

Chapter One

“No, no, no!” With steam billowing from the hood of her truck, Nikki maneuvered blindly easing the vehicle to the side of the road, making sure the horse trailer she was towing wasn’t blocking traffic. “You can’t die here. We’re so close to home.”

With a sigh, she killed the engine, climbed from the cab and kicked the front tire. “You couldn’t have held on for another three miles, could you? No-o-o, you had to blow out the rad here, you piece of shit.”

She waited in the inky black night for ten minutes before a vehicle crested the hill, its high beams blinding her until the driver dimmed the lights. She moved to the side as the Jeep zipped past, not even slowing to see if she needed help. A half-dozen cars zoomed by over the next half hour without a single one slowing. She was starting to consider unloading her newest horse and riding him home when a familiar white pick-up slowed then parked in front of her truck.

First a long, booted leg, then the rest of the driver’s body unfolded as he clambered down. Dillon Barnett jammed a dusty black cowboy hat on his head before he ambled over. “Hey, Nik. Need some help?”

“Yeah, my truck’s overheated.” Trying to ignore the shivery feeling that had her nipples hardening every time she set eyes on her neighbor, Nikki reached for the hood release.

Dillon caught her wrist and stopped her. “Whoa, don’t touch that yet. Let it cool down a while longer, or I’ll be hauling you off to the burn unit.”

Before she could stop herself, she leaned in and filled her lungs with his scent, detecting only a hint of the aftershave he’d used that morning behind a heaping of good honest sweat. Mostly he smelled of machine oil, sawdust and...mesquite? She scrunched up her nose and took another sniff. “You been at a barbecue?”

Dillon chuckled, a dark delicious sound that reminded her of humid summer evenings eating barbecued ribs and drinking cool beer. Of star-filled nights that promised long sessions of hot, sweaty sex.

Where had that come from? Maybe because she hadn’t been with a guy and had hot, sweaty sex in a couple of years?

“We’ve been cuttin’ down some mesquites out back of the old Pritchert place. New owners are plannin’ on putting in a pool and hired me to do the landscaping around it. I figured I might as well get started in there with my machinery.”

When he released her, she took a step back, stopping her sigh before it could escape. *Stop with the fantasies, Nik. If Dillon was interested in you, he’d have made some move after Wade moved out.* Oh, he was always over checking on her, helping her fix the fences the horses or weather knocked down, but not once had he given her any indication he was interested in her.

No, Dillon just did those things because he’d been raised to be a good neighbor, willing to help the struggling divorcee with the measly forty acres of scrub behind his spread of two hundred and fifty. Still, a girl could fantasize. Oh. My. The fantasies she’d been having about him lately.

But had she imagined the way he'd held her after pulling her against him? Or the way his hand stroked the small of her back? That couldn't have been accidental. Could it?

The sigh she'd been holding back escaped. "You know, your hat's the wrong color."

Frowning, he took off his Stetson and examined it, checking it both inside and out. "What d'ya mean? It looks fine to me."

"It's black. It should be white." *Lame, Nikki. Real lame.*

"Why—oh, white hat. Good guy. I gotcha." His puzzled expression remained. "Why am I a good guy? Because I stopped? Heck, I couldn't have just driven by. What type of a person would that make me?"

"Like the half-dozen other drivers who left me standing here?"

After knocking the dust off his hat on his thigh, he resettled it on his head, covering the thick black hair she'd been fantasizing running her fingers through. The shadows thrown by the brim hid the liquid-chocolate eyes that turned her knees into putty. "Pretty girl standing all alone at the side of the road at night? You're safer that they didn't stop."

Her heart thumped a little harder against her ribs. Pretty girl. How pretty could she be, considering she'd been in a truck all day? Still, it was nice to hear.

He grimaced at the still-steaming engine. "You call a tow truck?"

She shook her head. "I don't have my cell with me." She'd searched for the damned thing for a half hour before she'd given up and left home.

He pulled out his own cell. "Hey, Gloria, it's Dillon Barnett. Nikki Kimball's truck's overheated. Looks like she's going to need a tow." There was a pause then he frowned. "Shoot, you sure he can't be here any quicker?"

