



THE RANCHER'S UNEXPECTED FAMILY

Helen Lacey

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The Rancher's Unexpected Family

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1 COWGIRL COP + 1 SINGLE DAD = DOUBLE THE DESIRE! Running a ranch for troubled kids, policing the town and raising a son – Ash McCune is in complete control of her hectic life. Till one sexy single dad arrives on her ranch with his daughter. Cole Quartermaine is rich, successful, a good father. But he's leaving in a few weeks. But he makes her feel like a woman. Cole needs this time to connect with his newfound daughter. What he doesn't need is an attraction to the cowgirl cop who runs it. Nor hero worship from her son. He's going to return to the city or he could stay and make a family of four!

1 Cowgirl Cop + 1 Single Dad = Double the Desire!

Running a ranch for troubled kids, policing the town and raising a son—Ash McCune is in complete control of her hectic life. Till one sexy single dad arrives on her Cedar River ranch with his daughter. Cole Quartermaine is rich, successful, a good father. But in weeks, he's leaving. So why does he make her feel something she hasn't felt in years—like a woman?

Cole needs this ranch to connect with his newfound daughter. What he doesn't need is a jaw-dropping attraction to the cowgirl cop who runs it. Nor hero worship from her son. He's got three weeks to resist her and return to the city, a party of two...or stay and make a family of four.

A father figure...a dad.

That's how her son viewed him? He should've been more careful, not gotten so involved. Now he was leaving and the boy would be hurt.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I never realized how much he missed having a man in his life. Not surprising, of course. In Jaye's eyes, you're a perfect image of what a father should be... strong, kind. Everything he longs for. Everything I didn't give him." She shook her head. "Maybe because I'm scared of letting someone in."

"You're not afraid of anything," he said, grasping her hand.

"I **am** afraid," she admitted, holding his glance. "I'm absolutely terrified. Of you. Of...this."

"Me, too," he said quietly.

"So what do we do?"

"I don't know. Ignore it. Go with it. Honestly, I have no idea." He rubbed her palm with his thumb. The action was hypnotic and sexy and she swayed toward him. He felt her heat. "I promised myself... I promised you that I'd keep my distance." He looked down at how close she was. "Ash, you should tell me to leave."

She touched his face, cradling his jaw. "I should..." she said, her words trailing. "But somehow, I can't."

* * *

The Cedar River Cowboys:

Riding into town with romance on their minds!

The Rancher's Unexpected Family

Helen Lacey



www.millsandboon.co.uk

HELEN LACEY grew up reading *Black Beauty* and *Little House on the Prairie*. These childhood classics inspired her to write her first book when she was seven, a story about a girl and her horse. She loves writing for Mills & Boon Cherish, where she can create strong heroes with soft hearts and heroines with gumption who get their happily-ever-after. For more about Helen, visit her website, www.helenlacey.com.

For Nas Dean

Thank you for all that you do

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[Chapter One](#)

There was one thing Cole Quartermaine knew, and that was that he knew nothing about how to handle surly teenagers.

In particular, his surly teenage daughter, who was sulking in the passenger seat of his rental car, earbuds plugged into her ears, her mouth pressed into a flat, grim line.

She hates me.

No surprise there. It had been a fraught eight months since he'd first discovered the existence of fourteen-year-old Maisy, and that he was father to a girl who had no interest in getting to know him or having any kind of relationship. But he desperately wanted to work things out with his daughter...no matter how much she resisted. She didn't care who he was, or that they shared the same blood. She called him Cole and he didn't insist she say anything different.

To be honest, he wasn't even sure how he'd react if she actually did call him Dad.

He concentrated on the drive and glanced to the right, at the sign welcoming them to town. Cedar River, South Dakota—population, three thousand and something. A speck on the map that sat in the shadow of the Black Hills. It was where he'd be staying for the next few weeks—a world away from Phoenix and the life he had there.

But he had to do it. For Maisy's sake. The last few months had been hard on them both. She didn't want to be with him, she didn't want anything to do with him or his folks or either of his younger sisters. And since the alternative was foster care, Cole knew this might be the only chance he had of truly connecting with his daughter. When his lawyer and friend, Joel, had suggested it, he'd resisted the idea. He wasn't a small-town kind of person. He had lived most of his life in Phoenix, Arizona, although he'd traveled the country extensively when he was competing on the NASCAR circuit. But now that he was retired from racing and managing his family-owned race team, Cole spent the majority of the year in his city apartment in Phoenix.

And this, he thought as he drove through Cedar River, with its one traffic light, wide wooden-planked sidewalks and mix of old and new storefronts, was not any kind of big city.

He checked the GPS and took a left turn, crossing the river over a long bridge that took them east, with another five miles to travel. When the electronic voice from the GPS told him they had arrived at their destination, Cole turned right and went through a pair of wide, whitewashed gates. He looked down the long gravel driveway and spotted a ranch house in the distance. There were several other buildings dotted around the house, most of them smaller except for the huge red barn with a white roof that stood out like a beacon beneath the glow of the midmorning sun. Several horses and about a dozen head of cattle were grazing in the pasture, and he spotted a couple of dogs roaming around the ranch house.

“We’re here,” he said, to himself more than anything, because his daughter hadn’t spared him more than a surly glance for the last thirty miles.

Ignoring the heavy knot of tension in his gut, Cole pressed on the gas and headed down the driveway. He parked several yards from the main house and turned off the ignition, then unclipped his seat belt and turned toward his daughter.

“Maisy?” He waited for a reply.

After a moment she removed the earbuds and raised a bored eyebrow. “What?”

“We’re here,” he said again and nodded toward the windshield.

She glanced around and then shrugged. “Lucky me.”

Cole fought the irritation climbing over his skin. He looked out the window and realized the place seemed deserted. Only the two large brown dogs were moving around the yard, circling the car warily. Great...maybe they were attack dogs. “Stay here,” he instructed and grasped the door handle. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

She shrugged with a kind of disinterest he was becoming used to and popped the buds back into her ears. Cole looked at her and sighed as he got out of the car. One of the dogs barked as he closed the door and he took a couple of wary steps toward the house. He could hear music coming from the direction of the barn and then headed that way, watching as the dogs continued to circle around him as he walked. When he reached the barn he noticed how the hounds remained on either side of the door, as though they were standing on point and had been well trained to do so. The music was pure country and exactly what he’d expect to hear on a ranch on the outskirts of a town like Cedar River.

“Hello?” he said and walked through the wide doors.

He spotted an old truck in the corner, propped up on a set of jacks. Then he saw a pair of legs sticking out from beneath the tray, clad in jeans and attached to a set of curvy hips and then a bare, smooth belly peeking out of a grease-splattered T-shirt that was riding up over a taut set of abs. Cole came to an abrupt stop and stared at the shapely female form beneath the truck. His insides twitched with a kind instinctive reaction he suspected was wildly inappropriate, since he didn’t have a clue who she was. But still, he let his gaze linger for a moment, before clearing his throat and saying hello again.

Then he heard a clang, a curse and then the hips shimmied across the ground and a woman sprang to her feet in front of him. The first things he noticed were her bright green eyes and thick red hair pulled back in a messy ponytail. His gaze traveled down her throat, her full breasts, her small waist and finally to her booted feet.

“Hey,” she said loudly and clearly, so she could be heard above the music as she tugged down her T-shirt. “My face is up here!”

Heat smacked Cole squarely in his cheeks and he met her gaze instantly. She was younger than him, maybe around thirty, and was effortlessly pretty. There was a smear of grease on her forehead and another on her chin, but it did nothing to quell the instant and blisteringly hot attraction he experienced, like a bolt of lightning that came out of nowhere. Her green eyes glared at him and he bit back a grin. Feisty redheads weren’t on his radar, not when he had more important things to worry about.

“My apologies,” he said and kept his eyes locked with hers. “When I walked in here I didn’t expect to find someone like you underneath the truck.”

“Someone like me?” she queried, and regarded him as though he was a chauvinistic jerk who belonged in a cave. “Do you think women should stay in the kitchen and out of the garage?” she asked, and wiped her hands down her jeans, then turned off the radio.

“Not at all,” Cole replied, his gaze unwavering. “I think it’s helpful to be good at most things.”

Her brows rose steeply. “And are you?”

“Good at most things?” He shrugged loosely. “Like most men I’d probably like to think so.”

