

# WHERE THE WILD ONE ROAM

## Book 2 in For Love & Horses

By Barbara Ellin Fox

### Chapter One

The CJ7 lurched as deep ruts grabbed the tires and forced the steering wheel right. Kristi downshifted and made the turn. The vehicle's headlights illuminated a large, pistol-wearing cowboy with his arms folded, standing in the middle of the desert road. A human stop sign. Imposing in Nevada's dark pre-dawn.

"Well, Luna." Kristi straightened and relaxed her grip on the steering wheel. "It doesn't look like the Range Management Agency wants our company today." She glanced at her friend in the passenger seat. Couldn't they monitor a Nevada RMA wild horse roundup once without coming toe to toe with a Neanderthal ego? "This happens every time. Give the local help a gun and a badge, and they become self-important."

Luna pressed a hand into Kristi's forearm. "Smile and be your charming self. Keep antagonistic Kristi in the box."

Kristi twisted in the driver's seat and batted her eyelashes at Luna. "You know me—totally professional while idiots run the icon of the American west into traps by helicopter." She adjusted her attitude, then rolled down the window and leaned out. "Good morning. I'm Kristi Trevisano, humane observer with P.A.M. for the wild horse gather."

"Morning, ma'am." The cowboy strode to the driver's side with his thumbs hooked in the armholes of his bullet-proof vest. "Sorry to disappoint you. This here gather is on private land, and the public ain't invited. You'll have to head back into town. There ain't no Pam here, anyway. I only seen men."

Where did the RMA find these guys? The muscles in her neck begged to stretch. “Monty Lloyd...”

The Jeep rocked and the passenger door slammed. Luna marched around the front of the car, past the vehicle’s headlamps, waving her finger in the air. “What are they doing these days, Grundy Taylor? Sending you guys to school to teach you to be rude to the very people you serve? Now, unless you want to deliver Mandy’s next baby yourself, you’d better let us through this minute. Do you remember what happened when your last baby was born?”

The cowboy’s face turned bright red in the faint glow. He pulled off his hat. “Miss Luna, I didn’t see you in the Jeep. Hold on a minute.” He pulled a radio from his belt and held up a finger as he called.

Luna stretched her five-foot-three-inch frame to the max and leaned toward the man. “And tell Professor Monty Lloyd, Kristi Trevisano, his assistant with People for American Mustangs, has arrived.” Luna emphasized each word in the title so Grundy might catch the meaning of P.A.M. Then she marched back to the Jeep, climbed in, and pulled the door shut. Muttering to herself as she attached her seatbelt.

Grundy hooked the radio on his belt and moved close to Luna’s window. “Professor Lloyd’ll be up to meet his assistant before the first helicopter. Follow the road to that hill.” He motioned east to a barely discernible dirt path in the haze of first light.

Kristi’s nostrils flared as she bit down on her molars to keep words in her mouth. Like all the other roundups they’d witnessed, they would view this one from an area of the mountain that overlooked the sandy playa. Who knew? Maybe this time they’d be closer than a mile and would see the horses run down the chute into the temporary pens.

Grundy straightened and puffed out his chest. “Be sure you stay back there, out of the way. I’ll be along in a few minutes as your official escort. These horses are dangerous, and we don’t want no civilians getting hurt.”

“Thanks, Grundy.” Luna’s response softened. “Tell Mandy to keep in touch with me.”

Kristi drove the Jeep forward, chewing on her mouthful of comments. She glanced at her friend’s satisfied smile. “Well done, Luna. I didn’t know your EMT job wielded so much power.” Kristi huffed. “Horses dangerous. You’d think they were carnivores. If they get loose, all they want is to run back to their range.” She shifted to second gear, grabbed her to-go mug, and took a swig of coffee. “What happened with Grundy?”

“Couldn’t get his wife to the city in time, so he called me. How was I to know he can’t stand the sight of blood? The man passed out. Wasn’t any help at all.” Luna laughed. “Grundy can barely speak about lady parts, much less help maneuver a baby out of them.”

