"Yes. The man barely leaves her side. I suspect his presence has played a part in the reawakening of your sister. But hear me, Sara, she has been traumatized greatly and it will continue to be a long road for her."

"How long?"

She shook her head. "No one can predict but please know this," Dee said, reaching for Sara's hand. "Sometimes one must hit the bottom before they can begin to climb back to the top. I sense in your sister a fierce spirit. She has told me some of what you two have experienced at the hands of the man who hunts you."

"Our father."

"That man is no father," Dr. Santos said with a snap of finality. "Go. Go see her, Sara. I know she wants to talk with you."

Cactus watched Sara enter the cottage before turning to the beautiful she-wolf. "Thank you again for being here."

Dee drew in a deep breath and sent her eyes over the beauty of the surrounding woods. "I like it here, I think. Dallas is nice but it's such a city. So much iron, steel and concrete that it's often hard to remember what real nature looks like." She focused on him and smiled. "We Dallas wolves have heard much of the place you have created for yourselves in Cloverfield. As an unmated female, I must admit I am curious to meet some of these real cowboy lycans I've heard so much about." She shrugged. "Who knows? There may actually be a mate waiting for me on these dusty plains."

"He would be a lucky wolf to have you."

She smiled. "And in the meantime, we must do everything we can to keep these women safe, si? Word has a way of getting around and it won't be long before their father learns they are here."

Fury whipped through him, hot and wild. "Then bring him on. I, for one, can't wait to get my hands on the bastard."

"My sister and I are tired of running," Sara announced to the occupants of the room. Her voice rang out with conviction despite the butterflies that fluttered through her belly. Her alpha's study was filled with big, strong lycan men and women, many of whom she'd only met moments ago. Late afternoon sunshine streaked into the room to bounce across the hardwood floors. Cactus stood propped against the window frame, his arms folded across his chest and she felt his encouragement and some deeper emotion reach out to her, calming her soul. Cactus flanked Joe McKinnon on one side while Ringo Ramone was sprawled in a chair, deceptively calm, on Joe's other side. She'd only seen the dangerous Latino lycan, Rayne's mate, a few times but already she knew the stillness of his pose was a ruse. No one was more deadly than this man. Quinn sat in front of Joe's desk in a big, leather chair and Sara currently occupied its twin. The other woman reached out to take her hand giving her the courage she needed. "I'm tired. It has been two years since Anton murdered our mother and began to hunt us. I want to feel safe. I need to live again and so does my sister." She focused her gaze on Cactus. "Lately, I've come to realize there is more than this frantic existence and I'm ready to grab it with both hands and hold on for dear life but I know I can't do this alone. I need my pack."

"And you have us," Joe said in low, steady tones. "We welcome you as a sister, Sara. Believe me when I say this, we will do whatever it takes to protect you and Katie and make the hunter the hunted."

A low sound swept the room containing the pack's elders and leaders, almost sounding like a rough rumble of beasts readying themselves for the kill.

In the midst of it all, Manuel Montoya entered the room and approached Joe's desk. He swept a battered straw cowboy hat from his head, bowing slightly. "I hate to interrupt but I thought you'd want to know we've had a report of a stranger in Cloverfield. From his scent, we know he's lycan and he has been asking questions. He showed up at Moondoggies last night talking about his runaway daughters." Manuel

looked at her then back at Joe. "He said his daughters were unmated but powerful lycan females who were on the run after murdering their mother."

"Liar!" Sara shot to her feet, her outrage boundless. A roar of sound swept through the room. Cactus' hands were fisted as he took a step toward her.

"Easy, Sara," Quinn said, placing a steady hand on her shoulder. "We believe you."

Joe stood behind his desk and gave her a steady look but it was Cactus' voice that captured her attention. "Sara, stop it! You don't have to prove anything to anyone. As your intended mate I would know the truth of everything you've said. We've all believed you from the beginning. The asshole is trying to play people to get information. Settle down now."

And then he was there, claiming her in front of every occupant of the room. His arms went around her as he looked into her eyes. The room fairly trembled from the sudden quiet that fell. "I'm here, honey. We all are and now I have to ask you in full view of the pack. Will you consummate with me? Now. Be mine. Be my mate from this moment forward."

Shocked to her toes, she watched Cactus go to one knee. He took her hand and laid his forehead against it briefly before looking at her. A more beautiful male had never been born. Raw emotion swam in his eyes along with hunger and passion. A lump formed in her throat. Tears rolled across the surface of her eyes. Her heart tightened then pounded with brutal force in her chest. Joy burst through her like a song.

"Take me, Sara," he said. "And let me take you."

Chapter Eight

"My consummation will be tonight, Katie," Sara said as she gripped her sister's slender hand. "I had to tell you."

Just yesterday she had agreed to consummate with Cactus in front of most of the pack. There was no hesitation. She wasn't a fool. Cactus was everything she'd dreamed of in a mate and now she would claim him as he would claim her. Tonight the wheels of the rest of her life would be set in motion and an excitement and anticipation such as she'd never known before filled her to nearly bursting. Gabriel and Dr. Santos had just left the room allowing the two of them to speak privately. Katie looked fragile but beautiful laying there among the white linens. Her strawberry blonde curls, shining and freshly brushed, were spread like a river of pale fire across her pillow. Her blue eyes instantly filled with tears. "It's wonderful. I'm so happy for you. You deserve nothing but good things after these past terrible years."