She laughed and the sound hit him directly in the middle of his chest. Then she held out her hand before he had a chance to speak. “You must be Mr. Quartermaine. I’m Ash McCune.”

She's Ash McCune...

And not what he had been expecting. Joel had neglected to say how young and attractive his cousin was. Cole knew very little about her, other than the fact she was a police officer, a single mom and had been a foster mother to many kids during the past few years. Which is why he'd brought Maisy to her South Dakota ranch. He needed help with his daughter. And Joel had insisted that Ash McCune was exactly the lifeline he needed.

The moment their fingertips met, heat immediately shot up his arm. "Please, call me Cole."

"Sure," she said and removed her hand. "You're early. I wasn't expecting you until late this afternoon."

"Our flight was canceled and we had to switch to an earlier one. Is that a problem?"

She shrugged. "No problem. I just need some time to finish getting your cabin ready."

Awkwardness twitched between his shoulders. "I guess I should have called."

She shrugged again. "Like I said, no problem. I trust Joel explained our situation here?"

Cole's mouth twisted. "Actually, he was pretty vague about everything, other than the fact you graciously agree to allow Maisy and I to stay here for a few weeks."

"Maisy? That's your daughter?"

"Yes."

She nodded. "And she's fourteen?"

"She had a birthday last month," he replied.

"Does she know why she's here?"

Cole sighed. "She knows. And she's not happy about it."

Ash McCune's vibrant green eyes widened. "For the record, by the time they get here, most of the kids are resistant to the idea. And it usually works out."

"Usually?"

"Helping kids isn't an exact science," she explained. "And that's what we do here—we help kids." Her mouth twisted a little. "And the occasional parent."

His mouth twitched. "I'm glad to hear it. In my defense, I'm new to this parenting gig."

She nodded. "Joel told me. You've been friends with my cousin for a long time?"

"A few years. He dated my sister for a while a couple of years back. We've stayed friends and now he's my lawyer. Joel was convinced you'd be able to help Maisy."

"I'll do my very best," she said quietly. "But you do need to understand that I have no actual qualifications in child psychology. I'm an authorized foster-caregiver and have all the relevant documents to legally have children in my care. But there's nothing scientific about our methods. I guess what I'm trying to say is that we get results here through patience and kindness and caring."

"We?"

"My mom, Nancy, lives here and helps with the kids and I have an uncle who runs the ranching side of things."

He nodded fractionally. "You're a mother and a police officer, right?"

"Correct."

"Then I'd say you have all the qualifications you need."

She smiled and the action hit him way down low, in a place he'd somehow forgotten was there, and suddenly he felt about seventeen and keen to impress the cute girl in biology class. But he wasn't seventeen and this wasn't high school. It was real life. And he had a child who needed him to keep his head screwed on right.

"So... I should probably meet your daughter?"

Cole pulled himself from the foolish trance he was in and stepped back. "Of course. Ah, don't be surprised or offended if she's uncommunicative. My daughter doesn't say a lot."

"The sullen, silent type," she said and began walking from the barn. "I've handled that before."

And as he watched her hips sway as she walked from the barn, Cole was sure that Ash McCune could handle pretty much anything with one hand tied behind her back. Including him.

* * *

Good-looking men were nothing but trouble for a sensible, hardworking, small-town police officer and single mother. Logically, Ash knew that. But logic had spectacularly deserted her the moment she'd come face-to-face with Cole Quartermaine. Six foot something of lean, utterly gorgeous male with smooth brown skin, glittering blue eyes, broad shoulders and a sexy, megawatt smile wasn't what she'd been expecting.

I should have Googled him. Or at least asked Joel for more information.

Usually she knew more about the people whom she allowed to stay at her ranch. She knew he was rich and came from a prominent racing family in Phoenix. But when her cousin had assured her that Cole Quartermaine and his daughter were in dire need of her help, she'd agreed without resistance. She trusted Joel and all she'd been given were names, a brief and abridged history of Cole's occupation and the relationship between father and daughter, and an arrival date. She'd figured she'd simply find out anything else when they arrived.

Ergo, the hotter-than-Hades dad with the nice clothes and million-dollar smile who smelled absolutely divine was one major surprise.

And she didn't like surprises. Not ever.

As she strode from the barn she could feel his gaze burning through her. She straightened her back and kept walking, heading directly for the flashy new sedan parked in her driveway. The dogs were now beside her, doing their job. Milo and Mitzy were well trained and would restrain on command...but the only restraint needed in that moment was on her unexpectedly resurfacing libido!

Ash got to the rear of the car and waited. He walked around her and she got a waft of his aftershave...or soap, or shampoo, or maybe it was just her starved pheromones gone mad and she was imagining he smelled like a pine forest after the spring rain. Whatever it was, it struck her with the force of a freight train and she had to pull on every ounce of her usual good strength to not look like some kind of sex-starved idiot over a man she'd met just five minutes ago.

But boy, oh, boy...he was hot.

Ash watched as he tapped on the car window and then waited as the door opened and a girl got out. She was extraordinarily beautiful, with dark curly hair, pale brown skin and blue eyes like her father's. She had a small piercing in her nose and several long chains dangling from her ears. But there was no smile, no indication she was even remotely pleased to be where she was.

"Hi," Ash said as cheerfully as she could muster and walked around the front of the vehicle. "I'm Ash McCune. And you're Maisy Quar—"

"Rayburn," the girl said stiffly. "Maisy Rayburn."

Ash saw Cole flinch slightly and made a mental note. Right. Relationship between father and daughter is exceptionally strained and she doesn't share his name.

"It's nice to meet you," Ash said and smiled. "I hope you'll enjoy your stay here."

The teenager's gaze darkened. "I'm here because he made me come," she said and jerked a thumb in her father's direction.

Ash glanced toward Cole. He was frowning and she felt her smile falter. He must have gotten her meaning because he quickly transformed the frown into a smile and when he did her insides immediately fluttered like a moth caught by the glow of a bulb. Damn...he was achingly gorgeous. Maybe the most delicious-looking man she had ever met. Perfectly put-together features, with just a touch of a whisker shadow and a military-style crew cut that amplified his good looks tenfold. Yep, Cole Quartermaine was obviously one of those men who had it all.

Great smile. Check!

Great shoulders. Check!

Great load of trouble ahead. Check!

“How about we head inside for some iced tea?” she suggested.

“I’d rather just go to my room,” the teenager said.

“I have to finish getting the cabin ready,” Ash said and pointed to a small building about one hundred feet from the ranch house. “And we should probably get to know one another first.”

The young girl’s expression narrowed instantly. “We’re staying in there? Are you kidding me? What a dump.”

“Maisy!”

Cole’s voice was sharply disapproving and his daughter recoiled for a second before shrugging her shoulders in a willful way that spoke volumes. Ash did her best not to take offense. She’d been a cop for over a decade and had fostered nearly twenty-five children during that time, so a thick and resilient skin was a necessity. But there was no doubt the man standing by the car was not as adept at handling teenage stubbornness and anger. Compassion for him quickly coursed through her blood, along with a deep-rooted and heartfelt ache for the girl who looked so solitary and mad at the world.

“The cabin is clean and tidy,” Ash said and walked toward the porch. When she mounted the first step she turned on her heels. “Things aren’t always what they seem. Take me, for instance,” she said, shoulders back as she met Maisy’s glare head-on. “Five feet four and one hundred and twenty-five pounds wringing wet—some people might think I’m a pushover. Those people would be wrong. Come inside the house, you can take your bags up to the cabin later.”

Ash turned and walked up to the house, opening the door and screen. She waited for her guests to follow and then stood back as they crossed the threshold. Cole ushered his daughter up the steps and Ash managed a tight smile as they moved through the doorway. She closed the screen and walked down the hallway, over the shiny polished floors and into the large kitchen at the rear of the house. The warmth of red cedar cupboards and dark granite countertops struck her as it always did. She’d had the kitchen renovated a year earlier and loved spending time in the big room, with its large scrubbed table and chairs and the pots hanging above the stove. Ash loved to cook and did so whenever she could shoo her mother out from behind the counter. Fifty-seven-year-old Nancy Olsen-McCune-Rodriguez was twice-married, twice-divorced and Ash’s right hand on the ranch. Along with Uncle Ted, her mother’s much older brother, who was essentially the ranch foreman and lived in one of the four cabins behind the main house. And of course, Jaye, her twelve-year-old son, whom she loved more than anything.