At Nikki's anxious look, he shook his head. "Yeah, okay, guess there's not much choice. We'll leave the truck here,

and I'll take Nikki home." He paused, listening. "We're on Tower Hill Road, 'bout a half mile south of my place, right before it meets up with Alvarado. Oh, and Glor? Have Ernie call her when he knows what's wrong and how much it's gonna cost to fix it, will you?"

He ended the call and pocketed the phone with a frown. "There's a big pile-up on the interstate keepin' all the trucks busy, so the soonest Ernie can get a truck out here is an hour, maybe even an hour and a half. I'll take you home, and he'll pick up your truck soon as he can."

"What about Bashir?" Nikki waved to the horse trailer she'd been hauling. "I can't leave him here."

"How about we unhook the trailer, and I'll tow him home." He peered in the back of the trailer. "Bashir, huh? That's a rotten name to stick on a horse. You should rename him Buddy or Bucky or some good Texan name."

"Buddy?" She laughed. "Considering he's from Arabian bloodlines, I think Bashir suits him just fine."

The dark shadows accentuated the bright white of his grin. "Seems to me, one of your beloved Blues is named Daisy. Can't say it's a particularly Arabian name now, is it?"

She rolled her eyes. Figured he'd point out her lapse. "Daisy came to me already named. I could hardly change it since she'd gotten used to it, any more than I'll change Bashir's name."

Twenty minutes later, the trailer successfully unhitched from her truck and hooked up to Dillon's, Nikki found herself sitting beside Dillon in the cab of his truck. While he started the truck, she fiddled with one of the vents, turning it so the stream of cool air blasted her. The A/C in her truck had stopped working months ago. The trip back in the damned Texas heat had just about had her melting into the vinyl seats of her truck.

“Where’d you pick this one up?” Dillon checked his mirror and eased onto the road.

“Muncie.”

“Indiana?” He whistled through his teeth. “That’s quite a haul to do by yourself. You do it all in one shot, or you stop over somewhere in between?”

“I didn’t want to give Bashir’s owners a chance to change their mind, so once I closed the deal, I loaded him up and headed straight back.” She closed her eyes and fought the exhaustion swamping her.

“Shit, woman, that drive’s a good fifteen, sixteen hours one way even if you’re not hauling a trailer. You shoulda stopped somewhere in between. You coulda fallen asleep at the wheel.”

Without opening her eyes, she lifted one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. “Thanks for stopping tonight. I appreciate it.”

“As I said, I wouldn’t be much of a neighbor if I hadn’t offered a hand.” A strong hand dropped over hers, his thumb stroking hers. She didn’t dare open her eyes. If she did, he might stop.

He was always touching her. Nothing sexual, just little things. Massaging her shoulders when they were repairing the fences, or keeping his hand wrapped around hers after he’d helped her off her horse at the end of her last endurance ride. But after not having been held by a man for several years as her marriage fell apart, every nerve ending fired each place Dillon touched her. Tonight, being so close to him in the dark cab, her imagination inundated her with images. Images of him slipping his hand beneath her top, of him cupping her breasts, bending his head down to take her nipple in his mouth.

Her body heated, softened, imagining his hard thighs pressing hers apart, or holding her up against a wall as he plunged into her. The taut muscles in his forearms planted

on either side of her head while he pumped into her. Thick shoulder muscles rippling beneath her palms, except in her imagination, instead of hoisting himself on one of his horses, it was her he rode.

Dillon, bless his soul, didn't say a word for the next ten minutes, allowing her to indulge her fantasies. The truck slowed, the steady click-click of his turn signal announced they were turning onto the boundary road. Five minutes later, he turned right again. The truck bounced over the washed-out spots the spring rains had worn away, forcing her to grab the door handle and pray Dillon's truck didn't break a spring.

"Damn, Nik, you need to get a road grader in here to smooth these ruts out right soon. You're not going to be able to get the truck out one day."

"Graders cost money." Money she didn't have. Not that type of money, anyway. Not unless she got a couple more horses to board.

"You didn't happen to notice I've got one as part of my business?" He snorted. "I'll send one of my guys over to fix this up tomorrow morning."