"They weren't all so terrible. We had each other."

"We always will but things will be different now." Katie smiled. "We knew this day would come though. I suspect it may come for me too."

Sara thought of the way Gabriel Dunham had stayed by Katie's side, seeing her through the worst of things and knew it was closer than her sister might imagine. "He is a good man."

Katie glanced away as soft color dotted her cheeks. "Yes. I'm just getting to know him but he has been so loyal despite knowing what a freak I am."

"Stop that! Don't talk about yourself that way. This is something we must get used to. It's a part of who we are."

Her sister looked at her with a startled expression. "We? What has happened, Sara?"

Sara told her about the emergence of her own powers and shook her head. "What man wants to mate with a woman who will be stronger than he is?"

"Apparently Cactus has no problem with it." Kate grinned suddenly. "What a guy huh? You couldn't be luckier to find a man who isn't threatened by a powerful woman."

"He's wonderful, Katie. I can't wait for you to get to know him. Gorgeous, strong, funny, sexy. Hell, he's all man and I love that about him. He's tender too. I didn't know such tender men existed."

"You sound like a woman in love," Katie said with quiet conviction.

Sara went still as every moment of her knowing him swept through her mind. Her heart thundered in her chest as chills raced over her skin. She couldn't live without him. She knew that now. It was impossible for her to think of living her life without him. He made her ache and yearn and need.

"I think maybe I am."

After talking with her sister, she spotted Gabe propped against the front of her borrowed truck. Quinn had given her permission to drive it until she got her own wheels. Sunlight filtered through the leaves of the trees dotting the sheriff's strong features with shadow and sunshine. He wore his long, dark blond streaked hair pulled back at the nape of his neck and looked as handsome as hell, strong and competent. Suddenly Sara knew without a shadow of doubt, this strong lycan would lay down his life protecting her sister. She smiled.

"Why so glum, Gabriel?"

"Not glum," he answered with a low, raspy rumble of sound. "Worried. Does Cactus have a clue you are driving through the countryside alone?"

She instantly bristled. "We aren't consummated yet, Sheriff and I'm a woman who calls my own shots. I'm strong enough to protect myself or haven't you heard the rumors about me?"

He straightened from the truck and approached her. "Now don't go throwing a hissy fit. I don't mean any disrespect to you or the powers you possess but the fact is you aren't consummated yet. Not until tonight. Until you fully accept your wolf, you are vulnerable and Cactus won't like it a damn bit that you are out here traipsing around country you know little about. Did you tell him you were coming out here alone?"

"Um, no, I didn't. I didn't want to bother him while he's working."

"He is your mate and a crazy motherfucker is out there hunting you down." Gabe plucked a cell phone from his back pocket and punched in a series of numbers, keeping eye contact with her the entire time. "Cactus? Gabe. Thought you might want to know your soon-to-be consummated mate is out here at Martha's place. She came alone."

Sara faintly heard the sound of Cactus' raised voice and she had to admit the sound of it made her feel fidgety. Yeah, he was mad as hell at her. Damn it! Why shouldn't she tell her sister she was making the biggest leap in a woman's life? She wasn't an infant. Far from it.

Gabe snapped the cell phone shut and stuffed it into his back pocket. "He's heading this way now. I suggest you make yourself comfortable until he gets here."

"This is ridiculous," she snapped. "I'm not waiting here like I'm helpless." She dug her keys out of her jeans pocket and glared at Gabe. "Now back off, big guy, I'm heading back right now. I have a million things to do before tonight. Besides, if Cactus is on his way, I'll run onto him on the way back."

"Guess that's true enough." Gabe sighed and nodded his head. "All right, go on but keep the truck doors locked and don't stop for anything or anyone. Quinn has a shotgun on the rack at the back window and I know she keeps it loaded. Don't hesitate to use it if you feel threatened."

Sara nodded and climbed behind the wheel of Quinn's truck. She revved up the engine and as an afterthought, lowered the driver's side window. "Hey, Gabe."

He walked up and leaned against the door. "Yeah?"

"Just keep taking good care of my sister, okay? Thank you for that, by the way and thanks for worrying about me. It means a lot."

Gabe stepped back with a nod. "The way I have it figured, with or without my connection to your sister, we're pack. Pack takes care of each other."

"I'll try to remember that."

With a wave, she headed down the country dirt road that wound around the perimeter of the town of Cloverfield. It was a roughly five-mile drive back to the ranch house. Her mind was soon absorbed with her preparations for tonight. Tonight she would give herself body and soul to Cactus and at some time this evening, at the perfect time, she would confess her love. Would he do the same? Her heart thumping sharply she sent up a prayer to the gods that the way he touched her, looked at her, spoke to her, meant that he loved her too.

Reaching down to turn on the radio, she was suddenly jarred when a huge gray wolf leaped on the hood of her truck to snarl and snap at her. Drool poured from his slack jaws seconds before he bared his teeth in the wicked semblance of a grin. Sara screamed. Anton! She jerked the steering wheel to dislodge her father but the abrupt action sent her diving into a deep ditch at the side of the road. She screamed again as the truck rolled to a stop leaving her hanging upside down with only the seat belt holding her in place. She felt another thump. This time on the underside of the truck and then suddenly her father was standing there, naked, his long, gray-streaked hair tangled and matted giving him the appearance of a madman.