She washed and dried her hands and ignored the fact her clothes were grease-stained and she probably looked like an oily rag. “So, iced tea?” she asked and looked at her two guests, who were hovering in the doorway.

“Sure,” Cole said and stepped farther into the room. “Nice place you’ve got here.”

Ash nodded. “My grandparents bought the ranch over fifty years ago. When they died they left it to my uncle and Mom and me,” she said and grabbed the jug of iced tea from the refrigerator, then filled up three glasses with ice and a sprig of mint. “We run a few head of cattle and some horses. And we have chickens, an adorable alpaca and a few goats.”

“And two big dogs.”

She met his gaze and smiled a little. “They look formidable, but they’re quite civilized.”

“He hates dogs.”

Maisy’s voice was muffled but decipherable and Ash raised a brow. “More of a cat person, are you?”

He shrugged. “Not especially,” he replied and glanced toward his daughter. “And I don’t hate dogs. I just have...allergies,” he said and shrugged again.

“He’s allergic to everything.” Maisy again, even more disagreeable than before.

Ash’s eyes widened. “Everything?”

She noticed his cheeks darken. “Not everything. Bees,” he explained. “And shellfish.”

“Then I shall try not to poison you with my seafood paella,” Ash said and smiled. “I trust you have an EpiPen on standby?”

“Always.”

“My son has a nut allergy, so I’m well-rehearsed in emergency trips to the ER.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” he said and his mouth twitched in a half smile that sent her awareness of him skyrocketing. “As long as I stay out of your flower bed and avoid your paella, I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

Flirting...

For one crazy moment that’s what it felt like. Which was ridiculous, since his daughter was standing in the room and Ash hadn’t known her for more than fifteen minutes. But still, the notion lingered. Ash filled up the glasses and passed them around, careful not to get too close to the man now sitting on the far side of the dining table. She pushed the glass across the table and invited Maisy to take a seat. The teenager shrugged, clearly feigning an overinterest in the music coming from the buds she had in her ears so she wouldn’t have to talk. Ash was familiar with the ploy and pulled out a chair for Maisy, opposite her father.

“Take a seat,” she said and smiled.

The girl cranked her gaze toward her for a moment, then plunked heavily in the seat. “Sure. Whatever.”

Ash moved around the table and sat down, then directed her gaze straight onto the angry-looking teenage at the end of the table. “So, Maisy, tell me why you’re here?”

Dark blue eyes flicked up and glared at her. “Because he made me.”

“Yes, so you said,” Ash said with controlled patience. “I want to know why you think you’re here.”

She shrugged. “So I get to stay out of social services.”

“Is that where you think you were heading?”

“Ask him,” she said and jerked her thumb once again in her father’s direction. “He’s got all the answers.”

Hot Dad was about to respond when Ash held up a hand. “I’m asking you, Maisy.”

The teenager shrugged again, but wouldn’t look at her. “I dunno...maybe. I’ve done some stuff.”
“Stuff?”

Maisy glanced up, her gaze angry and resentful. “I stole a stupid book from a stupid store and got busted. They called the cops and then he had to bail me out.”

Ash took a sip of tea and nodded. “Do you like to read?”

The teen’s expression narrowed suspiciously. “Read? Yeah, I guess.”

“We have quite an extensive bookshelf here,” Ash said and smiled. “In the front living room. My mother is an avid reader and collects all kind of books. You’re welcome to read as many as you like while you’re here. Or there’s a great library in town, if you prefer.”

“I like fantasy books.”

“So does my mom,” Ash said quietly. “She’s going to enjoy having someone to talk to about them. I’m not much of a reader, unless it’s a cookbook.”

Maisy unexpectedly rattled off the names of several of her favorite authors and titles before settling her gaze back into her lap and then clearly upping the music volume. But Ash was pleased with their exchange. Small steps, she knew, were hard at first, but well worth the effort when it came to a lost child.

Now all she had to do was get Cole Quartermaine out of the hot-dad category and everything would be fine.

Yep...easy.

Not.

* * *

Cole couldn't believe what he was witnessing. Maisy communicating. Maisy talking. Maisy actually connecting with someone. In that moment he could have gotten up and kissed Ash McCune for getting his usually uncommunicative daughter to have something that actually resembled a real conversation.

Kiss Ash McCune...

Okay, maybe not.

For one, she looked feisty enough to hit him over the head with a frying pan. And secondly, thinking about kissing her was plain old stupid. Despite the fact he found her so attractive. He was in Cedar River for one thing—his daughter. Nothing was going to derail that. Not the fact that he'd suddenly discovered he had a thing for redheads.

"My mother homeschools, by the way," Ash said, getting his attention. "Four hours every weekday. In case you were concerned about Maisy keeping up with her schoolwork."

He nodded. "How many kids do you have staying here right now?"

"Three," she replied and glanced toward his daughter and then back to him. "Four. Plus one."

He didn't think he'd ever been anyone's plus one before. Cole kept his gaze locked with hers and heat instantly climbed over his limbs. He ignored the feeling and drank some tea, which tasted like poison and made him grimace.

"Not a tea drinker I take it?"

He shrugged loosely. "More a coffee and beer kind of guy."

Her expression narrowed fractionally. "This is a dry ranch with a strict no-alcohol rule."

Great. "Sure."

"For the kids' benefit," she explained. "Troubled teens and alcohol can be a bad mix. So, I keep the place free of the stuff. Much to the dismay of my uncle Ted."

Cole understood. "I'm not much of a drinker," he said quietly and endured another sip of the poisonous beverage in front of him.

"We also have a no-smoking rule."

He looked up and met her green gaze. "I haven't lit a cigarette since I was twenty-one."

She sipped her tea and smiled. "Sounds like you are vice-free."

Cole's skin prickled. "I'm as flawed as anyone else."

Her eyes widened for a moment and it was incredibly sexy. Even the grease mark still on her chin was sexy. He wondered why every word between them sounded like some kind of crazy flirtation. He wasn't in the market for flirting. For anything. And definitely not with a woman like Ash McCune. He didn't do relationships anymore. He kept his love life casual and had since he'd split with his ex-wife and gotten out of their two-year marriage a few years earlier—he'd lost his house, his heart and a good chunk of his savings.

Cole shrugged off the memory and got to his feet. "We should probably unpack."

She stared at him for a moment. "Sure. I'll just get the bed linen. I'll meet you outside."

He took off as though his heels were on fire, instructing Maisy to follow. By the time he was at the car and had taken their luggage from the trunk, the knot of tension in his shoulders had lessened. Until Ash McCune came around the porch and down the steps, carrying a wicker laundry basket piled with sheets and towels.

She swayed when she walked. Swayed. Damn.

Get a grip, Quartermaine.

Cole grabbed both his and Maisy's suitcases and left his daughter to bring his laptop and her small tote. He stayed several feet back as he followed Ash around the rear of the house and toward the largest of the five cabins that were all within a couple of hundred yards of the main house. She placed the basket on one hip, climbed the steps, opened the door and then walked inside. Cole did the same, instructing Maisy to follow, but her cell rang and his daughter quickly dropped her bag onto

the porch near the door and sat down on the step. Figuring it was one of her school friends, he told her not to take too long and gave her some privacy, then entered the house.

The cabin was roomy and open plan, with raked ceilings, a small kitchen and dining area and a large living space. There were a couple of mismatched sofas, a cabinet that housed a television, a gaming console and a large stone fireplace and hearth. It looked clean and comfortable and very livable.

“There are two bedrooms,” she explained. “The fridge and pantry are stocked with the basics, but if you have any special dietary requirements, there’s a supermarket in town. You’re also welcome to join us for dinner at the main house whenever you like.”

Cole nodded and followed her down the short hallway. She walked into a room on her left and placed the basket on the double bed. There was a robe, a small dresser and a chair in the corner and a worn rug on the floor. Cole thought about his huge penthouse apartment, with its modern decor and city views. He’d bought the place after his divorce, fully furnished and without any mementos from his failed marriage.

“I’m sure we’ll be comfortable, thank you.”

“Would you like me to make the bed up?” she asked.

He realized they were standing on opposite sides of the bed and met her gaze head-on. He glanced at the mattress and the serviceable blue patterned quilt draped over the bottom frame. “I’ve been making my own bed since I was eight years old, so I’m pretty sure I can manage.”

One of her incredibly sexy eyebrows arched dramatically. “Well, you did say you were good at most things.”

