
HER BRATVA COWBOY

Wild Horses of Lagrimas - Book One

AMARYLLIS LANZA



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Wild Horses

Anastasia

As soon as we got past the front stone and iron gates of the BRB Ranch, I relaxed. The worst was over. I had worried the cowboys might see us drive by and ask Flint Montgomery to stop, but nothing had come of it. It was almost too easy, really. Now I had to lose Flint, which would be trickier, but not impossible.

Flint was quiet as he drove off the ranch. Maybe he worried about being stopped with me in the car, too. He took a road which kept us as far away from the main house and the barns as possible. A lot of the ranch was still wild at the edges, full of trees. The Harrisons evidently enjoyed letting nature have its way. It was beautiful, and I might have loved staying here, under other circumstances.

When we got on the highway to Lagrimas, Flint started up with a load of questions about my father. He didn't believe me

any more than Dalton Harrison or Alexei Bogatyrev had when I said I didn't remember a thing about my past.

"You must really be terrified of your father if you want to insist on that ludicrous amnesia story," Flint said, grinning as if the whole notion of my being plain old happy waitress Olivia Platt was ludicrous to him. He turned his head to give me a piercing look. "Maybe there's something else you're trying to protect. Why does he want you so badly, I wonder?"

I wished he'd keep his eyes on the road. We weren't entirely in the clear yet.

"Why don't you call him and ask him?" I'll admit I was being snippy. His questions were trying my patience. Besides, I was tired of people telling me they didn't believe me. Okay, I *was* lying, but still. They couldn't know that for a fact. "I'm sure he'll give you a big reward for turning me over to him."

"I'd never turn a beautiful creature like you over to a monster," Flint said. "Under other circumstances, I might have offered you safe shelter myself."

"I'm not safe anywhere," I muttered, "according to Bo. I'm cursed."

Flint heard me, and turned to look at me again, his brow furrowed and his eyes fierce. "Did he *say* that to you?"

"Not in so many words, but he didn't have to." I looked away, crossing my arms over myself as I stared out the passenger window of the Jeep. "Wherever I go, there will be trouble."

Flint mulled that over. "Maybe the FBI could offer you protection—and maybe a new identity that sticks—if you had something to share that could put your dad in prison."

"I'd have to know something useful to cooperate, and I don't." That was a bigger lie, but Flint didn't need to know. "Bo would be a better choice to turn witness against my father, though I don't believe he wants to do that. He probably thinks he can take on my father, like he's Superman, or something. He's just crazy."

“I don’t know,” Flint said. “Bo struck me as a man who knows how to get things done. Once he’s set his mind on something, he won’t be talked out of it and he won’t stop until he wins.”

“There’s no way to win.” I realized that sounded like I had some way to know. Olivia Platt, the woman I had been pretending to be, would not know a thing. I covered my tracks. “Based on what Bo’s said about that man, anyway.”

“Don’t be like that. Where there’s life there’s hope.” Flint tried to put me at ease, sounding sympathetic, but I knew he had his own agenda. He only wanted to get my story for his movie.

“Hope isn’t very useful against sociopaths armed with automatic weapons.”

He parked up against a large, brick two-story building in downtown Lagrimas, across from Town Hall. “Yet, you made time for the library.”

I ignored the not-so-subtle reprimand. “Well, I won’t be long. I promise.”

He turned off the Jeep’s engine and opened his door. “Hold on. I’m coming with you.”

“That’s unnecessary.” I jumped out of my side onto the sidewalk. “I’m just popping in for a second. I’ll be right back.”

Flint wasn’t listening. He trailed behind me up the steps to the library like a shadow. I had to lose him. I decided to use his fame against him, so I headed straight for the front desk. Loretta and Shirley—the two librarians—and whatever ladies sat by the magazine racks next to the check-out desk would keep Flint busy long enough for me to get what I came for and vanish.