Well, of course he was.

The windows of the truck were smashed to bits and he reached in to grab her as she struggled with the buckle of the seat belt.

"I've got you now, you little bitch. Where the fuck is your sister?"

"Fuck you!" She screamed the words at him as she took hold of his wrist and gave it a viscous twist. Strength poured through her veins like wine and she bit back a savage grin as Anton yelled in pain and yanked back his hand. A bone thrust through the flesh

of his wrist but she knew that minor injury would not be enough to stop him. He was an old lycan who would heal quickly.

“What have you been hiding from me, girl?” he roared as he moved back to hold his injured wrist.

Sara wasn’t about to stay there, hanging upside down and converse with him. With a violent tug, she ripped the seat belt from her body and landed with a whump onto the ceiling of the cab. As if by divine providence, the shotgun became dislodged from the rack to land in her lap. Wasting no time, she crawled from the opposite side of the truck, squeezed through the broken window and rolled across the ground, the shotgun clutched in her right hand.

She’d just made it to her feet when she heard a wild cry. A low growl broke the air and she looked across the wreckage of the truck to see Cactus in wolf form leap toward Anton.

Cactus!

Man and wolf rolled across the dirty road. Dust billowed around them. In the far distance, she spotted Cactus’ truck sitting there with the driver’s side door open. Boots and clothing were scattered willy-nilly across the ground. Clutching the gun, she backed up then took a running leap onto the wrecked truck. Cactus, golden, beautiful and fierce, widened his jaw and went for her father’s throat but then Anton changed, shifted and soon the gray wolf and the golden were locked in a terrible battle.

Leaping from the top of the truck, she landed in the middle of the road a short distance from the battle. She didn’t stop to evaluate her heightened strength or her agility. It was second nature now and she wasn’t about to question it. Seeing Anton this close to her sister and threatening the man she loved sent a red haze of fury roaring through her brain. She lifted the weapon as the wolves broke apart. Cactus was a larger, sturdier and a much younger wolf than her father but Anton was mean. He growled at Cactus who bared his own teeth and snapped back. Cactus must have seen her, because he froze for just a second, possibly to be assured that she was uninjured.

Anton took advantage of the pause and leaped.

She didn't scream. She didn't cry out. She lifted the gun and shot her father as he moved through the air knowing that if she didn't Cactus might die. The blast rocketed him just a short distance from the front of Cactus' truck where he landed in a heap on the ground. Sara ran to Cactus as he did his shift. Tossing aside the gun, she grabbed hold of him, uncaring that he was sweaty, dirty and naked. He was alive and barely scratched. She touched a deep gouge and watched it close before her eyes.

She met his gaze and suddenly tears overflowed to rain down her cheeks. "Cactus," she breathed.

"Are you all right?" He sent his hands over her body as if to discern the facts for himself.

"Yes, I'm fine."

As one they turned to her father who was once more in human form. He lay utterly still, his arms and legs splayed out as he lay sprawled on the rutted dirt road. They raced up and stood over him seeing the evidence of his destruction in the ragged hole that had torn through his temple.

"Good shot," Cactus murmured.

"I didn't know I could."

He slid his gaze over her. What she'd done was purely self-defense and there wasn't a jury in Texas that would say otherwise. "You can do far more than you ever dreamed of, honey." He pulled her against him and she settled in, drawing his scent into her lungs and feeling free for the first time in years. When she finally stepped back, she looked toward the body of her tormenter and saw that, in the way of their kind, he'd reverted to his wolf in death.

"I guess we should bury him," she sniffed, feeling suddenly overwhelmed now that it was over.

"Nah, let him lay, darlin'. I'll call Joe and the fellas and they'll take care of him. I just want to get you away from here."

She gave Anton a single glance as Cactus helped her into his truck. Despite the grime on his body, he tugged on his clothing and boots and he got in beside her. "Can't show up at the ranch bare-assed now, can I?"

"Wouldn't bother me a bit." She knew he was trying to lighten the mood and loved him for it. "Cactus?"

"Hm?"

"Do you think it's really over?"

He shook his head. "I doubt it, sweetheart. He'd already told the lycans of the Hellfire Club all about Katalin. I suspect when Anton doesn't show up with you two in tow, they'll start looking on their own."

"We have to do something."

As Cactus drove back down the road toward the ranch, he reached out and pulled her against him. "Let's not think about that now, Sara. Anton has paid for his crimes against his family. He murdered your mother, abused his daughters and justice is served. And the Hellfire Club? Let them come. You are pack. Our family. My family. How about we concentrate on tonight and consummating things between us? Tomorrow is soon enough to worry."

When the ranch came into view in the distance, Sara's mind swept over the years past, the violence, the struggle, the ultimate death and destruction. She'd been strong and tough trying to hold things together but she wasn't feeling like such a badass now. Looking down at her hands clenched in her lap, she unfolded her fingers as a fine trembling set up. It was hard to breathe. An ache balled in her chest. Shivers raced like tiny fingers over her skin.