Cole’s pulse quickened and he motioned toward the bed between them. Awareness flared up, fanned by how the small room suddenly seemed absurdly intimate. “Would you like me to prove it?”

Her mouth opened slightly and she gasped. “Huh?”

Cole didn’t miss the startled look in her eyes. “We could...” He paused, fascinated as color rose up her neck, hueing her pale skin. Without even knowing how it happened, there was enough heat combusting the air between them to start a fire. “We could make it together. The bed, I mean.”

She swallowed hard and stepped back. “I don’t think... I’m sure you’ll manage without me.”

Cole smiled and half shrugged. “Of course. But it won’t be anywhere near as much fun.”

The innuendo was obvious and she turned beet red. And then fled.

It was, he realized, still smiling to himself as he watched her retreating figure disappear through the doorway, going to be a very long three weeks.

[Chapter Two](#)

I am officially the most foolish woman on the planet.

Ash was still cussing herself twenty minutes later as she washed up and changed into fresh jeans and a red blouse. Then she opened her laptop and typed in the name Cole Quartermaine.

She clicked several of the links that came up, scanned the pages and sat back on the bed, looking at the images on the screen. The Quartermaines were an old-money family in Phoenix. His third-generation Irish Catholic father had a mop of auburn hair and sparkling blue eyes, and his African American mother was so beautiful she looked like a movie star. He had two sisters, both younger. One was a lawyer, the other a marketing executive who worked in the family business. Cole had been born into a NASCAR empire and had a promising career as a driver until a near-fatal accident when he was twenty-seven. Now he managed the family’s team alongside his father. It was impressive stuff.

There were several pictures of him with an array of beautiful women and she figured a man who looked like Cole didn’t have to work hard to get female company. She’d read that he had an ex-wife and there was no mention of a current significant other.

By the time she returned to the kitchen it was past two o’clock. Her mother and uncle would be home later that afternoon, along with Jaye and the three kids currently staying at the ranch. They’d headed into town that morning for haircuts and lunch at JoJo’s Pizza Parlor and to give Ash some

much needed time to do a few repairs on the old truck that had seen better days. But she wasn't in the mood to spend any more time under the hood. She planned on making a roast for dinner that night, so set about preparing the meal and getting the meat into the oven. Then she pulled one of her mother's signature peach pies out of the freezer and left it to thaw on the counter.

From the kitchen window she had a clear view of all the cabins and wandered back and forth a few times to see if there was any movement from the one now occupied by her newest guests. But nothing. She made a pot of coffee and looked through the pantry for something to snack on, settling on a half-eaten packet of rice crackers.

Note to self—must stop thinking about a certain hot dad. Focus on the real reason he's here.
Easy.

Ash was dipping into the packet for her third cracker when there was a knock on the door of the back mudroom, which was just off the kitchen. She turned on her heels. The door was open and Cole stood there, looking so totally gorgeous as he rested one strong shoulder against the jamb that her mouth turned dry and the cracker she was eating suddenly felt like sandpaper as it lodged in her throat.

"Oh...hello," she said and coughed, then coughed again, quickly making her way around the counter for some water. She poured a glass, still coughing. She took a few sips, but the itching in her throat remained and she coughed again. And again. Until her eyes starting watering and she had to bend over to alleviate the dry, choking sensation.

Then she felt an unexpected hand on her back. A large, soothing hand that patted her gently between the shoulder blades. The coughing quickly subsided and she swallowed hard, feeling the heat of his touch through the cotton shirt she wore. Ash straightened immediately, swiveling on her heels. Which only heightened the intimacy of the space between them—which was no space at all. His hand remained on her back and they were close enough that she could see he had a small scar on his temple and another under his chin. And the scent of him once again assailed her senses. Never in her life had she been so intensely aware of a man—particularly one she'd known less than an hour. But this man made her remember that she was more than a mom, a rancher and a police officer...and that she was very much a flesh-and-blood woman.

"Are you okay now?" he asked quietly, dropping his hand.

Ash stepped back and nodded. "Ah, yes... I'm fine."

"I'm sorry if I startled you," he said and moved around the counter.

"Oh, no problem, I feel fine now. What can I do for you?"

"I thought we should talk," he said and met her gaze. "About Maisy. You probably have some questions and I'd like to discuss this without my daughter in earshot."

"That's a good idea," Ash said, regaining her equilibrium and good sense as she poured coffee into two mugs, and then asked the first obvious question. "Can you tell me about her mother?"

He shrugged a little uncomfortably. "Her name was Deanna. She died eight months ago. Pancreatic cancer."

"I'm so sorry," Ash said, handing him one of the mugs.

"Don't be," he said quickly and then frowned when he realized how odd his reply must have sounded. "I mean, of course, yes, it's tragic for someone so young...and for Maisy. But I didn't know her very well."

Ash's brow came up instantly. "Really?"

"Well, of course I knew her," he said, clearly uncomfortable. "You want the story, here it is—nearly fifteen years ago I knew her for three days. I was twenty-two, she was twenty. We met at a race and we hooked up, spending three nights together. I never saw her again after that. And then eight months ago a woman from social services knocked on my door and told me I had a teenage daughter."

She sat down opposite him. "Deanna never let you know she was pregnant?"

He shook his head. "It wasn't exactly a love match. It was a weekend."

"How do you think you would have reacted had she told you from the beginning?"

He shrugged again. "I'm not sure. At the time my life was hectic. I'd just won my first major race and I was regularly traveling around the country. And I wasn't interested in anything serious. But I'd like to believe I would have tried to do the right thing. I'll never know. All I know is that now I am in a position to do what's right...and that's to try and have some kind of relationship with my daughter and give her a home."

Ash admired his honesty. "She seems very resistant to the idea."

"She hates my guts," he said bluntly. "But I'm all she's got."

"Are there any relatives on her mother's side?"

"None," he replied. "Her parents have both passed away and there are only a couple of very distant cousins in Wichita. My parents and both my sisters have tried to help, even offering to have Maisy go and live with them."

"But?" Ash prompted.

"She says she doesn't want that, either. Frankly, I'm all out of ideas."

Ash nodded. "But you want her to be with you?"

"Of course," he snapped back quickly. "She's my kid. I'm her father. We're family. And family is everything. I just need to work out how to get her to at least like me."

"She doesn't have to like you," Ash said earnestly. "She doesn't have to love you. You just have to love her. No one tells you that when you become a parent—it's something we all learn in our own time and our own way. She'll come around, but you need to be prepared for a lot of difficulty in between. Anger, despair and probably a lot of silence. As irrational as it seems, she probably blames you for her mother's death."

His blue eyes glittered. "You're right."

"And telling her that you didn't know about her up until eight months ago will make no difference to her adolescent logic."

"You're right again. You can figure that out by one short conversation with her? How?"

Ash drank her coffee and then cradled the mug between her hands. "Experience. She needs someone to blame for her unhappiness and you're it. You'll need a thick skin to get through the next few weeks."

His mouth creased in a half smile. "My mom is black, my dad is white and I grew up in a city that is predominantly white and Hispanic. A thick skin was a necessary part of growing up."

Ash nodded slightly. "I guess we all have our trials. I was reading a few articles about you earlier," she said and drank some coffee.

"Really?"

"I Googled," she explained. "Mostly about your career and the family business."

He shrugged lightly. "The family dynasty," he said. "Three generations of grease monkeys. My grandfather made sure all the grandsons learned our trade under the hood before we were allowed behind the wheel."

"Not the granddaughters?" she inquired.

"We're an equal-opportunity family," he said and grinned. "However, both my sisters preferred college to the garage and our five cousins are all male. But you never know, Maisy might just decide to pick up a wrench instead of a textbook."

Ash raised a brow. "Good answer. If that's the case, I may get you to take a look at my old truck. The brake line needs replacing and the darn thing keeps overheating."

"No problem," he replied. "I'd like to earn my keep while we're here, since Joel made it very clear that you refuse to take any kind of financial assistance from me."

"You'll only be here a few weeks," she reminded him. "That won't make me broke."

He sighed. "I'd still like to pay my way."

She shook her head. "I'm doing this as a favor for Joel. And because I want to help you."

"I appreciate that, but —"

“Money muddies the waters,” she said, interrupting him and then she chewed on her bottom lip.

“Maybe,” he said and looked at her mouth for a second. “I’ve never really had to worry about it.”

