

## Chapter One

Daphne hooked the heel of her red cowboy boot on the first rail of the fence and hung her arms over the top. With her chin cupped in her hands, she stared at the man vying for the title of champion bronc rider.

“He’s something, isn’t he?” Ana tapped her arm.

She held out her hand for the soda Ana had brought her but kept her gaze on the action at the side of the ring. “Where did he come from?”

“I heard a few people talking earlier about how he comes from the next county over. Some bigwig rancher they’re all speculating about. Seems he has more dough than he needs, so it’s not like he’s fighting for the five-thousand-dollar pot.” Ana leaned over the railing. “His name’s Will Hanson.”

Daphne took in the way the man hovered over the horse in the chute, waiting for the countdown to begin. His legs spread wide on each side of the gates. Warmth grew and filled her tummy despite the cold refreshment she drank. His jean-clad thighs screamed for a woman’s hands, her hands.

His crinkled old cowboy hat sat low on his forehead. Dark, thick hair skimmed the collar of his shirt. She blew out a big breath at the way his shirt strained across his chest. If he belonged to her, she wouldn’t know what to touch first, his lower half or that delicious top half.

The buzzer screamed over the loudspeaker, and Daphne climbed up two rungs on the fence, not wanting to miss a moment of his ride. The wild bronc bucked sideways and

the crowd groaned. He'd drawn one of the wildest horses of the day. He'd be lucky to keep his seat long enough on a twister ride to even finish the competition.

Those thighs she admired clutched tight to the sides of his ride, his right arm thrown up and down in quick succession to keep the momentum. Her lips moved with the countdown, hoping he'd stay in the saddle.

The final buzzer signaled the end of the ride with the man still atop the bronc. The rodeo clowns entered the field to distract the horse. Instead of quieting down, the horse veered toward the fence in a rush to escape, and straight at Daphne.

Ana jumped down, but Daphne threw her leg over and straddled the top of the fence, waving her arm in an attempt to keep the horse from body-slammng his rider. More than one rodeo rider had busted a leg, or worse, on the unforgiving metal rails.

With a back-twisting turn, the bronc deposited the cowboy right in front of Daphne and turned his attention toward the rider who dared to break him.

The man landed on his feet in front of the horse. Daphne leaned over with her hand held out, her gaze locked on the bronc.

The cowboy grasped the lifeline of help, and in one smooth move hurtled over the top of the fence. Daphne jumped down beside him, her oversized cup still clutched in her hand.

The man dusted his gloved hands off on the back of his jeans, tilted the front of his hat in her direction and waved to the crowd. She stared in unabashed awe.

The announcer spoke over the loudspeaker, proclaiming him the winner and the crowd in the stands stomped and cheered. He gave one more wave then turned back to her. She gasped. Startling green eyes, framed in dark lashes, peeked out from underneath the brim of his hat.

“Thanks for the hand up, sweetheart.” The side of his mouth lifted. “Will Hanson.” He held out his hand. “And you are?”

“Daphne.” She stuck her hand out.

With a gentle hold, he brought the back of her hand up to his mouth and kissed it. “Thank you again, Daphne.”

Will gave her one last tilt of his hat, turned and meshed with the crowd swarming to congratulate him on the win. Ana shook Daphne’s arm hard enough her drink sloshed over onto her hand. She inhaled, shook her head and turned to her friend.

“Oh my God, girlfriend, I about had an orgasm watching you two.” Ana leaned in and smiled. “Have you ever seen a better looking man around this Podunk town?”

Daphne shook her head again.

“Come on, we have just enough time to get over to the beer garden and set up for tonight.” Ana looped her arm around Daphne. “It really sucks that Chum’s bar has to host the beer garden every year and we always have to work it. Just once, I’d like to let loose and saddle up to one of these rodeo players and have a little fun.”

Will Hanson walked back from the announcer’s stand. The winnings tucked in his pocket, he wanted to find a cool spot out of the heat of the sun, have a cold beer and then head home. It’d been five years since he rode in the bronc competition, and last night’s spur of the moment decision to come find out if he still could ride the beasts reminded him too much of the past. A time when he’d rode to escape.

*But it felt damn good.*

“Hey, Hanson! You want to join the boys for a beer? Drinks are on us, even though we can’t afford them.” Billy Johnson, the rider who’d come in second, grinned at Will.

“Can’t refuse that offer.” Will clapped the other rodeo cowboy on the shoulder in a show of solidarity. “Thanks.”

“No prob...I haven’t seen your kind of riding since I was a kid.” Billy kept in step with Will. “How long you been ridin’?”

“Probably since you were a kid.” Will lengthened his stride and continued walking toward the tent. He wasn’t in the mood to chitchat. He’d prefer to forget days gone by and riding the circuit.

