



# Better Than Chocolate

by

Wendi Darlin

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### **Dedication**

A special thank you to Rita Thedford,  
a great friend and a fabulous author.

### **Reviews**

#### **HIRED HANDS**

5 Hearts—Ms. Wendi Darlin has done an incredible job of telling a delightfully sensual story in a few short words. This ménage was so hot it sizzled. The plot was poignant with the sorrows faced by Nora, but the outcome was scorching. The book is a perfect storyline for someone who needs a quick fix.

This book is an absolute winner and something that will be extremely popular. It is not, however, for the faint of heart. The characters will remain in my mind for quite a while.

*~Brenda Talley, The Romance Studio*

4 Stars—Hired Hands is hot hot hot. This book will make you want to go and get a cowboy of your very own. At least it did for me.

*~Robyn, Manic Readers*

5 Cherries—Wendi Darlin writes the hottest, most emotional, well choreographed ménage scene I've read. And, I'll admit, I read this more than once before reviewing it. I imagine it's a story I'll return to again. As always, with these short stories I love, my only complaint is that they just aren't long enough. If you like romance along with your sex, and really enjoy a

good threesome, I can't recommend this story highly enough.

Kudos to Ms. Darlin for her remarkably well-penned story and now...please excuse me while I head out to find more of her backlist.

*~Poppy, Whipped Cream Reviews*

## Chapter One

“How many licks *does* it take?” Mila’s voice was low enough only Randi could hear. Her gaze drifted pointedly to the man standing across the corridor. “You know you want to find out.” She lifted a penis-shaped chocolate lollipop off the convention center’s skirted table and twirled it between her French manicured fingers.

“He doesn’t look the type.” Randi tried to shake the lust-fueled fever that burned her skin and gave the hunk in the tailored suit another once over. His underwear was probably crammed so far up his tight ass it’d take an act of God to jerk it out. There was something about him though. Something that had her pussy dripping and her clit begging for relief.

“Not the type for a blowjob?” Mila’s voice dripped with sarcasm. She wrapped her fingers around the chocolate Cock Sucker and stroked up and down the shaft. Tight Ass pulled his Blackberry away from his ear and stared.

“Put it down before he comes over here.” Randi snatched the candy from Mila’s hand and dropped it with the rest of the samples on the table.

“These conventions blow.” Mila plopped into the folding chair that came with their booth. “And not in a good way.”

The day was coming to an end, and only a few buyers still strolled past the booths, taking samples and brochures, asking questions about price point and minimum orders. And at the far end of the row of vendor tables, Clementine Andros and her entourage had stopped to examine the wares.

“Just think of all the business we’ll drum up and all the massages the money’ll buy in Cancun.” Randi hugged herself, warding off a sudden chill.

“I don’t have to pay to be rubbed.” Mila twirled the twisted plastic ends of a Breast Mint wrapper and popped the candy in her mouth. She arched a brow and winked at Tight Ass. He clamped his Blackberry closer to his ear and turned away. “Somebody’s got a sweet tooth this morning.”

“He’s a meat and potatoes man.”

“Not the way he’s checking out our candy.”

“He’s security. He’s checking everything out.” Randi let her gaze linger on his round ass then wander down to his thick thigh. What was it about that man? He hadn’t so much as budged from his post across the wide corridor. He spent most of the time on his Blackberry. And if that much communication wasn’t enough, a little black cord snaked up his neck and disappeared into thick dark hair that begged for a finger comb.

She’d never been into stiffs in suits, but she wouldn’t mind seeing how stiff this one could

get. Besides, he spent his day packing heat not pushing a pencil. Maybe he wasn't as stiff as he looked.

He glanced over his shoulder and dark, fuck-me eyes bore into hers. A jolt she didn't expect ripped through her. Not just a jolt, a lightning hot series of strokes and sensations that left her mouth hungry and her body dancing.

Randi gasped and gripped the edge of the skirted table. Her clit throbbed, and a shot of wet heat soaked the strip of silk that barely covered her swollen pussy. Subtle tremors of an orgasm built between her thighs and her legs trembled.

Talk about eye candy. He was hotter than the Anatomic Fire Balls spilling out of the crystal bowl at each end of the table. Damn, how long had it been? With a single look, the man could shake her like an earthquake.

She eased into the chair next to Mila and crossed her legs. The gray skirt that matched her very business like jacket slid up her thigh and cool air blew over her legs. "Did you slip something in my juice this morning?"

"Uh-uh." Mila rolled the Breast Mint around on her tongue. "But I think I might need to give the security in this place something sweet to suck on."

"He's mine!" Randi jerked at the ferocity of her own voice. She scooped her hair into a ponytail and held it up off her neck. "What is wrong with me?"

Mila laughed. "You need to get laid."

"I feel like I just did." Breath clung to her words, and heat crept across her chest. She ventured another look across the corridor and nearly melted under the heated gaze that swept her body. "What's he doing?" she whimpered.

"Checking you out. Damn, that man is ready to eat you alive."

Randi fought to draw air into her lungs. His gaze caressed her neck and lingered on her breasts. Her lips tingled as he lifted his eyes to her mouth.

"He's doing something." Desperation laced her words. His gaze dropped to her lap, and her knees slowly began to spread. "Oh, God." Her breath came in pants as invisible hands pushed up her thighs.

"You okay?" Laughter laced Mila's voice.

"No..." Randi gripped the edge of her seat tighter and bit back a scream as a thick, hot tongue speared the swollen lips of her pussy and slid into the wet crease. Her vision blurred, but across the corridor she could see Tight Ass's chest heave. "Oh, God. Make him st...ahh —" Lips she couldn't see wrapped around her clit and sucked, gently at first and then with an intensity that sent her head back and a squeal tearing up her throat.

"Bravo." A slow clap broke through the haze that enveloped Randi's mind.

"Ms. Andros!" Mila jerked Randi's arm, and the name shot off an instant alarm.

Randi fought to catch her breath and jumped to her feet. "Ms. Andros. We were hoping you would stop by."

Clementine Andros stared down her nose at the samples arranged on the table. A tight bun of black hair pulled at the thin skin of her temples, and lipstick feathered in the creases around her narrow lips.

Still shaking from the orgasm, Randi snatched up a brochure and offered it to the owner of the largest novelty franchise in North America. "The quality of our candies and edible products is second to none." The brochure in her hand hung in the air. "Our prices are very competitive, and we pride ourselves on customer service."