“Lucky you,” she said wryly. “I shall make sure I stir your coffee with a silver spoon from now on.”

He laughed and the sound made her heart beat faster.

When he spoke again she was barely able to meet his gaze. “I guess that comment did make me sound like a pompous ass. Which I assure you, I’m not. My grandfather didn’t believe in free rides in life, and my dad feels the same.”

“Sounds like you’ve had strong role models,” she remarked. “That will be good for Maisy. Tell me about your mother—I saw a picture when I was surfing the web. She’s striking.”

“She’s the best,” he replied quickly. “And she’s tried to develop a relationship with my daughter in the last few months, but Maisy...” He shrugged. “Small steps, I guess.”

Ash nodded. “Absolutely. Once Maisy works out that you’re not her enemy, I’m sure she’ll take comfort in the rest of your family, too. Thank you for being candid.”

“We’re living at your home, imposing on your generosity, so I have no intention of whitewashing how bad things have become.”

Ash’s insides contracted. He genuinely cared for his daughter and she felt a sudden surge of compassion for him. “Has it been difficult from the beginning?”

“She’s been in trouble pretty much since she came to live with me,” he replied. “Once it was confirmed that she was my daughter I sought full custody. Since there were no other close relatives it was granted and she moved into my apartment. But it was hard. Maisy didn’t want to be there. Actually, I’m sure she didn’t know what she wanted. But I enrolled her in school and then within a couple of weeks I got a call from the principal about truancy and smoking. She was suspended for a week and then we had the issue with the shoplifting and she got hauled down to the police station. Thankfully, Joel got the charges dropped, but I knew she was getting deeper into trouble. And frankly, I was all out of options until your cousin suggested we come here.”

“Can I offer some advice?”

He nodded. “That’s what I was hoping for.”

“Don’t expect too much, too soon,” she said and sighed. “She’s obviously still grieving for her mom and learning to trust you will take time. You need to put aside any impatience or judgment and simply let her...be. Tell me, does she have a boyfriend?”

His eyes rolled. “God, I hope not.”

Ash chuckled. “Well, she’s fourteen, and fourteen-year-old girls think about all that.”

“It’s what fourteen-year-old boys think about that worries me.”

She met his gaze. It was steady. Unwavering. She suspected he was always like that. Strong. Reliable. He’d clearly embraced the responsibility of his child, which said plenty about his measure. Ash admired that. Some people didn’t have the backbone for that kind of responsibility.

Like Pete.

A little voice reminded her that now was not the time to reminisce about Pete Shapiro and his many failings. She knew them as though they were carved within the very fiber of her soul.

“Well, there are no fourteen-year-old boys here at the moment, so you can relax.”

He sat back and the chair creaked. “You said you had three kids here right now?”

She nodded. “Yes. Tahlia, she’s eight. Her brother, Micah, is nine. And Ricky is seventeen.”

His brows came together. “Seventeen?”

Ash smiled. “No need to worry, he’s not interested in girls. At all,” she added. “Which is part of the reason why he’s here. His parents can’t accept that he’s gay and it’s been a tough time for him.”

He nodded. “I look forward to meeting them. And your son, of course.”

Ash’s heart warmed. “Jaye is amazing. He’s my whole world.”

“Can I ask about his father?”

“You can ask,” she replied. “He’s not on the scene and hasn’t been for a long time. And I’d prefer the subject not to come up around my son.”

“Sure,” he said easily. “Anything else off-limits? Old boyfriend? Current boyfriend?”

“No boyfriend,” she responded.

“Have the men in this town all got blindfolds on?”

Even if it wasn’t meant that way, his words sounded pretty flirtatious, and they both knew it. Heat, bright and damning, rose up her neck and throat and smacked her directly in the cheeks like a cattle brand. She got to her feet and pushed in the chair. Coffee was over. She had chores to do. And blue eyes to escape from.

“You should come for dinner tonight,” she said quietly. “That way you and Maisy can meet everyone. So, about six?”

He stood and nodded, obviously aware he was being dismissed. “Thank you. See you later.”

For a time after he left, Ash still smelled the traces of his cologne in the air. It was nice, sort of woody and masculine, and it did a whole bunch of things to her usual good sense. She shook the notion off and started packing the dishwasher and once the dishes were done, Ash picked up her phone and called her friend Nicola Radici. She wanted to vent and Nicola was exactly the ear she needed.

“So, he’s hot and single?” Nicola asked after Ash told her friend about her new guests, including how unfairly attractive Cole was. “How awful for you.”

Ash bit back a grin. “Yes. Inconveniently so.”

“Are you looking for sympathy?” Nicola queried and laughed.

Ash was about to respond when her son came through the door. Her heart flipped over at the sight of him. He was the light of her life. She ended the call, telling Nicola they would catch up soon, and then gave her son her full attention, briefly answering his questions about the new arrivals, and then she made him a snack. It gave her something to do and took her mind off things.

And off a certain, six-foot-something, utterly gorgeous man she suspected was destined to invade her thoughts and dreams for the foreseeable future.

* * *

When Cole returned to the cabin Maisy was sitting on one of the sofas, feet curled lotus-style, head down as she looked at her cellphone.

“Everything okay?” he asked when he spotted her.

“The cell reception here sucks,” she complained and held her phone above her shoulder with a dramatic scowl.

“It might be better outside,” he suggested. “We can go for a walk and look around if you like.”

She shrugged and stood. “I’m gonna go to my room.”

Cole watched her retreat down the hall and then heard a door slam. Every conversation was a battle. Every look one of defiance. Every interaction filled with rage. She was lost. Out of reach. And he had no idea how to connect with her.

He dropped into the sofa, defeated, wondering if coming to the ranch had been a good idea. At the time Joel had suggested it, Cole felt as though he’d been given a lifeline. But now, he wasn’t so sure. It was just geography. Maisy was still Maisy. He was still the one person she seemed to hate above everyone else.

She’s doesn’t have to love you. You just have to love her.

Ash’s words scrambled around in his head. She was right. But he still didn’t know how he should feel about them. The moment he’d discovered he had a daughter, he’d made every effort to do the right thing. It had been a no-brainer to have the required DNA test and then go to court to get custody. As scared as he was about the idea of being a father, she was his daughter, his blood. His parents had been over the moon at the idea of being grandparents and his sisters had immediately embraced Maisy into the family. It was Maisy who dragged her feet. Of course he understood—her mother was

dead and she felt alone. But she wasn't, and that was the most damnable and frustrating thing. He wanted to be her father, if she would just meet him halfway.

He stretched out and closed his eyes as fatigue settled into his muscles. It had been a long few days. Firstly, getting Maisy to agree to come to South Dakota had been challenging, especially when she insisted she was happy to go into the foster-care system. But he didn't believe her. Sometimes, he was sure he saw glimpses of her actually settling into the life they had together, but her resistance was like a wall she felt she needed to keep up. One he wasn't sure he could ever break down.

Cole sighed and relaxed against the scratchy sofa. It would work out. He had to believe that. He dozed for a while and when he awoke it was after five o'clock. Maisy was in her room and he tapped on her door and told her they were going up to the main house at six for dinner. He headed to his own room to unpack, and then shower and change. When he returned to the living room Maisy was standing by the fireplace, earbuds in their usual position.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Do I have a choice, Cole?"

The way she used his name made his nerves twitch. "No."

Her scowl increased. "Then I guess I'm ready."

They left the cabin and walked up to the house, side by side. Maisy's arms were tightly crossed and he suspected he was in for one of her dark moods. He'd tried to get her to open up about her mom, but she'd always responded with some snappy retort about how he didn't know anything about her and it didn't matter since her mom was dead. And guilt always seemed to manifest itself in him whenever she talked about her mother. For Cole, Deanna was a dim memory. A pretty, young blonde woman he barely recalled. There'd been a lot of women back then. A lot of beds. A lot of meaningless sex and awkward morning-afters. That changed after the accident that almost killed him when he was twenty-seven. He'd spent three weeks in a coma, with a broken back, busted left arm, smashed-up kneecap and so many cuts and bruises he looked like he'd gone through a meat grinder. Four months in hospital, several surgeries and six months of rehab had taught him not to take anything for granted. The accident ended his racing career and drafted him into an early retirement from the track. Now, he managed the team and crew, including his cousin Lance, who was regularly one of the top three drivers in the country at the end of each season. He missed racing, but his cobbled-together bones weren't able to withstand the endless workout that the NASCAR circuit demanded. And since he'd done everything he could to make sure he didn't spend his life in a wheelchair, he wasn't about to do anything that risked his long-term health. Even though the sidelines weren't as glamorous, didn't have the adrenaline rush of a podium finish, he could at least live the rest of his life on his feet.

