

FOR HIS BROTHER'S WIFE

Kathie DeNosky



*Desire*TM

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It's forbidden to fall for his brother's widow in this story by USA TODAY bestselling author Kathie DeNosky. The tornado that tore apart Royal, Texas, ripped Paige Richardson's world to shreds. She lost her husband and she expected her husband's twin, construction tycoon Colby Richardson, to offer a shoulder to lean on. But instead, he's distant. Why? What happened to the closeness they once shared? For years, Cole has kept his distance, but now he's staying on Paige's ranch while he helps the town rebuild. It's only a matter of time before the feelings—and secrets—he's hidden all come to the surface.

Before Paige realized what was happening, Cole leaned forward to brush her lips with his.

When he lifted his head, he seemed to search her face for a moment, and then took her into his arms.

Unable to find her voice, she simply watched as he lowered his head again to fuse his mouth with hers. It was as erotic as anything she had ever experienced. Of course, she had only kissed one other man in her entire life, and although her late husband's kisses were pleasant, they hadn't been anything like Cole's. The feel of his strong body pressed to hers sent shivers of longing straight up her spine.

The unexpected sensation jolted her back to reality and had her quickly pulling away from him. Had she lost her mind? Cole was her late husband's brother and the last man she should be shivering over.

Cole immediately released her and, muttering a curse, got up from the swing.

"I'm sorry, Paige. I was way out of line. It won't happen again."

"It ... wasn't entirely ... your fault."

* * *

For His Brother's Wife is part of the series Texas Cattleman's Club: After the Storm—As a Texas town rebuilds, love heals all wounds ...

For His

Brother's Wife

Kathie DeNosky



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KATHIE DeNOSKY lives in her native southern Illinois on the land her family settled in 1839. She writes highly sensual stories with a generous amount of humor. Her books have appeared on the *USA TODAY* bestseller list and received numerous awards, including two National Readers' Choice Awards. Kathie enjoys going to rodeos, traveling to research settings for her books and listening to country music. Readers may contact her by e-mailing kathie@kathiedenis.com. They can also visit her website, www.kathiedenis.com, or find her on Facebook.

This book is dedicated to the talented authors of the Texas Cattleman's Club: After the Storm series.

Ladies, it was a real pleasure working with you and I hope we get to do it again very soon.

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[One](#)

Colby Richardson—Cole to his friends and family—pushed his wide-brimmed Resistol back on his head and muttered a word he normally reserved for dire circumstances and locker room banter as he stood in the feedlot of the Double R Ranch and surveyed the damage to the outbuildings. His gaze strayed to the empty space where, up until six months ago, the main barn had stood. The debris had been cleared away, but it did little to erase the memory of seeing the barn he and his brother used to play in reduced to a pile of broken boards and splintered beams. The deadly twister that had leveled parts of downtown Royal, Texas, and several other small communities close by had skipped its way across the west Texas landscape, laying waste to everything in its path—including part of his family's ranch.

Glancing over his shoulder at the ranch house, he shook his head as he amended that thought. It didn't belong to his family anymore. When their father passed away a few years back, the ranch had gone to Cole's twin brother, Craig. Now it belonged to Craig's widow, Paige.

He sighed heavily as guilt and regret settled over him. He had always hoped that one day he and his estranged twin would be able to put the anger and resentment aside and, at the very least, establish a semblance of a relationship. After all, they were only thirty-two. There should have been plenty of time for that. But when the tornado tore its way through the area, his brother's time had run out, and with his passing any possibility of reconciliation between them had been brought to an end.

The devastation and loss of property were one thing, but the death of Craig—along with six other souls at the Royal town hall that day—was another. Cole and his business partner, Aaron Nichols, had used their Dallas-based construction company to help rebuild the town and make repairs to damaged property. But there wasn't a damned thing anyone could do to bring back the lives that had been lost. He wished with everything that was in him that there was.

Taking a deep breath, Cole unclipped the cell phone on his belt. He had put off making the repairs to the Double R long enough. The construction crew he had assigned to rebuild the Lone Star Bar and Grill would complete that job by the end of the day and could start on the repairs to the Double R first thing in the morning.

As he relayed the work order to the crew foreman and clipped the phone back onto his belt, he watched his sister-in-law leave the house and start across the yard toward him. A knot the size of his fist twisted his gut. The moment he'd learned about the tornado and Craig's death, he had rushed back to his hometown to do whatever he could to help Royal recover and to help Paige get through making the funeral arrangements for his brother. Right away it had become apparent that he'd have to keep his interaction with her brief and he knew she had to be confused by the strained encounters. But he hadn't anticipated the effect she still had on him.

The first time he'd laid eyes on her in his senior year of high school, Cole had been fascinated with her. Tall and willowy, she moved like a graceful dancer, and as he watched her walk toward him now, he found himself just as captivated as the day they'd first met. The slight breeze played with her long auburn hair and he couldn't help but wonder how the soft wavy strands would feel as he ran his fingers through them.

“I didn’t realize you were coming by today, Cole,” Paige said, smiling as she walked up to him. She used the name his family called him and it suddenly occurred to him, she was the only family he had left.

Shaking his head to dispel the last traces of his ridiculous introspection, Cole forced himself to concentrate on the reason for his visit to the Double R. “I’ve scheduled one of the R&N work crews to start rebuilding your barn and making repairs to the other outbuildings first thing in the morning.”

“Have the construction crews you brought with you from Dallas finished all of the work on the other projects first?” she asked. She had been adamant that the repairs the Double R needed could wait until permanent housing for the displaced families who had lost everything during the storm had been taken care of. Her selflessness hadn’t surprised him in the least.

He nodded. “Aaron is in charge of overseeing those crews, but he assured me the last of the houses R&N Builders are contracted to rebuild will be finished by the end of the month.”

“Good.” She shaded her pretty gray eyes from the midafternoon sun with one delicate hand. “Stella and I were talking the other day about how important it is to get the families back into homes of their own and reestablish a sense of permanence and normalcy,” she said, referring to Stella Daniels, the town’s acting mayor and his business partner’s new wife. “Children need that sense of belonging after what they’ve been through and all they’ve lost.”

Cole detected the compassion in her tone. One of her most compelling and attractive traits had always been her thoughtfulness for others and he realized she hadn’t changed much over the years. Paige was still the considerate, caring woman with a mile-wide soft spot for kids she had been in high school. It was a real shame that she hadn’t had any children of her own. When she’d married his brother, she’d been pregnant. Unfortunately, she had miscarried only a few weeks later and, to Cole’s knowledge, she’d never become pregnant again. He fleetingly wondered why, but he wasn’t about to ask. Cole had never been one to pry and he wasn’t about to start now. What had happened between Paige and Craig during their ten-year marriage was their business, not his.