"And pornographic theatrics are the best marketing you can come up with?" A wave of a

blue veined hand set the men and women around Clementine Andros in motion. “Wait! Please.” Randi hurried around the table on rubbery legs. “We...I mean...” Mila shouldered her out of the way. “My business partner is trying to say her orgasms are for personal enjoyment. Our company relies on the quality of our products and a sound, professional business strategy.” “Professional?” A trace of a smirk tugged at Clementine’s lips. Randi’s shoulders jumped, and the tingles of an orgasmic aftershock trickled down her spine. She glared across the corridor at Tight Ass, but his eyes weren’t on her. His jaw had clenched, drawing his full lips into a hard line, and his dark eyes, now fierce, were aimed at Clementine. Clementine slapped a hand to the back of her neck and spun around. Randi’s eyes darted to Tight Ass, and her mouth dropped open. Nothing but a removable panel of seagrass textured wall met her gaze. He was gone.

## Chapter Two

Titus dropped his mind shield and stepped from the shadowed doorway. Clementine Andros had sauntered off in one direction, and the brunette across the corridor had stomped off in the other. At least his gorgeous blonde hadn’t gone anywhere. Once in a blue moon the stars lined up enough to make things easier than usual. Few people were harder to get close to than Clementine. She kept her bodyguards wrapped around her like a cloak, twenty-four/seven, and she had the ability to sense every move he made. He couldn’t mask himself and get close enough to nail her devious ass or to find out which one of his men had worked his way onto her payroll. But he knew who could. His gaze skimmed the narrow back, slender waist, and miles of legs scooping up the brochures and sales paraphernalia spread across her table. His little candy girl could get in without setting off alarms. Best of all, he wouldn’t even have to convince the gorgeous plaything to follow Clementine like a hound. She was determined to do that all on her own. He could have read the determination on the beautiful woman’s face without his psychic abilities. She wasn’t about to take “no” for an answer, not even from an ice queen like Clementine. And if he played his cards right, she could help him find out who had switched sides before any of their undercover agents were compromised. He crossed the hall quickly. “She’ll be at the presentations tonight.” The sweet little thing jumped and whipped around so fast he had to catch her elbow before it caught him in the ribs. “Who?” she asked. “Clementine Andros. She never misses an event.” He followed the candy seller’s gaze down the corridor where Clementine was making her exit. “She won’t refuse a pitcher of sangria.” He caressed the young woman’s arm through the fashionable but flimsy fabric of her suit jacket. “A pitcher will give you enough time to convince her, don’t you think?”

She jerked her arm away and narrowed the most gorgeous baby blue eyes he'd ever looked into. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Why wouldn't I?" He let his gaze travel over her curves. "And maybe after you make that big sale you came here for, I can take you out to celebrate." He dipped his head close to hers and lowered his voice. "Or maybe we can stay in and celebrate even harder."

Randi knew she should smack the hell out of the pushy bastard, but her arms hung limp at her sides and her throat tightened as he came closer. "I don't even know your name."

"Yes, you do." His voice vibrated against her neck. "I told you."

She trembled as heat and need pulsed through her core. Whoever this guy was, he had her number and knew exactly how to make her lose control. Her spine stiffened, and she used both hands to shove him away. "Look, Tight Ass. You haven't told me anything, and I don't know what kind of..."

A glimmer flashed in his eye. "What did you call me?"

She swallowed hard and raised her chin in defiance. "Tight Ass."

"You thought I said my name was Tight Ass?" His sexy voice dipped into a low roar and laughter shook his broad chest.

"You didn't say your name was anything."

He captured a strand of hair close to her cheek and twirled it slowly around his finger. "I said Titus." His hand opened and fingertips brushed her scalp as his thumb traced her ear.

"My name is Titus. And you came so hard for me, I could almost taste you." His face bent toward hers. His breath eased past her lips and his voice dipped again. "Almost."

Holy hell. He had her number all right. Down to the very last digit.

"You didn't tell me your name." Her words came out in a whisper, and her knees had grown so weak she grabbed his thick bicep for support.

"I told you all sorts of things." His lips brushed hers. "You heard me."

He coaxed her mouth, sliding his tongue against hers in a kiss that filled her belly and left her hungry for more. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she heard his voice. *You taste even better than I thought you would.*

She jerked away.

"See. You can hear me." His smile was pure, smug sex appeal.

She stepped back, bumping into the table. A bowl of candy toppled to the floor. "I don't know what kind of mind games you're playing or what you're doing, but stay away from me. I don't date creeps anymore." Her hands gripped the table so hard her knuckles turned white and her arms shook. "Do you hear me? Back the hell off, and don't come near me again."

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Randi slid onto the barstool next to Mila. "Are you speaking to me yet?"

An empty highball rested next to Mila's hand and her long dark hair hung like a curtain, shielding her face. "No."

"Good. Just listen." Randi waited while the bartender slid a napkin across the bar. "Two of whatever she's having," she told him then lowered her voice and leaned close to Mila's ear. "I don't know what happened earlier, but I won't lose this deal."

Mila shook her head and blew a tired breath. "You lost it already."

"I didn't sink everything we own into a production run we can't afford and skip my electric bill to pay for a plane ticket just so we could come out here and not get the contract."

Mila finally turned to face her. "You didn't pay your electric bill?"

Randi shook her head and worried her fingertips on the smooth wood of the bar. "And rent's

due the day we get back.”

“Then what were you doing back there? You don’t fake orgasms even when you’re actually having sex.”

“I wasn’t faking.” Randi bit her lip while the bartender set the drinks down. She twirled the stem of her cherry and lowered her voice. “It was that man. Tight Ass. Titus. The security guy.”

“He was across the hall.”

“I know.”

Mila looked anything but convinced, but their friendship had weathered bigger storms than this. “So how are you going to get Clementine to sign a deal? She thinks we’re a couple of strippers gone straight. Probably thinks we’ll flake before the first order is filled.”

“Leave it to me. Just come to the presentations tonight, and if Tight Ass shows up, run interference.”

“This guy really got under your skin, didn’t he?”

“You could say that.” She sipped her cocktail and raised a questioning brow. “Cherry Coke?” Mila tapped her glass to Randi’s and shrugged. “Figured one of us needed to lay off the sauce.”

Randi set her drink down slowly. A keen sense of awareness washed over her. Something she couldn’t explain happened, but one thing was certain. She dropped her voice to a whisper. “He’s here.”

*I want to taste you again.*

His voice lilted through her mind like a memory or a thought. Her thighs quivered, and heat curled in her belly. A hand she couldn’t see slid around her waist, and a warm breath sent shivers down her neck. She gasped. “Oh, God.”

Mila spun slowly on her stool and scanned the room. “He’s at the table in the corner. What’s going on, Randi?”

“Get me out of here.”

### Chapter Three

Randi stopped just inside the double doors and scanned the large banquet hall. Salespeople, distributors, suppliers and buyers mingled at tables and in small clusters on the ornate gold and green carpeting. Enormous chandeliers hung overhead, and the far end of the room had been outfitted with a podium and large screen. International vendors would take the stage after the buyers were sufficiently liquored up, but for now, the champagne fountain and conversation were flowing freely.

