

Chapter One

Present Day, Utah

The early May heatwave poured down on the Utah arena, air so thick Monica wondered that she couldn't reach out a grab a piece of it and toss it into the stands. Her horse, Jinx, shifted, restless in the heat.

But it wasn't just the heat getting to her. It was seven weeks since that first night with Trickett Samuels.

Seven weeks of agony because she was away from Texas more than she was home.

Seven weeks of heaven because from the moment she arrived at his house in Lockhardt it was sensual overload.

The last three days had been pure torture. She was supposed to be home already, but her ranking was in the toilet because even when she was running barrels she was distracted. Thinking about Trick. Wondering what he was doing.

Remembering the things he did to her in bed. Imagining the things she'd do with him once she was back under the Texas sky.

Sleeping with Trick was supposed to ease the ache. Make it easier to stay on the road, continue forging her identity independent of the Double Diamond, her sisters or the family strings that seemed to pull at her more every day.

What twenty-four year old longed to go home? Not a single one of her rodeo friends. They were content to live out of suitcases, drive for hours on end to hit another show and win another check. Her? Since Kathleen got married last summer all she could think about was home.

Home and Trick Samuels. The last man she should want because he was so intricately tied to Lockhardt, Texas. One thing Monica was certain of: Lockhardt would kill the identity she was trying to forge. If she returned to Lockhardt for good, Monica would disappear back into the shadows of Kathleen and Vanessa.

Jinx flicked his ears toward the cattle pens and tossed his head.

"Not now, boy," said Monica with a light tug on his reins. "You can play with the steers later."

Music filled the arena as the last competitor took her glory lap. Jinx, standing in the middle of the group of barrel racers with Monica, restlessly moved from hoof to hoof. He flicked his ears toward the cattle pen again, and this time pulled his head in the opposite direction. *Eager to get going. Just nerves.* Monica kept a smile plastered on her face and tugged once more, a little harder this time.

"No, Jinx." What was wrong with him? In the three years she'd been running barrels with him, he had never once acted on the impulse to herd cattle. After washing out as one of her sister Kathleen's racers, Jinx had been trained as a cow horse against Monica's wishes. When she'd decided to go pro, her first investment had needed to be a good horse. She'd tracked down the rancher who'd bought Jinx for his spread in New Mexico, then purchased and retrained him as a barrel racer.

He flicked his ears toward the pen again.

Two more minutes, and whatever was going on in the pen wouldn't matter. They'd be out of the arena; she would collect her third place check and go home. Not to her little house in Austin, and not to Trick's hideaway. To the Double Diamond. Her sisters, Kathleen and Vanessa, were pregnant and wanted to bond before their babies were born. After the way their father more or less abandoned them to be raised by their grandfather, Kathleen and Vanessa wanted deep ties connecting all of them. Monica sighed. She was fine with family bonding, as long as Van kept her uptight opinions to herself. When she returned to the Double Diamond the summer before, for Kathleen and Jackson's wedding, Vanessa had been a pill. Ordering people around, throwing fits. Generally being the spoiled brat Monica remembered from her early teen years.

According to Kathleen, Old Vanessa had been replaced by some kind of combination Earth Mother–Party Planner. The fact she was still with Mat Barnes several months after they started dating seemed proof that she had changed, but Monica was withholding full support of her sister.

And Kathleen. Well, that relationship was a double edged sword. Monica genuinely loved her older sister, but forging a deep bond? When all Kathleen saw still saw was the eight year old who needed a mother? Kathleen loathed Monica's profession. Poo-pooed her abilities as a horse trainer. Already she was on edge and that was obviously rubbing off on Jinx, who pranced to the side once more. She needed to get him out of the arena, cooled down and loaded in the trailer.

Jinx tossed his head as the final rider came around, taking her place at the end of the line of barrel racers. Monica tightened the reins, but Jinx ignored her instruction. He whinnied, a warning cry if she'd ever heard one, just as the firecrackers exploded behind the pens.

Sweet God, what was going on back there? The attention of the arena audience, every barrel racer, and announcer was trained on the steer pens where another pop-pop-pop sounded, and then a bright, burst of color filled the air followed by a loud *BANG*.

What genius was putting on a fireworks display that close to the pens? Jinx pulled his head left and then right, trying to loosen Monica's grip on the reins, but she held tight. Whatever was going on, the worst thing Jinx could do was run from the pens. It could start a chain reaction.

The steers in the pen began bawling as the firecrackers continued. Several Roman Candles shot into the air followed by another loud bang, and more colors filled the sky.

It would be beautiful as a Fourth of July display, but not in early May. Not when it was unexpected.