Then he'd met Valerie. Beautiful, smart, self-destructive Valerie. He'd loved her. Married her. Divorced her. And then done his best to forget her.

Cole shook off the memory and walked around the front of the house. He could hear laughter and the sound of clinking crockery. It sounded a whole lot like dinner at his parents' house and the idea made him smile. He climbed the steps, waited for Maisy to catch up and then tapped on the front screen door.

A woman around sixty, dressed in moleskins and a glittery chambray shirt and boots, appeared behind the screen and gave him a beaming smile. "Well, hello, there. I'm Nancy, Ash's mother. Please come in."

Cole introduced himself and Maisy as they were ushered down the hall and into a large dining room. The table in the center of the room was wide and covered in a tablecloth, while dinnerware and an array of platters ran down the center. Dinner was clearly a big deal on the McCune ranch.

There were several other people present—an older man he assumed was her uncle and three kids, a boy and a girl who were clearly siblings of Native American heritage, and a teenage boy with heavily gelled and spiked black hair. He also sported a couple of piercings in his top lip and a dragon tattoo on his neck. Cole wasn't one to judge, since he'd gone through his own ink stage as a youngster.

The older boy, Ricky, shook his hand and then grunted in a friendly sort of way in Maisy's direction. Ash's uncle came around the table to shake his hand and once the introductions were done, Nancy said she was heading to the kitchen for a round of drinks.

"Wish it was beer," Uncle Ted said quietly so that only Cole could hear and grinned.

Another child appeared in the doorway. He had a shock of curly red hair and a face load of freckles. He also had a brace on his left leg and used a cane.

"Hi, I'm Jaye," he said and ambled slowly toward them, a noticeable hitch in his gait.

Cole didn't miss the disinterest in Maisy's expression. "It's good to meet you, Jaye," Cole said, and introduced Maisy, who gave a half-hearted wave. "I've heard a lot about you."

"I've heard a lot about you, too," the kid said cheerfully. "My mom was talking about you on the phone to someone today," he said and then frowned a little and shrugged. "Though I probably wasn't meant to hear it. Or tell you."

Cole laughed softly. He already liked the boy. "Well, it'll be our secret, okay?"

Jaye's freckled face beamed. "Sure thing. Mom doesn't ever need to know."

"Mom doesn't ever need to know what?"

Cole's gaze instantly shifted to the doorway. Silhouetted in the door frame and wearing a short green dress that shimmied around her thighs and showed off a truly sensational pair of legs, Ash McCune just about dropped him to his knees. He noticed her hair was out of its band and fell just past her shoulders. Cole stared and then swallowed hard, trying to get his wayward thoughts off her smooth calves and the curves that had somehow managed to consume his thoughts for most of the afternoon.

I'm in big trouble.

"Nothing, Mom," Jaye said and grinned. "Just guy stuff."

She smiled and Cole's stomach took a dive. Damn, she was beautiful.

"So you've met everyone?" she asked as she came into the room and stood behind her son, dropping her hands onto his shoulders.

"Yes."

"Mom said you used to be a race car driver," Jaye said, beaming up at him.

"That's right."

The boy's bright green eyes widened. "I'd love to drive a race car. That would be so cool. Mom said that maybe next year I can enter the soapbox-derby races at the spring fair. I'd like to enter this year though," he said and shrugged. "I've already got a plan drawn up for my cart and—"

"I said next year...maybe," Ash said and kissed the top of his head. "Now, how about you show Mr. Quartermaine and Maisy to their seats and we can all eat?" she said to the whole room.

A minute later they were all seated and Nancy had returned with a pitcher of homemade lemonade that she placed in the center of the table. Uncle Ted said a short prayer before they ate and everyone stayed quiet, including Maisy. Cole had been raised in a strict Catholic household, but rarely went to church except for weddings and funerals. He found himself seated between Maisy and Uncle Ted, and while his daughter was sullen and uncommunicative during the entire meal, the older man talked incessantly about everything from motor racing to the current price of barley and wheat, and the last time he'd visited the nearby Mount Rushmore. Cole didn't mind, though. Ted was friendly and personable, telling funny stories about the ranch and his years in the navy. But Cole was distracted. With Ash only a couple of seats away and holding court with the kids, who chatted about their day out, their haircuts and the upcoming spring fair, he couldn't help but be aware of her as she laughed and bantered with her son and the two youngest children. There was a kind of natural energy around her, and he realized how out of the loop he'd been lately when it came to being around an attractive woman. He hadn't been on a date for six months. And hadn't had sex in longer than that.

Almost as though on cue, he met her gaze across the table. She was smiling just a little, as though she had some great secret only she was privy to. He wanted to look away, but couldn't. Her smile deepened and he watched as she blushed. Whatever was going on, Cole's instincts told him she

was feeling it, too. He gave himself a mental shake, turned his attention back to his food and tried to start a conversation with his daughter, who'd barely spoken a word since they'd sat down for dinner. He managed to get a few sentences out of her and by the time the plates were cleared she was talking quietly to Ricky about music and the latest boy band. He relaxed a bit and pushed back the chair, got up and grabbed a few of the dishes still left on the table. The younger kids and Ted had moved into the adjoining living room to watch television and Cole headed for the kitchen.

Ash was alone, loading the dishwasher, but she stopped the task when she noticed the plates in his hands. "Oh, thanks so much."

"No problem," he said and placed them on the counter. "You're an amazing cook."

Her mouth curved. "Thank you. But the peach pie was my mom's doing. Some secret recipe she's been threatening to share for years, but still hasn't. Can you cook?"

"Not a lick," he replied and grinned. "Spoiled, silver spoon, only son—you get the picture."

She laughed. "Can you make coffee?"

He nodded. "Sure."

She waved an arm in the direction of the coffeepot. "Then you're on beverage duty while I keep stacking."

Cole moved around the counter. "You're bossy, anyone ever tell you that?"

She laughed again. "Of course. Just ask my son and Uncle Ted."

He grabbed the coffeepot. "He's a great kid, by the way."

"I know," she said quietly. "And you can ask, if you want."

Cole rested his behind on the countertop. "Ask?"

"About Jaye," she explained. "And his condition. He had an accident when he was two and half years old and was badly injured. There were surgeries and—and he..."

"He's a great kid," Cole said again when her words trailed off. "That's all I see."

She stopped what she was doing and turned, resting her hip against the counter, arms crossed loosely. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For not looking at me with the kind of pitying expression I usually get from parents of able-bodied children."

"I don't pity you," he said. "Or Jaye. He's obviously bright and well-adjusted."

"Yes. And he loves reading and music and art."

"And soapbox-derby racing?" he said, one brow raised. "He mentioned several times that he wants to enter this year."

She nodded. "I know. Maybe next year. I may be an overprotective parent, but I don't want him to get hurt, either physically or emotionally. The races can be really competitive and some of the other kids and their parents take it so seriously. I don't want him to be singled out or be disadvantaged because of his disability."

"That's a fair call," he said and rested his hands on the edge of the countertop. "But I don't imagine you can protect him from soapbox spills or schoolyard bullies twenty-four seven."

"My son is homeschooled," she said pointedly. "And you're right, I can't watch him every minute of every day. But while he's still a child, while he's here under this roof, I'm sure as heck gonna try."

Cole grinned. She had a lot of spunk. He liked it. He liked her. And it was getting more intense the more time he spent with her. Something had to give. One of them had to say what was now glaringly obvious.

He turned so they were facing one another. The heat between them had ramped up another notch. And then another. "Can I say something that might be highly inappropriate?"

She met his gaze without blinking. "Go ahead."

He took a breath. “I’m...the thing is... Even though I know it’s kind of crazy because we’ve only just met, I’m really... I’m really attracted to you.”

The air between them was suddenly thick with silence and he immediately expected outrage. But it didn’t come. Instead, she inhaled deeply and spoke. “I know. It’s mutual.”

“But it’s out of the question, right?”

She nodded. “Absolutely.”

“And if I forget that over the course of the next few weeks, will you smack me upside the head to bring me to my senses?”

“If that’s what you want.”