When she started to protest about how much it would cost, he narrowed his eyes at her. "No arguments. It won't cost me a thing."

Except paying the guy who ran the grader, or the gas both for the machinery and for the truck to haul it over. But she knew if she argued those points, she'd hurt his pride.

Once he'd backed the trailer up beside the barn, she reached for the door handle, only to hear him say again. "What's your hurry? I'll get it for you."

She settled back and waited, half amused at the idea of a man opening her door and half sad. It had been so long since anyone had bothered to worry about manners around her. Wade had never bothered with such niceties. And her brother Phil? The temperature in Hell would have to reach

the negative numbers before he ever got off his ass to do something for someone else.

Dillon hopped out, walked around the front of the truck and opened her door, holding his hand out to help her down. The moment their palms touched, a spark of electricity pulsed between them. Nikki stared at their joined hands then looked up to find Dillon watching her, desire bright in his eyes. His thumb swept over the pad at the base of her thumb. The spark between them shot straight up her arm and spread out like fork lightning to every part of her body.

“Why don’t I help you get Bashir settled in?”

I’d rather you helped me settle in for the night.

Flustered at how her body softened just from imagining cuddling up to him, Nikki nodded and slid out from the truck. Instead of letting go of her once her feet were on the ground, he slammed the door shut and walked with her to the back of the trailer, her hand still in his.

Once there, he had to release her so she could unlock the door. She backed her newest acquisition out the trailer and led him toward the barn, concentrating on where she was putting her feet along the rutted path.

A two-pitched bray started up from the pasture and a donkey trotted out from the ink-black night and butted his nose into Nikki’s stomach.

“Hey, Merlin, you miss me?” Chuckling, she stopped to scratch behind his ears.

“He acts like he hasn’t seen you in a couple weeks.” Dillon reached out and scratched the other side of the donkey’s neck. “Heya, buddy. How you doin’?”

Merlin quickly abandoned Nikki, switching his attention to Dillon.

“Traitor,” she muttered.

Throwing the latch on the barn, she opened the door and was nearly knocked over by her part-mastiff, part German shepherd. The huge dog barked and ran circles around her

before haring off across the fields. “Rascal? What were you doing locked in the barn?”

Shaking her head, she led Bashir into the barn and switched on the light. “Oh, shit! Phil, you lazy ass.”

“Mmm, shit is about right.” Dillon gestured to her oldest mare Witness’s stall. “Looks like no one’s cleaned out for a couple of days.”

She led Bashir into an empty stall and tethered him. Swearing under her breath, she grabbed a halter and slid it over Witness’s head. “Come on, girl, let’s get you out of there.”

Dillon frowned as the mare at first balked then limped from the stall. “From the way she’s movin’, I’m bettin’ he hasn’t given the poor old girl her meds today.”

Cursing her brother, Nikki tied up the mare by the door and checked the other horses. “Crap. None of them have any water. All the buckets are dry.”

A check of the feed room had her swearing even harder. “Damn it, there are as many feed bags as when I left.” She wheeled back to face Dillon and found him watching her again. His eyes swept down her in a slow glide. The track of his gaze branded every inch it touched as if he were staking a claim.

“I-I must have told him a dozen times he needed to check the troughs and make sure they had enough water.” She wasn’t imagining the look he’d just given her, not this time. She forced herself to concentrate instead of indulging in the fantasy Dillon Barnett might actually be interested—sexually—in her. As if he would be thinking about sex in the heat and the stench of the barn. “It looks like he hasn’t done anything since I left.”

He grabbed a pitchfork leaning against the wall. “Then we’d better get to it, hadn’t we?”

Between the two of them, they cleaned out Witness’s stall. Dillon disposed of the soiled bedding and replaced it

with fresh straw while Nikki filled first the water bucket, then stuffed a hay bag and hung it in the corner. Once the mare was back in place and munching on the fresh hay, Nikki checked the horse's swollen joints. "I swear some days I want to just hit that lazy brother of mine up the back of the head. You'd think he'd be glad to be living with me instead of in a halfway house with a bunch of strangers."