"Hang on," Cactus murmured. "Almost there." He removed his arm from around her, gripped the steering wheel and lay on the gas.

She barely noticed her surroundings by the time he pulled the truck to a stop in front of his house and when he tenderly drew her out and into his arms, she didn't protest. The next thing she knew, she was standing by his bed.

"Sit, honey. Let's get you warm."

Warm? Yes, she was freezing but it was summer. How could that be?

While pictures of her past raced violently through her mind, Cactus returned to strip her bare and before she knew his intent, he'd deposited her under the warm spray of his big glass-walled shower. She'd admired it earlier, with its shiny silver fixtures and built-in granite bench.

Beneath the warm water, she shivered as she turned her head to look at him. "Cactus?"

"Get warmed up, Sara. I'll be right outside if you need me."

Cactus stepped out of the steamy bathroom, worry about Sara riding him hard. Damn but she'd been through a lot. She wasn't so different from every other soul on the planet, he figured. Everyone had their breaking point. Even Sara who was the strongest woman he'd ever known. Gods, he loved her. When he'd gotten that call from Gabe, he'd dropped what he was doing and headed out that way, his heart plunging to his gut when he saw her truck overturned in the ditch. That rat bastard Anton was reaching for her by the time he braked to a stop and hauled ass to get to her.

She'd been amazingly beautiful in her fury, the strong hand of vengeance striking back at the man who'd had a wonderful family but chose the path of abuse and murder instead.

Cactus sat on the bed and tugged off his boots before digging his cell phone out of his pocket. The call to Joe didn't take long. He tossed the phone on the end table by the bed and was just moving toward the closed bathroom door when he heard her. Swallowing against the sudden dryness of his throat, he closed his eyes and leaned his forehead on the door. Her heartbreaking sobs rocked him to his core. For a man who

lived to protect, he felt as helpless now as he had the day he realized he'd been unable to save his little sister. His eyes burned, his belly clenched.

Stepping back from the door, he shed his clothes and then went in. She might not want or need him now but, by damn, she was gonna get him. Her wrenching sobs, the choking sounds she made, were like a knife in his heart. Steam billowed from the shower door when he opened it to see her sitting on the granite bench. Her arms were wrapped around her updrawn legs, her face was buried against her knees. She looked up through bleary eyes, her bottom lip wobbling. "He was supposed to love me," she whispered.

He knew he could handle her sass and spunk. He could more than deal with her passion but could he comfort her in her grief?

Feeling completely lost, he stepped into the shower and gathered her up. Sitting with her firmly perched on his lap, Cactus held her while she shed her tears. Sending his hand on a long, slow journey up and down the expanse of her back, he pressed kisses to her hair and wiped her wild, hot tears with his fingers. When she finally stopped crying long enough to draw a shuddering breath, Cactus stood and brought her with him until she was on her feet.

"Let me take care of you," he said simply. Reaching for the shampoo, he squeezed a dollop into the palm of his hand. Slowly, methodically, he washed and rinsed her hair careful to brush his fingers over her scalp offering something of a massage. When she sighed, he smiled slightly and went to work on her lush curves using his hands to chase the bubbles down her arms and breasts. He paid special attention to her nipples, her belly and between her legs.

Adjusting the spray, he rinsed the soap away before she finally opened her eyes. "Aren't you –"

Cactus pressed a kiss to the tip of her nose and shook his head. "I'm saving myself for tonight. Come on, let me dry you off."

Once he had her dried and tucked naked into his bed, he shrugged into his clothes and sat next to her.

"I don't get it." She gave him a watery smile.

"What?"

"I thought all guys were horn dogs."

"Hey! I can be horny with the best of 'em but not now."

"I don't get it. You had me the minute you stepped in the shower."

Cactus' heart squeezed tight as he bent down and kissed her lips. "I don't take advantage of women and you were in no position to tell me no, darlin'."

"I love you, Cactus," she whispered. "I was going to wait until the perfect moment to tell you but I swear, I can't think of a more perfect time than now."

Reaching down he pulled her into his arms and settled his mouth on her throat. "I would die without you."

"Does that mean—"

"Yeah. It means I love you, Sara Farmer Safina Petrova."

Chapter Nine

An army of three arrived by late afternoon. No one was more surprised than Sara when a series of light, playful knocks sounded on the door of Cactus' place. At first she stiffened at the sound but then she heard female laughter and opened up to find Quinn, Rayne Ramone and Maria standing at the threshold wearing smiles as big as Texas on their faces.

"No consummation would be complete without a little girl time," Quinn announced as she pushed her way inside followed by the other two women. She was carrying a gaily wrapped package, which she immediately thrust into Sara's arms. "For you."

"Wow! Hey guys! Um...come on in."

"I'd say we're already in," Rayne said as she lifted another pretty present. "Quinn and I didn't get much in the way of a pre-consummation fuss so we wanted to make sure you know you are surrounded by family today."

Tears of joy burned behind Sara's eyes and she couldn't resist hugging each woman tightly after they'd all set the gifts on the dining room table. Maria reached for a grocery store sack that smelled of something utterly delicious and reached out to settle a hand on Sara's shoulder. "The two of you should not worry about food on a night such as this. I have brought sirloin beef tips and pasta, along with a side of veggies and something, of course, for a sweet tooth. I assume you like chocolate?"