*She’s up front. Seated to the right of the stage.*

Randi shimmied, and a chill raced down her spine. She must be losing her ever-loving mind. It wasn’t possible for Tight Ass—or anybody else—to barge inside her head like that. She flicked her gaze to the right, and a tall, gorgeous figure standing near the wall stopped her heart and made her knees weak. Titus stared back at her, the quirk of a smile on his full

lips.

His gaze lowered, and instantly her nipples turned hard as the Ballbreakers they had in their inventory upstairs. A brush of cool air swept over her breast, and the moist lap of a tongue teased her areola. Randi glared at him.

“Stop it,” she mouthed.

His sensual lips spread into an easy grin, and his shoulders shook with laughter. *Later, then. Go nail the bitch, candy girl.*

Randi couldn't help but smile. That's exactly what she planned to do.

Mila sidled up next to her. “Spotted her yet?”

“No, but I've been told where to find her.” She pressed a small leather satchel to her stomach. “Keep an eye on Tight Ass.”

Mila laughed and appraised Titus, who now had his Blackberry to his ear and his gaze on the center of the room. “I might have to keep more than an eye on him.”

“I called him.” Randi bit the inside of her cheek. She had definitely lost her mind. The last thing she needed was a mind-plundering beefcake who could give her the most incredible orgasm of her life without laying a finger on her.

Mila gave her a playful nudge. “Better hurry up and take care of business then.”

Randi made her way through the crowd and, sure enough, Clementine's tight black bun stood above every other head at a round table to the right of the stage. Her entourage flanked her, three deep, on both sides. Randi swallowed hard. She had no choice. She would close this deal.

*Your friend has her hand on my ass.*

Randi spun around so fast she bumped into one of the waiters. Martinis sloshed and ran down the young man's hands. She mumbled her apologies and searched for Titus.

*Next to the podium.*

At first she didn't see him. He was tucked in close to the stage and a handful of people blocked most of his imposing frame from view. A wicked glimmer danced in his eyes. Mila was at least two feet away, engaged in conversation with a buyer who had placed a small order early in the day. She had her eye on Titus, but her hand was nowhere near his tight ass.

*Jealous and delicious.* A hand slid up the back of her thigh and closed around the curve of her bottom. *As soon as you land this deal, sweet cheeks, I'm going to have to have another taste of you.*

Randi shot a look at Mila who made a shooing motion with her hands and disentangled herself from the customer. Mila headed over to Titus, and Randi exhaled a breath of relief. If anyone could keep him distracted, Mila could. But she'd better keep her hands off his ass. Randi approached Clementine's table. Before she was within three feet of the woman, every eye at the table bore into her. Two of the men stood, ready to intercept her. She needed to act fast, or they'd cut her off before she got a word out. “Ms. Andros—”

One of the bodyguards stepped closer.

*Sangria.*

Randi maneuvered around him. “I'd like to buy you a drink. I'm afraid I didn't make a good impression earlier.”

Clementine Andros narrowed her eyes. “First impressions don't lie, darling.” She turned away, in dismissal.

“Just one drink. I believe I can change your mind.”



The guard grabbed hold of her arm with enough force to make his warning clear. “Ms. Andros doesn’t change her mind.”

*Sangria!*

“I understand you like sangria.”

The guard loosened his grip, then dropped his arm to his side. Clementine arched a thin brow. “Is that so?”

*With lime.*

“Yes. With lime, I believe.”

The young woman seated on Clementine’s left quickly stood and made her way to the far side of the table. Randi sucked in a calming breath. Maybe Tight Ass did know what he was talking about. She had no idea why he’d go so far out of his way to help her. But she didn’t have time to worry about that. All that mattered was she got this contract. She wouldn’t leave this table without Clementine’s signature.

*Who are you?*

The thought slammed into Randi’s mind so sharply a pain pierced her temple. Not Titus this time. Clementine.

She shuddered, but it was easy to see in Clementine’s eyes, now was not the time for questions. If she wanted to win, she had to play.

“Randi Marcelle, co-owner of Sweet Enough to Eat. Our novelty candies are the finest on the market.”

“Sit.” Clementine gestured to the chair next to her.

Randi pulled her satchel in front of her and hurried to take a seat. “I brought samples, and I’ll be happy to negotiate a reasonable price break for a large volume order.”

Clementine leaned close, hatred beaming from the black depths of her eyes. “Who sent you? And if you lie to me. I’ll kill you.”

Lips nipped at Randi’s ear and a familiar voice sounded in her mind. *She won’t kill you. I won’t let her. Just sell your candy, sweetheart.*

Randi glanced toward the podium, but Titus and Mila were nowhere to be seen. Either he’d moved in closer or he had the table bugged. “I’d like to propose a product rotation for each of your stores until we’ve established a sales pattern. At that time we can individualize orders based on—”

“Fine. Fine. Whatever.” Clementine waved her hand in irritation. “Print up the purchase order and fax it to my office.”

Blood pulsed through her ears. “I have a purchase order here. Already filled out.” She pulled a folder from her satchel and opened it on the table in front of her, quickly hiding her trembling fingers in her lap.

She’d never dreamed Clementine would accept her full proposal. The pre-prepared purchase order had been for show. A blank form was tucked directly behind it. Andros Enterprises had over five hundred locations all around the world with a sales volume that was mind-boggling. This one account could triple their manufacturing goals for the year. She slid a pen across the table, and Clementine signed the purchase order without giving it more than a cursory glance.

*Tell her Shekra has another deal for her.*

Clementine laid the pen on the table and slid a tongue over her stark red lips. She ran an assessing gaze over Randi and clamped bony fingers around her wrist. The chill of the older woman’s hand jolted across Randi’s skin. “If you’re one of Shekra’s, you just made the

biggest mistake of your life.” She trailed the inside of Randi’s arm with a blood red fingertip and leaned closer. “Tell your master I’ll be in my suite later.” Her raspy voice sent a chill down Randi’s spine, and the scent of cloves lingered in the air. “If he doesn’t show up, I’ll find *you*.”

## Chapter Four

Randi hurried into the elevator, clutching the signed purchase order. Nervous perspiration still clung to her skin. What had she gotten herself into? The elevator doors began to close, and she gulped the cool recycled air. Hopefully, Mila had seen her leave and they could pack up and get out of this place.

Clementine Andros was more ruthless than she had imagined. What kind of woman threatened murder over a batch of cock-shaped candies? A broad hand curled around one of the doors, and Titus stepped inside, his seductive smile gone. His dark eyes flickered, but not with the wicked gleam she’d seen before.

He crossed the tiny box in one stride and grabbed her waist. Her heart hammered, and the doors slid shut. She gripped his arms, crushing the purchase order between her hand and his steely bicep. “Who is Shekra? And what the hell are you?”

