



## Texas on My Mind: A Western Romance (The McCord Brothers)

By Delores Fossen

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**The McCord Brothers are the most eligible bachelors in Spring Hill, Texas. But these cowboys are about to get wrangled by the love of some very unique women—the kind who can melt hearts and lay it all on the line.**

Air force captain Riley McCord has come home on medical leave to find one heck of a welcome reception. Every unattached woman in Spring Hill, Texas, wants to nurse him back to health. That includes his childhood friend Claire Davidson—the only person who understands how damaged he really feels. In high school, she chose his best friend over him. According to Riley's rules, that should make her off-limits forever. But when Claire suggests a no-strings fling, he can't refuse.

Claire always wanted Riley—but she also craved the safety and stability he couldn't offer. So she chose another path, only to end up crazier about him than ever. She's even convinced herself that this time she won't be devastated when he leaves. Yet once Riley realizes the depth of Claire's feelings—and his own—he'll have to make the ultimate choice: return to the job he loves or stay home for the woman who's always lived in his heart.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Clear off space on your keeper shelf, Fossen has arrived." --*New York Times* bestselling author Lori Wilde

"The perfect blend of sexy cowboys, humor and romance will rein you in from the first line." --*New York Times* bestselling author B.J. Daniels

"Even if you think you've figured out whodunit, hang on til the end to get the full impact of the suspense, action and a family of sexy and lethal lawmen. From the shocking opening paragraph on, Fossen's tale just keeps getting better." --*RT Book Reviews* about *Sawyer* (4 1/2 Top Pick)

"Fossen pens another exciting story with plenty of heat and intrigue." --*RT Book Reviews* about *Cowboy Behind the Badge* (4 stars)

"...readers are going to be sorry to say goodbye to this family of honorable and sexy lawmen." --*RT Book Reviews* about *Wanted* (4 1/2 Top Pick)

#### About the Author

**Delores Fossen**, *USA Today* bestselling author, has written over fifty novels, and millions of copies of her books are in print worldwide. She has received the RT Reviewers' Choice and Booksellers' Best awards and was a finalist for the prestigious RITA Award. In addition, she has had nearly a hundred short stories and articles published in national magazines.

**Kaleo Griffith** is an actor and audiobook narrator. He has appeared in such television series as *Law & Order* and *Reggie's Family & Friends*. His audiobook narrations have earned three AudioFile Earphones Awards.

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There were two women in Captain Riley McCord's bed. Women wearing cutoff shorts, skinny tops and flip-flops.

Riley blinked a couple of times to make sure they weren't by-products of his pain meds and bone-deep exhaustion. *Nope*. They were real enough because he could hear them breathing.

See them breathing, too.

The lamp on the nightstand was on, the milky-yellow light spilling over them. Their tops holding in those C-cups were doing plenty of moving with each breath they took.

He caught a glimpse of a nipple.

If he'd still been a teenager, Riley might have considered having two women in his bed a dream come true. Especially in this room. He'd grown up in this house, had had plenty of fantasies in that very bed. But he was thirty-one now, and with his shoulder throbbing like an abscessed tooth, taking on two women didn't fall into fantasy territory. More like suicide.

Besides, man-rule number two applied here: don't do anything half-assed. Anything he attempted right now would be significantly less than half and would make an ass out of him.

Who the hell were they?

And why were they there in his house, in his bed? The place was supposed to be empty since he'd called ahead and given the cook and housekeeper the week off.

The sisters, Della and Stella, had pretty much run the house since Riley's folks had been killed in a car wreck thirteen years ago. Clearing out the pair hadn't been easy, but he'd used his captain's I'm-giving-the-orders-here voice.

For once it had worked.

His kid sister was away at college. His older brother Lucky was God knew where. Lucky's twin, Logan, was on a business trip and wouldn't be back for at least another week. Even when Logan returned, he'd be spending far more time running the family's cattle brokerage company than actually in the house. That lure of emptiness was the only reason Riley had decided to come here for some peace and quiet.

And so that nobody would see him wincing and grunting in pain.

Riley glanced around to try to figure out who the women were and why they were there. When he checked the family room, he saw a clue by the fireplace. A banner. Well, sort of. He flicked on the lights to get a better look. It was a ten-foot strip of white crepe paper.

Welcome Home, Riley, Our Hero, was written on it.

The black ink had bled, and the tape on one side had given way, and now it dangled and coiled like a soy-sauced ramen noodle.

There were bowls of chips, salsa and other food on the coffee table next to a picture of him in his uniform. Someone had tossed flag confetti all around the snacks, and some of the red, white and blue sparkles had landed on the floor and sofa. In the salsa, too.

Apparently, this was supposed to be the makings of a homecoming party for him.

Whoever had done this probably hadn't counted on his flight from the base in Germany being delayed nine hours. Riley hadn't counted on it, either. Now, it was three in the morning, and he darn sure didn't want to celebrate.