"Am I a living, breathing woman?" Sara laughed. "Of course, I like chocolate. It's a basic food group, after all."

While Maria carried her stuff to the kitchen, Sara looked at Quinn and Rayne. "Would you like something to drink?"

Quinn smiled and hollered over her shoulder, "Maria! Would you mind fetching something long-stemmed assuming Cactus has such a thing?"

"Not a chance, querida," Maria said. "Basic glasses. Hm, they'll have to do."

Puzzled, she watched Rayne reach into a big tote bag and pull out a bottle of bubbly. While she carried it to the table and popped open the dark green bottle, Maria arrived with a carton of orange juice and four iced tea glasses.

"Ooh, are we making mimosas? Yummy. Gods, I love my friends," Sara declared as she helped Maria mix the drinks. Rayne and Quinn headed into the kitchen and returned with a platter of chocolate éclairs and before long the four of them were sitting together talking about everything and nothing. Thankfully not a word was mentioned about Anton's death or the tragedy he'd brought in his wake. She was so grateful for that.

Sara reached for the juice and champagne and poured another round before the ladies encouraged her to open her gifts. "You really shouldn't have," Sara protested.

"Of course, we should," Rayne said, smiling. "Every lycan girl dreams of her consummation night and it wouldn't be complete without a little pampering." She slid a medium-sized package in her direction. The white wrapping featured pink roses and was tied with a large white bow. Sara couldn't remember the last time she or her sister had received a gift of any kind and emotion swamped her. Struggling mightily not to let it show, she gingerly unwrapped, savoring every moment until she'd exposed a beautiful box full to the brim with body lotion, bubble bath and scented candles.

Once the female ritual of passing around and smelling each item was done, she opened a large package from Quinn. The box contained a beautiful white lace nightgown that when worn would reach the floor. When she held up a tiny matching thong, she smiled. "This is supposed to cover something?"

Between the laughter that raced around the table, Quinn gave her a bawdy wink. "It's designed to tease, honey and not cover much of anything. Besides, knowing Cactus and seeing the way he looks at you, you won't have it on long anyway."

Sara rolled her eyes. "Well, there is that!"

Maria produced a small jeweler's box and Sara went still. Smiles faded from faces as she set the box in front of her. "It is a tradition that a mother gives her daughter something special for her consummation night. I was not blessed with children but had my Pete and I had a daughter, I would have given her these. I wore them on my consummation night a very long time ago. We had many happy years together and I wish you and Cactus the same."

Gingerly, Sara flipped open the box to unveil an aged pair of pearl studs. Their pale ivory color caught the light, so soft and beautiful, tears filled her eyes. "I'll wear them proudly, Maria. Thank you."

Over the next several hours, her fingers and toes were done and her lovely nightgown of white lace was spread across the carefully turned-down bed. Maria placed a ribbon-tied, long-stemmed rose upon pillows that had been lightly sprayed with a lavender scent. Rayne poured some of the bubble bath she'd given her into a tub of warm water and while Sara soaked and reflected on the night ahead, the busy bees stayed, well, busy.

She emerged from the tub, dried and applied the brand new lotion to her skin. Looking at herself in the mirror over the sink, she marveled at how good she felt but how very nervous she was. Her face was flushed, her skin rosy from the attention. She shrugged into a large, white, comfy robe while she dried her hair.

When she finally stepped from the bathroom and moved through the bedroom and into the living room, she was amazed at how her friends had transformed the place. Candles glittered on every surface and a soft smoky jazz played provocatively from the CD player. The center of the big square coffee table featured a clear shallow glass bowl with white orchids floating on the surface coupled with fat ivory candles in an arrangement that was classic and lovely. It was a scene set for romance and seduction. Sara knew Cactus didn't require such things but her woman's heart tightened at the romance of it all.

She glanced toward the dining room table to see it was set with fine china that she knew did not belong to her rough, tough cowboy. Crystal candlesticks dominated the table's center along, the tapers unlit but with a long candle-lighter sitting nearby.

"This is beautiful," she choked. "I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll be happy, Sara. You deserve it and so does Cactus. He's such a good man," Quinn said as she came up to embrace her. "Happy Consummation."

* * * * *

Cactus opened the door and paused. What the hell had happened to his house? It looked like an army of faeries had showed up to sprinkle stardust around the place. Lord knew, he needed a woman's touch around here but this was plumb crazy. A grin spread across his face as he stepped fully inside and shut the door. Leaning back against it, he smelled the scent of orchids in the air and took in the twinkling candlelight on the coffee table.

Then he went still.

Sara took near the dining room table looking just like one of those sparkly faeries he'd been thinking about. A vision in white lace, she blinked uncertainly at him. She held a long candle lighter in one hand and had obviously been poised to light even more candles when he'd come through the door.

"You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," he said. He paused for one second, tossed his straw cowboy hat onto the nearest chair and stalked toward her. He heard her gasp as he reached out and cupped her face. "I've seen a lot of things in my life, many of them not pretty at all. You don't know what it means to me to finally have something in my life that just downright takes my breath away."

"Cactus. Oh, honey."