His big body towered over her. His shoulders blocked her view, and for the first time she got a good, up-close look at him. The little black cord that snaked from his collar to the back of his ear wasn’t a cord at all. It was a tattoo, so detailed it appeared three-dimensional and so black it looked wet.

Like a magnet, pulled by a force she couldn’t control, Randi’s finger went to the ink on his neck, a spiral pattern that spread like a flame at his hair line and blended into his dark locks. Her tongue swelled, watering for the taste of his skin, and heat rose from her core.

*Have to...taste you.*

Randi wasn’t sure if the thought was hers or his. His chest heaved, and he lifted her, pressing her back against the mirrored wall. Her ass slipped onto the brass handrail. She leaned into him, her mouth drawn to the tattoo on his neck, her legs already snaked around his hips, and her skirt scrunched around her waist. His skin was smooth and hot. The contract slipped from her grasp, and her mind became completely occupied with a single obsession. Titus. He smelled like black licorice and arousal, and he tasted better than chocolate. Her tongue traced the dark design to the base of his ear, and an overwhelming urge to get closer rocked her core. He groaned and pressed his cock against her panties. His erection was hard as steel and too big to ignore.

The elevator dinged and slowed to a stop. Titus spun her around, and his gaze bore into something over her shoulder. The elevator lurched, and the lights dimmed.

“You did that?” She spoke the words against his skin.

He answered with a growl. “I’m going to taste you. Now.” His neck vibrated against her lips, and he leaned back into the mirror he’d held her against only moments before. She steadied her feet on the brass handrail, and Titus’ broad hand wound around her neck and gripped

her hair. He tugged her head back and met her eyes briefly. His gaze fell to her lips. He moved slowly, and her thighs tightened around him. This was a man who had already left her soaked, and melted her bones with no more than a look. Whatever he decided to do next might be the death of her. A slow sweet death she was more than willing to endure.

A whimper rose from her throat. His mouth was within an inch of hers. Before she could take a breath, his lips landed full against her mouth. His hand wound tighter in her hair, and his tongue dragged across hers. The impact was staggering.

*You taste...God. So fucking good.*

His kiss deepened. His arm tightened around her waist, and the buttons of her blouse popped and shot against the mirrored wall. What else could he do with that mind of his? Teeth grazed the silk of her bra, even as his mouth remained fully connected to hers. Another mouth nipped at her shoulder, and a hand slipped between her legs. She whipped around, breaking the kiss. Her breath was so heavy she could barely speak. There was no one else in the elevator. "Is that you? All of it?"

He laughed. "Only me."

"How?"

"As long as I can see you or feel you, I can touch you with my mind."

"And if you can't see me?"

He pulled her closer and shifted his hips so that his cock slid over her wet panties. "I'll make sure that doesn't happen." He pumped against her again, and she didn't give a damn about the improbability of anything he said.

"Show me what you can do, Titus. God, please show me." The elevator bounced, and her chin shot toward the ceiling. "They're fixing it."

Titus lifted her higher. Her ass rested on his abdomen and his thick erection pressed into the seam between her cheeks. "The elevator won't move until I let it."

He reached beneath her thigh, and his thumb caressed the wet silk that clung to her pussy and then slid beneath the fabric. She jerked at his touch, as electric as lightning, even before he found her clit.

*Wet enough to drink.*

"How do you do that?"

"The thoughts?" His teeth caught her bottom lip, and his tongue soothed the gentle bite.

"Telepathy."

His thumb circled her sensitive nub and dove into the swollen folds below. Her body flared, nipples tingling, muscles drawing tight. The clasp at the front of her bra twisted free, and her breasts fell with a heavy bounce.

*Oh, fuck yeah.*

He lifted her higher, and she gripped his shoulders for balance. His tongue raked her nipple while his thumb sought her opening. He drew her areola into his mouth and sucked hard at the same time he plunged into her. Randi bucked, but clung to his broad shoulders.

*Taste like candy. Sweet ass candy.*

As his words floated into her mind, hands slid down her back and fingers gripped the curve of her ass, spreading her cheeks. Not his physical hands, but there was no doubt where his mind was headed.

A hand curled under her bottom until fingertips dipped into the juices his thumb was coaxing from her hot channel. Slowly, the extra hand retreated, sliding along the crack of

her ass, until the drenched fingertips converged on her anus. Randi's whole body trembled. Her nipple burned, and yet she ached for him to suck harder. Her pussy craved him deeper, and her ass was as ready to welcome him as the rest of her.

"Fuck me, Titus. Everywhere." Her breath was so shallow she almost strangled on the words. "All at once. Fuck me. Now."

He sank his thumb deep, stroking the needy walls of her cave. Pressure built on her anus until one, then two fingers entered her tight channel. He fucked her ass hard and teased her pussy mercilessly while one strong arm held fast around her waist, and his massive body used the mirrored wall as leverage. Her shoes slipped on the brass handrail, and her body writhed like it was possessed. She couldn't hear anything above the harsh rushes of her own breath. The first shimmering wave of orgasm swirled deep in her pussy as a stronger one built deeper in her belly.

*Stand up.*

She heard him, but she was close. So close. Now wasn't the time to attempt a balancing act. Hands she couldn't see wrapped around her ankles and pushed her feet more solidly onto the brass rail.

*Give it to me!*

She rose, sinking both hands into his thick hair and holding tight. Her knees then breasts hit the mirrors, and her pussy landed on his face. In one stroke, his thumb was replaced by two long fingers. Phantom fingers continued to pump her ass hard and fast. She fought to stay upright, pressing her body into the cold mirror and into him. He held her securely with his mind, and the one fiercely strong arm that had never left her waist. She came in a tremor so violent, nothing but color flashed before her eyes.

His fingers were replaced by a hungry tongue. *So fucking good! Candy. Sweet, sweet candy girl.*

Even after the last of the tremors had subsided, he explored her pussy with broad licking strokes, lapping like he'd never get enough.

Her thighs burned, and suddenly the awkward, improbable position registered in mind. "I'm going to fall."

His laugh hummed against her skin, and he lowered her slowly. She slid along the firm slopes of his body until her feet stood unsteadily on the floor.

She bit at his jaw, raking her tongue over the rough masculine skin. "Are you a magician?"

His face was still wet, coated with her essence, and a rock hard erection pressed into her belly. "No. But I know a few tricks."

She palmed the ridge of granite flesh still trapped inside his pants. "Enough to keep Clementine Andros from killing me when my *master* doesn't show up in her room tonight?"

