The City Girl

By

Megan McCoy

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Published by Blushing Books®,
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ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901
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McCoy, Megan The City Girl

EBook ISBN: 978-1-68259-560-2 Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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Table of Contents:

Prologue	5
Chapter One	9
Chapter Two	17
Chapter Three	23
Chapter Four	35
Chapter Five	46
Chapter Six	57
Chapter Seven	65
Chapter Eight	74
Chapter Nine	80
Megan McCoy	84
EBook Offer	85
Blushing Books Newsletter	86
Blushing Books	87

Prologue

Jeb looked down at his bride of two days. Just forty-eight hours ago, he couldn't imagine how much they would enjoy being together, how hot the sex could be. Was it the new ring on her finger? The fact she'd made him wait till it was there? Rose was flat out the prettiest, smartest woman he'd ever met, or was liable to meet, he thought, as he squeezed her small hand.

"Is it really ours?" She turned to look up at him.

He couldn't get over how much emotion her deep gray eyes held. They made him want to melt into them, or into her.

With his free hand, he waved over the land, the lake, and the gently rolling hills, covered with still mostly bare trees. Another month or two and they would be full on green. "As far as your eye can see," he told her. Holding her hand, he pulled her back toward the large flat clearing a half a mile or so away from the lake that their land bordered and surrounded. "This is where we'll build your house—our house—and fill it with kids and critters, just like you want." He knew her dream of a large family and lots of chaos. He could go along with that. Hell, it was his dream, too. "I'll build fence for the horses' pasture over there, and you can see they already started on the barn."

"Oh, the horses get a home before I do," she teased gently.

They'd met at a café where she'd been a waitress and he'd been the drooling customer who walked in and spied her while he was on a trip with his folks. Then for the next year showed up regularly, and drank sodas till his back teeth floated, till she finally went out with him. They were both in their senior year of high school then. They'd married in her hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma, after she graduated college. He lived an hour south of there, in Okmulgee, and made the trip up to the diner a few times a week despite his dad yelling at him about it being a waste of gas, time, and money. Even back then, he knew what he wanted and how to get it.

Now that they were married, he wasn't going to miss the drive home, aching and wanting at night all. However, he was going to miss the fights with his dad who'd passed away from a heart attack last year, leaving him this farm, this land, this future with his new bride.

This was the first time she'd seen his—their—future home. Jeb had moved a small trailer on the land for now, but had big plans for their future here.

"The horses don't care what their shack looks like, as long as they're warm and dry. You are a bit more particular," he said. "The architect is coming out this afternoon with a set of plans for you to tear apart and tell him how the house should go."

"This afternoon?" She squealed. "Seriously, Jeb?"

"Seriously, Rose," he told her, grinning at her obvious excitement. "What kind of house do you want?" He already knew, they'd talked about it for years, while she finished college, while he built their nest egg, working on a ranch and in construction, and driving up to see her as often as he could. Often after ten or twelve hour days. Totally worth it. Like the song said, her smile made everything worthwhile.

After his dad had passed away, he found out that he'd been left a couple hundred acres that he never knew his dad owned, way up north in Illinois that his dad – Jeb's granddad - had left him. Generations of land that no one had lived on. Although they'd both lived in Oklahoma all their lives and their families were there, southern Illinois caught her fancy and captured his dreams. Sight unseen, he and Rose began to dream of their future life on this piece of land.

One day, while Rose was in the midst of finals hell, he'd had a couple of unexpected days off and drove to their new southern Illinois land, where he fell in love with the black dirt and softly rolling hills as hard as he'd fallen in love with the thrill in Rose's voice as she planned their future together. He often asked her about what she wanted, just to hear her excitement and determination to make her, their, dreams come true. With her and this piece of land, he could do anything. He cocked his head and stroked her back as he listened to her talk.

"A huge family kitchen, a living room big enough to double as the office for my—" she stopped and paused for a moment before correcting, "for *our* bed and breakfast. I want to play hostess every morning! I have to put this culinary degree to good work now that I got that piece of paper, you know. As many bedrooms as we can afford. And a master bedroom with plenty of room for us to play in private."

She clutched his hand, looked demure and he immediately got hard. Amazing what she could do to him. Yeah, he wanted that too. Why was he building the barn first? Idiot man.

"Can we stay here tonight, Jeb, please?" She turned to him, and snuggled in close. "Please? I don't want to leave. Ever. I just want to be here at our home."

Like he'd deny her anything. "I don't think you'll be as comfortable in the trailer as you are in the hotel, but if that's what you want, I can make that happen."

Rose sighed, her huge gray eyes tearing up with happiness as she said, "I think you can do anything, and I love that about you."