He kissed her, loving the berry sweet taste of her, the hot peppery passion buried just underneath. Taking it deeper, he swept her tongue with his then changing the angle

for one more teasing bit of what he wanted. "I thought the house looked mighty nice but it's nothing compared with you."

"Quinn gave this to me," she whispered against his lips. "Rayne and Maria brought gifts too."

Drawing back, he settled his gaze on her lips before meeting her eyes. "I'm glad. A woman needs friends and family at a time like this. At least that's what I hear."

"They took good care of me."

"And so will I." He took the long taper lighter from her hands and set the three ivory candles ablaze. Needing to touch her, he placed his hands on her shoulders, slipping his thumbs under the skinny straps that held that beautiful piece of white lace in place over her body. Her skin was soft, touchable. Lowering his eyes over her curves, he felt his cock twitch behind the fly of his jeans. Her nipples were soft and pink, barely visible beneath fabric that was much softer than he thought it would be. It clung like a second skin teasing him with glimpses of her bare belly and the tiny scrap of lace that barely hid her secrets. "Did you take a nap? Are you better?"

"Yes. Guess I just had to grieve. Not necessarily for Anton but for everything."

"It's the past now," he said. "Tonight we begin to work on your future. How does that sound?"

"Perfect."

"Then come with me." He took her hand and led her straight to the bedroom. If he had his way, they wouldn't leave this room for, oh, about a week or more but he wasn't about to rush things tonight. Slow and easy and everything that was seductive was just what he planned.

The bed was so inviting with its spread folded down to almost the foot leaving an expanse of crisp white sheets. He noted the long-stemmed rose lying across the pillows and smiled. "Looks like they thought of everything."

"Almost," she whispered. "They couldn't provide you. None of this means a damn thing without you, Cactus."

He kissed her swiftly and reached behind her to tease her ass beneath the sexy nightgown. "I have something for you."

"Show me."

Cactus reached into the top drawer of the bedside table and found the items he sought. He set a tube of lubricant on the table and held up a small plug. "Do you know what this is?"

"Um, yeah." Heat blazed to life in her eyes and he fought a smile.

He tossed the plug to the bed and reached around her to gather the fragile lace in his hands until he bared her sweet ass. His thumb slipped under the elastic of her barely there panties. "These are gonna have to go, darlin'. They're mighty sexy but right now they are in my way." She gasped a little as he slid the underwear past the globes of her butt until they lay in a dainty little puddle around her ankles. When she kicked them out of the way, he grinned and gave her ass a little tap. "Good girl. Now let me get you ready for something we'll do later. I've been dreaming for days about breaching your ass with my cock."

"I've never—"

"Yeah, I know." He kissed her and turned her to face the bed. Settling his mouth against her bare shoulder, he lightly nipped it. Just thinking of what he was about to do had his hungry cock going hard as a stone. "Trust me," he said.

"Okay."

"Bend over the bed. I want to look at you like that."

Placing his hand between her shoulder blades he moved her where he wanted her then gathered up the long nearly sheer nightgown until her back was exposed. His gums tingled with the urge to consummate with his mate but not yet. "I love looking at you like this. Spread your legs. Yes, a little wider, honey. Gods! You're perfect."

The folds of her pussy were open to his gaze, pink and dewy. Unable to resist, he drew his fingers slowly through the tender petals gathering her cream as he went. Bending over her, he pressed open-mouthed kisses to her shoulder blades, her spine and the dip of her waist. Gently, he set his teeth against the mounded globes of her ass while he slowly finger-fucked her pussy. When she began to squirm, Cactus spread her legs even wider and went to his knees behind her.

Sara's scent made his toes curl inside his worn boots. His cock hardened incrementally with each breath he drew and then hunger sank tender hooks in his belly. Unable to resist he drew his tongue over her pussy slowly, lingeringly, then went higher until he swept the tightly furled rosette of her ass.

She froze.

He swept the spot again then reached for the small plug and the lube. He applied a dollop to the plug and then took his time spreading more over her anus. "I'm going to insert this, honey. I'll go slowly. Tell me if you want me to stop."

"Don't stop."

Cactus laughed softly. "I haven't started yet."

"Smart ass."

He nipped one saucy butt cheek again then taking his time about it, he inserted the small plug. It would help ready her for the plans he had later. Much later. He gently tapped the plug. "How does it feel?"

"Tight. Good. I don't know."

Cactus pressed his lips to her ass. "Let's see if I can make it just a little bit better."

He gripped her thighs and set his mouth on her drenched pussy. With a low sound of hunger, he ate her out. He sank his tongue deep in her vagina, slowly and repeatedly until she writhed upon the bed. Sara went up on her toes and, pushing back against the invasion, whimpered her desire in soft tones. He curled his tongue over her clit and lightly sucked, alternating the pressure. The backs of her thighs began to tremble and he

rubbed them gently, offering comfort as the crisis came over her. One more pull on her clit had her coming hard against his mouth. Her muffled cries were absorbed by the bedding.

“Beautiful,” he whispered against her pulsing flesh. “My gods, you’re perfect.”

Standing between her spread thighs, he gently turned her. Her eyes were glazed, slumberous. A sexy little smile curved her lips.

“I think I’ll keep you, cowboy.”

He grinned at her. “That’s good to hear.”