Not knowing much about what little kids needed, Cole nodded. “I guess it’s important for them to feel that security.”

“I think we all need that,” she agreed, smiling sadly. “But especially after the tornado tore up everything familiar to us.”

“How are you doing?” he asked, barely resisting the urge to put his arms around her for a comforting hug. It had to be extremely hard for her to lose her husband at such a young age and in such an unexpected way.

“I’m okay,” she said, her gaze straying to the distant horizon. “In the past several years, Craig had had to go out of town on business a lot, so I’m used to spending time alone. But I always knew he would eventually be coming back home.” Turning to meet his gaze head-on, she added, “It’s knowing that won’t ever happen and that I’m truly alone in the world that’s the most difficult to deal with.”

“I know it’s been a big adjustment.” Cole stated the obvious.

He wasn’t sure what kind of business Craig had been involved in that would require a cattle rancher to make frequent trips out of town. But then he didn’t know much about his brother’s life beyond the fact that he belonged to the Texas Cattleman’s Club—the same as Cole and most of their friends. Cole had even convinced Aaron to join the Dallas chapter after they had become friends and gone into business together. The connections they had made through their involvement with the TCC, as well as their reputation for excellence in quality and value, had helped propel R&N Builders to become one of the premier construction companies in the state.

They remained silent for several long moments before Paige glanced toward his truck. “Did you bring your things with you?”

“No, I’ll just stay at the Cozy Inn,” Cole answered, shrugging. “I have to get up pretty early and I wouldn’t want to disturb you.”

When he'd returned to Royal six months ago, Paige had offered for him to stay at the ranch while he was in town, but he had declined. He'd told her that it would be easier for him to stay close to the job sites where his construction crews worked. But the real reason he had stayed in Royal instead of at the ranch was due to the attraction he still felt whenever he was around her.

Paige gave him one of those looks that a woman gives a man when she thinks he's being overly obtuse. "Think about it, Cole. I live on a working cattle ranch. I get up before dawn every morning to give the hired hands a list of things I want done for the day."

"Don't you have a foreman to do that?" he asked, frowning.

"I do, but he's still dealing with his injuries from the tornado." She shook her head. "He was in the barn when the storm moved through and it's a miracle he survived. I assured him that he would have a job once he recovered, so I'm taking over for him until he's able to return to work."

"Couldn't you have one of the other men act as foreman until he recovers?" Cole asked.

"I could have, but with Craig gone I need to stay busy," she answered. "Besides, I want to learn more about managing the ranch since I'm going to be running it alone."

"You could always sell out and move into town," he suggested.

She looked directly at him. "I did think about it. But this is my home now and I prefer the country quiet over the sounds of a busy town."

Cole couldn't fault her for that. He had grown up on the ranch and when he'd gone away to college, it had taken him most of his first semester to get used to the noise of a bustling campus. Now, living in Dallas, he spent most of his weekends in a fishing cabin on a nearby lake just to get a little peace and quiet.

"Living in town would be closer to the charities you're involved in," he said, shrugging.

He hadn't discussed anything about her future plans with her since Craig's death. For one thing, he had made sure not to spend too much time with her once it became clear he was still attracted to her. And for another, it really wasn't any of his business what decisions she made or where she lived.

"And staying here at the ranch instead of driving back and forth to the Cozy Inn would be closer for you while your work crew rebuilds my barn and makes the repairs to the outbuildings," she shot back. "You said yourself that you liked to be close to the job sites you're in charge of overseeing. You couldn't get any closer to the job than staying here."

He hadn't expected her to turn the tables on him and use his excuse not to stay at the ranch against him. "I wouldn't want to impose," he hedged.

She shook her head. "That's ridiculous, Cole. This was your home long before it was mine."

Cole didn't want to go into the fact that he really hadn't missed the home he grew up in. He had too many memories of the altercations he had been in with Craig to be overly sentimental about it.

"But it's your home now," he countered.

"And I'm inviting you to stay here," she said, giving him a smile that caused every one of his male senses to go on high alert. "It will give us the chance to catch up."

As he stared at her, Cole realized that he'd run out of plausible excuses. He couldn't tell her the real reason behind his reluctance to stay at the ranch with her. She would probably think he was crazy, and to tell the truth, he really couldn't say she would be all that far off the mark. It was absolutely insane to be so damned attracted to his late brother's wife.

Resigned, he finally nodded. "All right." He turned toward his truck. "I'll bring my things with me tomorrow morning when we start the job."

"Would you like to stay for dinner?" she asked, walking beside him.

"Thanks for the offer, but Stella has a town council meeting and I promised I'd meet Aaron for dinner at the TCC clubhouse to discuss business." He felt guilty when he noticed the disappointment she couldn't quite cover with her smile.

"Okay, then I'll see you tomorrow morning," she said, turning toward the house.

“I’ll be here for the next couple of weeks or so,” he felt compelled to tell her. Maybe knowing it wouldn’t be just a night or two would change her mind about having a houseguest for such an extended period. “Before I leave to go back to Dallas, you’ll probably get tired of looking at me over the dinner table.”

His words didn’t seem to discourage her. If anything, her smile brightened. “I’ll plan on making something special for dinner tomorrow evening to welcome you back home.”

Cole’s guilt at avoiding her the past six months increased tenfold as he watched her walk up the back porch steps to enter the house. He knew Paige had to be lonely. Her parents had both passed several years ago, and with Craig gone, charity work could only go so far to fill in the empty hours of a day. She was obviously anticipating having someone to talk to for a change.

Climbing into his truck, Cole started the engine and drove down the lane to the main road. The next few weeks were going to be a true test of his fortitude. From the time he’d seen her walking down the hall at Royal High School all those years ago, he had wanted nothing more than to make her his girl. But it was too late for that. She had married his brother and, even though he and his twin had never gotten along and hadn’t spoken in more than ten years, Cole wasn’t about to disrespect Craig’s memory or his marriage to Paige.

* * *

The following morning when Paige got out of bed, she found that she looked forward to starting her day for the first time in longer than she cared to remember. What she had told Cole yesterday afternoon had been all too true. Craig had been away on business several nights out of each month for their entire marriage, but she had always known he would be returning home. And even though they had stopped sharing the same bed a few years ago due to Craig’s restlessness while he slept, she had taken comfort in the fact that she wasn’t alone—that he was just down the hall in the master suite. But the finality of his death not only forced her to face the fact that she had been lonely for a very long time, but also made her realize that their marriage had never been what she had wanted it to be.