The ladies didn’t let me down. As soon as I greeted them, they rushed over to fawn over the big Hollywood star. Soon he was pleasantly surrounded by Texas roses. I headed for the cookbook section. There, on a top shelf behind a series of old books on pioneer cooking, I had concealed my treasure. It was wrong of me to put a book in the wrong section, especially hidden

behind others, but I hadn't wanted to risk that someone might find my book and check it out. I knew that shelf was too high for many of the patrons. There had to be *some* advantage to my unusual height.

I reached up easily, pulled my book from its hiding place, and took out the treasure I'd hidden in the small manila envelope taped to the back cover which used to hold the book's circulation card. While the library had stopped using those, they hadn't bothered to remove the holders, which made it an ideal hiding place. I slipped the onion paper envelope, which held the microfilm Vladimir had developed, in my pocket, and set the book back on a return cart. Then, I changed my mind, and slipped the book into the back pocket of my jeans. Yes, I was stealing from the library. I was a horrible person. But I had really enjoyed the kinky book. I'd read it several times when I first got to town and it seemed like a good memento of my time in Lagrimas.

I snuck into the small, tidy librarian's lounge, then went out the back door. It was yet another betrayal of the trust the library ladies had placed on me. I tried not to linger too long on that thought. I was leaving for their good and for the good of the whole town. The only way they would be safe was for someone to spot me elsewhere. Then, whatever men my father sent to get me would leave the town of Lagrimas alone.

I rushed to the bus terminal and bought a ticket for the next bus out of town—to Shreveport, Louisiana, not Tulsa, Oklahoma, as I had hoped. I decided Shreveport would work as well as anywhere else. It would definitely misdirect my hunters, as Vladimir would have said if he were still alive.

I sat on a bench in the waiting room until my bus pulled up.

I was free. Again. Finally.

Unfortunately, that's when everything went sideways.

Twenty minutes passed, at most, then a firm hand grabbed me by the back of my neck and lifted me out of my seat.

“*Idi so mnoy. Teper’.*” The gruff voice, demanding I go with him, threw me off for a moment. I thought one of my father’s men had finally caught up with me and I was dead.

Alexei Bogatyrev had never spoken to me with that tone, a harsh blend of ire and loathing. Even his stern voice always had a hint of love or respect in it, which I realized I had taken for granted.

His fingers pinched my flesh. “Let me go!”

“*Priyti!*” Alexei barked, smacking my ass hard four times before leading me out of the bus station by the scruff of the neck. The people in the place pretended to have more important things going on—like crocheting a shawl—than interfering. He was not calling me pretty, by the way. Like at all. He was ordering me to move it and not even trying to be nice. My eyes teared as he led me out to the BRB’s pickup truck, his arm now wrapped around my waist like a vise.

“How did you find me?” I asked as he drove back to the ranch.

Alexei refused to answer me, or even acknowledge me. His face was stone, and his hands gripped the steering wheel like he was trying to choke it. The tendons in his neck were taut as wires on a piano.

“Whatever.” I wrapped my arms around myself. “Be an asshole.”

Alexei didn't rise to the insult. He drove on in silence, as if I wasn't in the truck. I stared out the window as we passed the barns and other buildings of the BRB Ranch and headed down a different road that led deep into the heart of the massive ranch.

“Where are we going?” I asked, wary. The landscape had changed from green to brown, the grass giving way to patches of arid land and the hills on the north side of the property growing more distant. “Are you taking me to that *presidio* place?” My voice

was barely a squeak and failed me completely after that. Dalton Harrison had threatened me with the prospect of the presidio. Whatever it was, it didn't sound good. It seemed I'd find out soon enough just how bad it was. I had fucked up. I had assumed I could get away, that I could outsmart Alexei, but obviously I was wrong. I started crying, but Alexei ignored my tears. He just kept driving. Fine. I could handle the silent treatment.

I saw a patch of green ahead, behind a picket fence, where an old mansion stood at the end of a long driveway. We turned in, past a couple of oaks, and drove up to the stairs leading to a generous wrap-around porch with large columns connecting it to a protective roof that jutted out from the second floor of the house like a skirt. Three wood steps led up to the porch and the glossy-black double-door entrance with a half-moon window above it.

"What is this?" I asked. "What are we doing here?"