## Chapter Five

Titus released the elevator. The lights came back to full glare, and the car lurched once before continuing its ascent to the twelfth floor. The scent of sex filled the air, and his dick

weighed a ton. He needed to fuck her. Soon. The doors slid open, and she bolted into the hall. Her sweet little ass swayed two steps ahead of him as she led the way to heaven. Or her room. At this point, he wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

*I need to be inside you.*

His message registered, and she turned, wrapping her arms around his neck. The kiss was ferocious, tongues and teeth. Fingernails raked his scalp, and her back hit the wall with a thud. She climbed and clawed at his skin like a cat in heat.

*Your room. Now.*

He could barely focus enough to send her the message, and his tongue was too occupied to say a word.

Finally, he held her shoulders and stood back. "Let's go."

Her gaze fell to his mark, and the blue of her eyes completely disappeared, swallowed by a sea of black, her soul completely bare. His neck throbbed beneath the tattoo, and he knew without a doubt he needed to get her naked not only to relieve his aching cock but to confirm what he had suspected the minute he sensed her. She was one of them. One of his own.

He grabbed the leather satchel from her hand and tore through it, searching for her key card. Her blouse hung open, and her breasts spilled over the skimpy silk bra she wore. He dug deeper, checking the pockets. "Where's the damn key?"

Confusion carved lines in her forehead. She reached into a small pocket on the back of the satchel and drew back an empty hand. "I put it in here. I know I did."

A muffled scream sounded down the hall, and he grabbed her arm. "What's your room number?"

"1217."

He lifted his Blackberry to his ear. "1217. Hurry." He dropped the device into his jacket pocket without another word and pulled her toward the stairwell.

"Mila?" She ground her heels into the floor, refusing to go another step. "Was that Mila?"

"Are you sharing a room?"

She nodded. Her fleshy breasts rose and fell so hard he nearly lost all train of thought. His dick throbbed in protest, but he had to get her out of here before he could do anything about that.

Clementine had been more cautious and acted faster than he thought she would. A sure sign she knew they were here to wreck her plans. The boys would have to work fast. She had more fire power in this city than Shekra did, and with one summons, every one of Clementine's goons would be patrolling the halls of this hotel.

"It was probably Mila."

"Probably? Can't you read minds?"

"No. I send messages."

"But at Clementine's table—"

"Eavesdropping, not mind-reading. I bugged the salt shaker." He grabbed hold of her arm again and attempted to steer her back toward the stairs. "Come on. I've got help on the way." She jerked her arm free. "She needs help now!"

He pulled her close and clamped a hand over her mouth. She fought like hell as he dragged her into the stairwell. His adrenaline spiked, and it took every ounce of willpower he had not to take her right then and there. He pinned her to the wall and bent close to her ear.

"They want you to run in there. It's you they want. Not her."

She whipped her head to the side, and he pulled his hand off her mouth. "They're hurting

her!”

“My boys will be there before they can.” He smoothed the hair from her face. She was a fighter, all right. Ready to rush Clementine’s cavalry to save her friend. “She’ll be fine. And so will you. If you just do what I say.”

“Why do they want me?” she hissed.

“Because they think you work with me.”

“I barely know you.” A blush crept into her cheeks. “You know what I mean.”

“You know me better than you think you do.” He pulled her toward the ascending stairs. “I’ll explain later. Right now you’re coming with me.”

She staggered after him, not putting up half the fight she had in the hall. “How do I know you’re not going to kill me?”

“You weren’t worried about that in the elevator.”

They were halfway to the thirteenth floor when Clementine’s hound stepped onto the landing above them and leveled a .44 Magnum on Randi’s chest.

*Don’t fight me. Or we both die.* Titus sent the message and threw his arms around her.

A fuzzy second later, they were somewhere in the middle of the ninth floor. Dishes clattered as his foot bumped a room service tray that had been placed outside a doorway. His vision cleared, but Randi stood with her eyes clamped tight, fists clenched.

“It’s okay.” He pulled her down the hall and punched a number on his Blackberry.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Safe room.” He spoke into the phone, and within a second, the device was back in his pocket. “We teleported.”

“You can do that, too?” Her eyes were still foggy, and her stride was sluggish as he kept her in tow.

“Still learning. First time with a passenger. I’m glad it worked.”

She slowed to a stop. Her skin had gone pale, and her fingers trembled in his hand.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She glanced up at him, and her eyes narrowed. “Tell me right now what you are. If this is a dream, wake me up. If you’re taking me to your home planet, you won’t get me there alive.”

The laugh that ripped through his chest sent his head back. She was dead serious. And the little vixen had every right to be.

“Stop laughing and tell me what the hell is going on. Who are you? And why did that man want to shoot me?” Her voice rose an octave and more than a decibel. The tremble of her fingers turned to a tremor in her arm.

He pulled her close and pressed a kiss to the soft skin of her temple. “Just come with me. I’ll tell you everything. I swear.”

## Chapter Six

The safe room, as Titus called it, was probably known to the front desk staff as the Presidential Suite. The bar gleamed with granite counters and silver serving pieces, and the

living area was nearly as big as Randi's apartment.

Over by the sofa, Titus shrugged his jacket off and slid his Blackberry into his pants pocket. A starched white shirt, now creased from their romp in the elevator and that whole teleportation stunt, fit loosely around the well-defined muscles of his arms. The tattoo on his neck called to her in a way she couldn't understand and most definitely couldn't ignore. As if he felt her gaze, he turned. A slow smile cocked the corner of his mouth. "I guess you want me to explain a few things before I get you naked."

"So you *can* read minds."

He laughed and ran his hands through his hair. "No. But I know a 'go to hell' look when I see one." He motioned toward the bar. "Want a drink?"

"Sangria?" For a moment, he stilled, and then his big shoulders relaxed. She cocked an eyebrow. "Why don't we start with the sangria? Was that some codeword you knew would get me killed? Or was the threat to my life just a bonus?"

"Codeword, yes." He strode toward her. His body moved like a machine, all power and grace.

"And I realized we were taking a risk, but I figured it was worth it."

"Exactly what is my life worth to you?"

He stood directly in front of her. So close she could smell the familiar scent of his skin and sex they'd shared. "I'll protect you." His arms wound protectively around her waist, and his jaw set in a firm line.

"And if you don't?" Her finger drifted toward the design on his neck. It was hard to stay mad at a man who could rock her world the way he could.

"I'll die trying."

The sincerity in his dark eyes squeezed her heart and shot a jolt through her pussy. "You'd die for me?"

"Without question."

"Why?"

He turned his head and pulled open the collar of his shirt so that the tattoo was fully revealed.

She traced the tapered line that snaked to his collar bone. The artist was a master, and the design was so familiar she could almost taste it deep in the back of her throat. Like a memory she couldn't cling to or a scent long forgotten that triggered a wave of nostalgia.

Her mouth watered for another taste. "What is this?"

"A birthmark."

"You weren't born with it."

He turned his gaze on her. "No. It was given to me the day I was born."