She sighed as she walked into the bathroom for a quick shower. Maybe their relationship would have been different if circumstances had been less stressful when they’d gotten married and she hadn’t lost the baby. But she’d had very little control of the situation. The minute Craig’s father had learned she was pregnant, he had insisted that Craig do the right thing and marry her immediately. Her parents had been older and very conservative and the news of their only child being pregnant out of wedlock had broken their hearts. That was why when they urged her to accept Craig’s awkwardly worded offer of marriage—she hadn’t wanted to disappoint them further and agreed.

Unfortunately, only a few short weeks after she became Craig’s wife, she’d lost the baby and had been unable to become pregnant since. She supposed she could have requested they end the marriage and go their separate ways. But she had made a lifetime commitment when she’d recited her wedding vows and she had been determined to be a good wife to Craig, even though they hadn’t been in love.

As she finished drying her hair, Paige decided not to dwell on the past. Craig was gone and, although they might not have had the closeness she had always wanted for their marriage, they’d had a comfortable life together and gotten along well. That was more than some couples could say.

She went downstairs to the kitchen and started the coffeemaker. As she looked out the window above the sink, she noticed that Cole’s truck was parked close to where the barn used to be. “When he says he gets up early, he means it,” she murmured aloud. The pearl-gray light of dawn hadn’t fully given way to the rising sun and Cole had already arrived and was ready to start work.

When the coffeemaker finished, she poured two cups of the steaming brew and left the house. She walked down to where Cole stood looking at a set of blueprints. “I thought you might need some of this,” she said, handing him one of the cups.

“Thanks.” He smiled as he took it from her. “Since most of the jobs I’ve been in charge of are on the opposite side of Royal, I couldn’t see any sense in driving all the way across town and back

every morning for coffee at the diner.” Taking a sip, he nodded his approval. “This is the best coffee I’ve had in the past six months.”

“Doesn’t the Cozy Inn have coffeemakers in their rooms?” she asked.

He grimaced. “They do, but either I’ve been doing something wrong or they need to find a different brand of coffee packets.”

“Well, you’ll at least have decent coffee while you’re here at the ranch,” she said, taking a sip from her own mug.

“About that...” He hesitated. “I’m not sure it would be appropriate for me to stay here.”

She frowned. “Why on earth would you say that? There’s nothing improper about you staying here. This ranch has been in your family for five generations.”

He stared at her for several long moments before he finally nodded. “I guess you have a point.”

“I know I do,” she stated firmly. “Did you check out of the Cozy Inn?”

“I have to go back into Royal to meet with the crew working on rebuilding the hospital wing that collapsed during the storm.” He shrugged. “I’ll check out then and bring my things with me.”

The sound of a big truck had both of them turning to see a semi pulling a trailer full of lumber coming up the lane, followed closely by three R&N Builders pickup trucks. “It looks like it’s time for me to go back to the house and let you all get started on my barn.”

Cole handed her his empty cup. “Thanks for the coffee.”

His hand brushed hers, and a pleasant tingling sensation zinged up her arm. “I—I’ll have your room ready when you get back from town.”

As she walked back to the house, she felt Cole’s gaze following her as surely as if he’d touched her. Climbing the back porch steps, she entered the kitchen and took a deep breath. Maybe she shouldn’t have been so insistent that Cole stay with her on the Double R, she thought as she set his cup on the counter. When she had been in high school, she’d had a huge crush on him. Perhaps it hadn’t completely disappeared.

Thinking back, she could have sworn he had been just as smitten with her. But the one time he had asked her out, she’d had to explain that she wasn’t allowed to date until she was finished with school. He had assured her that he would ask her out when he came home from college for the summer after she’d graduated. But he had apparently forgotten his promise and stayed at the university to take a couple of summer classes. By the end of summer, Craig had charmed her into going out with him instead and the following spring they had gotten married. The only time she had seen Cole after that had been when his and Craig’s father had passed away.

She poured herself another cup of coffee and sank into one of the chairs at the table. The tension between the brothers at the funeral had been palpable and she never had learned why they were at such odds. She’d thought twins, even fraternal ones like Craig and Cole, were supposed to be close and share a bond that defied logic. But the Richardson brothers were as different as night and day. Whereas Craig had been outgoing and filled with restless energy, Cole was quieter and had a calming air about him. And the contrast didn’t end with their personalities.

They looked absolutely nothing alike. Cole had beautiful dark green eyes, was a couple of inches over six feet tall and had a muscular build and straight, light brown hair. Shorter by at least three inches, Craig had pale green eyes, wavy, dark blond hair, and had been on the thin side. Both men were extremely handsome but in different ways. Craig’s features were classic and he always looked as if he’d stepped right out of the pages of *GQ* magazine. But Cole had that rugged appeal that sent shivers up a woman’s spine and had her imagining how it would feel to be in the arms of all that raw masculinity.

Her heart skipped a beat, and she shook her head as she rose to put their coffee cups in the dishwasher. She had no idea where that had come from, but it definitely wasn’t something she intended to give further thought. She wasn’t looking to find herself in the arms of any man, let alone Cole

Richardson. Even though he was nothing like Craig, she had spent ten years with one Richardson brother and that had been enough to last her for quite some time.

* * *

Cole waited until the work crew left at the end of the day to move his things from his truck into the Double R ranch house. He wasn't looking forward to the next couple of weeks—especially after his reaction when his hand had brushed Paige's that morning as he'd passed her his empty coffee cup. If just that slight contact could cause his heart to stall and a fine sheen of sweat to bead on his forehead, what kind of hell would he go through being in such close proximity with her day in and day out?

Pulling his luggage from the back section of the club cab, he slowly walked toward the house. He hadn't been in the Double R ranch house in well over ten years and he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to go inside now. The memory of the night he'd left the ranch for good was an ugly one and had resulted in him severing all ties with his twin. They had managed to be civil with each other for their father's funeral a few years ago, but just barely. As soon as the service had ended, he had gone back to Dallas and, although Craig had started emailing him in the year or two before his death, Cole had deleted the messages unread. He hadn't been interested in anything his brother had had to say.

"I've got your room ready for you," Paige said, opening the door as he climbed the porch steps.

"Lead the way." He took a deep, fortifying breath as he stepped across the threshold and hung his black hat on a peg beside the door.

Cole did his best not to notice the slight sway of her hips as she preceded him down the hall to the circular stairs in the foyer, and he concentrated on looking around the house he grew up in. With the exception of some colorful Southwestern art on the walls, the house looked much the same as it always had. One of the terra cotta tiles at the foot of the steps had a hairline crack from the wear and tear of five generations of Richardson boys' roughhousing, and the honey oak banister still had nicks from where he and his brother had tried sliding down the thin rail.