Reaching down he tugged off his boots and tossed them aside. They landed with a loud clunk in a far corner of the room. He then went to work on his jeans and his shirt. Fortunately, he’d showered in the barn before coming to her. He didn’t want to waste any time with that at the moment. He was eager to claim his mate.

When he was finally naked, he went into the bathroom where he washed up quickly. By the time he’d returned, Sara sat on the bed eying him steadily. She cocked her head looking downright adorable. “Now what, Cactus?”

He laughed took her hands and pressed a kiss to the side of her neck. “Now we have dinner. Something smells great.”

Chapter Ten

Sara sat with her deliciously naked cowboy and tried to gain control of her emotions. She speared a chunk of beef and popped it in her mouth trying to ignore the fact she had a little plug in her ass. It was a terrible thing to know that Maria's delicious dinner tasted like so much cardboard in her mouth.

Oh boy!

If the naughty little scene he'd played out with her earlier was any indication, she was in for a hot, hot night. Could she handle it? Could she please him?

Cactus took a drink of the red wine she'd served with dinner. His gaze continually strayed to her breasts pushing against the diaphanous lace. He swallowed hard and licked his lips as he replaced the glass on the table. If she was any judge at all, he was having some trouble too and that pleased her just fine. She didn't want to be in torment alone, after all.

"How are you feeling, sweetheart?" He stabbed at some broccoli with his fork but basically ignored it.

"Much better after the long nap I took."

His eyes burning with intensity, he sent them down then up her body before zeroing in on her. "That's not what I meant."

Sara felt her face burn. "Um, okay. I'm trying not to fidget. I feel, I don't know."

"Full? Stuffed?"

She blew out a breath. "Yeah."

"Just wait until later."

Finally she'd had enough of his teasing and taunting. She was dying for him, aching for his possession. She took a quick sip of her wine then watched Cactus' eyes go

wide as she suddenly stood and rounded the curve of the table to stand in front of him. "You'll be sorry for teasing me this way, my man."

"And now don't I love it when you go all sassy on me. Am I teasing you too much, sugar? Is that plug in your ass driving you crazy?"

"You know it is," she whispered as she sent her fingers through his gorgeous hair. It was wavy, shiny and softer than silk. She felt his gaze on her nipples and they tightened to impossibly hard points. She wanted his mouth there, tasting her as he'd eaten her pussy earlier. Moisture pooled and dampened her between her thighs.

As if he'd read her mind, he turned in his chair, his legs sprawled in front of him, his cock rising high and proud from his groin. His balls were drawn up tight against his body and Sara feasted her eyes, all thought of food gone from her mind.

Casually, as if she did it every day, she stepped between his muscular thighs as he looped one around her butt to drag her close. His mouth opened, hot and devouring over her nipple and she met the action with a low moan. Letting her head drop back, she wallowed in the feel of his teeth gently scraping, using the barrier of the lace to lightly abrade her wickedly hot flesh.

"That feels so good, Cactus. Harder."

He made a rough sound against her breast as his fingers flexed on the globes of her butt. Gaining some control of things, Sara lightly took his shoulders and gave him a little push. He released her nipple with a pop of sound and looked at her. Hunger burned in his eyes but she was hungry too, hungry for a taste of him.

Dropping to her knees, she smiled, saw the knowledge in his eyes. The expression on his face, raw and savage, had her positively creaming for him. Returning the intensity of his gaze, she nipped his corded abs, licked his belly, nipped again at the tender space between his groin and thigh. She sucked that irresistible bit of flesh into her mouth.

Above her head Cactus groaned. Satisfaction whipped through her body. Fisting her hand around the base of his cock, she licked a diamond drop of wetness from the

head of his erection and worked him over with her tongue. Dragging her hand slowly up and down his stalk, she sucked him there, gently, then harder, increasing the pressure until he was thrusting against her.

“Take it.”

Sara took him into her mouth and sucked him deep, raising and lowering her mouth over his cock.

“You’re killin’ me, sugar. Damn.”

And want of him was killing her too. He tasted so fine. She licked, sucked and nibbled, reaching for his tight balls and holding them, finally, in the palm of her hand. Cactus said something unintelligible, which only encouraged her. Releasing his cock from her mouth, she lowered her lips to his balls and licked them too. With a low growl, he stood his movement so quick and sharp, the chair crashed to the floor.

He lifted her in his arms and headed toward the bedroom only pausing long enough to blow out the candles on the table. Sara could do nothing but hold on for the ride. She’d taunted him with her avid sucking and had successfully brought out the savage in him. Cactus carried her into the bedroom and pressed her against the wall.

“I don’t know where to fuck you first.”

She started to speak but he drew his rock-hard erection across her pussy. He cursed, frustration obviously riding him hard as he set her on her feet and whipped the nightgown over her head. “Better,” he murmured as he lifted her high, pressing her back to the wall.

The feel of his hot flesh almost sent her over the edge as she wound her legs around his hips to hold him closer. It wasn’t enough. Not nearly enough. His cock thrust over her drenched flesh with wicked intent. Sara clung. She cried out.

And then she was in his arms again and before she could blink was lying flat on her back on the big bed. The smell of lavender and roses permeated the air along with the mingling of their own unique scents. He leaned over her, one knee perched on the bed between her splayed thighs and took her mouth with indescribable hunger.

