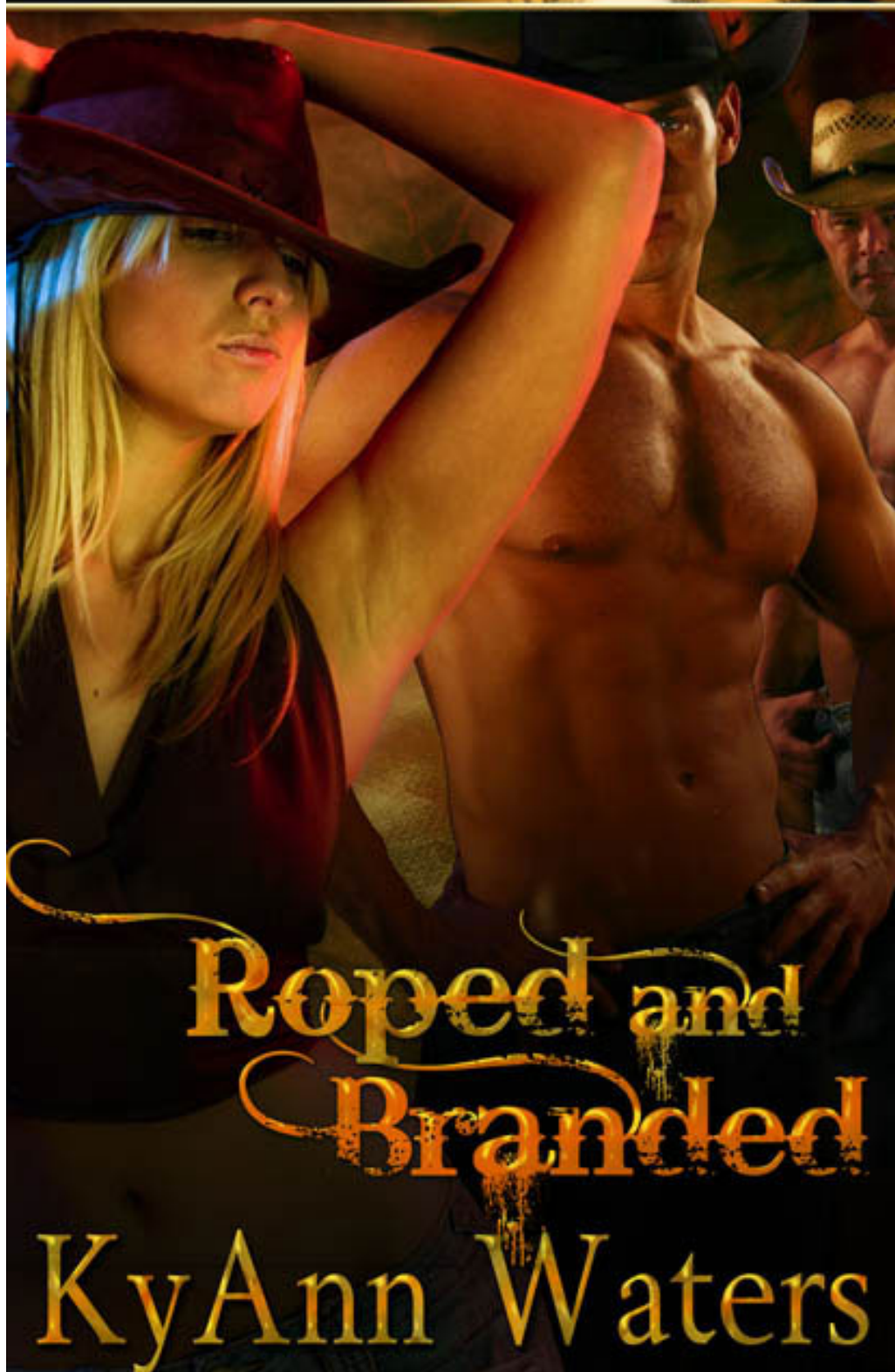


ELLORA'S CAVE **LAWLESS**



Roped and Branded

KyAnn Waters

Southern Texas is in the grips of a heat wave and DaniLee Hunter needs a distraction. The man she wants refuses to acknowledge she's all grown up, but the sexy ranch hand Waco is more than willing for an erotic roll in the hay.

Everything in South Texas stings, bites, or prickles...including Cord Stiles. As foreman of the Iron H, he has enough to deal with—including his growing attraction for DaniLee. She's wild and reckless—and impossible to ignore. It's time she's roped and branded...and he's just the man to do it.

The stakes are high in a late-night *poke-her* game. Cord, Dani and Waco lay their cards on the table. Winner takes all.

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Roped and Branded

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ROPED AND BRANDED

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Chapter One

"Dani, slow down."

"We can't." DaniLee Hunter chuckled. She wasn't sure of the cowboy's real name because everyone called him Waco. She glanced from his dreamy, moss green eyes to the tempting bulge of his cock beneath the brass buckle cinching the waist of his faded Wranglers. She traced the impression of the rodeo steer on the belt buckle. Waco groaned and his bulge flexed.

Dani grabbed his shirt and yanked. Snaps popped and the fabric parted. She stared, mesmerized by the tough, lean muscle and skin bronzed by wind and sun. She trailed a finger down his sternum and over his corded abdominals. His flesh quivered under her fingertips. Damn, the man was cut.

Ranch work hardened a body, even hers. She'd been called a tomboy since she climbed onto that first paint at four years old. At twenty-three, she was grown up and no longer had the small, lean build of a boy. She insisted she be treated like one of the men, but didn't have to look like one.

Waco grinned, shifted his broad shoulders and shrugged the shirt from his body. "We're playing with fire." His gaze darted to the closed barn door. "If your daddy –"

"Are you afraid to get burned?" She cocked her head to the side and slipped the button of her sleeveless cotton shirt free. "Feel how hot I am." Another button. Her shirt gaped.

Waco's stare dropped from her face to her exposed cleavage and his eyes darkened. "Fuck, Dani, how is a man supposed to keep his head around you?" He grazed a work-rough knuckle across a beaded nipple. Pleasure snaked from tip to clitoris.

"Oh baby, you aren't." She stepped closer and took Waco's tan cowboy hat from his head. Sweat dampened the chestnut curls at his temples. He wore his hair long enough

to run her fingers though, and hold on tight to while she sat on his face and rode his thin mustache.

She laughed as Waco impatiently pushed her into an empty horse stall. Her boots crunched the fresh straw on the dirt floor. The musky scent of horse and hay hung in the air.

He worked his belt loose. "There will be hell to pay if we get caught." His voice held an edge of laughter.

"That's part of the excitement." She arched one eyebrow and smirked. "And you know it isn't gentlemanly to tell a girl she isn't worth a little risk."

"I never professed to be a gentleman."

"Good because I don't want gentle."

He chuckled and jerked the zipper down. "I think you know you're worth a trip through hell." He parted the fly and his cock thrust forward from a thatch of dark springy hair.

"Yeah, I know all about you and your hedonistic ways. As long as it feels good—"

A devilish smile tilted his lips. "And, fuck, that feels good." She held his thick length in both hands and squeezed as he hardened further. Soft, smooth skin stretched tight over solid steel. The large bulbous head darkened to a deep red and pearly liquid seeped from the slit. She stroked him once...twice. Her grip was firm and she slid the skin over his rod.

He leaned his head back against the wood beam between stalls and hissed. "Harder, Dani." She squeezed, but his shaft was like rock. "Damn, your hands are strong."

So was her determination. She squatted into the fresh hay. Waco's dick was long and thick with veins bulging in high relief. A rich, earthy smell clung to his skin. She breathed deep, leaned in and tasted his length from base to tip. She circled the crown with her tongue, then took him between her lips and sucked.

Waco fisted his hands at his sides and thrust his hips toward her face. God, everything about the man was whipcord lean. His muscular thighs bent, giving her a better position to take more of his shaft into her mouth. She hummed in the back of her throat and savored the hard, heated length.

His velvety flesh was salty sweet and pulsed within her mouth. She curled her tongue around the ridge then flicked the tip against the slit. Her left hand wrapped around the back of his thigh and her right twisted gently and pumped his cock. She sucked hard, fist meeting mouth in the middle, making him wet and slick with saliva. She pumped faster, working her mouth up and down the shaft.

The barn door rattled.

"Who's there?" Waco jerked his hips, pulled free of her mouth and spun toward the door.

"It's only the wind." She laughed and fell back onto her butt. "Are you that worried about being caught with me?" She reclined back on her elbows and stretched her legs out in front of her. "We're just having fun."

Waco dropped to the ground beside her. "I happen to like working on the Iron H. Your dad is a good man." He circled her bellybutton with the blunt tip of his finger. Her tummy quivered as he traced a squiggly pattern higher.

"My daddy is at the house." She glanced around the vacant barn. "We're alone." She trailed her fingertips up his forearm, combing the soft, dark hairs with her nails. "It's just you and me."

Waco cupped her breast and rasped his thumb over the taut tip. "Ray isn't the problem—it's your keeper."

"I don't have a keeper," she said as if she meant it.

Waco snorted.

"I don't. Cord Stiles has no say in what I do." She kicked off her boots. "I do *who* and what I want." And she wanted to do Waco. Dani lifted her hips and shimmied off

her worn jeans. Then she threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled him down into the hay with her. "Less talk, cowboy."

Waco's lips were firm and demanding, but Dani knew what she liked and how she liked it and he wasn't aggressive enough. She spread her thighs and he maneuvered between them, grinding his rigid cock against her mound. With a shift of his hips, he emulated the slow thrusting of long, deep strokes. Only she still wore her thong. The string was soaked and rubbing against her sensitive clit.

She opened her mouth and glided her tongue along his. Sucking, nibbling and tasting fresh air and raw man. Her heart pounded against her ribs and her tummy fluttered. The delicious cock riding between her legs had her hotter than the Texas sun at high noon.

DaniLee wrapped her arms around his tapered torso and her legs around his lean hips. He groaned and plunged his hot, wet tongue deep into her mouth. Dani ate at his lips, but was growing tired of foreplay. She wanted to ride in his rodeo – wanted Waco to ride her hard and fast. Her pussy clenched, needing to be crammed full of his cock. She didn't want soft and gentle, but wanted on her hands and knees while he drove his dick into her cunt and thoroughly fucked her from behind.

"What the hell are you doing? Get the fuck off her!"

"Holy shit!" Waco leapt off, jerked up his pants, nearly zipping off his beautiful erection. Now *that* would have been a damn shame.

"Cord! Don't you knock?" Dani flopped back into the hay and draped one arm over her closed eyes.

"This isn't the Holli-Dani Inn."

"It could be if you get the hell out." She cracked an eye. Cord Stiles had one hand on his hip and the other holding reins. "Are you going to tie me up and make me behave?" She lifted her gaze from the leather in his hand to his face. "Because I prefer a paddle."

"Maybe I should go." Waco slapped his cowboy hat on his head.

"Yes, get the hell out of my barn and keep on walking." Cord's malevolent glare centered on Waco. "I want you off Hunter land."

Late afternoon sunlight streamed through a crack in the barn and slashed across the ground. Cord stepped forward and the light hit his shadowed jaw and tight line of his mouth. The worn, dusty Stetson covered his black-as-night hair.

Dani jumped to her feet. "Just a second." She figured she looked outrageous with her hands on her hips standing nearly naked between two virile men. But she *was* Hunter land and she decided who stayed and who left.

"Waco, your job is safe. Cord is wound just a little too tight. Maybe he's the one who needs to get laid once in a while." Not that he'd look to her for any physical release. She'd fallen for the dumbass when she was sixteen. Too bad he'd had a moral compass that wouldn't let him veer off course even the slightest bit.

For a couple of years she'd done all she could to tempt him. He saw her as his responsibility. Hell, even told her she was like a younger sister to him. Talk about stomping on her crush with the heel of his cowboy boot. She'd wanted him to be her first, had fantasized about losing her virginity on her sixteenth birthday. The fantasy fizzled when he'd given her small diamond earrings. Not jewelry for a woman, but simple little studs that while gorgeous and most likely expensive, they weren't her. Dani worked *and played* too hard for frills. She was more leather than lace.

Cord took two menacing steps toward her. "Get dressed." He faced Waco. "And get out." He spoke with an air of authority that demanded immediate compliance. Only she wasn't one to follow orders.

She hoped her cheeks weren't red. She popped a hip and mustered all the nonchalance she could. Crossing her arms over her belly, she stared Cord in the face.

A small shiver of awareness streaked up her spine. His eyes left her face, trekked lower and stumbled over her breasts. He coughed once, glanced at Waco, then at the door.

Cord grabbed a horse blanket from the partition between two stalls and wrapped it around her. "You should have more respect for yourself."

"Oh, I have plenty of respect for myself." She poked him in the chest. "It's you who won't acknowledge that I've grown up." The blanket slid down onto her arms, exposing her breasts again.

Waco tipped his hat and slipped out the door.

"A man would be blind not to notice." Cord tugged the horse blanket back over her shoulders and tucked it closed in the front. "That doesn't mean you need to fuck half the men on the ranch."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't go there."

"What do you call what you were doing in here?"

"Fucking *one* of the ranch hands." She dropped the blanket, spun and picked up her jeans. She glanced over her shoulder. His stare was glued to her ass. "I was trying to have some fun." His gaze snapped to her face. "You should try letting loose once in a while."

"There is a time and place for everything. Right now happens to be the time to work and I need Waco in the pastures." He leaned against the barn wall and watched her dress. "We've got twenty-five hundred head of cattle out in the field. They're as much your responsibility as mine."

She jerked her arm through the armhole of her shirt. "They're more my responsibility. But contrary to what you may have heard, I can't make rain...or make miracles. Nothing more can be done. Since I do my praying in church—"

"Waco certainly had you on your knees."

She narrowed her eyes. "I thought I'd release a little stress with a roll in the hay. Since it's hotter than Hades outside, thought I'd sweat a little in here."