"What's so amusing?" Paige asked as they started up the stairs.

Lost in the memories, he hadn't even realized he was smiling. "I was just thinking about the time I tried sliding down this rail and ended up wearing a cast on my arm for six weeks."

She grinned. "Not such a good idea?"

"Well, it had seemed like it at the time," he said, chuckling. "But I was only ten and quickly found out that it wasn't."

When they reached the second floor she showed him to the room closest to the stairs—his room when he'd lived here. "I hope you don't mind, but I boxed up the things you left behind several years ago and put them in a closet in Craig's...in the office just off the family room."

"You should have just thrown them away," he said, setting his suitcase on the bench at the end of the bed. He was surprised Craig hadn't insisted on her disposing of everything he had left behind. "I really wouldn't have cared."

"I couldn't do that. They weren't mine to get rid of." Shaking her head, she opened the curtains to let the late-afternoon sun brighten the room. "There were several sports trophies and medals. You earned those in high school, and I thought you might eventually want them."

"I'll go through the box while I'm here to see if there's anything I want to keep," he finally said, swallowing hard. Backlit by the sunshine coming through the window, she looked absolutely gorgeous, and if he hadn't already realized the extent of the attraction he still felt for her before, he sure as hell did now. Her dark auburn hair seemed to glow with shades of red and gold and emphasized her flawless peaches-and-cream complexion.

They stared at each other for several seconds before she started toward the door. "I'd better check on dinner. It should be ready in about twenty minutes if you'd like to wash up."

"Yeah, I'll be down as soon as I shower and change clothes."

When she pulled the door shut behind her, Cole took a deep breath, turned to get a clean set of clothes from his luggage and then headed toward the adjoining bathroom. It was going to cost him a

fortune in overtime and his work crew was probably going to end up despising him for it, but he was going to push them to get the Double R job finished in record time. His peace of mind depended on it and for a couple of different reasons.

At one time the Double R ranch house had been his home, but there were too many unpleasant memories of the clashes he'd had with his twin for Cole to be comfortable staying there. When they were growing up, he had dismissed Craig's narcissism and need to win as just being overly competitive. But when his brother had involved others—unconcerned if they got hurt in his game of one-upmanship—Cole had quickly realized Craig was driven by a dark side that seemed to be directed exclusively toward him.

As he finished his shower and pulled on a clean shirt and jeans, Cole gritted his teeth when he thought of their last confrontation. Before he'd had a chance to ask Paige out, Craig had somehow figured out the extent of the attraction Cole had for her and it was as if he had thrown down a gauntlet that Craig quickly picked up. When Craig had taunted him with his intentions of bedding her before Cole had the opportunity to ask her out, they had come to blows. Cole had even tried to divert his twin from his mission by telling him that he was no longer interested in Paige. But it hadn't worked and the next thing he knew, Paige was pregnant and she and his brother were getting married.

Taking a deep breath, Cole tried to release the rage that still gripped him whenever he thought of the callous way Craig had used Paige. It was one thing for his twin to come after him, but when his brother had involved her in his vindictive game, Craig had crossed a line. In Cole's opinion, it was unforgivable.

But that was ancient history now. His window of opportunity with her had closed long ago. No matter what lengths Craig had gone to in order to win Paige, Cole had to accept the fact that she had remained with his brother for more than a decade. That had to mean they had been committed to their marriage, and whether or not he and his twin had gotten along, Cole was bound to honor that.

Two

"I hope you like country fried steak," Paige said, looking up when Cole walked into the kitchen.

The faint scent of his woodsy aftershave put her senses on full alert, but it was the way he looked that caused her pulse to race. His short, light brown hair was still damp from his shower, and he'd shaved off his five o'clock shadow. She barely resisted the urge to sigh when her gaze drifted lower. He was wearing a gray T-shirt with the R&N Builders logo in red, white and blue on the front; the knit fabric had to stretch to accommodate his bulging biceps and emphasized his well-developed shoulders and chest muscles. Her gaze traveled farther, causing her pulse to speed up. His worn jeans rode low on his narrow hips and clung to his muscular thighs like a second skin. She had to force herself to concentrate on removing the apple pie from the oven without dropping it.

Why did Cole have to be so good-looking and so darned masculine? And why on earth did *she* have to notice?

"I like just about anything homemade, but country fried steak is a favorite," he answered, seemingly oblivious to her wayward thoughts. "Is there something I can do to help you finish up dinner?"

She shook her head as she placed their dessert on the kitchen island to cool, then reached for the platter of steaks and bowl of garlic and herb mashed potatoes. Carrying them over to the table, she motioned for him to sit down as she placed the dishes beside the garden salad she had prepared earlier. "I have everything ready if you'd like to take a seat."

He remained standing as she poured them both a glass of iced tea, prompting her to ask, "Is there something else you'd like? I think I have a beer or two in the back of the refrigerator if you'd like one of those instead."

He shook his head and stepped behind her chair as she set the pitcher on the table. "Tea is fine. I'm just waiting to pull out your chair for you."

Paige tried to hide her surprise as she sat down. When was the last time a man had been chivalrous toward her? She couldn't remember if Craig had ever shown her those kind of manners. Maybe when they'd first started dating or when they had attended one of the holiday balls at the Texas Cattleman's Club and he'd noticed all of the other men pulling out their wives' chairs for them. But she knew for certain that he had never done it for her when it was just the two of them sitting down for dinner at home.

"Thank you," she murmured as Cole sat across the table from her.

He shook his head. "I'm the one who should be thanking you for making all of this. Everything looks and smells delicious."

"I love to cook but rarely take the time anymore," she said as they filled their plates. "Cooking for just myself isn't as much fun as it is when I'm cooking for others."

"You don't have someone to do the cooking and cleaning?" he asked, taking a bite of his potatoes.

"After your father passed away, Maria stayed on as the cook and housekeeper for a couple of years before she retired," Paige answered, smiling fondly as she remembered the sweet older woman who had helped her early in her marriage and had taken care of the house and helped raise the twins after the boys' mother had died when they were five. "Craig wanted me to hire someone to replace her, but I talked him out of it."

Cole frowned as he took a drink of his iced tea. "Why?"

"I'm not the type to spend a lot of time on the tennis court or golf course," she said, trying not to notice the play of muscles in his forearms as he used his knife and fork to cut into the steak. "And until the tornado came through, my charity work only kept me busy a couple of days a week." She shrugged one shoulder. "I had to have something to do to keep me busy."