Her chest squeezed. "How cruel."

"It's a gift. And I'm proud to wear it."

She licked her lips. "I like it."

A low growl rattled in his chest, and his broad fingers closed over her hips.

"What does it mean?" She stood on tiptoe and pressed the tip of her tongue to the thin trail of ink at his collarbone. The taste of licorice and sex coated her tongue, and her body edged closer, craving him with an urgency she'd never felt before.

He sucked in a sharp breath as her tongue glided toward his neck. "I'm a born soldier of Shekra."

Something familiar tugged at her mind but remained just beyond recall. "Who is Shekra?"

"If you don't know, I'm not at liberty to say." He pulled her closer. "But I think you know."

She flattened her tongue against the broader lines of the tattoo and pressed her body hard against his. His power over her was stronger than any drug. Her mind only had room for one overwhelming thought. "Fuck me."

He hauled her off her feet and carried her to the bedroom. Using mind and hands, he had her stripped bare before she could free the buttons of his shirt. The white cotton fell away from his chest, and Randi groaned. Taut skin stretched over rigid planes of muscle, and abdominals rose like stepping stones toward the grand prize.

She gripped his waistband in both hands and twisted the button free. The dark fabric fell to his thighs, and a thick pink cock jutted up to greet her. No underwear. Just skin. Hot, gorgeous, delicious skin. She palmed his shaft, barely able to accommodate the girth with her fingers. A drop of dew beaded on the slit at the head, and her tongue swelled again. She bent to taste, her tongue leading the way. Titus speared his fingers through her hair and gripped tight as her lips closed around him. She sucked hard, drinking, craving, savoring the taste of his velvety skin. She swirled the broad head with her tongue and hungrily made her way down his wide shaft. Her knees sank into the carpet as she gently cradled his balls in her mouth.

*God damn!*

His powerful thighs shook, and his grip on her hair tightened. She lapped his sac with a wide gentle stroke and caught it in her hand as she kissed her way back toward the base of his cock.

There was so much of him, so many inches to explore, to devour. She slid her middle finger to the sensitive skin behind his balls and pressed in short easy strokes. Titus's breath shot out, and his cock jumped. She squeezed his firm ass with her other hand and went down on the head of his cock again. He tasted so good, better than any candy she could manufacture. His big body trembled, and he bombarded her mind with thoughts of desperation and pleasure.

She couldn't get enough. Every taste of him made her want more. And her pussy ached with a hunger so strong her hips jumped. The wiry hair on his thigh scraped her breast, and she moaned. As if he read her needs, phantom lips closed around her nipple, and a warm, wet tongue bathed away the sharp ache in her breast. His mind filled hers, begging for more, even as his hands wrapped around her shoulders and pulled her to her feet.

He kissed her, hard and deep. Then in a single motion, he flung her with him to the bed. His teeth grazed her nipple, then the outer curve of her breast. The hair at his temples had grown damp, and the tattoo on his neck blurred her vision. His fingers spread the folds of her pussy, and he groaned.

*Have to. Fuck you. Now.*

Her legs trembled. "Hurry. God, please hurry!"

He rolled her onto her stomach and tugged her hips, cocking her ass in the air. His thighs pressed into the back of hers, and the smooth head of his cock eased into the rim of her pussy, stretching her to a burn.

*So tight. Sweet tight little hole.*

She pushed back, desperate to ease the ache, to fill herself with this sexy beast of a man. A man who could do things every fantasy lover she'd ever had could do. His thigh muscles rolled, and he plunged deep, doubling over to sink his teeth into her shoulder.

*Mine.*

Yes, she was his. No one had ever possessed her so completely. His big cock stretched her



wide and drove deep while his massive body, hot and damp, glided over her. Her mind was bombarded with his claims of dominance. Ownership. He had her. She was his. And that's exactly what she wanted to be. Heat converged in her clit, swelling it, stirring nerves. Randi rode the frantic rhythm, gasping, crying, begging for more. Titus pushed the hair off her shoulders and ate at her neck, as crazed and desperate as she was. His palm cradled her skull as he held her hair high on her head. His mouth and teeth devoured every inch of skin he could find. His tongue skimmed the vertebrae at the top of her neck, and he stilled. Her hips jumped, hopelessly trying to keep up the rhythm, but he didn't move. His other hand dove into her hair, shoving it high on her head. A wild moan pierced the room as his mouth came down on the skin just below her hairline.

*Birthmark. Shekra's birthmark.*

Randi gripped the bedspread and struggled against the pending orgasm that clenched her core. The intensity of the buildup frightened her. Never had anything swamped her senses to such a degree. Never had her entire body threatened to shatter so completely. No matter how hard she tried to fight it, she couldn't contain the inevitable. The dam burst, sending her on a fall that had her completely in its mercy. She screamed and held on as Titus's cock swelled, and his hips found the rhythm that would take him over the edge with her. His mouth clamped onto her birthmark, and her mind swarmed with swirls of color and a rush of sounds. Her nipples hardened to a sting, and every nerve in her body erupted like a volcano. Heat flowed through her. Wave after wave of mind-wiping pleasure and hot, hot pulses crashed over her. Her inner walls spasmed, and Titus plunged deep, pressing the full weight of his huge body into her and roaring his release as another heated tide filled her.

She collapsed beneath him, her nerves still ringing and her lungs fighting for air. His come spilled out of her, wetting her thighs and soothing the friction of his cock as he found a slow, steady tempo. Titus sucked at her shoulder, and murmured against her neck until finally he rolled, taking her with him and tucking her close to his side. Nothing could have prepared her for the explosiveness of their connection. Their heavy breaths filled the room, and his palm cradled her breast.

She wet her bottom lip and willed her lungs to calm. "What was that?"

He shifted, pulling her closer and tangling his big leg with hers. "You're empathetic, and I'm telepathic. Makes for a hell of a good time in the sack."

Her ass pressed into his hard abdomen, and she fought to clear her mind. "I'm not empathetic."

"The hell you aren't." His hand moved slowly over her breast. "I gave you an orgasm from across the hall. You can feel and hear everything I send your way."

"But—"

"You have the mark." His hand climbed to her shoulder, and his thumb stroked the skin high on her neck. "Here."

Nerves shot off like rockets beneath his touch, and goosebumps rose on her arms. "That's a natural birthmark."

"The feminine version of Shekra's mark. Pale, flesh toned, and mostly hidden by your hair." He turned her to him, his expression soft and questioning. "Your parents never told you about Shekra?"

She chewed her bottom lip. Her mother, or as her father would say, the "kook" who'd given birth to her, hadn't been in the picture since she was an infant. And her father had never

told her anything that she couldn't find in a book. "Who is Shekra?"

"A psychic, like the rest of us. A true psychic, not a pay-by-the-minute scam artist. She monitors the society, keeps the honest people honest and the crooks as inline as possible." "And Clementine?"