Swallowing her coffee saved the windshield from a shower. “And he’s carrying a gun?”

Luna shrugged as they bumped over the dirt road. Kristi shifted the Jeep into 4-wheel-low and ground up the craggy incline.

“Are you crazy?” Luna squealed as she grabbed at the dash. “I’m not riding with you on the way down.”

“Oh, come on. You’ve driven with me enough to trust me up a little hill. Besides, do you want to lug the tripods, multiple cameras, and our coolers up here on foot? Don’t you know they chose this spot just to make our job more difficult? Have a little faith.” Rock and gravel spun behind them as the Jeep climbed. When they leveled off on top, Kristi grinned at Luna. “I may get lost, but I’ll never get stuck.”

“Oh boy, don’t you know never to say never?” Luna tapped on the windshield. “They’ve got us out of the way again.”

“Hey, we’re closer than normal, but the traps are around that other hill.” Kristi pointed to the right, where an edge of burlap showed beneath a pink and gray sky. “Why can’t they hold these things on public land where the people have access? Surely, they can find their happy place somewhere on fourteen million acres.”

Luna shook her head. “Careful what you say, Kris. We wouldn’t be here at all except for Monty’s connections with the national resource committees.” She pushed the Jeep’s door open.

“I know. He’s a lifesaver.” Kristi pulled on a tan floppy-brimmed hat, leaving an auburn braid hanging down her back. “Sometimes Range Management creates so many obstacles I wonder if we’re doing the horses any good.” She climbed out of the Jeep, then reached into the back seat for her camera. “This will be the first time for my new Nikon.”

“Nice.” Luna lifted the video camera and a tripod from the back seat.

“Do you remember how to operate the video?” Kristi slid the carry strap for the Nikon over her head and grabbed a second tripod.

“Please. I’m still a pro from last time. I want to see your new digital.” Luna picked the camera off Kristi’s chest with her free hand and whistled. “I bet this set you back. When will you become a full-blown professional photographer?”

“And give up my part-time nurse’s salary? Are you kidding me?” Kristi waved her off. “If the P.A.M. grant didn’t pay for these lovely vacays in Nevada, I’d be taking pictures in my backyard in Missouri.” She hooked a soft cooler strap over her shoulder, then hoisted the tripod and walked toward a flat area. “I only have one more year of grant money to finish the photo documentary. Following the horses will be tough on my nickel.”

Kristi shielded her eyes as the sun cleared the horizon. “Huh. They sure kept folks out.” She shook her head. “I thought there’d be a half dozen observers today.”

Luna spread the legs on the tripod and leveled them on the rock. “I guess not, and you know the horses will go to the new private holding facility. We’d have less luck getting in there than we did here. Range Management sure likes to say no to public observation.”

“You’d think the wild horses belonged to them instead of the American people.” Kristi arched the small of her back. Always the same story. The public against the Range Management Agency, and them against the horses. Kristi looked across the desert where the horizon blended into the sky. There were so few advocates for the horses.

A gray-bearded cowboy on a matching horse climbed the hill on the diagonal from the other side.

“Hey, Monty.” Luna waved. “You two sure look the part of the American west today.”

“Good morning, ladies.” Monty doffed his hat, then stepped off his horse.

“Until he speaks.” Kristi chuckled.

Montgomery Lloyd’s English accent undermined his cowboy’s appearance.

“Rampart looks fit.” She patted the horse’s neck, then leaned her tripod against her hip and handed Monty a thermos from her cooler. “Earl Grey. Don’t say I never gave you anything. Any news?”

Monty twisted off the lid and filled it with hot liquid. “They found another horse dead out near the Twin Star mine. Hit by a vehicle.”

Kristi’s stomach seized. Not again. “That’s the fourth or fifth in the past three months. No way so many horses would run in front of trucks in the desert. They run away from human activity. The only time one would run into a vehicle would be...”

Monty held up a stopping hand. “If they panicked.”