She wasn't going to mention that she had hoped to fill her hours taking care of her children. But it didn't appear that she was going to have any. And it was too emotionally painful to think that she might never have a child of her own.

They fell silent for a time before Cole asked, "Do you still paint? If I remember correctly, you used to be a fairly good artist when you were in school."

"I hadn't put a brush to canvas in years," she said, surprised he remembered her love of art. "But I recently started painting again and thought I might turn Craig's den into a studio."

"Isn't that room a little too dark?" Cole asked, frowning. "I thought natural light was better for painting."

"It is," she agreed, smiling. "Craig converted the sitting room off the family room into his office."

"That would be a good place for a studio," Cole said, taking a bite of his steak. "With that wall of windows on the east side, the lighting should be perfect in the mornings."

"I thought so, too." His genuine interest made her smile. It was nice for a change to have a conversation while she ate, instead of dining alone in silence. "Craig gave me your father's den for my office when he converted that room and since I don't need two, I think it's the obvious choice for a studio."

Cole looked thoughtful. "You know, the lighting would be even better if the south wall was all windows, as well."

"I thought about that, but I wasn't sure it was structurally possible," she admitted. "What do you think?"

"It would need to be braced up in the attic since that's a load-bearing wall and a couple of beams added for support where the two walls meet in the corner, but I don't see why it wouldn't work." His smile caused her pulse to flutter. "I'll check it out for you before I head back to Dallas and let you know for sure just what would need to be done."

"I'd really appreciate that," she said, excited at the possibility of having an artist's studio with the perfect amount of natural lighting.

When she rose to cut them each a slice of apple pie, Cole carried their empty plates to the sink, rinsed them and placed them in the dishwasher. "No more work than I think it would take to make those changes, if you'd like, I could have my work crew get that done for you before we go back to Dallas."

"Really?" she asked, her excitement for the project rapidly building. Craig hadn't discouraged her love of art, but he had never encouraged it, either. "It could be done that soon?"

"Sure."

Cole's smile made her feel several degrees warmer. How could a man look sexy as sin with nothing more than a smile?

"There's no reason not to go ahead if that's what you want," he continued, seemingly unaware of the effect he was having on her. "The work crew will be here, and even if it takes a couple of extra days, I doubt they'll mind. It will just add to the small fortune Aaron and I have paid them in overtime and travel expenses over the past six months."

"Thank you so much, Cole." Thrilled that she was actually going to have her own art studio, she turned and, without thinking, wrapped her arms around him for a hug.

"No problem," he said as his arms lightly closed around her.

They both froze in place, and to say the moment was awkward would have been an understatement. Aside from the fact that she had embarrassed herself with her impulsiveness, the feel of Cole's solid strength surrounding her caused her knees to wobble. Staring up at him, she could tell that he was just as surprised by the embrace as she was. But it was an awareness in his dark green eyes that shocked her all the way to her core.

"I...um, thank you," she said apologetically, feeling heat color her cheeks. Taking a step back, she hoped he didn't notice her hands trembling as she dished up their dessert. "Would you like a scoop of vanilla ice cream on top of your pie?"

He shook his head. "Not this time. It looks and smells delicious just the way it is." She started to reach for the dessert plates, but he picked them up and carried them to the table for her. "As long as we'll be working on it, are there any other changes you'd like to make to your studio?"

His voice sounded just a bit deeper. Was he feeling the tension between them the same way she was?

"How much trouble would it be to put down a laminate or tile floor?" she asked, feeling a little more comfortable now that they were back on the subject of renovating the ranch house.

"No trouble at all," he said, taking a bite of his pie. He seemed more relaxed, as well. "While we get started on the barn, why don't you think about all the changes you want made and then let me know what you decide later on in the week?"

She smiled. "I'll do that."

As they continued to talk about the renovations to Craig and Cole's childhood home, Paige couldn't help but wonder again what had happened all those years ago. What had caused the twin brothers to have a falling out? And why had Cole left Royal without at least telling her goodbye?

Being an only child, she had no idea about the dynamics of sibling relationships. But she couldn't imagine anything so upsetting that it would make them stop talking to each other for more than a decade.

When they'd first married, she had asked Craig about Cole's departure, but he'd told her it didn't matter and they had never talked about it again. Of course, Craig had rarely discussed anything of importance with her. She had always felt a bit like an outsider within her own marriage.

"Thank you for going to the trouble of making dinner," Cole said, drawing her back to the present. He stood up and carried their empty plates to the sink, rinsed them and put them in the

dishwasher along with the dishes from dinner. “It was the best home-cooked meal I’ve had in a long time.” He chuckled. “Actually, it’s the only home-cooked meal I’ve had in years.”

“I’m glad you liked it, Cole.” She rose to clear the rest of the table, but he was already reaching for their iced tea glasses. “I’m sure you’re tired from working on the barn all day. I can take care of cleaning up.”

He shook his head as he put their glasses into the dishwasher. “You cooked a great dinner. The least I can do is help with the dishes.”

As she watched Cole finish collecting the dishes to load into the dishwasher, she couldn’t help but note one more contrast between him and Craig. Her late husband had never voluntarily helped her with anything around the house and she’d gotten the distinct impression that he considered anything domestic to be “woman’s work” and beneath him.

“If you don’t mind, I think I’m going to call it a night,” Cole said as she finished wiping off the kitchen island. “The crew will be here around dawn.”

“How many men will there be?” she asked, turning out the light as they left the kitchen.

“Seven, counting me. Why?”

“Tell them not to worry about bringing their lunch after tomorrow,” she said as they walked down the hall toward the stairs. “I’ll have something ready for them every day they work until the job is finished.”

“That’s very generous of you.” Cole placed his hand on the small of her back to guide her as they started up the steps. “But you don’t have to do that.”

“I know I don’t.” She barely managed a smile. “I want to do it.” His hand at her back was only meant to steady her. But the heat from his wide palm seemed to sear her skin through her clothing and made it difficult to draw her next breath.

“We’ll appreciate it,” he said when they reached the top of the stairs. “But don’t go to any extra trouble.”

Stepping away from him at the door to his room, she nodded. “I’ll be sure to keep it simple.”

They stared at each other a few moments longer before Cole opened his bedroom door. “I’ll try to be quiet in case you want to sleep in tomorrow morning.”

“Sleep well,” she said as she turned to enter her room across the hall.

Closing the door, Paige leaned back against it and took a deep breath. Why did she feel as if she was still that starry-eyed sophomore girl talking to the cutest senior boy in Royal High School whenever she was around Cole? And why had he broken his promise to ask her out when she graduated?