"Ray should've taken a switch to your backside."

She tugged her shirt together and slipped the buttons through the slots. "You think you're my daddy. Maybe you can teach me how to behave." She tilted her head to the side and dared him with a lift of an eyebrow.

His cunning blue eyes darkened like the ominous signs of an approaching thunderstorm. "Don't tempt me, little girl. Paddling your backside would be my pleasure."

"Promise?"

He moved with the swiftness of a rattlesnake strike. Suddenly he was upon her, towering above her, then backing her toward the rear of the horse stall. "I know you think you're tough, one of the men. But I don't think you could handle me."

"I can handle anything. I think I prove that around here every day."

His voice was deep and seductive, and cut with an edge of danger. "Ray lets you run wild."

She curled her lips into a smile. "He always has. He still remembers what it's like to let loose and have a good time. Something I think you've forgotten." She laid a hand on his chest. A kaleidoscope of butterflies fluttered in her tummy and her fingers trembled. Cord Stiles was huge, intimidating and the most capable rancher she'd ever met—outside her daddy, of course. Cord worked with a fierce intensity. She respected that—respected him.

But she also wanted to fuck him. He was solid sex appeal and just a glance liquefied her legs and that wasn't the only thing he made wet. She wasn't a virgin, but it wasn't as if she was making her way through the men working the Iron H. Even she needed sex now and again. Occasionally she made the rare exception of a romp in the hay with a ranch hand like Waco. It was just sex and she wasn't going to apologize for having a sex drive. But Cord, now he made her heart gallop like a herd of wild mavericks.

His hand rested on her waist and pleasure slipped through her veins like warm honey but with the intoxication of Rip Milken's homemade spirits.

Was the barn growing warmer, or was it just how close she was to him? A bead of sweat trickled along her hairline. Maybe this was hell. She'd always imagined his hands on her, but always settled for someone else. She leaned closer.

"What about Waco?" he whispered close to her face, his hot breath fanning against her lips as his hand roamed over her hip. His fingers were long and firm and they pressed into her, holding her close.

Or maybe he'd finally show her a heaven under the weight of his body, his cock buried deep in her pussy and his mouth on hers. "Waco is my friend."

"I'm your friend."

He was but he could be so much more. "What do you want?" she asked. "I don't have regrets."

With his hesitation, he proved he had more self-control. She could barely breathe with her heart pounding, standing so close to him, smelling him.

"Two men in the same day?"

Feeling brave because he hadn't pulled away, she nipped his lip. "I can handle it." God, would he finally make a move? If he wanted, he could take her now.

"So you want to have a little fun and you think you can handle me?"

"I think I could handle both you and Waco. Maybe we should've asked him to stay."

Cord leaned his head back and laughed. "Christ, Dani, you are looking for trouble." He swatted her on the backside.

She lifted her chin and curled her lips in a slow smile. "Hell yes."

He stepped around her. "If you're looking for a good time or need to release *stress*, find something else to do besides my men." He shoved open the barn door and strode into the bright sunshine.

Dani bristled, stomped on her boots and followed.

Chapter Two

Throughout the day, resentment and frustration coiled within Cord, twisting his gut into knots. He knew why. Part anger and part jealousy. He wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans.

DaniLee Hunter was going to be the death of him—and the deaths of many other men if they didn't keep their hands off her. Of all the stupid, irresponsible, erotic positions for him to find her in. *Waco*. He shook his head. Waco was a good worker, kept out of trouble—now Cord had to keep him out of Dani. She deserved better than drifting ranch hands. He mentally chided himself, banking the flare of possessiveness. *Yeah, she deserves better than me*. Regardless how much he wished it, she wasn't going to stop being Ray's daughter, wasn't going to stop being flirtatious and reckless.

She needed to get her head in the right place and so did he. The fields hadn't seen a drop of rain in six weeks. However, that wasn't what threatened the cattle. The brutal heat was taking a toll.

His feet felt like anvils as he climbed the porch steps. The day had been long. All he wanted was to check on Ray, grab a bite to eat and head to bed. He walked down the hall and into the kitchen.

"Howdy, Barb." He smiled and hung his hat on the peg by the back door. "Smells wonderful." He lifted the lid to a giant pot of simmering Texas chili. "How's the old man tonight?"

"He had a good day."

Cord worried about Ray. In recent weeks, his health had deteriorated. Doctors couldn't do much more for the stubborn old goat. Too much whiskey, work and women. Ray had lived hard, worked hard and played hard. Moreover, he hadn't taken

care of himself. But that wasn't what was killing him. Not a damn thing anyone could do about Ray's cancer.

Ray had spent his life building the Iron H. More than a hundred years before, the Hunters staked claim on south Texas real estate. Ray Hunter, Sr. and now DaniLee's daddy had seen Hunter land increase to more than ten thousand acres of scrub, hills and streams. Prime cattle land when drought and heat didn't have a stranglehold on the region.

"Damn, woman, I'm hungry. You've made enough for an army."

Barb bumped a generous hip against his. "That's because I'm feeding an army." She opened the large stainless steel oven and pulled out a mammoth-sized pan of golden cornbread.

"Oh yeah," Cord said, "have you got a platoon in your room? I always knew you were a woman with wild ways."

"Shame on you. You know I'm a one-man woman." She huffed and a light blush tinted her cheeks. He suspected the woman who took care of DaniLee most of her life had once been a handful for any man, and not just because of her generous curves and full figure.

Barb had worked for Ray for more than thirty years. More than her employer, she loved Ray. When Dani's mother died, Barb stepped into her shoes and into her bed. She and Ray had kept their relationship discreet in the beginning. Over the years, all who knew Ray and Barb accepted their involvement though Ray never remarried. Barb seemed content with her place in Ray and Dani's life.

"DaniLee has a card game going tonight. That little shit has most of the ranch hands over in her loft." Barbara tsked as she set the bread on the island in the middle of the large kitchen. "You'd think she was my girl for her wildness." Barb winked at Cord then sighed. "But I told her I'd bring the chili and cornbread to go with the beer and whiskey." She cackled. "Hopefully they'll all be half drunk before they deal me in. I need to earn me a little more eBay money. There's an Elvis plate of *Jail House Rock* I

need to add to my collection." She put a hand on her hip. "Do you know that damn plate is already over a hundred dollars?"

"Sometimes your girl needs a good lickin'."

She laughed. "She's your girl too."

"My girl?" Cord stirred the chili and ignored the flash of awareness warming his chest and shooting heat toward his groin. No, she wasn't his girl. She was wild with a fiery temper. They were friends and couldn't be anything more. He worked for her father. And even if that ever changed, she'd still be off-limits. His appetite for sex included more than he could demand from her—he couldn't be rough with Dani. Although she was strong and competent, she was small. A few inches over five feet tall, feminine curved, yet trim. She was a wisp of woman. He cared about her. In his private thoughts, he could admit his feelings went deeper than friendship. "She doesn't listen to a damn thing I say."

Barb shut off the oven. "Maybe you aren't saying what she wants to hear. Never mind now, I need to get this to the poker game." She handed him two potholders.

"She'd better keep the noise down. Ray needs his rest."

Barb gave a snort. "Well, that man isn't resting tonight." She pointed to the pot. "You carry the chili." Barb used oven mitts and grabbed the cornbread handles.

"Why won't Ray be resting?" Cord wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"Oh, honey," she said with a strained voice from the weight of the pan. "You couldn't keep Ray away from that card game. You know how he is. Who do you think brought the booze?"

Anger simmered in Cord as he put on his cowboy hat, grabbed the pot then followed Barb out the side door off the kitchen. Like the peppers in Barb's chili, with each step closer to the gathering, he grew hotter and more pissed.

Last fall Ray had been diagnosed with leukemia. Too late to save him. The cancer left him weak and he needed rest. "Ray's too hardheaded for his own good," Cord muttered.

"Yep, just like you and just like DaniLee."

The Hunter ranch house was a sprawling eight-thousand-square-foot rambler with a detached two-story four-car garage. The second level of the garage had been converted into an apartment—now Dani's living space.

Cord watched Barb's rounded buttocks wiggle her way up the wide steps. A balcony stretched the back end of garage and looked out west over miles of Hunter land. The doors and windows were open and Chris LeDoux's *Life is a Highway* drifted on the evening air.

"Come and get it," Barb hollered.

A chorus of cheers erupted from inside the room.

Dani rushed to the door and swung the screen open. "Just in time. The animals are getting restless." Barb walked past and Cord followed. "You feeling restless?" she asked him when he paused in front of her. Her whiskey-colored eyes sparkled with mischief. She'd cleaned up since he'd last seen her. At least she didn't have straw poking out of her long, dirty blonde hair.

"I see you found another way to entertain yourself."

"Working on it." She invited him in with a tilt of her head. "Waco is here. Behave or you'll have to go home." Her full, kissable lips formed into a knowing smile. "We're having fun."

"I know how you like to have *fun*."

"If you act like an ornery bull, I won't let you play."

"Are you sure I want to play?" He carried the chili into her apartment. The kitchen area was on the left.

Dani's apartment was one large room. No walls, very little furniture, just open space. The room was equal to the size of the garage, only with vaulted ceilings. Hardwood floors had braided country rugs scattered about the room. There were large windows on every wall. Dani slept on a king-size mattress and box spring in the back corner.

The only privacy was the bathroom and a large walk-in closet. In the center of the room was an enormous circular table carved from distressed wood. Weathered and nicked, but with character. Dani had made stools with padded seats out of old whiskey barrels. The men sat around the table playing cards.

He set the chili on the stove. "What's the game?"

She lifted the lid, stood on her tiptoes and peered into the pot. Her cutoff shorts barely covered her ass and her T-shirt inched higher, giving him a glimpse of flat, tanned tummy.

"Poke-her, winner takes all." Dani dipped a wooden spoon into the pot, gave a quick stir and brought a taste to her lips. She blew against the steaming chili.

"Do I hear a veiled invitation?" What the hell was he doing? He shouldn't let her goad him but he couldn't seem to stop himself. Perhaps because they'd voiced intent in the barn. "The man coming out on top is a winner even if he loses."

She sipped from the spoon then set it to the side of the pot. "Sorry, Cord, but there won't be any man *coming* on top." Dragging her finger along her lower lip, she caught a drip of chili. She stared straight into his eyes, licked her finger, then said, "Because I like to ride."

Christ, the woman played with fire. Like a moth to the flame, he followed her to the main part of the room where Ray, Waco, Barb and half a dozen other men laughed. Even with the windows and door open, gray cigar smoke hung heavy in the air. Beer bottles littered the table and filled the trash can near the door.

"Cord, you're going to spoil my good time with that scowl on your face." Ray patted Barb on the ass and handed her his empty tumbler. "Another, darlin', if you

wouldn't mind." Ray pointed his finger at Cord. "I don't want to hear it. I want a drink and a cigar—" He leaned forward. "And if I can get Barb to agree, a little lovin'."

"I heard you," Barb called from the kitchen area. "I told you I won't have you dying in bed." She returned with his drink. "At least not while I'm in it."

"Every man dreams of going that way." Waco tossed his ante into the center of the table.

"Oh, you want fucked to death?" Dani cocked an eyebrow. "Are you looking for someone to send you to an early grave?"

"DaniLee!" Cord exploded.

"Take it easy, Cord." Ray took a hearty swallow of whiskey. "She's just teasing the man. Besides it's not about getting fucked to death, but getting fucked to death by the woman you love." He caressed Barb's generous ass and kept his hand on her hip.

"You keep talking those romantic words and you may meet your maker tonight." She winked. "I'm sure all this dirty talk whets your appetite. So y'all get yourselves over there and eat. If you weren't hot from talking about sex, you will be after a bowl of that chili." She cackled.

The men filed into the kitchen area. Dani waited—her stare locked on Cord. What the fuck had he done to piss her off? Her eyes narrowed and her lips pulled into a thin line.

He crossed his arms over his chest and raised an eyebrow.

"I want to talk to you." She stormed across the room, grabbed him by the shirtsleeve and jerked him out of his stance. "Outside." She practically stomped to the door, whacked the screen door with her palm and slammed it open.

Cord followed her out onto the deck. "Dani, listen."

She spun around. "No, you listen. Stop this! Stop acting like my big brother. I don't want to be your little sister. I get it. You aren't interested."

"Dani, that isn't fair. You don't know what you're asking for."

"Don't start because I don't need to hear your ideas about what's good for me." She leaned closer. "I'll let you in on a secret. I already know what's good for me. But I don't know what's wrong with you. I'd say you're jealous of Waco, but we both know that isn't the case."

That statement might not be far from the truth.

"You come in with a sour-ass attitude. If you can't let loose and enjoy yourself, then leave."

His temper fired up as fast as hers. "Why don't you think of someone else besides yourself? Like Ray for starters."

She shook her head. "Oh no you don't. Don't you dare try to tell me what's best for that man." She thumped her chest. "I know." She pointed into the house. "Barb knows. He's in that room surrounded by the people he loves and who love him."

Tears filled her eyes as she continued. "I'm going to lose him and nothing I can do will change that. Late-night poker games with booze and chili are all he has. Hopefully Barb will take him home, tuck him into bed, then climb in with him. God, don't you get it?" She tossed her hands in the air. "No one knows how long he has. But this is what he wants." She started back into the house, but paused in front of him, meeting his stare. "And sometimes you just have to take what you want. Damn the consequences."

Cord stood on the porch, not ready to go back in and pretend that he wasn't scared to death of losing the old man. All he had in life was in that room, and if he allowed himself to dream, all he wanted out of life was in there too.

Over the past few years, his feelings for Dani had changed. Didn't that make him some kind of sick fuck? He'd known her since she was just a little girl. He'd watched her grow up. Back when she was ten and he was twenty, the ten years between them seemed like a lifetime. She was twenty-three now and grown...and fucking ranch hands in the barn.