“Or if they’re running them down with the trucks.” Kristi muttered. Mines needed water and when they wanted to expand, they would do anything to be rid of the wild horses.

“Remember, loose lips will sink the King’s armada.” Monty took a sip of tea, then sighed. “I’ll take a closer look when this roundup ends. Then we’ll monitor the situation.” He took another swallow, capped the thermos, and stuck it in his saddlebag. “You ladies remember the drill for today?”

They nodded. No matter how many times she tracked horses with Monty, he always went over the rules of engagement.

He lifted his chin and raised a wooly gray eyebrow as he recited. “Do not react to anything you see. Keep comments to yourself. Make notes. Document everything with pictures and video. Make the RMA think you love them.”

Kristi touched Monty’s arm. “Are they...?”

“I don’t know if they’re going after Snowflake’s herd in this group.”

Kristi’s chest tightened. She’d spent four years photographing the white mare’s herd for the documentary. The little band shrank each time RMA held a round-up in Granite Range.

“They’re planning to take nine hundred horses off the range this time. If we’re lucky, she’ll have her group too high in the cliffs, and the helicopters will get their number without noticing.” Monty put a foot in his stirrup and mounted. “Remember, the stallion won’t breed his own daughter, so at least one of Snowflake’s daughters is with another band now.”

She nodded. Snowflake’s first filly, Flower, was three. *Please be far away.*

“I’ll come back for you after they’ve brought in four or five groups. Until then, you’ll get a better view if you move over there.” He pointed to the east.

The Englishman and his horse wound down the hill toward the trap, while Kristi and Luna lugged their tripods, backpacks, and other supplies to their new location. Grundy shadowed them, puffing from his climb.

The two burlap wings of the funnel trap fanned across the desert floor like a giant with arms opened wide, waiting for his prey. A long line of metal fence panels, covered to obstruct the horse’s view, extended beyond the wings, forming a corridor to force the captives into small metal corrals.

Luna and Kristi reset the tripods, leveling the legs on the uneven rock. At the whop of a helicopter’s approach, Kristi pulled off the lens cover. “Be sharp, Luna. Here they come.”

The first group of horses appeared over the ridge, running behind their leader in a cloud of dust. The small helicopter flew low, scooting from side to side, ordering the horses forward. In

unison, the laboring horses moved east and then west to avoid the predator in the sky. Giving no care to the weary animals, the helicopter continued sweeping its target toward the trap the way a housewife rids her kitchen of dirt.

“Looks like they’ve been running hard for a long time.” Kristi steadied the Nikon on the tripod and snapped stills while she spoke. She zoomed in on a single horse struggling to keep pace with the others. A youngster. The lens on the new camera gave her a front seat view. “That baby can’t keep up. They need to give him a break.” Each time the horse slowed, the chopper ceased its sweeping, dropped back, and flew lower, threatening the lagging animal.

Kristi’s heart dove with the helicopter’s prodding of the young horse. The colt tripped and fell, then lurched to his feet. Went down again and lay, head up, watching his family disappear. The pilot left him in the sand and drove the herd through the trap.

Wait... a bay horse darted to the west, circled back, and scrambled toward the youngster. A breath grabbed in Kristi’s throat. Was this the mother? The horse’s steps slowed as she approached the downed animal.

Thumping rotors increased as the predator helicopter flew from the trap, closed in on the mare, and hovered with its skids near her rump. In three long strides, she moved away from her colt, only to slow again. “Back off, you jerk. She’s exhausted.” Kristi spoke to no one, swallowed, and rubbed a hand across her wet cheek. “I hope you’re getting this, Luna.”

“I am.”

The helicopter circled and flew at the mare a second time. She ran four more heartless strides forward, stumbled, and stopped.

Kristi spit out her words. “All it takes is one rogue flyboy like him to screw things up. There’s got to be a special place in hell for people who torment animals.”