A crowd had already formed outside the makeshift tent where the fair offered a beer garden for the adults. An older guy played bouncer at the entrance and soon the group of riders worked their way inside. Will swept off his hat, ran his hand through his hair and plopped the hat back down low on his forehead.

“Hang tight, I’ll get you a cold one.” Billy hurried away toward the back of the tent.

Will backed up and stood against the tent wall. His gaze followed Billy’s path through the crowd. He raised his eyebrows. The woman who’d helped him over the fence stood behind the table, tapping the keg.

She stuck her lower lip out and blew the long strands of hair out of her face, and the front of his jeans grew tight. Those lips of hers begged to have his cock between them.

Unable to hear what she talked to Billy about, he studied the way she tilted her head and gave him her full attention. He liked that about a person. No stuck-up genes in her makeup.

Billy turned and lifted a plastic cup full of beer and foam up in the air in his direction. The woman raised her head and searched the side of the room until she encountered him. His cheek twitched at the way her face flushed. She lowered her eyes only to lift her head and take a second gander.

The double look she gave hooked him. He’d play his time right and whisk her back to his place. She displayed

just enough spirit to tempt him and enough shyness to let him do what he wanted. It'd been a while since a woman displayed both qualities he needed. *Too damn long.*

"Here you go, champ." Billy handed over a cold cup of beer. "I'm going to catch up with the other guys, you want to come along?"

He chugged half the beer, wiped the foam from his upper lip and shook his head. "Nah, I'm good. Thanks for the beer."

"Alright. Major congrats on the big win again." Billy held up his glass and shrugged. "See ya around."

"Hey, Billy." He stepped forward and stopped the other man's exit. "What's the story behind the woman serving drinks?"

Billy turned toward the back, smiled and faced Will again. "Oh, that's Daphne Norris. She's one of the serving girls at Chum's downtown. The other one beside her is Ana."

"Does Daphne have a brand on her?" Will studied the woman, but his full attention was on Billy's answer.

Billy laughed. "Hell no, men have tried, but that's one filly that don't lower herself to any ol' country boy. Rumor has it her daddy was a two-timing dawg bent on the bottle and she don't want to saddle herself with the same. He left her all alone to take care of her dying mother."

Will nodded. "Thanks." Jesus. The woman had gone through hell and back. A son of a bitch for a father, and losing her mother on top of it. He swallowed. No wonder she kept everyone at arm's length. Who could blame her?

His gaze traveled back to the woman. Long auburn hair swung freely around her shoulders and halfway down her back. Her skin was so pale and perfect it begged his fingers to roam over her entire body to find out if it really was as smooth and soft as it appeared.

She held her head at a regal angle, belying the clothes that outed her for a belt-buckle bunny. No, something about her overrode the persona she wanted others to see. She wasn't someone who settled on serving beer for a living. Damn, the girl deserved some pampering.

With her back toward him, he lowered his study to the red flashy boots on her feet. Her solid thighs seemed to go on forever before reaching the hem of her short denim skirt. He'd bet the jackpot she didn't wear any panties and enjoyed the way it cooled her off in the warm summer weather.

Will finished his drink. Not one to overindulge, he decided the night asked for one more beer before he called it quits. He waited for a break in the line at the keg, wanting to have Daphne's attention all to himself, and then worked his way to the back. He'd need to play this right. One wrong move and he had a feeling the woman would run from him.

A feral kitten. That's what she reminded him of, a scared but brave little kitten who waited for just the right person to trust. *If I can get her to come home with me, I'll show her how much she deserves to find happiness.*

"Beer or wine?" Daphne finished wiping the table, looked up and smiled. "Hey, it's the bronc champ of the night. Congratulations again."

He nodded. "Thanks, and I'll have a beer too."

She turned her back, stuck a cup under the tap at an angle and slowly filled the cup with beer. His gaze lowered to her backside. Her hip-to-waist ratio leaned toward a perfect curve for a man to grab on and go for a different kind of ride.

"Here you go." She held the beer out. "Three-fifty a cup."

He placed money into the palm of her hand, closed her fingers and leaned over to kiss the inside of her wrist. Even

through the malty smell of beer, the sweet scent of woman tickled his nose.

“Thanks for the beer and the hand up earlier.” He picked up his cup, tilted his hat and walked away.

By the time he walked across the tented area, he’d drained the cup and tossed it in a nearby trash can. Outside, his body relaxed and the muscles that ached earlier from the competition no longer killed with each step.

His plan was working perfectly, and soon Daphne would run out of the tent straight into his life. He licked his lips.  
*Five, four, three, two, one...*

“Stop right there, mister!”

*Bingo.*