She shook her head at her own foolishness as she pushed away from the door and got ready for bed. She might have had a huge crush on him when she was younger, but that was ancient history. He had made his choice not to ask her out. Besides, some questions in life were just better left unanswered.

* * *

The following afternoon, Cole kept a close eye on the clouds in the Southwestern sky. They had been gathering since right after lunch, and unless he missed his guess, they were in for one of the legendary Texas gully washers. Hopefully the rain would hold off until they finished framing the barn, but he wasn’t going to bet money on it. There was more than a fair chance he’d lose.

Twenty minutes later, the first crack of thunder rumbled overhead and he knew their workday had come to an end. He motioned for his men working on the rafters to climb down the ladders.

“Go ahead and start putting away the tools,” he said when they were all safely on the ground. “We’re going to call it a day. There’s no sense in risking one of you being struck by lightning.”

“See you in the mornin’, boss,” they all called as they hurriedly loaded their tools into the company trucks.

When fat raindrops began to fall, raising tiny puffs of west Texas dust as they hit the bare ground, Cole grabbed the blueprints for the barn from the tailgate of his truck, threw them into the front seat to keep them from getting ruined and slammed the door. Waving to his men as they drove away, he jogged across the ranch yard to the back porch. He'd no sooner sprinted up the steps than the sky seemed to open up and pour.

Staring at the curtain of rain just beyond the shelter of the porch roof, he clenched his jaw so tight he could've cracked a couple of teeth as he struggled to keep from cussing a blue streak. It was only mid-afternoon, and just the thought of being confined to the house for the rest of the day and night with Paige had him tied up into a tight knot. How the hell was he supposed to do what was honorable and right when it seemed the universe was throwing every obstacle it could in his way?

Considering the attraction he still had for her, he knew beyond a shadow of doubt the hell he was going to go through being alone with her. The urge to take her into his arms had been almost overwhelming, and if he hadn't realized that before, he did after she threw her arms around him for that tight hug last night in the kitchen. He had known it was her excitement over turning his brother's office into an art studio that had caused her impulsiveness, but that did little to prevent his body from feeling as if he'd been treated to the business end of a cattle prod. Then, when they'd walked upstairs together and he had discovered she was sleeping just across the hall from him, he'd lain awake half the night wondering what she wore to bed or if she wore anything at all. The other half had been spent speculating about why she wasn't sleeping in the master suite. Was the thought of lying in bed without Craig beside her more than she could bear?

"Cole, is everything all right?" Paige asked from behind him. "Why don't you come in?"

Turning, he found her standing just inside the open back door. "Everything's fine. I was just watching it rain," he said, knowing that his excuse for not going inside the house sounded pretty lame.

"You might be out here awhile," she advised with a slight smile. "It doesn't look like it's going to let up anytime soon."

Resigned, he took a deep breath and followed her into the house. "That's why I told the work crew to knock off for the rest of the day."

"That was probably a good idea." She walked over to open the oven door and check on something inside. "I heard on the news this morning that the weather is supposed to be this way for the next week or so."

Why did she have to look so damned good to him? And why was he having such a hard time keeping things in perspective?

His heart thudded against his ribs when her words suddenly sank in. "The rainy season doesn't normally set in for another couple of weeks."

"I guess it's coming early this year." She closed the oven door and shrugged one slender shoulder. "But you know how it is around here in the spring. We'll probably have nice, sunny mornings and a pop-up thunderstorm just about every afternoon or evening."

It was all Cole could do to keep from groaning aloud. Due to the unpredictable Texas weather, this two-week job had every chance of becoming a month-long ordeal. At least for him. His work crew would reap the benefits in travel pay and overtime when the weather did let up. But he was going to face a lot of long hours confined to the house with the most alluring woman he'd ever known. His only consolation was once his men got the roof put on the barn, there was a little work they could do on the inside—rain or shine.

He supposed he could make a trip into town to see how Aaron and his crew were progressing on the hospital wing. Or he might stop by the TCC clubhouse to have a beer with one of his friends. But checking on the hospital rebuild would only take up an afternoon, and he'd never been one to start drinking in the middle of the day. What he needed was another project to keep him and the crew busy for several days—maybe even a week or two.

"We might be able to work around the rain," he said as a plan came to mind.

She looked skeptical. “How?”

“We could work on the barn and outbuildings when the weather permits and on your studio when it’s raining,” he said, hoping it would reduce the amount of time they’d spend alone.

“That sounds very efficient,” she agreed. “Are you sure you don’t mind the extra work? You were only supposed to take care of rebuilding the barn and repairing the outbuildings before you go back to Dallas.”

He shook his head. “It will probably take a little longer to get the office converted to your studio because we’d only be working inside when we couldn’t work outside,” he warned. “But it would keep the work crew from being idle when it rains.” He wasn’t going to mention that part about cutting down on the amount of time he spent alone with her.

“I don’t mind it taking longer at all,” she said, smiling. “That room already has an outside entrance to the patio so it will be easy access for them, and since it’s on the far end of the family room, it won’t disrupt the rest of the house.”

“Have you given any more thought to what you want done to the room?” he asked, warming to the idea more with each passing second.

“I really haven’t had the time,” she admitted. “Maybe we could go over some possibilities after dinner.”

“Sure,” he said, nodding. When she reached for a couple of pot holders on the counter, he stepped forward to take them from her. “Let me lift that out for you.”

“Put it on the island,” she said, pointing toward the marble top.

He set the cake pans where she indicated. When he turned back around, he found her staring at him. “What?”

“Nothing.” She shook her head. “I was just thinking about possibilities for the studio.”

Something told him that wasn’t the reason, but he wasn’t going to press the issue. Some things were just better left as mysteries of the universe.

“If you don’t mind, I think I’ll go upstairs for a quick shower and some dry clothes,” he said, deciding to make a hasty exit before he did something stupid like wrap his arms around her and kiss her senseless.

She smiled as if she might be happy to have him out from underfoot. “Take your time. Dinner won’t be ready for another hour.”

“When I come back downstairs I’ll help you finish up,” he offered.

“That would be nice, but don’t feel that you have to,” she said, sounding a little breathless.

He nodded and, without another word, walked down the hall, climbed the stairs and entered his bedroom. With his pulse hammering in his ears, Cole made a beeline for the shower, stripped off his clothes and stepped beneath the refreshing spray.

As the warm water washed over him, he scrunched his eyes shut, let his head fall back and tried to come to terms with what he’d just discovered. Staring into Paige’s crystalline gray eyes, he had detected the same awareness he was certain was reflected in his own. And if he’d had any doubt about what he’d seen, the breathlessness he had heard in her voice convinced him that she was feeling the same magnetic pull he was.