"Her abilities are well-tuned, but she's more interested in money and skirting the law than she is in preserving our heritage or maintaining a safe environment for our children."

The soft sincerity that coated his worry for the children wrapped around her heart and snagged her right then and there. She was completely and utterly lost for this over-muscled, wildly sexual, mind-blowing man. She traced his bottom lip with her finger and followed with a quick swipe of her tongue. "You have children?"

His hand flattened over her belly and cupped her protectively. "Not me, personally. But our people do."

"How are they in danger?"

A cloud settled in his eyes, and his voice dropped. "Imagine what society would do with a kid who could transport himself through a wall or will a rollercoaster to go any speed he wanted."

"Or give a woman an orgasm from across the hall?" The depth of his pain and an acute understanding ballooned inside her. He had been that kid and was now that man. A life of veils and a protected childhood.

*They would have ripped me to pieces, drugged me into a zombie.*

His lips came down fully on hers, and his mouth opened in a kiss. Her tongue couldn't get enough. Her mind filled with hunger, hers and his, a collective bombardment of both their needs. And then another question flooded in. She ended the kiss with a groan of regret, but she had to know.

"Why would Clementine want me dead?"

A muscle in his jaw jumped, and he leaned over the edge of the bed to pick up their clothes from the floor. "Shekra interrupted several of Clementine's schemes, and now Clementine has declared war. She's threatened to kill any of us that have infiltrated her business or cost her a dime." He helped her into her bra. "That's why I'm here. Working security. Someone on our team is playing for both sides, and we have people in Clementine's inner circle. If she finds out, she'll kill them."

"But you won't let that happen."

"None of us will." The Blackberry in the pocket of his pants chimed, and he quickly pressed it to his ear. After a brief exchange, he dropped the Blackberry onto the bed and pulled his pants to his hips. "Your friend has been taken somewhere safe. Getting you out of here will be a bigger challenge."

His semi-erect cock peeked from the open fly of his pants, reminding her why she had been so easily distracted. Thank God Mila was okay. Now it was time to get out of here. This war of psychics wasn't hers, no matter how incredible the sex was or what kind of man she believed Titus might be. She had her own problems to deal with. And thanks to Mr. Mind Games, she'd nearly forgotten about them.

She pulled her buttonless shirt together and tied it at the waist. "I'm fucked." A smile quirked his lips, and she looked away before she got sucked in by his charm again. "Don't be so smug. The sex was great, but without that contract Clementine signed I can't pay my rent. And if you hadn't sent me in to get killed, I could've convinced her to buy our products without putting my life on the line."

“She only buys from companies she has a vested interest in.”

Randi snatched her panties off the bed, furious with herself for trusting a man she didn't know, losing the business deal of a lifetime and getting herself into a situation she might not make it out of. “If that was the truth, she wouldn't need to come to these conventions.” “She's always looking for new blood.” Titus tugged the panties from her hand and stuffed them into his pocket. “You could've convinced her to sign your contract, but she would have owned you. And when you refused to bend to her way of doing things, she would be after you just like she is now.” His hand curled behind her knees, and he slid her bottom first to the end of the bed. “Don't worry about that candy of yours.” His hand slipped between her legs, and his touch scattered every worry from her mind.

Randi moaned in defeat. She couldn't resist him, and she'd be an idiot to try. His head dipped to her throat, and he kissed his way to her ear.

*Trust me. I'm better than chocolate.*

She did trust him. More than she'd ever trusted anyone. More than she trusted her own family. Her common sense had never been pushed around so easily, but with Titus her rationale was overpowered by something innate, something she didn't have the will to fight. And only one reason made any sense.

“My mother was a psychic.” She had almost forgotten. Kook was her father's word of choice, but he'd let the truth slip once when she was six or seven. Somewhere buried deep in her memories she recognized names. Shekra. Even Clementine.

And words. Telepathic. Empathetic. Child cruelty. Her father had saved her, he claimed. From her mother's kooky lifestyle. From abuse.

Automatically, her hand went to the slightly raised birthmark at the base of her skull. The smooth skin tingled beneath her touch. The memories were too old, but in her mind she knew. Her father had taken her from a culture he didn't understand. From people cruel enough to tattoo a newborn and who banded together in almost cult-like existence.

“Your father's psychic, too.” Titus buttoned his shirt and slid her skirt over her ankles. “You didn't know that?”

“My father's not psychic.” Even as she said it, she knew she was wrong. He had always known too much, prepared for things no one would expect, caught her every lie. He was psychic, but he worked hard to hide it. Even from her. She lifted her hips so Titus could slide her skirt into place.

He bent over the bed and planted a lingering kiss just below her navel. “To be marked, both parents have to be.”

She was marked, and she would have gone the rest of her life ignoring what she knew deep in her soul if Titus hadn't forced her to recognize the truth. He had dragged her into the very lifestyle her father had spent years shielding her from. Guilt and a sense of loyalty toward her dad settled on her chest, but one look at Titus and she knew where she belonged. A blast shot through the room, and the door to the hallway slammed against the wall in the entrance to the suite.

Titus yanked her from the bed, and deposited her in a narrow closet. One second he was standing in front of her. The next he was gone. She didn't have to be empathetic to know what he was feeling. Protective rage clouded around him, and an invisible hand pressed her firmly against the wall.

Gunfire and pounding footsteps filled the corridor outside the room and the living area of the suite. The scuffle broke glass, splintered wood and was accented with the thud of bodies

slamming into walls and onto the floor. Another shot rang out, and Titus's pain broadcasted in her mind at the same time the pressure holding her in the closet fell away.

"Titus!"

She ran into the room, her blood burning like acid in her veins. Two men in suits had two others, more casually dressed, at gunpoint. Titus lay on the floor, blood pooled near his abdomen, and his dark eyes flashed with rage. One of the armed men, a tall blond dressed like Titus, lowered his weapon and strode toward her.

*Traitor!*

At Titus's warning, Randi froze. With a grunt, Titus raised himself and squeezed off a single round before he collapsed again. The tall blond crumpled to the floor, and one of the two captives against the wall made a break for it. The other suit leveled the would-be escapee before he made it to the door, and the man on the wall ran to Titus's side.

Randi ran to him, too, her head pounding with an onslaught of sound, her chest filled with emotions, and her abdomen burning in pain. She felt him. All of him. His thoughts, his emotions, his wound. And she knew without a doubt, everything he'd told her was true. The man in the suit stuck his head into the hallway and spoke into his Blackberry while the man at Titus's side ripped open Titus's shirt to inspect the wound. "The rest of them are with Clementine," he told Titus. "I'll meet up with them at the usual place. Contact me when the painkiller wears off." He glanced at Randi then back to Titus. "Can she be trusted?"