Alexei didn't answer. Instead, he got out of the pickup, opened my door and pulled me out, carrying me like a sack of potatoes over his shoulder to the entrance where he put me back on my feet in front of Lillian Harrison, who stood at the door shaking her head at me.

"Oh, Olivia." She stroked my arm gently, and it stung. In a different life, the pleasantly padded woman could have been my mother. I didn't want her to be so disappointed in me.

"Anastasia!" Alexei barked so loud that even Lillian shook.

"Yes, Sir," she said, looking to her feet. "I won't forget again."

What the hell?

"Come, Anastasia." Lillian took my hand. "We'll get you settled."

"Wait!" Alexei ordered. He put his hand on my butt and reached into the back pocket of my jeans to pull out the book I had stolen from the library. He glanced at it, smacked my butt with the book pretty hard, and stomped off the porch, tossing the book on the bench of the pickup truck. Then sat behind the

wheel, slammed the door, and stormed out the driveway, raising a cloud of dust.

Well, at least he didn't check my front pocket where he would have found my treasure. More fool him. Now, I just had to find somewhere to hide it in my new place—whatever this place was.

As soon as I followed Lillian indoors, I felt the knot in my stomach unwind. Whatever I had imagined awaited me—it wasn't this. The place was like an old-fashioned sorority house. The double doors led to a large sitting room with dark wood floors and light yellow wallpaper, decorated in an antique style, with a piano in one corner, a large chandelier holding real candles overhead, and a double staircase at the back which led to the second floor. There were women everywhere, reclining on daises and sitting on antique couches—all dressed in cotton or linen pantalets, bodices, and corsets—chatting, relaxing, and having a tea party. We followed the burgundy Persian carpet runner at the center of the room, past the women, and up the right side of the double staircase. I felt some of the women's eyes surreptitiously following my footsteps, but none met mine as I looked around.

“Up is right, and down is left,” Lillian explained as we stepped up. “Your quarters are in the right wing of the house. Your room looks out on the back garden, which is very nice. During your free time, you may go anywhere you like inside the house, and you can sit on the porch or take a stroll in the garden, but you may not cross the perimeter of the fence. There will be consequences. In your case, they would be pretty severe since you already have an infraction for running away. Your Daddy will address that with you later. Right now, he's real busy trying to keep everyone from harm.”

I stopped one step behind her. “My what?”

Lillian turned around. “Your Daddy. Bo. Alexei. Your husband, hon.”

“Lillian, I’m sorry, but he is none of those things,” I said. “He’s a dangerous guy.”

“Not dangerous to you.”

Lillian continued up the stairs to the landing of the second floor, where there was an antique credenza decorated with a crocheted runner and a large crystal vase full of white and yellow roses. She led me to the right, down a white hallway with dark hardwood floors, carpeted with a dark green runner. The space between each of the six bedroom doors on either side had a brass reflective candelabra holding two beeswax candles. I had noticed no electric lamps or bulbs in the house.

“Don’t you have power here?” I touched the brass candelabra which hung on the wall before the door on the left where Lillian stood.

“The idea is to go back to basics, with something useful to do every day. This is the original homestead of what was the XOX Ranch before Dalton’s family split it into the BRB and the Dusty Rose ranches. The house is really old and was never connected to the grid. You’ll be comfortable. I promise. It will surprise you how quickly you can adjust to life without the distraction of technology, and without modern conveniences.”

It would surprise me a lot. Living without electricity sounded way too close to camping for my liking. “What is this place?” I moved up to stand next to her at the door.

“You’re at the Wild Horses Institute, darling.” She made a slight flourish with her hand. Then she leaned in conspiratorially. “Dalton was right, as always. He’s a bit annoying that way, but never tell him I said that.”