"I want you so badly I ache," he whispered against her lips. His eyes were dark with passion as he firmed his jaw and flipped her to her belly. She turned her cheek against the cool sheets as he reached for a pillow and shoved it under her belly. His weight came over her back briefly. "Are you ready for me to fuck your ass, honey? Please say yes."

"Yes. God, yes."

Cactus reached between her thighs and worked her flesh with his fingers. She was already wet, she knew and ready for whatever was to come. The tube of lubricant was still lying on the bed from when he'd inserted the plug. She went still as he reached for it. His hand settled warm and solid on her butt and after a soft caress of her flesh he reached into the shadowy center of her and removed the plug. The feeling of sudden emptiness made her gasp.

"Shh. I'm going to take good care of you, Sara. Let me lube you up and make sure you are stretched enough to take me."

"O-okay."

She heard a sound and knew he was applying stuff to his fingers and then she felt them there, covering her, circling. He settled one hand at the base of her spine. "Relax for me and push back."

Sara did as he asked but jerked a little at the gradual entrance of his finger. Forcing herself to relax and breathe in slow and steady, she waited. It wasn't long before he slid in another finger. The sense of fullness returned with a rush as his fingers moved, scissoring deep to widen her for the inevitable joining.

When Cactus removed his fingers, she had a moment's hesitation before she felt the head of his big cock seated at her entrance. The time to stop him was now but she couldn't. She didn't want to. Dark desire curled deep in her body as he breached her slowly. When he slid in to the hilt, she went still. Then he began to move, fucking her ass, gripping the soft mounds with his hands, stroking her hips as he plunged deep and deeper, taking her higher until she fell off that ravenous edge of pleasure.

But he wasn't finished.

Belatedly she realized he didn't come and disappointment beat at her. He gave her a sharp look then went to the bathroom. She heard water running in the sink and then he was back, dragging a warm cloth over her lower body.

"Fucking sick of waiting for this, Sara." He tossed the cloth aside and moved between her splayed thighs. "I've wanted this since the moment I first clapped eyes on you and the feeling has only grown stronger. Will you take me? Mate with me? Consummate with me now?"

"Yes, oh yes, Cactus, I love you!"

His smile was fierce, possessive. "And I love you. I'll always love you, Sara." Cactus cupped her behind her knees to lift and open her body to his gaze. His hands drifted over the soft insides of her thighs. "You know what will happen?"

"My mother told us a long time ago. The base of your cock will swell once you are inside me. You'll bite me and my wolf will be born."

"Your wolf was born with you, sweetheart. She has been inside you all this time just waiting to emerge."

"Show me."

Cactus took his cock in his hand and drew it through her pliant flesh then with a low groan, he plunged deep. The sensation was so incredible they cried out together. Pistoning through her body slowly at first and then with ever increasing power, he drew her up until she sat upon him in the center of the bed. Belly to belly, he whipped his body in and out of her pussy. Sara rotated on his erection with each pass. Her clit was distended, ultra sensitive and swollen and seeking greater pressure, she squeezed him tightly with each pass. His bite on her breast was sharper than it had ever been before and she gasped at the pleasure-pain, the violent sweetness of it. Cactus looked up and she stilled at the sight of his teeth elongating in his mouth. He opened with a growl and sank them into the soft flesh of her shoulder.

Sara cried out but not in pain. His bite sent a surge of explosive sensation rocketing through her body. Her heartbeat picked up speed as she desperately tried to drag air into her lungs. Buried deep in her pussy, his cock began to swell to unbelievable thickness. Oh hell yeah, he was lodged there and would be for hours.

Who could imagine such a powerful joining? Certainly not her as she climbed higher and higher, wild in her submission, saturated in pleasure. She felt every bit of his heavy shape, every emotion that poured like a flash fire from him to her. His strength, his pride and his love of her, seeped deep into her heart and mind.

"Your heartbeat is racing through my blood," he choked. "It's incredible."

"I feel yours too. I feel how much you love me. I know how much you want me."

Suddenly the emotion, the physical pleasure was too sharp and sweet to bear. Her body seized just as Cactus pushed his full power deep inside her body. Clinging, clasping his back, she buried her lips against his shoulder as lights and orbs swam before her eyes only to explode in a symphony of color. She screamed as she came. She felt Cactus' cock pulse wildly before blasting his semen deep inside her.

Gasping as he laid her back on the bed, moving carefully with her, Sara smiled up at him. "I think we're stuck," she whispered.

"That we are, darlin'. I predict tonight we're going to have a hell of a ride."

Sara giggled and rolled her hips delighting in the low sound of pleasure he made. Lust was growing, passion roaring to life all over again. "Mm. Then I suggest we make the most of it."

"I agree, my darling mate. I most definitely agree."

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 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.

Regina welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Regina Carlisle

Feral Moon

High Plains Shifters 1: Highland Beast

High Plains Shifters 2: Lone Star Lycan

High Plains Shifters 3: Ringo's Ride

Killer Curves

Mistletoe Magic: Breath of Magic

Mistletoe Magic: Elven Magic *anthology*

Spanish Topaz

Tempting Tess



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com