When the hell had she gone from pest to pin-up? Because what he saw in the barn today showed him exactly what she'd been trying to give him since she was sixteen. He

faced the open window. Dani hitched her hip on the edge of the whiskey barrel where Waco sat. One hand rested on his shoulder and the other held a longneck bottle of beer. Christ, she drank and swore like a ranch hand, yet had the subtle curves of a woman...a woman he wanted. Maybe it was time to do something about it.

Cord was about to walk back into the house when the screen opened and Barb stood in the doorway. "What's wrong?"

She came out onto the deck. "I want to take Ray back to the house, but I don't want anyone to know...especially Dani. I think you're right. He's had enough but he won't want my interfering in front of everyone. I thought maybe you could come up with an excuse to get him to leave."

Cord cracked a smile. "Make me the bearer of bad news." He wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

"Well, everyone knows you're an asshole."

They went inside. A new game of poker was underway. Cord approached as Waco dealt and worked his way around the large table. Dani discarded and Waco flicked a replacement in front of her. Then she tossed a couple chips into the center, raising the bet.

Ray laughed. "What do you think, boys? Thinks she's bluffing?"

"I never bluff." She took a sip of beer.

Cord tried to peek at her cards. "But you cheat."

She glared at him with her mouth slightly open. "I don't cheat." She chuckled. "Besides, everyone knows the rules before they play with me."

"Do you ever play by anyone else's rules?"

"Is this conversation still about poker?" Jackson tossed chips into the pile. "Because I call." He flipped over his cards. "Two pair."

Ray tossed his cards face up onto the table. "Beats my pair."

It was Waco's turn to show his hand. "Care to make a side bet?" He leaned back, keeping his cards close to his chest.

Dani pulled her lip between her teeth. "Name the stakes?"

"Anything you want, but not here. I'll collect at a time of my choosing."

Cord didn't like the implied stakes.

"So you're saying that if *I* win, I can have something I want?" She narrowed her eyes but her mouth turned up into a mischievous grin. "Whenever I want."

Cord knew exactly what she wanted if the incident in the barn was any indication.

Waco shrugged. "I don't intend to lose."

"Ooohh." Barb rubbed her hands together. "This game is getting interesting."

"You think?" Cord didn't agree. Aside for the confrontation in the barn, he liked Waco. He was a good man to have around the ranch, knew his way around livestock. However, he wasn't going to know his way around Dani. Waco wanted her. Damned if he'd let Dani give in to Waco. "I think it's time to call it a night."

"Okay, winner names the prize."

Shit. The girl had balls.

Waco tossed his cards on the table. "Ace high."

Dani burst into laughter. "All you have is an ace." He had five cards, but not even a pair. "I don't need Lady Luck to win this hand." She fanned out her cards and laid them down. "Full house, kings over tens." She scooped the chips into a pile.

Waco leaned forward. "See the genius of my plan." He lowered his voice. "I still get lucky."

Jackson gave a loud whistle. "She's hot tonight."

Cord agreed and it was time to douse the heat. "Ray, I wondered if I could talk to you."

"Not now, we're ready to deal another hand."

"Actually it can't wait. I need to go over the losses this week."

Barb put her hand out to Ray. "Come on, let's go home. I'm tired."

He patted her hand. "The game will break up soon. Go ahead without me."

Barb looked to Cord.

Shit. It was getting late and Ray did look tired. Happy, but tired. "Ray, I'd prefer to talk tonight."

"Later."

"It can't wait."

Ray waved a hand, attempting to dismiss the subject.

"Ray, the barn is burning down."

Jackson laughed and stood. "I guess that means the party's over, boys."

"No, Lady Luck is with me." Dani glanced at the clock. "I guess it is late."

Not that it would matter if she did want the game to continue. The men were gathering their hats and tossing their beers into the garbage.

All except Waco. He walked into the kitchen and cut another piece of cornbread, as if he belonged in the apartment...like he was home.

"Good night, Daddy." Dani hugged Ray, then Barb.

"I'll help Barb get him home." Cord glanced at Waco then back to Dani. "Do you want some help cleaning up?"

"Waco's sticking around. I think we can manage," she said.

Cord had to help Barb. He didn't want her tripping down the stairs with Ray. Tension tightened his gut. He also didn't want to leave Dani with Waco, and he didn't like the direction of his thoughts. After he'd found them in the barn, he knew what would happen once they were alone again. Thoughts of Waco and Dani together were less disturbing if he was here with them. He didn't want left out, didn't want Dani seriously involved with Waco—didn't want her seriously involved with anyone.

"Cord, you coming?" Barb stood in the doorway.

He glanced over his shoulder. "Yep." He turned back to Dani. "But I'll be back."

He strode across the room and out onto the deck. He'd started down the stairs when he heard Dani holler after him. "Don't worry about coming back over," she said. "I'll see you in the morning."

Not a chance in hell.

Chapter Three

The full moon cast a glow on the path from the garage to the house. Ray grumbled about being the reason the game broke up.

"You can't push too hard," Barb said. "You need to think about Dani. If you don't want your health to stand in the way of your life, then you need to accept when it's time to call it a night."

"I don't want Dani to remember me sick." Ray clutched Barb's arm for support. Cord went to his left side. He didn't want to rob Ray of his dignity, so he just stayed close in case Ray needed his help.

"Then don't be stupid," Barb continued. "She'll live her life with guilt if she thinks she could have kept you around a little longer."

Ray turned to Cord. "Speaking of that, I need you to make me some promises."

"You don't have to ask, Ray. You know I'll take care of her."

"She's not a little girl anymore. She's capable of running this ranch." He slapped Cord on the shoulder. "With you at her side."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"You ride her too hard."

Ray had no idea how hard Cord wanted to ride her. His cock warmed with arousal.

"I can die in peace if I know you're here to take care of my girls."

Cord smiled at Barb.

"Oh stop," she said to Ray then glanced to Cord. "I can take it from here. Thank you, hon, we'll see you at breakfast."

Cord tipped his hat, spun on his heel and practically sprinted his way back to Dani's. He quietly ascended the stairs, acknowledging the thoughts in his head. He

remembered the way she looked in the barn—hot, eager and demanding. At first he'd been unable to speak, he'd stared as she greedily kissed Waco, had her hands on the man's dick and spread her legs for him.

Cord's cock had been hard since, and growing harder the closer he came to Dani and Waco. His boots were quiet on the deck as he expectantly went to the door.

Dani sat next to Waco, facing him. A bottle of whiskey was between them on the table. Waco flipped over his card. Her head fell back and her seductive laughter slid over Cord's skin, down his spine and into his dick—but she wasn't flirting with him.

She stood from her barrel and straddled Waco's lap. Her hips gyrated, just like she was fucking him. "You win. What do you want?"

Dani blocked Waco's face with her body, so Cord couldn't see his expression.

Waco wrapped a hand around the back of Dani's neck and jerked her mouth to his. His other hand went to her hip, encouraging her to grind against him. Her silken blonde hair fell like a curtain to the middle of her back. Waco fisted his hand in her locks until his knuckles whitened.

Dani moaned and Cord walked into the house.

She glanced over her shoulder, then jumped from Waco's lap. Damn, she was turned-on. Her lips were red from kissing and her cheeks flushed with color.

Waco pushed back his stool. "I guess it's time for me to go."

Dani put her hand on his shoulder, silently asking him to stay. "The party's over." She glanced at the clock. "And it's late."

Cord crossed to the large table, grabbing a beer on his way and pulled up a barrel chair. "I'm not tired."

"Are you sure you want to be here, Cord? Because Waco is staying."

"So am I." He could handle her with Waco—so long as she wasn't shutting him out. He couldn't take his eyes off her, but he spoke to Waco. "Are you up for another round?"

A devious smile pulled at the corner of her mouth. She shifted, sat on Waco's lap while continuing to stare at Cord and said, "Oh yeah, he's *up* for it." She arched her back and leaned toward Cord. "Would you like him to prove it?"

Waco coughed and thumped his chest with his fist. "I'm not sure we're all talking about playing cards."

Dani pivoted and nipped at his lips. "We can still play cards...and have a good time." She glanced over her shoulder. "Cord, I hope you remember how to have fun. I know it's been a while."

Cord tipped the beer to his lips. Hell, it'd been too long. He didn't want to fuck around. He wanted Dani. Before he'd walked through the door, he'd known that tonight wouldn't be about just them. When he'd discovered her in the barn, in a veiled way, she'd invited them both to this moment. "Let's play."

"This is my house, my life and you know how much I have wanted you to be here. But what happens tomorrow when you feel guilty?"

He'd rather deal with tomorrow – tomorrow. "Dani, I'm a big boy. I can handle it."

"Waco?" She leaned in and whispered, "Don't worry, I promise you'll feel good."

He gripped her hips and chuckled. "Then I'm game. What are the stakes?"

Dani moved to the barrel between them and picked up the cards. She began to shuffle then paused and glanced to Cord. "Me." She dealt each of them two cards, one face up. "Twenty-one is the game."

"What are the rules?" Waco picked up his hole card.

"No rules." Cord set his beer on the table.

"I might cheat."

"Someone still wins," Cord said. "We're playing against Dani, not each other."

She lifted her stare from her card to Cord. "And if I bust?"

"Then we both win." He ran his finger along the lip of his beer bottle.

Dani visibly swallowed. "I recall a recent conversation we had in the barn."

He hadn't been able to think of much else. "Are you sure this is what *you* want?" His gut clenched. Now he'd crossed the line. He hoped to God she didn't want him to leave, because now that he was here, he intended to stay. While they were on the deck, she'd given him some advice. *Sometimes you just have to take what you want. Damn the consequences.*

"I've always know what I've wanted." She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth then let it pop free. "Tell me what you want."

"I want to be here, with Waco, and fuck you."

Waco whistled and tipped his beer to his lips. "I guess that 'bout says it all." He drank.

"Not quite." She leaned into Waco and took the beer from his hand. "Do you want to kiss me?" She took a sip.

He closed the space between their faces. "No, I want to fuck you too."

She smiled. "Then you have to get twenty-one."

Never before had Dani wanted to lose at gambling. Cord had set the rules, now she'd make him work for his winnings. Adrenaline pumped through her veins and her body heated.

She propped a foot on the edge of the barrel seat. "Dealer plays last." She held the deck, ready to give Cord another card.

"I'll stand."

Her heart tripped on a beat. Cord was an aggressive gambler. He had to have to good hand. She moved on to Waco. He tapped the table once. She flipped over a card. Six of diamonds.

"I'm good." He grinned. "Very good."

"Of that I have no doubt."

Waco chuckled. "That's what I love about you. You know what you want."

She brought her gaze back to Cord. "I do." She dealt herself another card. "But I don't always get what I want." Maybe tonight she finally would. No doubt, they were all heading for the bed. That didn't scare her. She liked Waco—but she loved Cord. This might be her only chance to show him. She flipped over her cards. "Seventeen."

"Sometimes you don't know what you're asking for." Cord turned over his hole. The jack of hearts and the nine of spades. "I play for keeps."

Waco turned over his. "And I play to win." He had twenty.

Excitement of knowing Cord was going to watch her with Waco flashed through her. Warmth flowed into her pussy and her chest tightened. Would Waco want her to give or would she receive?

"So what do you want?" She stood and took a step closer. "You could make another gamble. Flip a coin, heads or tails?"

"Either way I'd win. You have a nice ass, but your mouth is very tempting. So I'll get started with a kiss."

Dani sat sideways on his lap and draped her arms over his shoulders. "Just a kiss?" She brushed her mouth softly against his. He sipped at her lips as his hand inched inside her shirt.

"Maybe a little more."

The days were too hot to wear a bra. He cupped her bare breast and stroked a thumb over her taut nipple. She moaned and took the kiss deeper. His tongue glided along hers. Gentle suction sealed their lips. Shifting angles, she wiggled against his erection.

Damn, the man could kiss. She broke for breath.

Cord grabbed his beer and adjusted on his barrel chair. "Deal."

Dani chuckled at the clipped demand. She went back to her seat and dealt the next round.

Waco waved her off. "I'll stay."

"You must have a good hand." She faced Cord.

He hesitated, then tapped the table for a card. She flipped one over. "Fuck! Twenty-three."

"So, cowboy, what have you got?" Waco had nineteen. "Ah, too bad." She flipped over her cards. "I win."

Dani stood, yanked her shirt over her head and dropped it to the floor. She cupped a breast in each hand and pinched her nipples. Her skin was alive and sensitive to her own touch. Chills broke along her arms and a steady ache pulsed in her pussy.

Slowly, she trailed a hand down her tummy and into her shorts. She closed her eyes, feeling their stare as she touched her damp curls.

More daring than she'd ever been before, she unsnapped her shorts and shimmied her hips until they dropped to her ankles. She shifted her gaze onto the men. "It's too hot for clothes."

Cord growled and ran his fingers through his hair. "Christ, Dani."

Waco laughed. "I think we need cold beers." He slapped Cord on the shoulder as he went to the kitchen. "Dani?"

"Yes, I'm feeling rather warm."

A muscle ticked in Cord's jaw and his eyes darkened. "You're having fun."

She wagged her brows. "Absolutely. Are you?"

His penetrating stare made her shiver. Dangerous, predatory, he watched her like a hawk stalking its prey. Any moment he could swoop down on her. A ribbon of fear snaked around her chest and squeezed. She knew that once she'd had a night with Cord, she'd want more. Much more.

She turned to Waco. "There are condoms in the top right drawer in the bathroom."

Waco set the beers between them then went to get condoms.

"Cord, tonight is going to change us."

"I know."

Then why was he here? Not that she'd wish him anywhere else. But he hadn't wanted her until he'd discovered her in the barn with Waco. Unlike a toss with Waco, Cord had her heart. She knew him. If he convinced himself tomorrow that this was a mistake, that he regretted his decision, she'd be devastated. For years, he'd rejected her but after tonight that rejection would be unimaginable. Then why wasn't she backing out? One glance at Cord and she knew why. Even with his stubbornness, she wanted him.