The chopper gained altitude and headed north. The shudder traveling through Kristi turned to dread as three horsemen galloped from the containment. One swerved toward the colt and two to the mare. They circled behind her, swinging their lariats. Kristi’s stomach wretched. “Why don’t they leave her alone? Can’t they see she’s spent?”

“They’re trying to drive her to the trap.” Luna’s thick voice barely sounded from behind the video camera. “You know they get paid for each one they take off the range, not the ones they leave behind. Those contractors make a bundle on these roundups.” Luna cleared her throat.

Kristi snorted in disgust. “They sure don’t want to leave eight hundred dollars on the range today. Jerks. Get close-ups of both their faces. I need footage of greed for my documentary.” She squeezed her eyes for a second as her throat thickened. The mare’s devotion touched a deep place.

She pointed the Nikon at the cowboys. “No!”

Kristi stamped her foot as the ropes twirled above the horse. The first loop settled over the mare’s head and then a second followed. The horse gave little resistance as they dragged her from view.

A bang drew Kristi’s focus to the young fallen horse. “Was that a shot?” Her heart hammered. “Grundy!” She screamed at their official escort. “Was. That. A gunshot?”

The guilt on Grundy’s face answered her.

“Why?” She shook her fist at the sky. “Why do these idiots continue to torture the horses?” Kristi wheeled with the power of a thousand lightning bolts in her glare and stepped toward Grundy.

The weight of Luna’s arm slid across her shoulders. “Stay calm. You won’t do any good if they throw us out of here.” Her rasping voice stopped Kristi. *Luna has trouble with this, too.*

Her friend raised an eyebrow over flared nostrils. “Remember the threats at the last roundup? Volunteer agreements can disappear. This is private property and Monty needs your help.”

Kristi blew out a ragged breath. “I know. You’re right. It’s so unfair.” She swallowed the burn in her throat. “I’m okay. I’ll be fine.” She walked a circle and stretched her neck from side to side, then stopped two feet from Grundy with her hands fisted. “Sorry for that.”

He grunted.

Luna shoved a cold, water bottle at her.

“There’s nothing to photograph right now. Let’s sit for a minute.” Her friend pulled her by the wrist into the sand.

They rested until the next faint sound of rotors brought them to their feet. Another helicopter behind a larger herd drove horses toward the trap. They went through the same wave pattern to the east, then ran to the west before a cowboy released the trained Judas horse. The herd followed the domestic traitor along the lane to captivity.

Kristi counted nineteen mature horses and six foals. They watched the same scenario twice more before she heard her name.

“Kristi.” Monty waved from Rampant’s saddle. “Let’s go.”

She and Luna snapped the lens caps on their cameras and started down the hill.

“Will you be all right?” Luna gave her a hard look.

She nodded.

“You’re sure? Because I’ve never seen you get that upset on site before.”

The unexpected had happened in the first group, and her heart had attached itself to the mare. “The tragedy caught me off-guard. At least I know what I’m walking into at the pens.” She knew full well one could never prepare for the stench of fear and the screams of panicked horses. She gave Luna a grim smile. “I’m fine.”

She sucked in a breath and hung the camera around her neck. As hard as it was to watch the helicopters drive the horses from their mountain homes, run them to exhaustion, and witness cowboys rope and drag off the ones who resisted, this next part always crushed her.

Once the horses could not escape the trap, the RMA cowboys split them into groups. Men with electric prods and ropes drove youngsters from families and mares from stallions, stripping everything from the horses.

The two women scurried down the hill and approached a pen with mares and foals too young to separate. Two lay in a heap on the ground. Kristi’s eyes welled as she snapped pictures. These babies may have run twenty miles to keep up with their mothers. She swallowed the emotion. The damage to their tiny hooves said they wouldn’t survive.

She moved on snapping photos of horse handlers, while recording data, and searching for horses the advocate groups knew by name. P.A.M.’s agreement with the Range Management Association included taking photos to make the contractors look humane. It covered her soul with dirt. As long as the government gave wild horse contracts to RMA, playing their game was the only way she’d get close enough to photograph the truth.