Or have women in his bed.

And he hoped it didn't lower his testosterone a couple of notches to have an unmanly thought like that.

Riley put his duffel bag on the floor. Not quietly, but the women didn't stir even an eyelash. He considered just waking them, but heck, that would require talking to them, and the only thing he wanted right now was another hit of pain meds and a place to collapse.

He went to the bedroom next to his. A guest room. No covers or pillows, which would mean a hunt to find some. That sent him to Lucky's room on the other side of the hall. Covers, yes, but there was another woman asleep facedown with her sleeve-tattooed arm dangling off the side. There was also a saddle on the foot of the bed. Thankfully, Riley's mind was too clouded to even want to consider why it was there.

Getting desperate now and feeling a little like Goldilocks in search of a "just right" place to crash, he went to Logan's suite, the only other bedroom downstairs. Definitely covers there. He didn't waste the energy to turn on the light to have a closer look; since this was Logan's space, it would no doubt be clean enough to pass a military inspection.

No saddles or women, thank God, and he wouldn't have to climb the stairs that he wasn't sure he could climb anyway.

Riley popped a couple of pain meds and dropped down on the bed, his eyes already closing before his head landed against something soft and crumbly. He considered investigating it. *Briefly* considered it. But when it didn't bite, shoot or scald him, he passed on the notion of an investigation.

Whatever was soft and crumbly would just have to wait.

Riley jackknifed in Logan's bed, the pain knocking the breath right out of him. Without any kind of warning, the nightmare that he'd been having had morphed into a full-fledged flashback.

Sometimes he could catch the flashback just as it was bubbling to the surface, and he could stomp it back down with his mental steel-toed combat boots. Sometimes humming "Jingle Bells" helped.

Not this time, though.

The flashback had him by the throat before Riley could even get out a single note of that stupid song he hated. Why had his brain chosen that little Christmas ditty to blur out the images anyway?

The smell came first. Always the fucking smell. The dust and debris whipped up by the chopper. The Pave Hawk blades slicing through the dirt-colored smoke. But not drowning out the sounds.

He wasn't sure how sounds like that could make it through the thump of the blades, the shouts, screams and the chaos. But they did. The sounds always did.

Someone was calling for help in a dialect Riley barely understood. But you didn't need to know the words to hear the fear.

Or smell it.

The images came with a vengeance. Like a chopped-up snake crawling and coiling together to form a neat picture of hell. A handful of buildings on fire, others ripped apart from the explosion. Blood on the bleached-out sand. The screams for help. The kids.

Why the hell were there kids?

Riley had been trained to rescue military and civilians after the fight, after all hell had broken loose. Had been conditioned to deal with fires, blood, IEDs, gunfire, and being dropped into the middle of it so he could do his job and save lives.

But nobody had ever been able to tell him how to deal with the kids.

PTSD. Such a tidy little label. A dialect that civilians understood, or thought they did anyway. But it was just another label for shit. Shit that Riley didn't want in his head.

He grabbed his pain meds from the pocket of his uniform and shoved one, then another into his parched mouth. Soon, very soon, he could start stomping the images back into that little shoe box he'd built in his head.

*Soon.*

He closed his eyes, the words finally coming that he needed to hear.

"Jingle bells, jingle bells..."

He really did need to come up with a more manly sounding song to kick some flashback ass.

\* \* \*

"Hi da tookie," someone whispered.

Riley was sure he was still dreaming. At least, he was sure of it until someone poked him on the cheek.

*Hell. What now?*

"Hi da tookie," the voice repeated. Again in a whisper.

Obviously this was some kind of code or foreign language, but Riley's head was too foggy to process it. He groaned—and, yeah, it was a groan of pain—and forced his eyelids open so he could try to figure out what the heck was going on.

Eyeballs stared back at him.

Eyeballs that were really close. Like, just an inch from his.

That jolted him fully awake, and Riley automatically reached for his weapon. Which wasn't there, of course. He wasn't on assignment in hostile territory. He was in his own family's home. And the eyes so close to his didn't belong to the enemy.

They belonged to a kid.

A kid with brown eyes and dark brown hair. Maybe two or three years old, and he had a smear of something on his cheek.

"Hi da tookie," the kid said again. He didn't wait for Riley to respond, however. He jammed something beneath the pillow.

A cookie, aka tookie.

And it had an identical smell to the one Riley had just been dreaming about. Except it was no dream. Riley realized that when he lifted his head and the crumbs fell onto the collar of his uniform. *Hell's Texas bells.* He'd slept on a chocolate-chip cookie. But why the devil was it there in Logan's bed?

Like the women in his own bed and the gibberish-talking kid, an answer for that might have to wait a second or two because Riley had a more pressing question.

"Who are you?" he asked the kid.

"E-tan," the boy readily answered.