When Waco returned, she dealt the cards. He showed a seven. The ace of spades for Cord. Her tummy flipped and her pulse spiked. "Are you feeling lucky?"

Cord checked his hole card and smiled. "I will be as soon as you finish dealing the cards."

She slowly flipped her card—another ace. Their gazes connected and she felt the pull from the tips of her toes to the peaks of her nipples.

"Fuck this." He launched off his barrel, and in an instant was at her side. He grasped her shoulder with his calloused hands and hauled her to her feet. His mouth descended, claiming her lips as he kissed her.

Only it wasn't a kiss. He plundered, demanded, thrusting his tongue into her mouth as his hands roamed over her naked flesh.

Cord growled and pulled her tight to him. Her breasts crushed against his chest, her stiff nipples prodding into him. She twined her arms around his neck. As long as she could remember, she'd imagined being held just like this, feeling his cock riding between her legs. She hadn't expected to feel fragile or for him to be so overpowering. He exuded strength and raw masculinity. He was taking her and all she could do was hold on.

He cupped her ass and lifted her against his erection. The denim of his jeans rasped against her soaked, swollen folds. She dripped cream, ready for anything he wanted to give her.

Cord ripped his mouth from hers and kissed along her jaw. He backed her toward the wall, only she bumped against Waco's solid chest first.

Waco steadied her with his hands to her hips. It felt like there were hands everywhere. Cord's on her back, Waco's on the curve of her ass—then her inner thigh. A shiver chased over her skin. Waco sifted her hair through his fingers and brushed it to the side. Then he kissed her shoulder, aligning his cock with the crack of her ass. A rush of liquid heat surged through her body and pooled in her pussy.

Her head lolled to the side. "I hope one of you had twenty-one." Breath hissed through her teeth.

Cord bent and latched on to one nipple. He greedily sucked her breast into his mouth. The sensation tugged on her clit. He rolled the nipple between his tongue and his teeth and then gently bit.

"Fuck." Cord jerked his shirt down his arms and off. Her mouth watered. With each move he made, his washboard abs rippled. She had to touch him. She skated a finger down his sternum, following the feathered, downy soft trail of hair to the waistband of his jeans.

"Waco, let me have her." Cord put one arm under her knees, one around her back and lifted. He set her on a barrel. Leaning forward, he kissed her.

Dani closed her eyes and sought his tongue with her own. She whimpered as his thighs spread her legs. His work-rough hand glided up her inner thigh. Cupping her mound, he parted her folds and curled a finger into her pussy.

She shuddered with pleasure. His finger was thick and unbending. Plunging deep, he coaxed her juices to flow. A second finger stretched her, scissored back and forth until her internal walls swelled. He increased his speed, thrusting and prodding, searching for the spot to make her come apart.

Dani gripped his arm, her nails leaving crescent shapes in his skin. "I'm going to come."

Cord chuckled. "Always say, 'Let the lady go first.'"

While Cord finger-fucked her, Waco went around the room and closed the windows, drapes and locked the door. No one was leaving tonight.

When he was back at Dani's side, Cord pulled his fingers from her pussy, touched his tongue to her tangy flavor and grinned. "I think your pussy might be the only thing sweet about you."

"Sweet is boring." Waco touched her curls. "In south Texas, everything stings, bites and prickles—just like Dani." He slid his finger into her. "And it's hot—just like right here." He flicked his finger.

Cord rose and crossed to where Dani had long strips of leather from the tack room hanging by the door. He grabbed a three-foot section and returned to her side. After he stripped off his jeans, he put his hand on Waco's shoulder.

Cord had never been modest. That he was about to share Dani with another man didn't bother him—not like walking in on her and Waco in the barn did. Tonight he was claiming her. In Dani's own words, this was fun. However, he didn't want to find her in the barn ever again.

Dani leaned her head back, and cried out as her body convulsed. Waco slipped his fingers from her pussy and brought them to her lips. "Taste yourself." She hesitated, still euphoric from her orgasm.

Dani refocused on Cord. Her eyes clouded with desire. Then she wrapped her hand around Waco's wrist and brought his fingers to her lips. Her pink tongue flicked against his skin and tasted her juices. Then she sucked his finger into her mouth and mimicked how she pleased his cock with her mouth in the barn.

Cord fingered the strip of leather, adrenaline coursing through his veins. His cock ached and his mouth watered. He could smell her hungry cunt.

With a glance, he had Waco moving out of the way. He braced his hands on the table, one on each side of her. He lowered his voice. "I'm done fighting against us."

She blinked a few times and lifted her chin.

He kissed her, a soft, gentle kiss to show her he'd never hurt her. But where Dani was concerned, he had to have some rules. She was wild and impulsive and he was jealous and overbearing. "After this, there's no going back."

"Then you want sex between us to mean something?"

"Hell yes." He glanced over his shoulder. "I'm sure it means something to Waco too."

"Yeah, but I don't want you to get the wrong idea." Waco smiled at Dani. "We're just having a good time."

"Absolutely." She grabbed Cord by the waistband and tugged him closer. "I want you here, you know I do, but I don't want Waco to leave."

"Neither do I, but, Dani, we stop unless you and I come to some understanding." Heat raced into his shaft. If he wasn't hard before, his erection bordered on painful. He wouldn't beg, but if she didn't speak soon he might bend.

"You aren't my daddy." Her shoulders stiffened.

He chuckled, low and controlled. "Be assured. I don't want to be."

Her eyes tracked down his sternum, over his stomach and paused on his cock. Her fingers pressed against his girth. "What do you want from me?"

He released the breath he was holding. "You know me, but you don't *know* me." He covered her hand. "When it comes to sex, I can get a little rough."

"And you like to share."

He glanced to Waco and smiled. "Sometimes." He turned his gaze back to hers and their eyes locked.

"When it comes to sex—" Her eyes shifted to Waco then back to Cord. "Or anything else, when haven't I liked it rough?"

He kissed her, spearing his tongue between her lips, grazing her teeth and savoring the silken heat. He tightened his hold and she whimpered melting into him. Tight, perfect nipples prodded against his chest. He released her lips, then bent and latched on

to the raised tip. She tasted good. He laved one then the other with firm swipes of his tongue.

"Stand up," he whispered against her lips. Cord grabbed the leather and handed it to Waco. "Tie her hands."

"You want to tie me up?" she asked, her tone laced with excitement.

"Wait a minute." Waco put up his hands. "I want a willing woman."

"You heard her. She's willing, now tie her hands," he commanded. "Behind her back."

Cord stared hard into her face and tenderly brushed her bangs from her face. "Trust me."

"I do trust you." She stood and put her arms behind her back. She gripped her right wrist with her left hand and her left wrist with her right hand. "Do what he says." She gave her back to Waco.

"With your elbows bent, you won't be uncomfortable," he said, twining the leather around her wrists and crisscrossed it along her forearms. "Are you afraid?"

"Of you and Cord?" She glanced over her shoulder at Cord. "No."

Warmth spread through Cord. He positioned himself behind Dani and wrapped his fingers around the front of her neck. He pressed his cock into the crack of her ass and let his fingers drift lower, over her breasts.

Leaning in close, he whispered to her. His breath ruffled her hair. "I'm leaving the rest up to you." He rolled her nipple between his thumb and finger. "Spread your legs for me and tell Waco what you want him to do."

She glanced to Waco. "I want you naked."

Waco unzipped his jeans and pushed them past his hips. He paused and glanced to Cord.

"We all know anything that happens tonight stays between the three of us." Cord narrowed his gaze. "Just between us."

Waco nodded and stepped out of his jeans. "Just a late-night game of chance."

Cord slid his hand down her stomach, across her pelvis.

Her bound arms fumbled to grasp his cock. "Please," she whispered.

"No."

"Then touch me."

Cord petted her curls, tracing her slit with the tip of his finger. Cream slicked his hand as he parted her folds and rasped a finger over her clit. Her knees nearly buckled. Waco knelt in front of her and she widened her stance.

"Such a pretty pussy. Pink and wet." Waco flicked his tongue against her labia, then slid it between her hot inner folds. Cord braced her upper body as she leaned back, trying to give Waco more of her pussy to tongue.

Reaching between his legs, Waco squeezed his dick. Between the two of them, they'd ride Dani hard. Cord followed the crack of her ass with his fingertips until he reached her hot, wet sex. Waco lapped at her slit and sucked her clit as Cord plunged two fingers into her cunt.

"Ah, yes, fuck me."

Waco propped one of her legs onto his shoulder, spreading her wide. "Condom," he said to Cord then stabbed his tongue into her pussy again.

Cord grabbed a rubber off the table and quickly sheathed his cock. The dynamics were different than he'd done before, but if Waco didn't mind dick with his pussy, neither would he. This was about Dani. She'd given herself to both he and Waco and she'd get the ride of her life before morning.

Positioning at an angle, Cord caressed her ass.

Dani moaned, gripping her bound hands into fists. Cord kneaded her firm buttocks, then spread her cheeks apart. Her nails scratched his stomach as she searched for something—anything to hold on to.

She balanced on one leg, her other on Waco's shoulder. Waco held her steady as Cord fit the head of cock to her opening. Waco backed away a few inches, and Cord drove slowly home, stretching her as he filled her full of his cock.

Holy shit. Cord's cock was huge. She bit hard on her bottom lip and relished the sweet agony. God. Cord, the man of her fantasies, was sinking his cock into her slick channel. Oh so good. Her walls convulsed around his shaft. Rearing back, he then plunged hard again. Steady and deep, his thrusts were punishing in intensity.

Oh, kill her now because this had to be heaven. Waco's mouth was on her pussy. Heat exploded in her clit and her legs liquefied. With each rasp of his tongue and each plunge of Cord's cock, she slipped further into the delirium of lust. Pleasure unfurled within her as waves of sensations rolled through her body. She wiggled against her confined arms. She needed to grab Waco's hair and ride his face.

She whimpered and a pulsing started deep in her center. She trembled, gasped and careened toward release. His tongue lapped faster, lashing up, down and over her clit, sipping her juices. Oh God, she came. Violent spasms contracted her channel. "Oh yes, yes. Oh my God, yes! I'm coming."

Cord clutched a fistful of hair, drew her head back, exposing her neck. He kissed her, nibbled her flesh, then sucked. Pleasure spiraled out of control. Intense euphoric waves washed over her. Muscles tightened and her core continued to convulse.

Waco stood, grabbed a condom off the table. She struggled to catch her breath. Her heart galloped and her muscles melted.

Cord pulled out and spun her around. "Wrap your legs around me."

She whimpered, struggling to stand. "I can't—not with my hands tied."

With a jerk on the leather, the bindings slackened and Waco freed her arms. Blood rushed into her hands in stinging pulses.

Cord lifted her. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders as he carried her to the bed.

“Am I going to take you both?” she whispered near his ear, flicking her tongue against the whisker-rough skin of his neck.

“I’m going to fuck your mouth, your sweet pussy and your ass.”

She smiled. “Promises, promises.” A rush of cream flooded her cunt. She wanted this—wanted them both. Cord was strong, determined and often overbearing. She wanted nothing less during sex. “I don’t want soft and timid.”

He sat on the edge of the bed. Her knees straddled his hips. She lifted, grabbed his cock and lowered onto his length until she had all of him buried deep inside.

With a hand on her jaw, he kissed her, his tongue pushed into her mouth both firm and demanding.

Cord held her hips and groaned. “Fuck, you feel good.” He latched on to her breast, sucking the nipple. She felt the pull in her pussy and gyrated her hips. Throwing her head back in abandon, she rode his cock, reaching for another orgasm.

Cord released her breast. Still seated at the edge of the mattress, he fell to his back, taking her with him. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.” She was breathless and energized. The feel of Cord’s large hands on her was enough to make her agree to anything—as long as he kept on fucking her. “Waco, there’s lubricant in the bathroom.” She smiled at Cord. “Hurry. I want you both.” She shifted, lifted and plunged hard on Cord’s cock. She rode him like this was her first rodeo and she was going for broke.

“I’m not going anywhere.” Waco moved in behind her. “Hold her still.” Her ass was in the perfect position. Cord held her hands in his and stretched their arms above his head. Waco palmed her ass. With a gentle caress, he pulled her cheeks apart and slipped a finger, slick with lube, into her puckered rosette to the first knuckle. The cool gel countered the sting of penetration. A few plunges of his fingers had her backing into his hand. “Ready?”

“Yes!” She released a shuddering gasp as he pressed forward and pierced her sphincter with the crown of his cock.

Dani cried out as he inched forth. The tightness of her rim relaxed and Waco eased out then drove in again.

Cord held still and kept her immobile while Waco continued the slow slide into her rosette. Both Cord and Waco had big cocks and she took pleasure in every inch stretching, burning and consuming her. Waco spread her cheeks and increased his speed. With each slam home, she cried out.

She bucked against Cord. They thrust in tandem, matching a rhythm that had her breaking apart. Heat surged through her body. Her breasts pressed flush against Cord, her nipples jabbing into his chest. Waco gripped her hips. He was driven, fucking her ass until the erotic sensations of having both pussy and ass plundered had her reaching for release. Sparks flashed behind her eyes. She tugged on her arms, but Cord held her too tightly.

Dani had no choice but to take all they gave her. With Waco fucking her ass and Cord buried balls-deep in her channel, she shattered. Rhythmic convulsions of her pussy gloved Cord's cock and her rim clenched tight to Waco. Hot juices rushed from her center and made her wet sheath even slicker. Cord thrust harder, faster, unbelievably deeper. They fit her perfectly, their cocks filling her to bursting.

"Oh fuck!" Cord released her arms, grasped her hips and pounded into her with the strength of a raging bull. Now that her arms were free, she braced her palms on the bed, and arched her back.

"No arms." Waco grabbed her biceps and yanked her arms behind her back, jutting her breasts forward. Pulling tight, he leveraged his thrusts and crammed her ass full of his cock.