She opened the door to the bedroom assigned to me. I stepped through hesitantly, but what I saw was pleasant in the daytime. It had a double bed inside, covered with a white crocheted blanket, with night tables on either side, each with

candlestick holders on crocheted doilies, a tiny vase of roses, and small carafes of water covered by a drinking glass. An intricately carved antique armoire with a large mirror in the center panel, against the wall closest to the hall, looked like it was a cherished heirloom. The small writing desk by the windows was well cared for, too. A beautiful vanity table with a large oval mirror graced the corner between the fireplace at the foot of the bed and the windows. A tall, narrow, washing-up table stood closer to the bed. It held a large ceramic bowl and pitcher, both painted with pink roses, and linen hand-towels embroidered with the letters WH. Lillian bent down by the bed on the side closer to the windows, and reached under to grab what looked like an enormous ceramic teacup, painted with bluebells.

“You may not want to go to the outhouse in the middle of the night, especially now that it’s chilly, but we have chamber pots. You empty yours in the morning and wash it properly in the water pump out back. Okay? We keep clean around here. You also have your own washing bowl, but you fill the pitcher when it is empty.”

I stared at the woman, still holding the chamber pot like it was a fine decorative item, unable to speak. Did they also have no running water? *Oh, no, no, no.* This would not work for me.

Lillian continued while I stared. “Mistress Hyacinth will give you a list of your daily chores and your lesson plan. She’ll show you around the place. I wanted to be here to greet you. I know this must all be odd. After all, you didn’t sign up for this voluntarily, like our other girls.”

That’s right. I did not, and I wanted out immediately, but I couldn’t get my mouth to form the words. Not that Lillian gave me a chance since she was on a roll.

“Just don’t cause more trouble and make us regret giving you this chance. I know the men are pretty angry with you right now, but they’ll get over it. Well, maybe not Alexei. He might take a

while longer. Just be a good girl. He'll come around. I know he really cares about you."

I scoffed and snorted loudly at that. Lillian asked me to take a seat on the bed as she pulled the desk chair over to sit facing me.

"Listen, Anastasia, I know this all seems strange to you, and it is a little different, no pun intended, but it works." She sounded confident, and maybe it worked for women who knew what they were getting. I couldn't see it working for me. Still, I just sat and listened. I was in shock, and she was so eager to persuade me this place was heaven. "When I first came to Wild Horses, I had some serious doubts whether I had done the right thing. Then I met and married Dalton and I've been so thrilled as his wife. He is a pretty strict Daddy, but also very loving. I enjoy knowing my limits and I can always count on him to be there for me when I need him. He takes care of me and I take care of him. I haven't stopped having opinions, or living my life, but I know I'm not alone with the burden of living." Lillian reached out to put a hand on one of mine, which was gripping my knee hard. "You haven't really had that, from what I hear. You got a pretty raw deal, growing up with that monster. Here, you can heal while you figure out what it is you really want in life."

"Lillian," I said, measuring my words as I released my knees to take her hands in mine. "You seem like a lovely lady, and you and your husband were kind to me, paying for my hospital and all that, so I say this with all due respect. You have no fucking idea what you are talking about."

She laughed, took her hands back and patted me on the head. She had to stand up to do that, because of my height, but she was leaving anyway. "You're going to have some real fun here before you're done. I can guarantee it." Then Lillian closed the door and left me alone.

I sat on the comfortable brass bed, just trying to wrap my mind around my situation. It all seemed ridiculous. Why would anyone live willingly in a place with no electricity or running

water? Still, the muffled laughter rising through the floorboards suggested that the other women were having a good time. Weirdos.

After a while, I got up and wandered around the room, checking drawers to find a hiding place for my treasure. It might be my room, but I suspected someone might come around to clean. Since the house was full of strange women, I really couldn't be confident that one of them wouldn't go snooping around through my things. In the end, I decided the best place to hide the microfilm was through a gap on the spine of a curious, thick hardbound book I'd found in the desk's drawer, entitled *The Wild Horses Guide to a Happy Little Life*. I settled down to read it, and was only just getting started when there was a rapping on my door and a tall, slim woman, dressed in a purple Victorian gown, with her dark chestnut hair in a tight knot at the base of her neck, entered without waiting for me to reply.