Not that close to the steer pens. Bang, *BANG*, *BANG*.

The bawling increased, and Monica looked to the top of the stands. The announcers looked as shocked as she did. Along the chutes, cowboys who'd competed in the roping events earlier in the night pushed their hats back on their heads, worried expressions on all their faces. She searched the stands for the rodeo manager, but couldn't find him. The music ended, and the fireworks display increased.

Brilliant reds, greens, and blues burst overhead as display after display shot high into the air. Jinx moved restlessly again, not because of the loud noises—he'd been around enough fireworks as a racer—but because of the effect of the fireworks on the cattle. People in the stands oohed and awed over the display, clearly excited by the turn of events. The other horses were sliding side to side, eager to get away from the loud booms echoing around them.

"Monica, what do we do?" Lori, the barrel racer who'd placed second ahead of Monica, asked, fear evident in her voice. Monica heard a creak from the pens as the bawling increased. The cattle were in distress. Whoever was shooting off the fireworks needed to stop. Now.

Another bright shower of lights exploded. In their glow, Monica saw a group of teenage boys behind the pens, whooping it up, punks in hand. Idiots. They should know better than to set off fireworks that close to holding pens. The steers shifted restlessly in unison, trying to get away from the noise. The rail fences around them gave a little as the herd moved left. Another loud boom sounded from behind the pen, and the cattle surged forward. One of the boys pointed and started laughing.

God, they were doing this on purpose.

The barrel racers hadn't been dismissed, but with the spectators watching the display, it didn't matter. They needed to get out of the arena. Now.

"Go," Monica shouted to the other barrel racers. "Exit. Now." She pointed to the gate marking the beginning of the raceway. A couple of the cowboys must have seen the cattle were ready to bolt, because they opened the gate wide and started yelling at their compatriots.

The cowboys jumped off the chutes and rails and ran toward the back of the arena. Either trailering their horses or jumping on them to help control the animals about to stampede.

Another loud bang, this time sounding like an actual bomb, and the steers shoved forward, breaking through one rail fence and trampling over another. Anything, to get away from the loud bangs behind them. Louder, angry bellows and snorts sounded from the left where the bulls were penned. The calls from the steers and the fireworks angering the massive beasts. *Please, God, don't let them freak out, too.*

"Go," Monica yelled again, and the other racers seemed to come out of a trance. As one, they raced for the exit gate.

She pulled Jinx's reins to direct him toward the cattle pen. She had to head off those steers before they out of the arena and into the streets, but Jinx shook his head—hard—reared onto his back legs, and began sprinting toward the exit, too. Spectators began screaming from the stands, finally realizing the fireworks display wasn't part of the show. Monica muscled Jinx around to ride the stand rail, yelling at them all to stay put. They were safer in the stands than on the ground with the cattle. No one listened. Finally, Jinx reverted to his training, put his head down, and Monica nudged him toward the steers pouring into the arena.

Three cowboys, all ropers, came up on Monica's heels just as the last steer broke through the arena fence. She stayed on point with Jinx, galloping toward the herd; the other cowboys each took a flank, one riding to the left, the other two to the right. Another loud bang sounded, this time from behind the bull pens. A shiver of fear went down Monica's spine. The bulls.

Lights flooded the arena. Thank God, the herd hadn't taken out the power. Yet.

Monica glanced up and saw two big cowboys grab the pranksters behind the obliterated steer pen. Monica turned a few head toward the cowboy on the right, who circled the steers back toward the ruined pens.

Monica gave Jinx his head, and he culled more steers from the main group of forty. Sent a few one way, a few the other. Man and beasts were running, running, as more cowboys joined the group trying to stop the stampede. The angry noises from the bull pens grew louder, but Monica didn't stop to look. She had to focus on the cattle before her.

More cowboys joined the fray, one taking point. Monica turned Jinx toward a corner where two steers rammed their heads against the fence. She turned the cattle and took a deep breath. Only a few people remained in the stands, all looking stunned. Monica took off her hat and wiped the back of her arm over her forehead.

Jinx's ears flicked, and he tossed his head. Dread filled Monica when a loud growl sounded. She turned and saw one of the bulls, a huge, hairy thing that had to weigh over two thousand

pounds, staring at her. She tried to remain still, but Jinx was antsy and moved. The brilliant lights in the arena sparkled off the rhinestones in her top. The bull lowered his head to charge and Monica slammed her heels into Jinx's hindquarters.

Jinx lunged forward, but wasn't quite fast enough. Monica felt the impact on her horse's hindquarters, and then she was falling, and everything went black.