So what was he supposed to do? How was he supposed to resist that? After all, he was a man with a man’s needs, not a hapless eunuch. But giving in to his feelings wasn’t an option, either. He and Craig might not have gotten along in life, but Cole was determined not to denigrate his brother’s memory by putting the moves on Craig’s wife such a short time after his death.

Cole’s first and probably best option would be to leave the Double R as fast as he could. But where would he go?

He was certain his room at the Cozy Inn had already been taken. They only had so many, and with the influx of workers there to rebuild the town needing a place to stay, the owners had a waiting list for their rooms, along with every other hotel or motel in the area. And crashing at Aaron Nichols’s

place was out of the question. Even though he and his wife had just moved into a beautiful new home in one of Royal's exclusive subdivisions, Aaron and Stella were newlyweds. There was no way Cole was going to intrude on their time together.

The only other option he had was to stay on the ranch, hope the weather cooperated enough for him to work his ass off and get the job done as quickly as possible. Then he intended to get back to Dallas as fast as his truck could take him.

Gritting his teeth against the heat building in his lower belly, Cole reached out and turned the warm water into an icy spray. The next couple of weeks stretched out before him like a life sentence, and he was going to have to fight with everything in him to keep from acting on the attraction. But he was determined to do the right thing or die trying.

* * *

After a rather silent dinner, Paige poured herself and Cole a cup of coffee. "Would you like to go out on the porch to have our coffee while we talk about my studio?"

"Isn't it a little chilly for that?" he asked as he accepted the mug she handed him.

"I have a jacket," she said, laughing. "Besides, I love listening to the falling rain. It's very calming."

She omitted the fact that she needed the wide-open feel of being outside in the hope of easing some of the tension between them. With Cole in residence, the normally spacious two-story house felt a whole lot smaller and made her more aware than ever of the attraction still simmering between them. She might have been able to ignore it if she hadn't seen the heightened awareness in his eyes that afternoon when he'd helped her remove the cake from the oven. But all it had taken was one look and she knew they were both dancing around on thin ice.

"Here, let me help you with that," he said, setting his coffee on the counter when she reached for her denim jacket on one of the pegs beside the back door.

When he took her jacket from her, Cole's hand brushed hers, sending a delightful tingle up her arm. "I—I was just going to throw it around me," she stammered.

Nodding, he stepped behind her to gently drape the garment over her shoulders. His hand seemed to linger a little longer than was necessary, and it was all she could do to keep from leaning her head to the side to lay her cheek against the back of it.

"Ready?" he asked, picking up his coffee mug. When she nodded, he reached around her to open the door. "Ladies first."

As they walked out onto the porch and sat down in the swing, Paige realized she'd made a serious error in judgment. She hadn't even considered how intimate it would feel as the sun went down and the dark night enveloped them.

"Besides the floor and another wall of windows, what do you want done to your studio?" he asked, setting the swing into motion.

"Would it be a lot of trouble to add a couple of cabinets for storing paints and canvas?" she asked, happy to focus on something besides the man seated on the other end of the swing.

"It wouldn't be any trouble at all." He took a sip of his coffee. "In fact, we could even add a sink for cleanup if you want."

She liked the idea, but she wasn't sure how difficult that would be. "Wouldn't that be a lot more work adding the extra plumbing?"

Cole shook his head. "Not really. The north wall already has water and drain pipes running inside of it for the half bath on the other side. It's just a matter of tapping into those."

Enthused by the way the plans were shaping up, Paige set her coffee cup on the small wicker table beside the swing and turned to face him. "That would be fantastic. Since I mostly work with acrylics and watercolors, I'll be able to rinse and clean brushes without having to leave the room and run the risk of dripping paint on something."

“It’s nice to see you’re excited about it.” His smile caused a tiny flutter in the pit of her stomach. “And I’m glad I’m able to help make it happen.”

Suddenly self-conscious, Paige laughed nervously as she sat back in the swing to stare down at her hands. “I’m sorry. You probably think it’s silly for a grown woman to be this enthusiastic about something as commonplace as redecorating a room.”

He placed one index finger under her chin to lift her head until her gaze met his. “Not at all. Why would you think that?”

“I suppose it’s because I’ve never done something like this before,” she admitted. “Craig liked the way the house was and discouraged me whenever I mentioned wanting to change anything about it.”

Cole’s only reaction was a slight narrowing of his dark green eyes. “It’s your house now, Paige. You can do whatever you want with it.” His touch and the gentle tone of his deep voice sent a shiver up her spine and made her more aware than ever that there was still a spark between them.

Before she realized what was happening, Cole leaned forward to brush her lips with his. When he lifted his head, he seemed to search her face for a moment before he set his coffee cup beside hers on the wicker table, then took her into his arms.

Unable to find her voice, she simply watched as he lowered his head again to fuse their mouths. The feel of his lips as he slowly, methodically acquainted himself with hers was as erotic as anything she had ever experienced. Of course, she had only kissed one other man in her entire life, and although her late husband’s kisses had been pleasant, they hadn’t been anything like Cole’s. Warm and pleasantly firm, Cole’s lips caressed hers in a way that made her feel as if he was worshipping her.

When he softly traced her mouth with his tongue, then coaxed her to open for him, Paige couldn’t have denied him access if her life depended on it. As she parted her lips, her heart beat double time and at his first gentle stroking of her inner recesses, she felt as if she would melt into a puddle. When his arms tightened around her, Paige automatically wrapped hers around him and held on as the feel of his strong body pressed to hers sent shivers of longing straight up her spine.

The unexpected sensation jolted her back to reality and quickly had her pulling away from him. Had she lost her mind? Cole was her late husband’s brother and the last man she should be shivering over.

Cole immediately released her and, muttering a curse, got up from the swing. Walking over to the porch rail, he kept his back to her and remained silent.

Unsure of what else to do, she rose to her feet and picked up their coffee cups from the wicker table. “I...um, I’m pretty tired. I think I’ll go ahead and turn in for the night.”

As she started to open the back door, he finally spoke. “I’m sorry, Paige. I was way out of line. It won’t happen again.”

“It...wasn’t entirely...your fault,” she said honestly as she continued into the house.

After placing their cups in the dishwasher, she went straight upstairs to her room. Why did she feel so confused about Cole kissing her?

She had known what he intended to do when he set his coffee cup down and took her into his arms. He’d given her ample time to resist, but she hadn’t made a single move to stop him. Why not?

Lowering herself to the side of the bed, she shook her head. She knew exactly why she hadn’t protested. The truth of the matter was, she had wanted him to kiss her. And a part of her wished that he hadn’t stopped.