“I think we both know,” he said quietly, “what I want. This is about what’s best. I need to keep my head screwed on straight while I’m here, for Maisy’s sake.”

“I agree.”

She was in agreement. It was all going to work out fine. But still, Cole wasn’t entirely convinced that they could ignore the tension and awareness between them.

He pushed himself off the counter. “Great,” he said as he passed her and headed for the door. When he reached the doorway, he turned. “I think I’ll skip the coffee. And, Ash,” he said, looking into her eyes. “Maybe you shouldn’t wear that sexy little dress anymore. Because it seriously messes with my good intentions.”

[Chapter Three](#)

He thought she was sexy.

Ash turned hot all over just thinking about it. Had she ever considered herself sexy before? Probably not. It made her feel like someone else. Someone she didn’t know.

She wasn’t that person. She was the person other people confided in. In high school she was the girl always put into the friends-only category. Even her relationship with Pete had started out in the friendship zone. They’d been lab partners and then study buddies and then one night, over hot dogs and Kool-Aid, he’d kissed her clumsily. They dated for the last two years of high school and by then she knew they were perfect for one another. They’d talked about their future, made plans and imagined their wedding day and everything that would follow. She would join the police department while he would become an apprentice mechanic at a garage in town. Then they would travel and see the world together and one day start a family and live happily ever after. But then she got pregnant a year out of high school and everything changed. Not at first. In the beginning, Pete seemed as happy as she was. They got engaged and agreed they’d marry once the baby came. Jaye was born—beautiful and precious. But soon, her dreams turned to dust. Pete wasn’t interested in being a father. He was more interested in his motorcycle and drinking and other women.

The wedding was postponed and their relationship deteriorated. After Jaye’s accident things got worse because Pete had been watching him that afternoon. Or not watching him, as it had turned out. He’d taken his motorcycle out for a test run and left Jaye alone on the porch. Pete had insisted he’d only been gone for a few minutes. But it was long enough for Jaye to crawl out of his playpen and wander off. And Ash couldn’t forgive him for not protecting their son. For months afterward, she was consumed with sleepless nights, hospital visits and endless doctor and physical-therapy appointments.

Four months after the accident, Pete left town on his motorcycle and never came back, leaving a note saying he wasn’t cut out to be a father and wanted to see the world. Ash hadn’t heard from him since. His mother followed a few months after he did, clearly unable to deal with the shame that her son’s departure had left in his wake.

After that, Ash focused all her energy on her son, the ranch and her career. She graduated from the police academy in Rapid City and then joined the department in Cedar River. She had all the support she needed from her mother and Uncle Ted and carved out a valuable life for herself and her child. She rarely dated and didn’t want to think how long it had been since she’d shared any kind of intimacy with a man.

Sheesh...too long.

Because with dating came sex, and with sex came responsibility and the potential for a relationship. And she didn't have time for that. She had too much going on. With the ranch and her job and Jaye and the kids she took in, sharing her life with someone seemed...impossible. At the very least, difficult. So, love and sex took a back seat. Or so she believed.

Since yesterday she had been thinking about sex. Sex that was hot and heady and scorchingly erotic. Sex that could make her senses sing and leave her breathless and wanting more.

Sex with Cole Quartermaine.

All night long.

At least, that's what she'd imagined in her dreams. She'd had a restless night and now, at nine o'clock on Sunday morning, Ash wished she could hole up in her bedroom for a few more hours and not allow reality to intrude. But it would.

I'm really attracted to you.

Cole's words echoed in her head.

She couldn't remember a man ever saying that to her before. She had gone out with a few guys over the years and even had a couple of lovers, but there had been very little heat and even less real attraction. But this—this was different. This was heat and awareness on a whole different level.

Of course, nothing would come of it. Firstly, he was at the ranch for her help with his daughter. An affair would be a distraction from that. Secondly, she wasn't about to start anything that had no future since he lived in a different state. And thirdly, it was too ridiculous to contemplate!

By the time she headed downstairs Jaye's room was empty and Ash knew he would've already had his breakfast with Tahlia and Micah and was probably outside with his great-uncle. Ricky resided in one of the smaller cabins just a stone's throw from the house, but the younger kids lived in the main house in the room next to her mother's. Uncle Ted had moved into one of the larger cabins years ago, which made him a good chaperone for anyone staying in the cabins.

Ash poured herself a coffee and buttered a piece of toast and was just about to sit down at the table when her mother entered the room. She looked up and smiled.

"Everything all right?" her mother asked.

She nodded. "Sure. I overslept. My busy week catching up with me."

"Well, you have a few days before you go back to work on Wednesday, so you have time to relax and unwind."

"I know," she said and drank some coffee. She'd planned a few days' leave to get acquainted with her new guests, but now she wasn't so sure that was a good idea. "Is Jaye with Uncle Ted?"

"No," her mother answered. "With Cole."

Her back straightened. "Why is he—"

"They're in the barn," her mother interrupted. "Tinkering with that old truck of yours, and there's a good dose of hero worship going on. The kid is certainly smitten."

He's not the only one.

Ash put on a serious face. "Cole's here to try and connect with his daughter, not to answer Jaye's million and one questions. I should probably—"

"It's good for Jaye," her mother said, cutting her off again. "And probably good for Cole, too. I think he had a rough night with Maisy. When I went to check on Ricky last night after dinner and give him his lesson plan for this week, I heard them arguing. There's a whole lot of hurt and anger in that young girl's heart, most of it directed at her father."

Ash understood the feeling. Her own father had left when she was ten years old. Her stepfather left when she was fifteen. And then Pete when she was twenty-one.

Men always leave.

She shrugged off the notion and ate her breakfast, conscious of her mother's scrutiny.

"What?" she asked.

“Exactly,” Nancy said and came around the table. “What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing,” she said and got up. “I’m going to check on Jaye.”

“He’s nice,” her mother said and smiled, seeming as though she knew exactly what was going on in Ash’s churning thoughts. “Really nice. Don’t you think?”

Ash shrugged. “What I think isn’t important.”

Nancy chuckled. “Oh, stop being so sensible. There’s nothing wrong with admitting you like him. Or that you think he’s...nice.”

There was everything wrong with admitting that.

“Have you been reading Jane Austen again?” she asked and took her dishes to the sink. “You know how that always makes you sappy and sentimental.”

“And I love how you always deflect the conversation away from yourself whenever I mention the idea of you dusting off that cynical heart of yours.”

Ash dismissed her mother’s words with a wave of her hand. “I’m not a cynic. I’m a realist.”

“You’re a scaredy-cat,” Nancy said, grinning. “But with two failed marriages behind me, I’m probably not in a position to give advice.”

“And yet, you still do,” Ash said with a smile as she moved around the counter. “Can you watch Tahlia and Micah? I’ll be back soon.”

Ash headed outside and made her way toward the barn. The dogs raced around with sticks and the chickens were pecking around the yard. It was a warm morning and the ranch was buzzing with sounds and scents. The goats were bleating and walking the fence line of their pen, usual behavior when they spotted someone walking across the yard. And Rodney, the five-year-old alpaca who acted more like a dog than anything else, was following Uncle Ted around near the vegetable garden. It was a peaceful scene and Ash was consumed by a sense of how much good there was in her life.

And then she heard it.

Music. Loud and awful. Some kind of heavy, brain-draining rock that hurt her eardrums.

She followed the sound into the barn and stood by the doorway. Cole was bent over the hood of her old truck, dressed in worn jeans and a black T-shirt that molded to his shoulders and showed off way too much of his gloriously well-muscled arms. And then she spotted her son, perched on an old fruit crate, about two feet away from the truck, laughing and flapping his arms in time to the mind-numbing music and clearly having a fabulous time.

Ash stayed where she was and enjoyed the moment. She loved seeing Jaye so happy. He was mostly a cheerful child, and intelligent and compliant. He had something of a stubborn streak, too. Particularly when he wanted something—like entering the soapbox-derby race at this year’s spring fair. Part of her longed to let him spread his wings and enter the race. But she was scared for him and, as always, her priority was keeping him safe. If he got injured or bullied she would never forgive herself. It was better this way. Better to wait until the following year. He’d be older and better equipped to handle the risks. Sure, he was disappointed and made his feelings abundantly clear whenever he got the opportunity, but she was prepared to shoulder his frustration if it meant he was kept out of harm’s way. Overprotective...maybe. But she could live with that.

“Mom!”