"Yeah, well, Phil doesn't seem to like getting off his keister unless someone's prodding his sorry ass with a pitchfork. I say we march up to the house and make him come down and muck out while we watch."

Straightening, Nikki turned her attention from the mare and watched Dillon, who was working on the next stall. The barn still held the day's heat, so he'd ditched his shirt. The muscles of his back rippled as he dug into the soiled bedding with the pitchfork then hefted it into a wheelbarrow. The overhead light glistened off a bead of sweat at the top of his neck. Nikki forced air into her lungs as the bead trickled down over his spine, disappearing into his jeans.

He glanced over his shoulder with a puzzled expression, then straightened and leaned on the pitchfork. "Nik? I'm serious. What d'you say I go up and march Phil down here to help out?"

She frowned. "His car wasn't out front, so he must have gone out."

He was probably drinking down at the Boot-T Bar. Figured. If he got stopped for a DUI, he could spend the night in jail. There was no way she was bailing his ass out this time. Let him explain it to his parole officer.

"Hey, it's all right, Nik." Dillon laid a hand on her shoulder, rubbing it lightly. "At least you weren't away any longer, and from the looks of it, the horses are all okay. It won't take us long to get it cleaned up."

“Yeah, it just pisses me off. All his life Phil has gotten away with this type of shit while I’ve been left cleaning up after him. I wish just once he’d do something without me having to push him every step of the way.”

“He’s twenty-four years old. It’s time you push him out to find his own way, damn the consequences. I just can’t figure out why he couldn’t live at your parents’.”

“It’s part of the court stipulations. He had to live within Barnett County until the remainder of his sentence is served. Since Mom and Dad moved back to Michigan...”

“You didn’t feel like you could turn your back on your family. I get that. But why couldn’t Phil have gotten an apartment of his own?”

“He can’t afford it without a job. And a guy with a record isn’t exactly the type most employers are looking for.” She wasn’t about to explain how her mother had played the guilt card, or how she’d not felt she could say no. Besides, she was the only one living in the house now, not to mention she’d thought Phil would help out. “If it was one of your brothers, wouldn’t you have taken them in?”

“Yeah, I guess I would. But they would have been out here doin’ their chores instead of parkin’ their keisters on the couch all day.”

There wasn’t much she could say to that, so Nikki returned her attention to her chores. They worked in a companionable silence, though she’d never been so aware of having another person in the barn with her. When she reached for a bag of grain, Dillon took it from her as if it were no heavier than a bag of sugar. “I got it.”

His stomach muscles taut, he carried it to the spot between Bashir’s and Witness’s stall doors before dropping it. He bent over to rip it open, his jeans pulling tight over his ass. Paying so much attention to the delectable sight instead of where she was walking, Nikki stumbled over an empty bucket she’d left on the ground.

“Whoa, watch out there.” Dillon grabbed her, his arm whipping around her waist.

She landed against him with an oomph, aware of how his thigh muscle pressed against hers, his arms banded around her waist, his muscular chest mashed into her breasts. She could have blamed the heat flooding her on the sultry August evening, but she had no explanation for the electricity arcing between them.

His breath whispered out of him, a soft caress over her cheek. The brim of his cowboy hat brushed the top of her head as he closed the distance between them, skimming his lips over hers.

Holy crap, he was kissing her. In real life, not in one of her fantasies.

She tilted her head, her hands clutching his arms half afraid he might disappear if she let go. While beneath her hand, his heart pounded in a steady beat, her own pulse spiked as fast as a hummingbird’s.

The tip of his tongue brushed the seam of her mouth; she parted her lips, allowing him entrance. He didn't plunder, but he didn't let her escape either. A hint of burnt coffee and spicy male teased her taste buds. Her breath hitched when he shifted positions, pressing the hard length of his erection into the cradle of her hips. Savoring the taste of him, her mind swirled into fantasies of getting naked with him, his hot flesh sliding over her, into her.

One of his hands slid under her tee and splayed over the small of her back. A shiver zigzagged along her spine, following the path of his calloused fingers and palm as they rasped her skin. She made a tiny whimper as she ground against him, urging him on. Taking the sound as encouragement, he deepened the kiss, took more from her. Demanded more. She gave everything he asked of her, but took equally from him. Her body pulsed with need by the

time he finally ended the kiss, the stiff stubble of his beard abrading her cheek as he withdrew.