Paige took a deep breath. Had she been so lonely that she fell into the arms of the first man who showed her the slightest bit of attention? Or was it the identity of the man that was responsible for her atypical behavior?

She suspected it might just be a combination of both.

Three

After spending a second sleepless night thinking about the woman across the hall, Cole was bone tired and more than a little irritable. Half of the crew was down with food poisoning from grabbing dinner out of a vending machine at a gas station the night before, everything on the build was taking twice as long because of their absence and the weather was threatening to end the workday early again. The only thing that seemed to have gone right the entire morning was his managing to get up and leave the house without running into Paige.

“Larry, watch what the hell you’re doing!” Cole shouted as the man barely missed hitting another one of the workers in the head with a board.

When Larry Martin turned to give him a questioning look, Cole immediately noticed his pallor. A ghost couldn’t have had less color. “Did you get a sandwich out of that vending machine last night like the others?” Cole asked.

Larry nodded. “We all had the egg salad sandwiches.”

“What about you two?” Cole asked, turning to the other men.

“No way, boss.” Harold Jenkins grinned. “Me and Terry had better sense.”

“Yeah, we went through the drive-through at the Moo & Cackle and got a healthy meal,” Terry Goodman chimed in. “We both had the macho man burger, a basket of chili cheese fries and a large chocolate milkshake.”

“I’m glad you didn’t decide on something unhealthy,” Cole said drily.

“I think I’m dying,” Larry complained, holding his stomach.

“Go ahead and pack it in for today,” Cole said, resigned to the fact that with the majority of his crew out sick there was no way they could get anything else done on the build. “One of you call me in the morning to let me know how many of you are able to work.”

While Harold and Terry loaded tools into the truck, Cole rolled up the blueprints. “Larry, I want you and the other three who ate from that vending machine to go to the urgent care clinic at Royal Memorial Hospital,” he said, placing the barn plans in the seat of his truck. “R&N Builders will pay for the visit and whatever medication the doctor prescribes.”

“Thanks...boss,” Larry said, sounding worse by the minute.

“But do me a favor. Don’t eat egg salad out of a vending machine again,” Cole advised.

“I don’t think...I’ll ever eat...again,” Larry moaned.

If he felt as bad as he looked, Cole couldn’t say he blamed the man. “Just get to feeling better. You can worry about what you eat after that.”

As he walked toward the house, he watched the R&N truck drive down the lane and felt first one, then another drop of rain land on his forearm. In no time, it was a steady shower and by the time he climbed the back porch steps, the sky opened up with another downpour. It wasn’t even lunchtime and the rain had already set in for the day.

Staring at the back door, he wondered what he was going to say to Paige. Would she want to talk about last night? Or would she prefer to act as if the kiss never happened?

He guessed he could come up with some excuse to make the five-mile drive into Royal in order to avoid the situation entirely, but that would only delay the inevitable. Besides, he had never been the kind of man who avoided confrontations. He preferred to hit a problem head-on, deal with it and put the issue behind him.

He opened the door, entered the kitchen and looked around. He had expected to find Paige getting ready to make lunch, but she was nowhere in sight.

“Paige,” he called, walking down the hall.

“I’m in Craig’s off...in the room I’m turning into my studio,” she called back, correcting herself midsentence.

Cole walked across the family room to the doorway of what had been the sitting room when he’d lived there. When he realized Paige was cleaning out his brother’s desk, he picked up a filled box. “Where do you want this?” he asked.

“In the den,” she said, brushing a wayward strand of her long auburn hair from her cheek. “I wanted to get the room cleared out so your men can get started on the studio whenever they’re ready. I can go through Craig’s things later.”

“I assume Craig had the accounting records and breeding registers on a computer?” he asked, picking up one of the filled boxes. “Do you need that moved, too?”

“Craig used a laptop for everything,” she said, opening one of the desk drawers to poke around inside. “I moved it into my office the week after his funeral.”

Carrying the box to the den, he realized that Paige hadn’t yet looked him directly in the eye. He hated that she felt embarrassed or awkward about something that hadn’t been her doing. He was the one who’d initiated the kiss, and he was going to take full responsibility for it.

“Paige, we need to talk about last night,” he stated when he returned to find her sifting through the contents of a small tin box.

“I’d rather not,” she said, continuing to give her full attention to the container.

He walked over to where she sat in the chair behind the desk and, moving the tin out of the way, took her hands in his to pull her to her feet. “Look at me,” Cole commanded when she kept her gaze trained on his chest.

When she raised her gaze, he hated the embarrassment he detected in her dark gray eyes. “What happened last night was not your fault,” he assured her. “I take full responsibility for it. I was the one who took advantage of the situation.”

She surprised him when she shook her head. “I can’t let you do that, Cole. I was just as guilty as you were.”

“How do you figure that?” he demanded, frowning.

“Would you have stopped if I’d asked you to or given you the slightest indication that I was uneasy about it?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” he said without hesitation. “I’ve never forced my attention on any woman and never will.”

“Exactly my point,” she said, nodding. “Don’t you get it, Cole? I might have been a bit surprised at first, but I wanted you to kiss me. The only reason I put a halt to things was because I was frightened by that realization.” She took a deep breath. “I’m still not sure that I’m comfortable with that little bit of self-discovery, but it’s the truth.”

He had known they were attracted to each other, but hearing her tell him that she had wanted his kiss sent a wave of heat through him at the speed of light. Cole felt his body begin to tighten and barely managed to keep himself from groaning aloud.

“I don’t think my staying here is a good idea,” he said, releasing her hands to take a step back.

She stared at him a moment before she shook her head. “That’s nonsense. All the hotels and inns in Royal are still full of workers here to rebuild the town. It would be next to impossible to find a place to stay. Besides, we’re adults. There might be a lingering attraction between us from when we were younger, but surely we have enough control to be objective about it.”

As he stared at her, he had to agree that what she said made sense. They weren’t and never had been hormone-crazed teenagers who couldn’t keep their hands off each other. Hell, last night was the first time he had even kissed her.

“You’re right,” he finally said, nodding. “We can handle this.”

And maybe if he repeated it to himself enough, he might even start to believe it.

* * *

After lunch, Cole checked to see what kind of bracing would be needed in order for his men to turn the south side of the room into a wall of windows for Paige’s studio while she continued packing boxes. When he came back downstairs, he carried them into the den for her, and in no time they had Craig’s desk and file cabinets completely emptied.

As they worked together to clear the room, Paige began to relax. They both seemed to have put last night behind them and were moving toward building a companionable friendship.

“The only things left to move to the den are a few boxes in the storage closet,” Paige finally said, unlocking the door to gaze inside.

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