"Hold her," Cord gasped the request, then came. His muscles bunched, his jaw clenched and his cock pulsed in her pussy. Pleasure strained his face.

A thrust later, Waco jerked her arms back hard. His groan became a shout. Strong fingers bit into her flesh. He pressed deep and stilled. Breath hissed between his teeth.

Sweat slicked her skin and her heart pounded. Cord's chest rose and fell with heavy breaths. Behind her Waco struggled for a breath as he slipped from her body. He gently kissed her shoulder and rubbed circulation back into her arms.

Cord ran his fingertips along her thighs. "Are you okay?"

She rose on her knees, releasing him. "I'm great." She just didn't think she could walk. He'd milked every ounce of energy from her body.

Pleasure still pulsed in her pussy, a soft contraction revealing just how many times and how hard she'd come. She scooted to the top of her bed and collapsed onto a pillow. Melting into the bed, she let the tension of great sex slip away.

Warmth filled her and the musky male scent of sex surrounded her. Not only did she have her fantasy of Waco fulfilled, she'd finally had Cord in her bed. She lifted her heavy lids. Both he and Waco had pulled on their jeans and spoke in hushed tones in the kitchen. Waco gave a nod and Cord laughed. Her tummy swooped. Worry, that only a moment ago she didn't feel, niggled at her. She hoped they weren't talking about her. She'd be damned if she'd let them.

"I'm not sure what secret deal y'all are working on over there, but if it includes me, I want in on the conversation." She climbed off the bed and stood on weak legs. "Just because we've had sex doesn't mean you have a free pass anytime you want it." It might be a little late to be indignant. The ménage was her idea, wasn't it? She jerked on the bedspread, tugging it off the bed. She stumbled in the material as she wrapped it around her body. "This was still my choice. So don't assume the door is always open to come in and fuck me."

Waco grinned as she approached. "Would never think of assuming anything. You know what they say when you assume, you make an 'ass' out of 'u' and 'me'."

Cord leaned against the counter and sipped a beer.

"Don't you have anything to say?"

"Plenty. But you don't seem like you're in the mood to listen?" His words held an unspoken promise. She tamped down the uneasiness churning in her belly.

"No." She brushed past him. "I'm tired." And more than a little sore. Yet, she wouldn't tell them she also felt exhilarated and energized. Still, she wanted to sink into a warm bath and relish in the delicious aches in her body. Tomorrow she'd have to deal with another scorching day and dead cattle in the fields. And whatever repercussions stemmed from their encounter.

As incredible as it felt to have both men lavish their attention on her and fuck her numb, she had responsibilities. They could have sex, laugh and play a game of cards. Waco was the wild card. She gave a mental chuckle. That's why she got along so well with him. She enjoyed being around him and he was so completely opposite of the way Cord treated her. Waco lived day to day. Cord worried – about her, Ray, the Iron H and ranch hands like Waco. He carried responsibility because it suited his temperament. Actually she understood Cord's position. He was a dominant, aggressive man. She wouldn't want him any other way. That's what appealed to her. She didn't want to be tough all the time. Cord had played her perfectly. Only with Cord, she didn't want to be played. She wanted whatever was between them to be real.

They weren't in bed now. What happened between the three of them couldn't carry into the morning.

"So, I'll see you both at breakfast."

Waco crossed to his discarded shirt and shrugged it on. Then he headed toward the door. He leaned in and kissed her. He wasn't rough and ravaging as he had done during sex, but kissed her sweetly, tasted her tongue briefly and gently threaded his fingers through her hair. She sighed and sank into the kiss. Finally he released her mouth. "See you at breakfast, beautiful."

Chapter Four

Cord slipped his shirt on while Waco gave Dani a goodnight kiss. Not that he wanted to leave, but he needed to speak with Waco about Dani.

She was headstrong and stubborn. Hell, she had to be. The ranch hands wouldn't respect her if she showed weakness. Managing the Iron H would take a strong hand—managing Dani was impossible.

Waco walked out the door, giving Cord an opportunity to say goodnight in private, acknowledging that there was something more between he and Dani.

Looking into her face, Cord felt his gut clench. After years of denying his desire for her, he almost couldn't bear to walk away.

He kissed her briefly with lips, tongue and hands. After he parted, he said, "Sleep well." Because he would be back.

Cord followed Waco down the stairs. Crickets chirped from the darkness. Heat from the day hadn't dissipated with the setting of the sun. His thoughts went to the cattle in the fields. Unless the heat wave broke, they'd continue to pull dead livestock out of the pastures. Tomorrow he'd talk to Dani and Ray about selling off most of the herd before they succumbed to the elements.

"I can't say I don't have concerns."

Cord startled from his thoughts. "Yep." He inhaled deeply. "I have plenty on my mind." Not just about the cattle, Ray, Dani and now the potential complications of a sexual triangle.

"Will tonight change my position here on the ranch?"

Cord cast a quick glance at Waco. "Yep, suppose it will."

Waco nodded. "Play it straight with me. I know you were pissed off in the barn today. Tonight was a bit of a shock, but I can roll with just about everything." He raised an eyebrow. "I don't worry much about the future. Right now I enjoy living for the moment. I think Dani is a lot of fun."

"She is, and I know the two of you have become friends."

"Good friends." Waco chuckled. "But I don't expect to have an open invitation to Dani's bed. Fuck, Cord, we all know she's in love with you. But if you weren't going to fuck her..." He shrugged. "She does what she wants. If she wanted to do me, no way was I turning her down."

"I'm hoping tonight changes things between me and Dani." Cord paused and stopped Waco with a hand to the forearm. "What happened tonight doesn't have to become complicated. But after being with her, I'm not going to let her go."

Waco nodded. "Understood."

"Thank you." He put a hand on Waco's shoulder. "I'm not saying sex between the three of us has to be a one-time event. It'll be up to Dani. I needed you to know where I stand."

Waco cracked a grin and continued on the path to the bunkhouse. "After tonight, I can't help but hope that invitation is quick in coming."

He liked that Waco accepted the situation. He'd always been protective of Dani, even when she didn't want his interference. Muscles stiffened in his neck. He rolled his shoulders. Teasing him was like teasing an ornery bull. Dangerous and volatile. But a smile still tugged on his lips. Now they could work off their disagreements in bed. In fact, he finally found a way to get her to say yes.

"I'll see you in the morning."

Waco chuckled and continued toward the bunkhouse. "I'd ask you to give her another kiss for me, but I don't want my ass kicked."

"Waco?" Cord paused.

He spun around.

"Thanks and I'm sorry about earlier in the barn."

"The way I see it, everything worked out fine." Waco tipped his cowboy hat. "G'night, Cord."

Hell, the sun would be up in a few hours. Cord crossed the yard. The lights were still on at Dani's. A ribbon of tension tightened his jaw. He wasn't sure what his reception would be, however, he had no intention of going back to the bunkhouse.

Dani's slightly off-key singing dwarfed the low music on the stereo. She gathered beer bottles from the counter and drained them into the sink.

Cord opened the screen.

Dani squeaked and dropped the bottle in her hand. "You don't ever knock, do you?" She put a hand to her heart. "You scared the shit out of me."

At least this time he didn't discover her with her clothes off and another man sliding between her smooth, tapered thighs.

She bent and picked up the two large chunks of glass. He rushed to her side. "Careful, don't cut yourself."

She gave a snort as he took the pieces from her. "Thanks." She dusted her hands on the seat of her cutoffs. "Why did you come back? Did you forget something?"

He tossed the glass into the trash. "Yes, this." He pulled her close and slid his lips languidly over hers. Nothing rushed, but a gentle nudge with his tongue had her lips parting and his tongue snaking into her mouth.

Dani clutched her fists in his shirt and curled her tongue around his. Tasting, wanting and urging him to give her more. With a shift of her hips, she pressed against his erection. A low groan rolled from his chest and his arms banded around her narrow frame. She fit him perfectly. Maybe she always had.

Over the years, he'd noticed her growing up, changing and becoming not just a beautiful woman but also a competent ranch owner. She was strong and assertive with the men. Part of him acknowledged he never wanted to break her of that.

But now she was in his arms. *His woman*. And he didn't want to share her. He trailed his hands down her back to her buttocks. Her cheeks fit his palms perfectly. The girl he'd watched grow up, the one who had followed him around while he'd worked the ranch, then teased him with her young body as she discovered her sexuality, that girl was gone.

"You're mine," he whispered.

She laughed and gently bit his bottom lip. "About time you figured it out, cowboy."

With brief touches of lips, he softly kissed her as he unsnapped her cutoffs and ripped the zipper open. "Take them off."

With a shimmy of her hips, she pushed her cutoffs to the floor and stepped out of them. Cord grasped her at the waist, set her on the counter and spread her legs.

Dani pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. A moment of hesitation and her eyes flashed with uncertainty. Then a hint of a smile turned her lips up at the corners. She glanced down, then lifted her gaze and met his stare. Warmth flushed through his system. She scooted fully onto the counter and widened her legs.

Saliva moistened his mouth and he ached for a taste. His cock swelled into the zipper of his jeans. Swallowing hard, he banked the need to free his dick and plunge into her cunt. Moisture glistened on her soft curls. Running his finger along the seam, he gathered the creamy wetness.

"Tonight changes everything between us."

"Then you finally acknowledge I've grown up and I'm not my daddy's little girl anymore?" She tugged her tank top up and off. "I'm a woman."

"My woman." His gaze fixed to her high breasts and rosy tips. He ran his knuckle over the smooth slope. She shivered and arched into his touch. She was all long limbs and feminine curves with milky flesh.

One night of sex didn't make a relationship, but in the beginning, they'd had friendship. After years of wanting and denying the burn in his chest whenever he was with her, the connection between them exploded with the first kiss.

"Does that mean we'll have more private late-night card games?" She grabbed the front of his jeans and jerked him closer.

"Aren't you worried I'll get jealous if another man puts his cock in your mouth?"

"After tonight?" She chuckled. "You...jealous?" She gave a snort and lowered his zipper. "Even if I thought you were capable of jealousy —"

Oh, he was capable.

"Waco is my friend. We wanted the same thing, a night."

"Just one night?"

She glanced down. He curled a finger under her chin and raised her face.

"It's not the same as when I'm with you," she whispered. "You know I'd rather have your cock in my mouth." She slipped her hand into his jeans and gripped his rigid shaft. "I can prove it." She licked her lip. "Take off your jeans, Cord."

His name slipped from her tongue and hit him in the gut. She spoke with the lazy Texas drawl of a woman speaking to her lover.

Cord stepped back and tugged off his boots. Pushing his jeans past his hips and down his thighs, he then kicked them off. He grabbed his dick at the base and slid the stretched skin over the solid length beneath. Pleasure streaked into his balls and liquid seeped from the slit. Just hearing her say she wanted to suck his cock had him hardening to the point of painful. Stroking his shaft had blood rushing from his head. Muscles tightened. He squeezed harder.

She shifted to jump from the counter. "Not tonight, sweetheart." He stepped between her thighs and aligned his cock to her passage. "You're mine now." She wrapped her legs around his hips and he thrust balls-deep.

And he was finally hers. Dani dug her nails into the solid wall of his muscular back. Flesh rippled beneath her fingertips. Each fierce thrust of his cock burned her with his brand. Her pussy was tight around his girth, relishing in the heated friction of his shaft sliding in, stretching her taut, then pulling out.

Playing with Waco was nothing compared to having Cord's full attention. Pleasure washed over her in waves, building momentum, carrying her to release. His hands stroked along her spine, to the curve of her hips. Then his firm fingers grasped her buttocks and lifted.

She gasped. His cock sank deep into her slick sheath. Locking her legs around his hips, she bounced on his cock as he lifted and lowered. Cord fucked her with an intensity and hunger that robbed her of breath.

Cream flooded her channel. "I'm coming." Tears burned behind her eyes. Good hell, since when did she cry during sex?

Never.

Because she'd never been with Cord, never been with a man she loved.

"Ohfuckohfuckohfuck. Yes!" Sparks shattered and flashes of brilliant light sparkled behind her closed eyes. Contractions pulsed around his cock. She drew in a ragged inhalation, caught in the storm of his powerful movements.

With a growl, he turned and slammed her back against the wall. Pounding into her, he rode her hard, demanded more. She cried out then sank her teeth into her bottom lip.

Cord sucked, licked and kissed along her neck. Her thighs couldn't spread wide enough to give him the depth he needed. She felt as if she were breaking apart...and it felt wonderful.

She held tight, her breasts flattening against his chest as he carried her to the bed. Damn, the man had stamina and strength. His solid erection just continued to thrust in and out, ramming into her pussy with unquenchable desire.

She fisted her hands in his hair and yanked his mouth to hers. He was strength and wildness, control and aggression. She trembled in his arms, coming undone. He understood exactly the way she wanted sex—the same way he did—rough, fast, and hard.

Still holding her, Cord tumbled onto the bed. She lay on her back as he braced his body with his arms. Possession glinted in his piercing eyes. But also something more. Tenderness. She'd seen glimpses of his feelings for her in the past. He kept such firm control on all he did. Like Waco had said, everything in South Texas stung, bit or prickled. Cord was no exception.

But not tonight. Tonight he just burned. Blazing passionate kisses over her flesh, filling her heated depths with his solid rod, God, she was on fire for him.

Overwhelmed with emotion, she gave him more. She clenched her internal muscles, trying to keep him deep. The full strokes of his cock plunging into her pussy slowed and he leveraged higher. They were a perfect fit as he glanced to their joined bodies and stared at his shaft sliding into her. She arched her hips, reveling in the powerful way he controlled his rhythm. Cord mastered all he did—including her.

The muscle in his jaw clenched and his body strained above her. The connection intensified.

Faster. Oh fuck. Pleasure spiraled through her core. He dug deep, ground against her, then banged his cock into her pussy. Cream gushed from her center and the wet sounds of their bodies slapping together blended with her heavy gasps. Her heartbeat pounded in her head.