His gaze traced down her in a long slow path. “How long you been on the road?”

Huh? Was that a backhanded way of saying she looked tired? Or that she needed a bath? She glanced down at her now dusty jeans and scuffed-up boots. *You are so not sexy, Nik.* Here she’d been fantasizing about them taking the leap from friends to lovers for months, and he’d chosen to kiss her socks off the night she resembled Rascal after he’d fought a knock-down-drag-out with the local raccoon.

“I left Muncie last night as soon as we closed the deal.” The heat of the kiss bled away, replaced with the frustration she’d felt at seeing the conditions Bashir had endured. “You should have seen the place, Dillon. It was a disaster waiting to happen. There were old junkers and car parts in the middle of the pasture, and their horses were so freaking thin they wouldn’t have scored more than four on the Hennecke scale. I’ve a good mind to report them to the sheriff. I wished I could have taken all their horses.”

“Hey, there’s only so much you can do.” He lifted his hand as if to cup her face but dropped it again. Yeah, he was already regretting kissing her.

“I guess.”

“You’ve been on the road a long time. You must be exhausted.”

Not too exhausted for you.

“I’m ready for bed, if that’s what you mean.”

She wanted him to be in her bed beside her. On top of her. Inside her.

She headed out of the barn, waiting for him before she closed the gate. “Do you want to come in? Have a beer or a soda or something?”

Me?

“You’re not too tired?” His eyes were hidden in the shadow of the brim of his hat, but his voice made promises that had her pussy throbbing.

“Come on in for a while.” *Stay tonight. Tomorrow. As long as you want. Ride me until I’m too exhausted to move, to think.*

He covered the distance between them before she could blink. His hand cradling the back of her head, he stared down at her. “You’re sure about this, Nik?”

He had to ask? “I’m sure.”

He strengthened his hold on her hair, tilting her head so he could feather kisses down her neck. At the same time his free hand cupped her ass as he ground his erection into her. She hooked one leg around his hip, and rocked against him, the pressure against her clit setting off a firestorm of sensation.

“Not here, baby. Inside. Where we can take our time.”

Despite her frustration at having to delay her gratification, she nodded.

Lacing his fingers with hers, they walked toward the house, Dillon catching her when she stumbled over a rut. “Sure is dark back here. You need to install a motion-sensor light to cover this area.”

“I have one. Phil must have turned it off.” She stopped and stared at the house, scanned the yard. That’s what was wrong. There were no lights on. Phil never turned off the lights. Even if he had, there’d be the flicker of the television on the walls since he usually fell asleep in front of it, leaving it running all night. So why was the hair on the back of her neck prickling?

“What’s the matter?”

She slowly shook her head. “I don’t know. It’s silly. You’ll probably think me nuts. Phil’s car’s gone, which means he’s out. He’s probably just turned off the lights, or

maybe we've blown a fuse, but something just doesn't feel right, you know?"

His grip on her tightened as he guided her back to the cab of the truck. He retrieved a shotgun from behind the seat. "Gimme your keys. I'll make sure there's no one inside."

She rummaged in her bag and flipped through her keys, separating the front door key from the rest.

He jammed it in his front pocket then tightened his grip on the gun. "Stay here."

She reached out, grabbed his hand before he could leave her. "Dillon, be careful."

With a smile, he covered her hand with his in a comforting gesture. "It's probably nothing, but it doesn't hurt to be careful. Right?"

With that, he released her and slipped through the shadows to the front of the house. A minute later, light flooded out the living room window, spilling across the yard. She expected to see more lights turn on; instead, he reappeared, hurrying toward her, his cell phone to his ear.

Once he'd shoved his phone in his pocket, he wrenched open the truck door and growled, "Get in the truck."

"What's wrong?" Her seatbelt had barely clicked into place before he'd started the engine and they were halfway down the lane. "Was someone there?"

"I didn't want to wait to find out." His jaw tightened. "Sorry, Nik, but you've been robbed."