Jaye’s voice broke through her thoughts and she frowned when she saw Cole jerk back and bang his head on the hood. He cursed loudly and then quickly apologized as he turned toward the radio and flicked down the volume.

“Mom has a swearing jar in the kitchen,” her son said matter-of-factly. “Ten cents for every bad word.”

Cole rubbed the back of his head. “I better start saving my dimes.”

Jaye laughed loudly. “I’ve got a stash in my piggy bank if you run out.”

Ash smiled to herself, enjoying the exchange between man and boy. Jaye’s only regular male company was Uncle Ted, and although he was kindhearted, he was also busy running the ranch and

didn't have a lot of spare time to spend with her son. It was nice to see him so relaxed and carefree and clearly reveling in Cole's company.

"Is your head okay?" she asked and walked toward the truck. "Not concussed or anything?"

He gave her a wry smile and his blue eyes glittered spectacularly. "Nothing permanent. Just whacked the metal plate in my skull."

"You have a metal plate in your skull?" she asked, frowning.

He laughed and grabbed the cloth Jaye was now holding toward him. "I'm kidding. About it being in my head. I do have two attached to my spine, though," he said as he wiped his hands.

Her frown increased. "Really?"

"Really. I was in an accident around ten years ago."

"I read about that," she said and forced herself to stand back while Jaye slowly got to his feet. Helping him came to her as naturally as breathing, but she knew she needed to give him his space and independence. "It's what ended your career as a driver?"

"It did," he replied and moved around the front of the truck. "I broke my back and a bunch of other bones and spent months in the hospital."

Ash was horrified. "You could have been killed."

He shrugged. "It's a dangerous sport. I knew the risks. I had a tire blow out and lost control. It happens. But I was stubborn and wouldn't let it beat me. Then had to learn how to walk again."

"You couldn't walk?" Jaye's incredulous voice rang out between them.

"That's right, buddy. I spent a long time in hospital and then worked with a physical therapist to get back on my feet."

"I have a physical therapist," Jaye announced, clearly proud to have some common denominator with the man in front of him. "I go and see her every two weeks, don't I, Mom?" He didn't wait for her to respond. "Her name is Becca and she's really nice. Grandma says she's a cougar, though," Jaye said and then frowned. "But I don't really know what that means."

Ash gasped slightly. "Ah, Jaye, why don't you go and see if Uncle Ted needs any help with the vegetable garden."

He groaned. "But, Mom," he complained. "I'm gonna help Cole fix the truck and that's going to take—"

"You can still help," Cole said easily. "We'll work on the truck some more tomorrow. And if it's okay with you, I'd like to talk to your mom about a few things."

"About me?"

Cole shook his head fractionally. "About Maisy. You know how I told you she wasn't feeling so great this morning?"

Jaye nodded, absorbing Cole's words as though they were gold. "Okay, I'll see you later. See you later, too, Mom," her son said as he headed from the barn.

Cole waited until her son was out of sight before speaking again. "So, about this cougar..."

Ash met his gaze and laughed. "I really have to tell my mother to stop gossiping."

"Where's the fun in that," he teased and draped the cloth over the hood. "Your brakes are fixed and the thermostat needs replacing. I've spoken to your uncle this morning and he's given me the number of a place in town where I can get the part ordered."

Fixed. Just like that. Ash had been under the hood of the old truck countless times, trying to figure out the problem. The next stop was the auto repair shop in town owned by her friend Joss Culhane—probably where Cole intended ordering the part from. She experienced a feeling of gratitude that quickly manifested into awareness when he crossed his arms, flexing muscles that were impossible to ignore. Awareness morphed into a blisteringly hot rush of lust so intense it almost knocked the breath from her lungs.

She wanted to say something. Anything. But nothing came out. It was Cole who spoke next.

“I’m sorry about last night,” he said quietly. “I shouldn’t have said that to you. Sometimes I speak before I think and—”

“I didn’t deny it,” she said, cutting him off, suddenly hot all over. The less they said about the subject, the better. “Let’s just forget about it. You said you wanted to discuss Maisy? Is she unwell?”

He shrugged lightly and looked a little uncomfortable. “Ah, girl stuff, she said. Which is obviously my cue to just nod and say nothing. But if you could look in on her this morning I would be grateful,” he said and sighed. “She’s not exactly talking to me at the moment. She doesn’t want to be here...she made that very clear.”

Ash nodded, feeling a deep surge of sympathy for his daughter. And him. “My mother heard you arguing when she went to check on Ricky.”

“It wasn’t a new argument. Just Maisy being...Maisy.”

Ash offered a gentle and knowing smile. “I’ll go and see how she’s doing. And, Cole,” she said quietly, “thank you for spending some time with Jaye this morning. He usually only has Uncle Ted to show him things around the place.”

“He’s good company,” he replied and smiled. “And smart, and quite the mechanical engineer. He showed me his sketches for his soapbox cart—you know, for when he gets to race.”

Ash moaned a little. “He’s been trying to get my agreement for the past six months.”

“Last night you said you were reluctant to let him enter this year?”

“Absolutely,” she replied. “He could get injured.”

“Or not,” Cole said as he moved around the truck and closed the hood. “I imagine it will be well supervised.”

Ash knew it was. The spring fair was a popular annual celebration in Cedar River and all the competitive events were run smoothly and safely, from the rodeo to the three-legged races. But it wasn’t only Jaye’s physical safety she worried about, but also his emotional well-being.

“He could get...teased.”

Cole wiped his hands on a rag. “He seems like a pretty resilient kid to me.”

Ash straightened her spine. “Are you saying you think I should let him do it?”

Cole moved back around the truck and faced her. “I’m saying that he’s a smart kid who’s sketched an impressive set of plans for a soapbox-derby cart. That’s all.”

Resentment licked across her skin. He didn’t have any right to an opinion. And just as she was about to say as much, her irritation suddenly wavered. Because he was right. Jaye was resilient. And strong. And smart.

“I think I’ll go and check on Maisy,” she said, confused by the unexpected lack of clarity in her thinking. When it came to her son, Ash always knew the right road. But somehow, this man she’d known for less than twenty-four hours made her question her usual rock-solid resolve. “I’m taking the kids for a picnic down at the creek this afternoon. You and Maisy are welcome to come along.”

She turned and walked away before he could respond, grateful that she didn’t have to look into his eyes any longer and determined to get all thoughts of him out of her head. When she reached the cabin, she tapped on the door and, when no response came, opened it and headed inside. Maisy sat on the sofa, earbuds in, her expression like thunder.

“I knocked,” Ash said when the teen scowled in her direction. She walked toward the sofa and smiled. “Your dad said you weren’t feeling well. Is there anything I can get for you? Hot water bottle? Ibuprofen?”

Maisy immediately looked defensive and then shrugged. “Sure. Whatever.”

Ash left the cabin and returned about five minutes later. Maisy was in the same spot, still scowling, still looking as though she had the world on her shoulders. After a few more minutes Ash had the water bottle filled, the painkillers and a glass of water on the coffee table and she held out a can of soda.

“Ginger ale,” she explained. “I find it helps with an upset tummy.”

Maisy took the can. “Thanks.”

Ash smiled. “We’re all heading down to the creek later for a picnic. I know Ricky would like the company if you’re up for helping me chaperone the younger kids.”

Maisy met her gaze for a moment. “Is he coming, too?”

“Your dad?” Ash asked. “I invited him. I guess that’s up to him.”

The teenager shrugged disinterestedly. “If I go, he’ll go—so we can bond, or whatever. The counselor at school said it takes time to bond.”

“The counselor is right. It takes time and effort.”

Maisy shrugged again. “He tries too hard.”

“He’s your father,” Ash said gently. “That’s his job.”

Maisy’s gaze jerked upward and her expression softened for a nanosecond. “Maybe I will come.”

“Great. I’ll see you later.”

Ash left the cabin and lingered on the small porch for a second, looking out across the yard. Cole was near the entrance to the barn, and then he began walking across the yard toward Uncle Ted and Jaye. He had an easy kind of swagger to his movements, and she remembered how he’d talked about the accident that had almost killed him and how he’d had to learn to walk again. It spoke volumes about his dedication and commitment. There was something almost magnetic about him...and it wasn’t simply her reaction to his obvious good looks. Sure, he was handsome and had a stellar physique. But this was something else. Something more. And she was still thinking it as she walked back toward the house.

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