Luna followed behind Kristi with the camera running. Her video skills caught moments that Kristi’s stills missed. Her friend spent weeks at the roundups. Each time they observed herds taken from the range, normally outspoken Luna drew inward.

“Hey, you! Don’t give those horses water until they’ve settled.” Monty stood toe to toe with the water truck worker, shouting for him to stop filling the tank. Giving the over-heated

horses too much water when they first arrived could cause crippling laminitis consigning a wild horse to death. If they forgot to give them water later, horses would die.

Monty advocated for humane treatment. He spoke out for shorter holding pen containment and humane shipping to confinement. The data and incidents he recorded kept the RMA figures honest, except the numbers of horses that left the trap site didn't always jibe with the number reported. *The battle won't end until they've eliminated every horse.* She glanced past a row of pens at Monty. If it wasn't for his long relationship with the natural resource groups, they might not help the horses at all. Kristi sought to emulate his tact and methods of dealing with adversity. Sometimes she failed.

Grunts and squeals from the stallion pen tightened her chest. Proud animals who'd blazed across the plains, defended their herds, and fought one another to form their families, were crammed into a small metal corral with the very warrior horses they'd battled. The air clouded with dank body steam as the horses shifted and milled, distraught and confused. These fighters with rebellion in their eyes and freedom anchored in their hearts had no future. They'd be shipped to short-term holding, processed, gelded, and hopelessness would take hold.

Kristi swallowed the burn in her throat. All but a handful would go to long-term pastures with forty-thousand other wild horses to disappear forever or worse—to travel the slaughter pipeline.

"Kristi." Monty strode her direction. "I need you to photograph them loading the mares. The truck pulled in." He motioned to the end of a paneled corridor where a semi had backed a trailer into position.

She rested a hand on her old friend's arm. "What happened to the mare they dragged away?"

He shook his head and sighed. "Don't know. They loaded her back behind the hill. She's gone."

Squeals and shouts split the air. Kristi wheeled around, nearly bumping Luna. A black stallion climbed the metal pen. He fell back, and the corral lurched.

"He's stuck!" Monty bolted toward the pen as men ran at the horse, hollering. Bellows sounded. With one violent jerk, the horse pulled loose, then hobbled along the fence.

Shoulders drooped, Monty returned muttering, "He'll be another statistic." He spun toward the lane. "Hurry. They're loading."

Kristi and Luna rushed to the makeshift funnel directing the horses to the semi's trailer. Men climbed fence panels and held whips with plastic bags attached to the ends. Kristi bit back her words. They called these flags, the same way they called roundups gathers. RMA covered their harsh actions with soft words. As a mare ran past, a cowboy shook his flag behind her and scared the animal forward. Kristi snapped hundreds of photos as mare after mare skittered through the lane and up the ramp into the huge livestock truck. With each new mare, the burning odor of urine and terror-sweat increased.

A groan pushed out of Kristi's mouth as a wild-eyed, sandy-colored mare ran down the chute and scrambled up the ramp. Then another mare raced the corridor and squeezed into the container. The ramp closed, and the engine started. Flower's terror-filled eyes peered through the slats in the trailer. She was just another wild horse destined for a number and life in holding corrals. Fighting the knot in her throat and the burn in her eyes, Kristi continued shooting pictures, capturing the mare's last glimpse of freedom.

The semi pulled away jostling the mares. One horse slid, then regained her footing. A sharp pain jabbed Kristi's side, jerking the camera from her grasp and throwing her off balance. She yelped and landed hands first in the sand and muck. Her camera hit the ground with a thud. *No!* She'd worked long hours buy it.

A lanky cowboy with a long scar on his face leaned down and tugged her braid. "Watch what you photograph, missy. A lot more can go wrong than dirt on your lens." He gave a second pull. "No problem keeping track of you with all this red hair."

**Want to keep reading?**

**Find out what happens next in *WHERE THE WILD ONES ROAM*.**

**[Continue Reading on Amazon](#)**