Titus grunted. "She's one of us. Been out of the fold for a while though."

She recognized the man hovering over Titus. He had been with Clementine earlier. He had to be one of the insiders that Titus was here to protect. The man reached for Randi and pulled her to her knees. "Keep pressure here." He pressed her hand into Titus's side. "Don't answer any questions. You didn't get a good look at anyone. This was a random attack."

*Do what he says.*

"Owen!" The suit at the door held his gun close to his chest. "Get out of here!"

Owen turned to Randi. "Stay with him. He'll be fine."

In two heart-pounding seconds, Owen and the man in the suit were gone. Randi crawled closer to Titus and lifted his head onto her lap. The pain in her abdomen doubled her over, sending her chest-first into his face. He nipped at her breast, and a shot of lust pierced the pain in her mind. The burning ache dulled, and she looked down into his strained smile and dark eyes.

"You held me in the closet, but you couldn't see me," she said.

"We've got a hell of a connection, candy girl."

A million questions ran through her mind, and the future was sure to tilt her life on its axis. Nothing would ever be remotely the same for her again, and as she stroked Titus's hair, she didn't care what that meant, as long as she got to discover all of it with him. "What do we do now?"

His mouth quirked higher, and the silent message he sent her wrenched a laugh from her throat. "Later, big boy. And that's not all I'm going to do to you." She traced the tattoo on his neck with her thumb. "You have some candy sales to make up to me."

"We take care of our own," he whispered. "Your business will be fine, and Clementine isn't going to get away with this."

She knew he was speaking the truth. "Where's Mila?"

"She's in good hands. They'll take care of her until we get there." His fingers closed over her

arm, and her lips ached for a taste of him.

“Everything’s going to be fine. I promise,” he said.

“You are better than chocolate,” she whispered as police and paramedics charged through the door. “I can’t get enough.”

### **About the author...**

Wendi Darlin grew up twenty miles from the nearest stoplight, minutes to the Gulf of Mexico, and steps from an open pasture. Like any native of the South, she can tell you there's nothing sultrier than a Southern setting, whether it's at the beach or on a rural rolling hill. Warm nights, sweet scented air, and a lazy drawl can absolutely melt a girl. She writes from the home she shares with her husband, son, their two shelties, and Sparky, the little wiener dog. When it's time to take a break you'll find her near the water, usually not far from a white sand beach.

Visit Wendi at [www.wendidarlin.com](http://www.wendidarlin.com).

Also available

## **Hire Hands**

by

**Wendi Darlin**

Forty-two year old, Nora Lambert struggles daily to keep the family ranch running smoothly and has learned to rely on young, sexy Cole Shanahan. It’s been eighteen months since her husband passed, and the loneliness is killing her. More and more often, her sexual fantasies include Cole, but he hasn't shown any interest in her.

Out of respect for her late husband, Cole has denied his attraction to Nora. Until his identical twin, Jesse, makes a move that Cole never dared. Finding the woman he wants in his brother’s arms spurs Cole into action. He's willing to let Nora have both him and his brother. Once. Then he's staking his claim.

## Hired Hands

Nora worried the dishcloth in her hand and stared out over the rolling grass hills behind the house. An offer that was hard to refuse weighed on her mind. Enough money to start over, to make a new life. There wasn't a single damn reason to hang onto the ranch. She tossed the washcloth aside and pulled her long dark hair over one shoulder. No, there was one reason.

She glanced at the empty farmhouse table where her son, Dylan, would normally be shoveling breakfast into his mouth. His chair sat empty, and the stove was cold; only the aroma of coffee filled the kitchen. The house was too silent, and her hands itched for the usual routine. She'd barely gotten used to making meals for just the two of them. And now with Dylan spending spring break with her sister in south Texas, the loneliness hit her hard. Her husband was gone forever, and at thirteen, her son needed her less everyday. She turned back to the sink and the burden on her shoulders.

Dylan deserved the ranch; he'd already lost too much when his father died. This land was a piece of him, just like it had been with Robert. She couldn't let her son lose his home. But she couldn't manage it on her own.

Cole Shanahan was doing a fine job, but he was a young man, hungry for his own place. And it wouldn't be long before he found a way to get what he wanted. There was no guarantee another offer to buy the ranch would come around after Cole moved on.

Maybe it was better to take the sure bet and sell now. What did she know about cattle and rowdy cowhands? Robert had handled all of that. He was a third generation rancher. He managed everything with such efficiency she never had a reason to learn the details of his work.

She took care of the house, raised their son, and loved her husband in every way a woman could. But a year and a half had passed since Robert died, and though the pain was manageable now, the loneliness was killing her.

Tears stung the back of her eye, but she brushed them away with the back of her hand. Through the window, she caught movement in the barn. Her womb fluttered and her thighs tensed. Having a man like Cole around didn't allow her body to forget what it needed either. She dropped her hands, letting them slide down the front of her blouse. Her body ached to be touched. Her lips longed to be kissed. She lay awake at night yearning for the feel of a man pressed hard against her.

One particular man.

She kneaded her nipples and sucked in a sharp breath. A woman with Cole Shanahan sleeping on her property every night shouldn't have to starve for sex.

Another movement drew her gaze to the barn. Disappointment swept through her chest as one of the cowhands loped off. There was no sign of Cole's broad shoulders or his honey-brown hair, mussed from the old Stetson he wore and the wind that rolled down from the mountains. Cole Shanahan was as rugged and beautiful as the land he worked. His dark chocolate eyes swam with gentleness and honesty. He was as dependable as he was strong. Men like him were harder and harder to come by.

Even before Robert died, she had fantasies of making love to her husband while Cole ran his wide rough hands over her thighs, her breasts. She shivered as heat pulsed between her legs. Fantasies like that weren't meant to come true, and she wasn't one to act on them if they did.

Lord, she could imagine them though. Nora's eyes fluttered closed. She caressed her breasts, squeezing against the incessant tingling beneath her skin. Cole. The man brought every urge she had roaring to life.

A breeze whipped through the open window and caught her hair. A whiff of spice and man assailed her. She tightened the hold on her breasts.

"Cole..." she murmured, practically tasting his name on her lips.

"Oh, darlin'," came a low growl outside the window.

Nora's eyes popped open and searing heat rushed to her cheeks. "Cole! I—I didn't..."

His eyes dropped to her hands where they still clenched the front of her blouse. She immediately clamped them to the counter. Her mouth went dry, her arms trembled, and fear and embarrassment struck her like lightning.

Then a hollow ache took over, egged on by the unmasked desire in his dark eyes as he took in her curves. This wasn't a side of the soft-spoken, no-nonsense cowboy she knew at all.

To purchase *Hired Hands* and other erotic titles, visit [www.thewilderroses.com](http://www.thewilderroses.com).