“Cord!” She clawed at his shoulders, trying to hold on as he fucked her up the bed. Hard, vigorous thrusts, staking claim to her.

He stretched his neck and with a shout, erupted. His cock pulsed in her pussy. Jets of hot cum slicked her passage as he rode his orgasm like a champion bull rider.

With a heavy exhalation, he lay on top of her. Dani absorbed his weight. His cock twitched in her channel and her legs still wrapped around his waist. Threading her fingers into his hair, she cradled his head where it rested on her shoulder. Soft kisses tickled her neck and his touch gentled to a caress on her outer thigh.

Rolling to the side, he glanced at the red numbers of her alarm clock. "I need to be in the fields in two hours." He flopped to his back and draped an arm over his eyes. "Let's go to bed." He tugged on the blanket.

Her lips twitched into a smile. She'd never extended an invitation for a man to stay the night. Apparently, Cord didn't require one. "Aren't you going home?"

He leaned over and rested his large hand on her hip. "Dani, I am home."

Chapter Five

A rooster's screeching call pierced the predawn morning. Cord blinked against the sun's intrusion. With only a couple of hours of sleep, the day would be long.

He stretched then kissed the top of Dani's head. "Morning."

"It's an illusion. Go back to sleep. We still have hours before anyone will need us." Dani curled into a ball and snuggled against his side.

"If we have hours..." He slid his hand beneath the blanket. Her skin was warm and soft. Cupping her breast, he rasped a thumb over her nipple.

She shifted her legs against his and bumped her ass against his swelling erection. "You'd think I'd be sore, but I can't seem to say no to you."

"Remember that." He slid a finger between her cheeks, pressed against her rosette, then deeper to the moist folds of her pussy. Circling her velvety entrance, he then slid his finger into her. "Open for me."

Her back arched and she reached between her legs. Her pussy dampened further as she pressed her fingers against her clit.

Dani rolled to her back, spread her thighs and he moved onto her.

"Why the smile?" he asked, his cock nudging her opening.

"Truth?"

"Always." He poised ready to plunge his hot, hard rod into her.

"I still can't believe you're here...in my bed." She wrapped her leg over his and attempted to impale herself on his shaft. "Now fuck me."

"Not yet."

"Cord. Please."

He chuckled.

Footfalls sounded on the wooden steps leading to her place. "Cord! Holy shit." She shoved hard then scrambled away from him. "Someone's coming."

Cord pulled her back into the covers and banded his arms around her middle. "You will be once I bury my cock in you."

"Not now!" She struggled against his hold. "Is the door locked?"

"Fuck if I know."

The door opened. "DaniLee? You still sleeping, honey? Breakfast is on the table at the house. Your daddy—"

Dani flopped onto the bed and covered her head. "No one around here knows how to knock!"

"I'll be damned. Isn't this a sight to behold?" Barb clucked her tongue. "I told Ray something was going on between the two of you. After last night at the poker game, we kind of thought...well, it doesn't matter what we thought. Your daddy is going to be happy to know you two finally figured out what the rest of us have been seeing for years."

Dani bolted upright. "You can't tell him!"

Barb put her hands on her hips. "You give me one reason I shouldn't and it better be a damn good one."

Tugging the sheet from Cord, she scrambled from the bed. "Get up and get dressed." She tripped on the bedding on her way to grab his pants. "I don't want him to know...not yet." Finding her own shorts, she dropped the sheet and stepped into them without panties.

"Calm down." Cord sat on the bed, only the blanket covering his nudity.

"Calm down?" She pulled on a tank top. "Get up." She turned to Barb and pointed a finger. "You know what he'll assume and I don't want to give him the wrong impression."

"Oh, honey, I think I have the right impression."

"Barb, I love you like a mama, but I swear to God, I'll tie you to a chair before I let you tell him about me and Cord." She raked a hand through her hair.

Cord lay back and laced his fingers behind his head. "Barb is a smart woman. She knows exactly what's going on."

Dani blew her bangs from her eyes. Barb know? Impossible. How could she when Dani wasn't sure herself? Heat rushed into her cheeks. That was the crux of the issue. Cord wanted her. That wasn't the same as loving. Without a single doubt, she knew she was capable of running the ranch. Since her daddy had started getting tired, and then the diagnosis, the day-to-day responsibilities had fallen to her and Cord. Truthfully, she didn't want to run the Iron H without him.

Pushing him into a relationship might push him out of her life. That she wouldn't let happen. Not when she finally had him in her arms...and in her bed. Fear twisted in her gut. Her dad was dying. A day, a week, a month? They didn't know how long they had. She had to be grateful for every sunrise. She didn't question whether Cord cared for Ray and everyone on the Iron H. Nevertheless, she didn't want to be anyone's obligation, or their security blanket.

A night of naughty poker and hot sex didn't wipe away the years of rejection. The timing sucked. He had to stay because he wanted to and she had to know she wasn't a means to an end. She was the Iron H. Cord had to want her more than the ranch.

"DaniLee, you're worrying for nothing." He patted the bed. "Come here."

Dani swallowed the lump in her throat, his voice seeped into her soul and her heart wanted to believe the sincerity glinting in his eyes. She approached.

Barb shook her head. "I'll be damned. She can listen to reason."

She stopped, turned and narrowed her eyes at Barb. "I did just spend the night in bed with him. That doesn't mean he's broken and branded me."

"Bullshit." Cord launched out of the bed and grabbed her around the waist.

"Cord, let me go."

"Never."

Barb squealed and covered her mouth. "You've roped yourself a wild one."

Cord held on to Dani, pinning her arms. "Run, Barb! I'll hold her down."

"Stop! Barb, get back here!"

"Barb, do what I say." He leaned into Dani. Warm breath feathered against her ear. "I guess I haven't explained the situation to you well enough," he whispered. "Would you prefer to talk here or in front of Barb and Ray? Not that it makes a damn bit of difference to me. I know what I want."

She stopped struggling. Her pulse raced and her breathing grew shallow. Not from the exertion of fighting against Cord's hold, but fearful of what he'd say once they were alone. She glanced to Barb. "I guess we won't be down for breakfast."

She paused at the doorway. "What should I tell Ray?"

Cord shifted. "Tell him we're having breakfast in bed."

"Don't you dare tell him that. If you do I'll break every one of your Elvis plates."

Barb gasped. "You don't have to be spiteful."

"Then tell him we're going into the fields checking the livestock."

Barb hesitated. "Fine. I suppose it's your business." She grabbed the door handle. "Maybe I should lock the door." She tsked. "You two are old enough to know better. Anyone could walk in here."

"Not if they knocked."

The door clicked shut and Cord dragged her down to the bed. In a swift movement, he had her flat on her back and straddled her.

"Now you and I are going to talk." He held her arms to her side.

"I can't talk with your penis so close to my face."

He chuckled. "Do you want me to scoot closer or farther away?"

"That depends on what you want to use my mouth for. Talking or tasting?"

He climbed off. "I want to talk."

She sat and nodded. Cord tucked a tendril of her hair behind her ear. The simple touch caused a flurry of flutters in her tummy.

"There's no reason to keep our relationship from Ray."

She gave a snort. "Until yesterday, we had a friendship."

"Until last night, I'd been an asshole."

"You're still an asshole."

He stared hard into her face. "Dani, you came into my life when you were young. Your father is my best friend, and I want more than a casual romp. I'm not Waco and I'm ten years older than you. All or one of those reasons was enough to keep me from doing something I was absolutely certain I'd regret." He was silent a moment. "That you might regret."

"I don't regret last night." She wiggled away from him. "That doesn't mean I'm ready for a public declaration and if that woman blabs—" She pointed to the door. "I'm screwed." She scooted off the bed. "And yes, I'd be screwed either way. Getting screwed by you is fine, but I'm not ready for Barb's interference." Dani tossed his jeans on the bed then bent and slid her bare feet into sneakers. She straightened, flipped her hair from her face and glanced to Cord. "See you at the house."

"Dani, wait."

Ignoring his outburst, she crossed the room, unlocked the door, grabbed her cowboy hat off the peg and took off after Barb. When that woman was on a mission, she could move. If Dani didn't hurry, Barb and Daddy would have her future with Cord planned out. She took the stairs two at a time and tore off across the hard-packed dirt. Muscles in her legs burned. Damn, she was sore from Waco and Cord. Ignoring the bite of pain, she jogged up the main house steps and crashed through the front door. She glanced left then right, then gulped air as she stalked down the hall. In four steps, she reached the kitchen. At the threshold, she braced her hands, one on each side of the doorjamb.

Barb stood at the stainless steel coffee urn. "You look winded, DaniLee." She cocked an eyebrow. "What have you been up to this morning?"

Dani narrowed her gaze.

"DaniLee!" Cord bellowed from the foyer.

She closed her eyes and started counting to ten. Cord was at her back before she reached four.

"We need to talk."

Barb took two more mugs from the cupboard. "Come on in. Breakfast is ready." She pressed the lever on the urn, filling the mugs then set the cups on the table. "Sit down. We can have a nice chat."

Dani glowered at her smug smile. "I'm not in the mood to chat." She crossed the room and kissed Ray on the cheek. "Morning, Daddy. How'd you sleep?"

"Fine." He patted her arm with his weathered hand, his gnarled fingers giving her a gentle squeeze. His strength was waning. Ranch work had taken a toll on his body. The disease was taking the rest. "How's my girl?"

"She must be hungry," Barb said.

Dani tossed her hat to an empty chair then sat across from Ray. "I'm starving."

Barb set a plate in front of her. "I'm sure you've worked up an appetite. Plus you'll need your strength to keep up with—" Her eyes shot to Cord. "With the men."

She nearly choked on a sip of coffee. If Barb only knew — there had been two men.

Cord came into the kitchen, grabbed one of the mugs and leaned against the counter. He lifted his mug for a sip of coffee, his piercing blue eyes locked with hers.

Dani inhaled, tamping down her awareness of the slightest details. His posture appeared relaxed, that just-tumbled look, but she could feel tension rolling off him.

An hour ago, she'd had her fingers in his dark, ruffled hair, last night had those whiskered cheeks between her thighs. When he crossed his arms over his defined chest,

a flutter swirled in her belly remembering the way those cabled arms had felt wrapped around her.

She trembled internally. But damn it, she wouldn't let Cord see the effect he had on her. The man already claimed her heart. She wasn't going to rush him. Just because she'd jump right back into bed with him didn't mean the issues that had always been between them weren't still there.

"Today is no different than yesterday, or the day before that." She didn't smile, making sure her meaning was clear to both Cord and Barb. "Nothing has changed."

"Damn frustrating too."

Her head snapped to Ray. "Huh?"

"Nothing has changed." He slapped the table with his palm. "Still no sign of rain."

She released a breath but her heart still galloped. "You're right. No rain." She shot Cord a look of warning. "We do need to talk about the cattle, the ranch and what to do about it. That is all we need to talk about."

"There's going to be more dead cattle in the fields."

"Maybe we should sell off most of the herd."

"We'll take a loss." He lifted his tired eyes to Cord.

"If we can hold out, the prices might improve." Local ranchers were all thinning their herds. With the surplus of supply, prices were bound to bottom out.

"Not if we only have dead cattle to sell."

Cord nodded. "I just want to make sure we explore all options."

"Unless you can do a rain dance, we're out of options."

With the conversation shifting to safer topics, Dani stabbed several sausage links and put them on her plate. "We could have the herd moved within a few days."

Ray nodded. "I think it's best. We'll be lucky to stay in the black this year."

"You don't need to worry about the finances," she said, and bit into the spicy link. "We can have a couple of rough years and still pull through." He'd been a frugal

rancher. The Iron H came first. In good years, money was spent wisely and in leaner times, Ray had known how to tighten the belt so ranch hands didn't lose their jobs and the Iron H still prospered.

Clicks sounded from Cord's cell phone.

"Cord!" Jackson's frantic call came through the push-to-talk feature.

Cord unclipped the phone from his belt. "I'm up at the house. What's up?" He released the side button and waited. A few seconds passed. "Jackson?"

"Yeah, I'm here." His breathless words came in a rush.

Dani rose. Fear tinged Jackson's voice and caused the hairs on the back of her neck to prickle.

"We need the dozer."

Cord's gaze snapped onto hers. He was thinking the same thing she was. Given the heat and drought, needing the dozer meant only one thing. Dani whirled and raced to the front door, bolted off the porch and peered into the western sky. She turned a full circle, taking in the entire skyline. Cramps clenched her chest and her stomach rolled. Dark, angry funnels of black smoke billowed in from the distance. "Wildfire!"

Chapter Six

The front door crashed open as Cord rushed onto the porch and down the stairs, headed for the barn. Dani tore off after him.

"It's the Dorado," he shouted. "Jackson is already on his way. Tim will get the bulldozer over to Dorado land and start making the break line."

"Your phone," she ordered. Cord tossed her the phone and she called the county fire department, then the nearest surrounding ranches. Because of the drought, a fire now didn't just jeopardize the Dorado but every property within twenty-five miles. A mild breeze could stoke a small grass fire, easily becoming a devastating environmental nightmare.

"Find out if it's crossed into Hunter land. I need to know what we're dealing with."

Dani nodded and with each phone call, pieced together more information. A few acres burned, but the flames were moving fast and heading toward the Dorado homestead.

Last, she dialed Waco.

"Fire," she stated into the two-way radio feature. "The Dorado."

"Where's Jackson?" Waco demanded.

Tears burned her eyes. The Dorado was Jackson's family ranch. Jackson's dad had wanted to give him the experience of working for a large ranch like the Iron H. After a couple years, he could go back to the Dorado, apply all he'd learned and turn the small family ranch into a force to be reckoned with. He had the drive and the skills. Ray had taken the kid in and taught him well. Cord had told her he hated to see the day come when he'd lose Jackson. He'd done well by the Iron H.