"Hello, Anastasia," she said, with a prim smile and a back as straight as a broom handle. "I am Mistress Hyacinth. I'm glad you've already found our Little guide. Your Institute clothing is in the armoire, and you should change into that immediately. You can wear the overcoat and the boots to go out back, to the outhouse, so you don't catch a chill. We ask that you remove the boots in the house, in favor of wearing your soft slippers, or walking in stockings or barefoot, if you prefer that. The boots make such an awful noise indoors and they also scratch up the wood floor finish. Since your Daddy has grounded you, you must stay in your room today until he comes to visit you tonight. However, if you need to use the outhouse, you may, but come straight back to your room. You also won't be doing chores today, or joining us for meals downstairs. I have a roster here for you that shows you a menu of activities for the rest of the week and some of the courses available."

She placed a paper on the desk with a weekly schedule, neatly written by hand, which showed me assigned to do a bunch

of things: dishes, polishing silver, dusting. Before I could look at it too closely, though, she pulled some blank sheets of parchment paper from the desk drawer and laid them by the guidebook.

“You have some lines to write today. You will write, ‘I will not run away from my problems’, a thousand times, until you have filled out these pages front and back. We will bring your meals to your room. You can leave the trays outside the door, or bring them to the kitchen yourself, if you go to use the outhouse. However, I would recommend that you don’t linger too long outside your room. That will count as an infraction. I would hate to have you add to your punishment today. We will bring you up a bathtub tonight, before your Daddy arrives, so you can wash up and be ready for him. We expect him around nine or ten. It’s flexible. He is busy right now, but he will want to have a word with you tonight. If you need me for anything, please ring the bell by using the pull cord by the fireplace. I’ll come as promptly as I am able. Do you have questions for me now while I’m here?”

“Yes,” I said. “How soon can I leave?”

“As soon as you are ready,” she said.

“Good. I’m ready now. Please, can you call me a cab or something?”

“No. You are not ready. You are far from ready, young lady. We will decide when you can go.”

“So, I’m a prisoner here?”

Mistress Hyacinth shook her head slowly, giving me a look which suggested I was trying her patience. “You are here to learn and you will remain until you have learned.”

“Learn what?”

She made her back even straighter, which seemed like an impossible feat until she somehow accomplished it. The silk fabric on her dress stretched to follow the swelling of her bosom as she took in a deep breath. “Well, each of our young ladies has something different they have to discover about themselves so they can be truly happy and settled.” Mistress Hyacinth sounded

almost rhapsodic as she said this, like she really believed her own bullshit. “In your case, though, I’ve been told you’re here until you learn to speak Russian.”

“*What?*”

“Russian,” she said. “That’s all I was told. Apparently, your Daddy thinks it’s very important.”

“That’s ridiculous.” I raised my palms. “You can’t keep me here until I learn to speak a foreign language.”

“Well, you can fight the process or accept it.” Mistress Hyacinth waved her delicate right hand from one side to the other, showing my options. “Either way, you’ll be safe here with us. It will be fun, except for the punishment part, but you can avoid that by being a good girl, doing your assignments, and following instructions.”

“I want a lawyer,” I said. “You can’t just keep me here against my will, I demand to see a lawyer.”

“Okay,” Mistress Hyacinth said, with a sharp nod of her oval head. “A lawyer will come to see you later.”

“Really?”

“Yes, of course,” she chirped. “We want you to be safe and happy. Nobody’s trying to force you into anything. We’re only trying to keep you safe from the trouble in town. While you wait, I recommend you change into your proper clothes and write your lines, though. You’re also welcome to read the guide at your leisure. When your lawyer arrives, I’ll bring them up to your room.”

“Thank you,” I said, hesitantly.

The woman agreed much too easily. It felt like a trap, but I didn’t have an alternative. The drive out to this place through BRB land had been long enough that I knew I couldn’t just walk back to town before dark, assuming I was bold enough to try. It wasn’t very pleasant territory in parts. There might be snakes or other things waiting for me out there. My best move, I figured, was to play along until I could use my get out of jail free card. It

would be a very final move, but I'd reached the end of the line. I would not just sit in this weird Little sorority and wait for whatever sick games Alexei Bogatyrev had planned for me.

I was Anastasia Volokov, for heaven's sake. I did not take orders. I gave them.