That didn't explain much, and Riley wasn't sure how much a kid that age could explain anyway.

"Tookie," the boy repeated. He took one of the crumbs from Riley's collar and ate it.

All right, so maybe that did explain why he'd slept on a cookie-laced pillow. This kid was responsible. But who was responsible for the kid? He didn't get a chance to find out because the little boy took off running out of the room.

Riley got up. More groaning. Some grimacing, too. The damage to his shoulder and knee weren't permanent, but at the moment it sure as hell felt like it.

The docs at the base in Ramstein, Germany, had told him he needed at least three more weeks to recover from the surgery to repair the damage done by the shrapnel when it'd slashed into his right shoulder and chest. After that, he'd start some physical therapy for both the shoulder and his wrenched knee. And after that, there would be a medical board to decide if he could continue being the only thing he'd ever wanted to be.

An AF CRO. Short for Air Force Combat Rescue Officer.

It twisted his gut to think that it could all be taken away. That whole "life turning on a dime" sucked donkey dicks, and he could go from being part of an elite special ops force to someone he was darn sure he didn't want to be.

That was a violation of man-rule number one: don't be ordinary.

Frustrated with that thought, with the pain and with the whole world in general, Riley headed into the adjoining bathroom. When he came out, the kid was still nowhere in sight.

Brushing away some more cookie crumbs from his uniform, Riley went into the family room to look around. No sign of E-tan there. Someone had cleaned up the party remains, so Riley headed to his own bedroom. *Good gravy.* The two women were still there, still asleep. Riley was about to wake them, to tell them about the cookie-hiding toddler, but then he caught a whiff of something else.

Coffee. The miracle drug.

And he heard someone moving around in the kitchen. Since Della and her sister, Stella, had sworn on John Wayne's soul and their mama's Bible that they would follow Riley's orders and stay far away from the place, there shouldn't be any sounds or smells coming from anywhere in the house. Still, if this was a break-in, at least the burglar had made coffee. He might just give up everything of value to get a single cup.

Once Riley hobbled his way to the kitchen, he saw that E-tan had already crawled into a chair at the table. Like the rest of the house, the kitchen was sprawling, and even though they had two other dining rooms, Riley had eaten a lot of his meals in this room. In fact, he'd sat in that very chair where the kid was sitting now.

Riley immediately located the cookie source. There was a plate of about a dozen or so of them on the kitchen table. He spotted the source of the moving-around sounds, too.

Another woman.

A blonde this time. Her hair was cut short and choppy and fell against her neck.

This one was very much awake. She was at the stove, her back to him, and she was stirring something in a skillet. Her body swayed a little with each stir, and despite the F-5 tornado in his head, Riley noticed. Hard not to notice since she was wearing denim shorts that hugged a very nice ass.

An ass that was strangely familiar.

She turned slightly to the side when she reached for the saltshaker, and Riley got a look at her face. Familiar all right.

*Claire.*

A real blast from the past. Calling Claire Davidson a childhood friend was a little like saying the ocean had a bit of water in it. Once they'd been as thick as thieves, but he'd pretty much lost touch with her after he graduated from college.

Riley took a moment to savor the moment. There was always something about Claire that reminded him of home. Of the things he'd left behind. Not that she'd been his to leave, but it always felt a little like that whenever he thought of her. Now he didn't have to conjure up a memory. She was right there in front of him.

Wearing those nice-fitting shorts.

Riley went to her, slipped his arm around her waist to give her a friendly hug.

And Claire screamed as if he'd just gutted her with a machete.

Along with slapping him upside the head with an egg-coated spatula.

She made some garbled sounds. Hit him again. This time on his already throbbing shoulder. She took aim at him once more, but her common sense must have kicked in, and she looked at his face.



"Riley, my God, you scared the life out of me!"

"Really? I hadn't noticed." He didn't mean to sound grouchy, but hell in a handbasket, that spatula had hit the wrong spot.

Claire's face flushed red. Then she smiled. And despite his eyes watering in pain, he had no trouble seeing it. That smile always lit up the room, and it gave him a sucker punch of attraction. But as Riley had done since about the time he'd first sprouted chest hair, he stepped back. For the past fifteen years or so, Claire had been hands-off.

Not that she'd ever actually been hands-on.

Evidently she didn't have the same rules about the hands-off part. She put her arms around him, pulled him really, really close to her for a hug. He wasn't able to bite back a grunt of pain so the hug was short and sweet.

"I'm so sorry." Claire grabbed a tea towel, began to wipe the egg off his face. "I heard about your injury, of course."

Judging from the noodle banner, so had everyone in town. "I'll be fine. I just need a few weeks to recover."

At best, that was wishful thinking. At worst, an out-and-out lie. It was a sad day when a man lied to himself, but right now Riley needed anything that would get him through this.

Lies and oxycodone.

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