"He's already heading over. I'm with Cord. Where are you?"

"North pasture. I have a couple of guys with me."

Dani turned to Cord. "I hate to say it, but we need to think about Iron H stock." Her stomach twisted. "We need to secure the herd, and then help at the Dorado."

Cord nodded. "You're right." They crossed the property to Cord's truck.

"Waco," she said into the phone. "Have the men drive the cattle to the south side of the river. We can swing by and pick you up."

Cord quickly gathered tools from the barn, tossed them into the bed of the truck and then he climbed behind the wheel. "We'll be there in five minutes."

She disconnected and handed the phone back to Cord.

For now, her questions and concerns about what had happened between them didn't matter. Personal problems paled in comparison to the potential danger facing the Dorado and other ranches in the area. Right now, their reality encompassed triple-digit temperatures with zero precipitation. With so many hot, dry days, Texas was a tinderbox waiting for just this type of disaster.

"The county will start with water drops," he said as he turned the ignition, stepped on the gas and drove north. "If more than a few acres are burning, the dozer is going to have a hard time staying ahead of the fire."

Cord raced across the fields, through streams and jarring ditches. The truck bucked and dirt sprayed from the tires, leaving a trail of dust in their wake. Dani pointed to the Silverado up ahead. Several mounted cowboys waited near the truck.

Waco barked orders, telling them where to move the herd. "Secure the stock and keep your radios on. We'll keep you updated on the direction of the fire." He opened the passenger door of Cord's truck and Dani slid to the middle. "Let's go."

They sped toward Dorado land. Waco leaned his head out the open window. He put his hand on his hat to keep it from blowing off. "There's the county chopper." The bird whirled above them, a heavy balloon of water suspended from the belly.

In the distance, red and yellow lights flashed against the darkening horizon. "Damn, this is going to be bad." Inevitably, the fire was going to spread. Dani hoped they stopped the blaze before it destroyed the Dorado and before the flames reached Hunter land.

Cord parked the truck a half mile from the burning scrub. Bulldozers, tractors and men with shovels turned the dry, hard soil. Several mowers worked in a line, cutting a forty-foot-wide swath of ground. Hopefully by cutting off the dry brush fueling the flames, they'd contain the fire because there was little chance of rain. Closer to the flames, firefighters backburned to the break line.

Dani tied the bandana around her nose and mouth. Hot air burned her throat and lungs. She tucked a pair of work gloves into her back pocket. Grabbing a shovel out of the bed of the pickup, she joined the line of ranchers and ranch hands.

She smiled as Waco took position beside her. Cord walked the line. She assumed he looked for Jackson. He returned a few minutes later. "There's another mower at the Edwards' place. I'm going to drive over and bring it back." He glanced at Waco then back to Dani. "Will you be okay here?"

"What?" She cupped a hand around her ear. Hearing Cord was difficult over the constant thrum from the farm equipment. Screeching blades whacked the scrub and the revved engines of dozers vibrated through the ground and into her body.

"I don't know where they'll want the mower. I might end up near the barn or the house. Will you be okay until I get back?"

She chuckled. There had to be thirty men in the vicinity. She couldn't throw a rock and not hit one. "I'll be fine." His gaze roamed over her face. Intimate tenderness warmed his eyes. Answering warmth heated her tummy. He'd always been concerned for those around him. This was different. "Take care of you and I'll see you later."

He patted his radio. "Stay in touch. I want to know where you are at all times. This bitch could turn and I need to know you're safe."

She gave him a salute. "Yes, sir."

He swatted her on the butt. "Waco," he hollered. "Watch her ass until I return."

Dani laughed. "I like watching yours," she hollered back as he walked toward the truck. Worn jeans hugged his lean hips and long legs. She smiled, relished the flutter in her belly.

A moment later, he drove off and the easy bantering was forgotten.

Hours passed but the flames didn't cross the break line. Black smoke thickened the air. She couldn't be sure how much time passed because the dark sky blocked the sun. Today would have been another hot, dry and windless day, but fire created weather of its own; lightning, wind and unbearable heat.

Waco handed her a bottle of water. "Thanks." She tugged off her right glove then removed the bandana from her face and wiped her brow. Tipping the bottle to her lips, she took a long drink. Cool water trickled off her chin. "I haven't seen Cord." She worried about him and about Jackson. Men like them bled for the land. Hell, she and Waco weren't any different.

Waco adjusted his cowboy hat. His mouth tightened and he looked toward the east before facing her again. "I just spoke with Jackson. Cord is at the Dorado homestead, what's left of it." He kicked a dirt clod with the toe of his boot. "The house is gone."

"Oh my God." She covered her mouth with her hand. "Is anyone hurt?"

He shook his head. "Only livestock."

Dani nodded. Livestock were the rancher's lifeblood, but loss of life wasn't recoverable. She glanced over her shoulder to the smoldering distance. The Dorado wouldn't be the same after today. "I suspect Cord will be a while." Several men gathered their tools.

"The fire isn't spreading." Some hay bales still burned, but the direction shifted and the fire slowly burned itself out. Most of the Dorado herd and all neighboring properties were safe. "I guess we can head back to the Iron H. We can meet up with Cord later."

Dani took off her other glove. She tucked them into her pocket. She glanced to a group of men to the left. Cord had the truck so they'd have to catch a ride back to the Iron H. They walked over to the men.

Dani leaned against a fence post and listened to the details.

"The fire had moved fast," Tim, one of the Iron H men, said. "There just wasn't time to save the house." He faced Dani. "How're you doing?"

"Tired." She wrinkled her nose. "Sad."

"We all feel the same way." He bumped her hip.

Dani lost her balance and she slid off the narrow post, scraping her shoulder. "Ow," she cried out and jerked away. "Shit." The post was rough and jagged. Blood dotted her shirt where it clung to her flesh.

Tim grabbed for her. "Oh hell, I'm sorry, Dani." He helped her to stand.

She chuckled but flinched from the pain. "I think I'm more tired than I thought."

"You're hurt." Waco rushed to her side. "Can I look?" She turned, giving him her back. He pulled the material from her skin. "Shit, you look like a porcupine."

The post had felt like brushing up against a bed of nails. Her skin stung.

Waco glanced to Tim. "Give us a lift back to the Iron H?"

"Let's go." They said goodbye and Waco helped her into the cab of Tim's Chevy.

"Waco, it's a scratch. I'm fine."

"I'll stop worrying once we take a look and get those splinters out of your pretty skin."

She narrowed her eyes. She didn't need him playing nursemaid in front of Tim. When it came to work, they weren't equal. She was the boss and his tender touches were going to make her look weak.

As they rode back to Hunter land, they passed a burned-out gully and numerous charred trees. Acrid scents of fire hung in the air and ash covered part of the trail. In the distance heavy machines continued to turn the soil and once the sun went down, water

drops would hit any remaining glowing hot spots. In the meantime, she needed to speak with Ray and Barb. The Dorado was going to need the help of the Iron H.

Chapter Seven

Cord stretched, feeling the pain of every aching joint and muscle. Smoke, soot and sweat stained his clothes. His hair matted to his head beneath his cowboy hat. Sorrow weighed like lead in his gut.

Jackson planned to take his dad Ben and stepmom Maria into town for the night. The Dorado was a small family ranch. In minutes, fire had destroyed the house, but they'd saved the barn. Cleanup would take days, rebuilding months and recovery years.

Cord had watched friends lose their home today. Made him appreciate all he had. Last night, he'd felt damn lucky. Tonight, he felt damn lucky again.

Earlier he'd wanted to join Dani and Waco, but Jackson had needed him to try to save the house. Once the house was lost, he'd stayed longer. Jackson had been frazzled yet determined. Cord had to give the man respect. Seemed natural for him to step into his old man's shoes and coordinate the firefighting efforts until County arrived.

Heat radiated off the hood of his truck and blurred the horizon. The setting sun dipped low in the sky. He'd called Dani's cell. When she hadn't answered, he'd dialed Waco.

Worry wormed its way into his thoughts. After today, he didn't want to take anything for granted. Especially DaniLee.

Stifling-hot air blasted him when he climbed into the cab of his truck. His dry throat screamed for water and his stomach grumbled. With a heavy weight on his chest, he turned the ignition and headed toward Hunter land.

He called Roger on the cell phone. He'd been working the line with Waco and Dani.

"Roger, where are you?" He hadn't realized how tense he'd become. "Have you seen DaniLee?"

"Yeah, she's hurt. Tim took her and Waco to the Iron H."

Cord's stomach rolled and heat raced into his face. "What happened?" he snapped.

"I don't know. I wasn't with them. News travels fast."

Not fast enough. He stepped on the gas. Damn it. He should've stayed by her side. She wanted to be tough, be seen as one of the men. She was going to have to learn the even the strong, capable DaniLee Hunter had limitations.

"I don't think it's serious," Roger said. Cord hoped he was right. He'd never forgive himself if something happened to her.

"Thanks." He couldn't talk, could barely think. He thought of Dani. What could have happened? Was she burned? His throat welled with emotion.

Racing along the worn ruts linking Hunter and Dorado property, he couldn't drive fast enough. He had to get to her. Several minutes later, he parked the truck in front of the Iron H. His sprint ate up the distance between his truck and the front veranda steps. His boots hit the wood planks. The hollow echo mimicked the empty feeling in his chest.

He burst through the door and hollered. "DaniLee!" He headed straight toward the bustle and noise coming from the kitchen. "Where is she?" Cord took three steps into the kitchen. He was breathless and his heart pounded.

"Seems you came running in here this morning yelling for her." Barb set biscuits on the table. The aroma of fried chicken hit his nostrils. Barb had a fryer the size of Texas on the counter. Dozens of chicken legs popped and sizzled and at least two dozen men crowded around the table with cold beers in their hands and corn on the cob on their plates.

Something wasn't right. If Dani was injured, where was the concern? "What's going on?"

"You're just in time to eat."

"I was told Dani was hurt."

Barb was too busy with the noisy group in her kitchen to slow down and talk to him. He stepped into her path.

“Roger said she was with Waco and that she was hurt.”

“I don’t know where he heard that. DaniLee was fine when I saw her a little while ago. Now eat.”

Relief washed over him, but he didn’t understand how the miscommunication could happen. If she had answered her phone, he wouldn’t have jumped to the wrong conclusion. He drew a deep breath into his lungs and sighed. He didn’t think he’d ever been that scared.

He reached into the pile of chicken in the center and grabbed a golden brown drumstick. Then he bit into the meat and moaned. “This is the best chicken I’ve ever had.”

“You’re just starving. Right now, cardboard would taste like steak.” She pointed to a chair. “Sit down and eat before you fall down.”

The chair legs scraped the floor as he pivoted the chair around and straddled it backward. “Thanks, Barb.” With the relief of knowing Dani wasn’t hurt, his body sagged. The sorrow of the day crashed over him and stripped the last of his energy.

“It’s going to get a might busy around here. But like I told DaniLee, if I can cook for fifty I can cook for a hundred.” Barb handed him a beer. “She asked Ben and Maria to stay here while the Dorado is rebuilt. We have the room. I figure, for the next several weeks, the Dorado men will take meals here too.” She sighed and returned to the fryer. “That girl has a special way about her. Tends to everyone but herself.”

Yeah, he knew that. Actually, he loved that about her because he operated the same way. “Where is she?”

Barb dabbed sweat off her brow with a dishtowel. With the men chattering and food being passed around, the kitchen was noisy. Cord stared hard at Barb so she’d see he needed her to answer him.

"She and Waco were dropped off earlier, grabbed a bite to eat to go then they went to her loft." Barb rolled chicken in egg, then crumbs and spices and dropped it into the hot oil. "I haven't seen either one of them in a while."

The chicken soured in his stomach. Dani and Waco alone? His jaw tightened. Part of him knew she wouldn't fuck Waco—not after last night. Damn it. Could Roger have misinterpreted the situation? Dani wasn't hurt, but that didn't mean she and Waco hadn't gone off together. She did what she wanted, always had. *A relationship*, is that what they had? Hell yes, and she was as unfamiliar with commitment as he was, but he had the added affliction of jealousy. They both needed to get used to the idea of having more than a cantankerous connection. He downed the beer and tossed the drumstick in the garbage.

"Grab a plate, Cord. Let me get you a biscuit and corn." Barb fluttered about the kitchen, seeing to her flock.

"I'm not hungry." He stood.

She approached and spoke quietly to him. "Cord, honey, I think you should stay here." She smeared butter on two biscuits and put them on a plate. "Stay and have yourself something to eat. It's been a long day for everyone."

"I should check on Dani."

"I told you she wasn't hurt so don't try to bullshit me. I see the fire in your eyes. Nothing like the blaze they had over at the Dorado. I'll not have you storming over to the loft because Waco's over there. I don't know what's going on between DaniLee and Waco or you and DaniLee for that fact." She twisted her lips into a small smile. "I mean, I know some of what's going on. Probably more than I should. I don't want to be in your business with her. But tonight isn't the time to start a feud with Waco."

He towered above Barb but she didn't cower. "This morning you were ready to tell Ray about finding Dani and me in bed."

She huffed and spun away. "That was this morning. I changed my mind. I don't need Ray upset. She's a big girl and old enough to choose her friends."

"Now who is trying to bullshit who?"

"I don't have the time or energy to fight with you and honestly, I'm surprised you want to fight with me. But do what you have to. Go up there, lay into Waco, piss off DaniLee and make an ass of yourself." She pointed her finger at him. "But make sure she knows I'm not involved. She threatened Elvis, and if she breaks one of my plates, I'm coming after you. So play nice."

"I never play nice."

"Well, that just might be why she's in her loft with Waco."

Cord couldn't laugh. Heat raced through his body and his palms itched. He clenched his hands into fists. "Why in the hell did Dani threaten your plates, Barb?" He closed his eyes, took a mental moment to calm down and said, "Is she seeing Waco?"

"Shame on you, Cord. Not if what I saw this morning is any indication."

Talking to Barb wasn't going to satisfy his concern. Only seeing Dani, holding her and making sure he hadn't imagined what he'd felt with her last night wasn't only on his part. What if she'd wanted him all this time and now that she'd quenched her curiosity, she was done? He stalked out of the kitchen, down the hall and out the door.

The sun had set and the sky blazed in a wash of oranges and purples. Smoke from the Dorado lingered in the air. Another stifling-hot night. Tamping down the flare of jealousy, he attempted to think rationally. What would he do if he found out she'd rather be with Waco? Muscles bunched in his arms. It's not as if he could slam his fist into the man's gut and kick his ass all the way back to Waco, Texas. Actually, that Dani would want to be with Waco made more sense. They were closer in age and both loved to laugh. They were free spirits. Cord on the other hand ate stress for breakfast. Hell, he hadn't remembered how to have a good time – until last night.

A lump rose into his throat. This was why he'd kept his distance. Damn, he'd screwed Ray's daughter. Ray trusted him and he'd jumped her like a rutting stallion. No, last night they'd done more than fuck. They'd connected – at least he had.

He rounded the corner and light from her windows spilled into the dusky evening. Pain sliced through his chest and his stomach rolled. Each step up the back porch brought another wave of anxiety. Adrenaline surged through his system. He wanted to see her alone in her loft. He wanted Barb to be wrong. He wanted Waco to be with the other ranch hands reliving the fire they'd valiantly fought and conquered. He paused and closed his eyes. Dani's laughter drifted to his ears from the open loft windows.

He took a step closer. He didn't want to see her as she was last night, before the games, when she'd been in Waco's lap.

"Does it hurt?" Waco's voice grated against Cord's nerves. He'd spoken softly, tenderly. The way a man seduces his lover.

"It won't once you pull it out." She laughed. "Do it fast!"

Cord stood outside, listening to the conversation. He didn't want to look in the window, didn't want to see his woman in Waco's arms.

"Then it will hurt."

"You can kiss it better."

"You can't rush me."

"A cowboy like you? This isn't your first time."

There was a moment of silence. Cord didn't breathe. He tightened his hand on the rail.

She moaned. "My God, it's huge."

"Do you want to bite on this?" Waco asked.

"I'll bite you if you don't hurry." She gasped and Waco apologized.

"We need to be careful."

Muffled words followed.

"You pushed it back in," she snapped. "Take it out. Take it out. Oh my God, what are you doing to me?"

"You said you could take a little pain."

Cord couldn't listen to any more. Hurt and anger boiled and bubbled. He launched up the remaining stairs, grabbed the screen and burst through the door.

Waco jumped away from Dani.

"What the fuck are you doing? Get away from her."

"Cord! Shit, you scared me. Will you never knock?"

Dani adjusted the robe she wore. Silken material clung to her curves yet, only reached to the top of her bare thighs. Belted in the front, her nipples poked against the fabric. Damp hair cascaded over her shoulder. Obviously she'd showered.

"I told you not to touch her."

"No, you told me not to fuck her." Waco's shirt and the top button of his jeans were undone. He slid his palms into his front pockets.

"Don't fuck with me. I can see with my own eyes what I've interrupted."

Dani put her hand on Waco's arm and pushed him out of the way. "How long were you standing outside the door?"

"Long enough."

"Obviously not. Or you wouldn't come charging in here like an ass." She adjusted the knot on the robe and approached. With each step, the fabric parted higher on her thigh. "What did you think we were doing?"

"I know what I heard." And it had sounded like fucking to him. But Waco didn't look like he'd had Dani bent over the table or on her knees giving him a blowjob.

"If it sounded like sex, why did you stand there listening?"

"Cord," Waco said. "We weren't fucking." He spoke to Dani. "You're going to fuck up a good thing by misleading him."

"I didn't say anything. He's jumped to his own conclusions. He'll believe what he wants. First in the barn, then last night, of course I couldn't keep my hands off you. I'm a bitch in heat."

"Dani, I didn't say that."

"Yes, you did! With your accusations." She shifted her robe and showed Cord her left shoulder. "He was giving me a little first aid and TLC. I brushed up against a post."

Cord stepped forward. Besides red scratches, she had puncture wounds from several deep wood slivers. "Damn it." He gingerly touched her marred flesh then faced Waco. "I'm sorry. I heard you on the stairs, and from my perspective, well, I assumed — I'm sorry." A cold wave of relief washed over him. Never before had it felt so good to be wrong.

"Waco was able to get them with the tweezers. I stood in a hot shower, thinking it would be easier for him to remove them."

Waco grabbed his hat off the seat of one of the whiskey barrel stools. "Although a wet, hot Dani would be impossible to ignore, I wasn't in the shower with her." He gave her a wink. "I'm going to head out." Waco slapped his hat onto his head. "I'll let you two work this out alone."

The turmoil ricocheting through Cord dulled to a steady throb. His heart still slammed around in his chest, but the need to clench his hands into fists and knock the shit out of Waco faded. He was the only one needing his ass kicked.

"Where're you going?" She reached for Waco's arm.

"Make-up sex is for people in a relationship." He leaned in and kissed Dani on the cheek.

"Who said anyone was having sex?"

"It's what I'd do if I'd screwed up with my girl." Waco wagged his brows at Cord. "See you at breakfast."

Waco tipped his hat and, without pause, crossed to the door then walked out.

"Cord." Her voice trembled. "Don't let him leave this way."

"Stay here." He followed Waco out the door. He had to say something. "Waco —"

"Don't worry about it, Cord. You don't have to explain. We've all had a long day. Maybe before yesterday, I would have been in her bed. We all need time to adjust." He glanced toward the window. "You should know her better than anyone."

"I do. After last night, I'm not going back to the way we were."

"You and Dani have something special. I haven't known her half her life like you have but it seems to me, Dani says what she means and does what she says. From what I saw today, last night didn't change her and it didn't change me. Maybe you're the one who needs to get his shit together. You want to play, fuck around and have a good time? Hell, I'll be here, but I'm not going to put up with the bullshit. I think she's a great girl, but I'm not looking for a relationship with her. I like being her friend. But if you can't handle it, I'll move on."

Cord couldn't move on. DaniLee and the Iron H were all he wanted out of life and he didn't want one without the other. The Iron H would be just another ranch without her. Now that he'd been in her bed, he couldn't go back to catching her in the barn with ranch hands. After last night, he'd be in her bed every night or he'd leave permanently.

His gaze locked on Waco. She deserved better than he'd given her. The heaviness of what he'd done weighed on his conscience but he wouldn't make excuses. "I can handle it. You belong on the Iron H."

"Good, then I'll see you tomorrow." Waco went down the stairs and across the yard to the bunkhouse.

Cord spun and walked toward the door. Dani waited at the threshold.

"Before you ask, yes, I was listening."

He stepped closer. "The conversation wasn't private." He tugged on the belt to her robe. "Why do you look so happy?"

"Because you aren't immune."

"Immune to what?" He grabbed the end of the robe's belt and tugged. The fabric gaped. She wasn't naked beneath the robe as he'd assumed. A thin strip of black satin covered her pussy. Her tummy quivered in the warm evening air.

"To me."

No, he hadn't been for quite a while. "I haven't been immune for a long time." He tucked a finger beneath the side string of her thong and rubbed his knuckle against her smooth flesh. "I am sorry."

Dani glanced up into his face. "You should be." She pressed against him. "So maybe you should make it up to me." Her eyes heated. "I think you owe me some TLC."

Last night, Cord had invited Waco back to their bed, but after the emotional slam of thinking about them together, he didn't think he could be in a relationship where he shared—not Dani. They needed to talk and he needed to explain. His insecurities were unfamiliar and not Dani's problem. She hadn't done anything wrong. He was the only one fucking up.

"Was last night just a good time for you?"

Dani stared at him for a moment before answering. "You know it wasn't."

He released the breath he was holding. "There's no going back. There's no one else for me. I'm in love with you."

"Love?" She narrowed her eyes and tilted her head. "Cord, all the problems that existed between us before yesterday are still here." She stepped back and ran her fingers through her hair then tucked the strands behind her ears. "Let me tell you a few things, Mr. Stiles. Everything I love is on this ranch." She poked him in the chest with her fingertip. "That includes you." She flattened her hand over his heart. "I know you love the ranch." She paused and stared into his eyes. "You have to want and love me more."

"Oh hell, Dani." His arms banded around her petite frame and pulled her close. "Yesterday changed both of us. Nothing I said was meant to get you in the sack for one

night." Careful of her shoulder, his hands slipped down her spine and over her hips. Clutching the fabric of her robe in his fist, he bared her ass, then palmed each firm globe. "I'm sorry I accused you of fucking Waco tonight. Rage exploded in my gut. You can't imagine my thoughts."

"I don't have to imagine. I could see the hurt on your face." She inhaled deeply. "You don't really need me to tell you how I feel."

"Yes, I do," he whispered then brushed his mouth against hers. "I wasn't just fucking you last night after Waco left."

She nodded. "I know that."

"All these years I knew pursuing—anything—with you could possibly destroy everything I care about, you, the ranch and your family." He buried his nose in her neck and inhaled the sweet intoxication.

Dani trailed her fingers to the nape of his neck. She pressed against him, stood on tiptoes and nipped his bottom lip. "You can't lose what you don't claim." Lust brightened her eyes, but there was something more. With a slow smile, she let him know she knew exactly what she wanted. And she wanted him. "Ranchers know to brand what belongs to them." She kissed him deeply. Her robe draped open. Bodies aligned, her breasts flattened against the stiff linen of his shirt. She moaned and slithered against him, running her fingers over his shoulders. The kiss was a lover's kiss, familiar with open mouths, bodies and tongues entwined.

Cord breathed her breath, drinking in the scent of shampoo and woman—his woman. He reached into the robe and palmed her breast, rolling the tight tip between his thumb and finger. He pulled back and stared at her slight curves and smooth flesh. Her erect nipples elongated and darkened.

Dani grabbed his shirt and, with trembling fingers, worked the buttons free.

He covered her hands and sipped her lips. "Slow down. We have all night." He kissed her long and leisurely. *They had forever.*

She moaned and rolled her pelvis, dry-fucking him through his jeans. "Don't want slow." She straddled his leg and rode against his thigh, grinding her mound into his hard muscle.

Cord gnashed his teeth and tightened the reins on his slipping control. He bent his knees, lifted her high onto his cock and thrust against her. He ate at her mouth with an intensity and demand that hardened his cock and tensed every muscle in his body.

With his hands on her breast, her beaded nipple poked into his palm. But it wasn't enough. She raked her nails through his hair, grabbed fistfuls and jerked his mouth back to hers. Teeth grazed his lower lip, then her hot, wet tongue traced the seam of his mouth and plunged inside. He opened wider, lashed at her tongue with his. God, she was everything he needed.

Kisses and intimate touches heated his desire. "I'm branding what's mine." He sucked her flesh. "You're mine," he growled and tugged the panties out of the way. Cream dripped from her slit. He gathered her nectar on his fingertip and painted her clit. Her head lolled against his shoulder. Cord fastened his mouth to her soft, scented flesh where shoulder met neck and kissed. He trailed kisses along her collarbone.

"Yes, Cord. Fuck me."

His hands were rough. His cock ached, stretched, demanded. He had to fuck her, brand her—he wanted to make love to her. His kind of sex, the kind Dani craved and only he could give her. He put one hand behind her knees. She squealed as he lifted then carried her across the room.

"Wait, Cord. Not on the bed."

"Why not? I'm taking the risk. I love you."

"I love you too, but you aren't getting into my bed." She put her hand to the side of his face and forced him to look at her. A smile curled her lips. "I want you. Now. But you're filthy from the fire. So put me down, take a shower and then you can have me."

He carried her into the bathroom, then set her down and took her hand in his. "Just so that we're clear," he lowered his voice, "I want it all."

Dani stared at their joined hands. An old scar marred the top of his hand from the knuckle on his thumb to his wrist. She remembered when he'd nearly severed three fingers on a hay mower. She traced the jagged line with her fingertip.

He bent and turned on the water. "Tonight was my problem, not yours and not Waco's. I can't say it won't happen again." He shrugged out of his shirt. "I'm possessive over you."

He stepped out of his jeans and drew her close. Heat from his cock warmed her tummy and amusement glimmered in his blue eyes. He sealed their mouths. She parted her lips, curled her tongue around his, let the robe slip from her shoulders and drop to the floor.

Cord groaned, pulled back and stepped into the shower. "Get in here."

"Demanding too." She joined him in the shower. He was tall, strong and made her feel feminine. Yet on the ranch, he respected her authority.

His eyes glazed as he followed a rivulet of water between her breasts and down her stomach. Overnight he'd stopped hiding his feelings behind the façade of being an asshole. The Iron H was important to him, ran through his blood. Someday she'd have to face Ray's death. And she'd have this man—who loved her—at her side.

"Cord?" He raised his eyes to hers. She blinked water from her lashes. "I love you."

Muscles bunched in his arms as he gathered her close. His hot, hard cock pressed between them.

Desire flared knowing she was about to have him deep inside her quivering pussy. Since he'd walked in tonight, she'd been riding the edge of arousal. His deep voice aroused her and with Cord, and only Cord, she was powerless to resist.

"Turn around."

She did and braced her hands on the shower wall. Water cascaded over her head and down her back. He bent and kissed her scraped shoulder. His touch sizzled on her hot skin. He gripped her hips and angled her pelvis.

His lips brushed her ear. "You've roped me in and now you're mine." His cock thrust home, stretching and filling her.

Dani cried out and backed hard against him. "Then I have been branded."

He chuckled, reared back and thrust again. "Roped and branded."

About the Author

KyAnn Waters lives in Utah with her husband, two children and two dogs. She spends her days writing and her evenings with her family. She enjoys sporting events on the television, thrillers on the big screen and hot scenes on the pages of her books.

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