His stomach jerked with some kind of emotion he didn't really recognize. How did he get so lucky? How did he endure his life without her in it? Luckily, their new marriage and her strong love for him, her belief in him, made him feel confident that he didn't have to ever worry about that. She was his, day and night... oh, the nights for the rest of their very long lives.

Jeb vowed to do anything to make her happy, to never let her worry, to always take care of her and make her feel safe and well cared for. If that meant he had to blister her butt on occasion, as he'd had to do twice while they were dating, then he would. But unless that needed to happen, he would be the gentlest, kindest, most generous husband a woman could ask for.

He didn't see a bit of conflict in those thoughts. To him, a good paddling on occasion kept her sweet, happy and confident in his love, just like his dad had done for his momma. Again, he didn't see a conflict in those thoughts, either. He realized, however, he was a simple man and not made for deep thoughts about whys and wherefores. He'd leave that up to her. Her active little mind often worked triple time but as long as it worked, and now for at least, for the second generation of marriages, it seemed to work. He wasn't going to try to fix what wasn't broken. If she needed petted and gentled, he'd do that. If she needed her bottom paddled, he'd do that. Whatever the woman needed, was his desire.

He walked her over to the house plot, and scooped her up in his arms, making her giggle. "Now I'm carrying you over the threshold," he said, pretending to walk up a few steps. "Now I kiss you," and he followed through on that thought, gently, sweetly, not wanting it to lead to more just yet. "Want to walk around a minute?" He continued the pretend tour of their future house, pointing out the kitchen living room, office, their bedroom, and the guest rooms.

"Oh, but now we came back outside, because it's just too nice to be inside," he placed her gently on the ground, and sat down beside her on the cool hard dirt. "This is where your big old fashioned porch will be. Maybe we'll hang a dinner bell and you can call all those dozen kids you want in when it's time to wash up for supper. We'll hang out with our friends here, in the evenings. When we're old, we'll sit here on the porch swing and smell those roses you're going to plant as soon as the house is done, and watch the horses and grandkids play."

"Yes, to the dinner bell! Jeb, this sounds like a perfect life. Do you think it will really happen?"

He kissed her hard, and then said, "Yes. It will. I will do everything in my power to make it true for us, for you."

Rose sighed happily, looking around, then turned, and reached for him, hungrily. "What do you say we get started on that family legacy right now?"

"That sounds like a great idea," he said, pulling her closer to him.

Nine months later, at the ripe old age of 22, he was a dad.

Chapter One

Thirty years later...

Cassandra Carter turned her brand new, pretty blue sports car into yet another tree-lined road, splashing through the late spring puddles and wondering when she'd get to wash her new baby again. She'd saved forever to get this car! Soft white leather seats, light blue exterior, dark blue interior, so many bells and whistles she still didn't know what they all did. Some woman spoke to her and told her where to go when she got lost. Her radio seemed to just know her favorite songs. She loved this car. She'd earned this car. So many twelve and fourteen hour days, so many holidays, nights, and weekends working while others played and partied. It all came down to this car.

Well, the car was a symbol of her work and she adored this symbol. A five-hour trip wasn't long enough. Cassandra felt very tempted to turn around and drive back home to Chicago, just so she could make the drive again. How reckless would that be, she wondered. She wouldn't do it, but oh, it had been tempting for a minute.

Even though the lanes weren't marked and the speed limit was much lower, the potholes in the road reminded her of Chicago. Her sweet softly voiced lady of all information told her she was way south of the big city, though. Who knew southern Illinois looked like the pictures the hills of Kentucky or Tennessee? Not this city slicker. She thought everything south of I-80 was flat land and farms. Instead, she was into low hills, lovely lakes, rambling rivers, and woods that seemed to go on for miles and miles. Oh, yeah, and some farmland. It was pretty enough, but really? She'd not seen a coffee shop for an hour. Good thing her mom had prepared for that and bought her a fancy new coffee maker for her room while wishing her well and hoping she had running water. Cassandra wasn't worried, she'd seen pictures of the efficiency apartment on the ranch that would be her home for the next six months.

She hoped this was a good idea. If not, it was six months out of her life. After that, she'd be ensconced into her newest assignment for the management company she worked for, in a brand new high-rise hotel, still not quite finished, as soon as she headed north again. The new hotel would be open for Christmas and she'd start hiring and training people for the café, the diner, the new restaurant, and for housekeeping, the first of November.

Since this job would end right after Halloween, it had seemed perfect. Sure, she could have gone to the beach and sat for six months, the corporation she worked for paid her

generously, but she wasn't a beach sitting kind of person. She loved the beach for a few days, but liked to be busy and be active, and falling into this job at what she kept thinking was a dude ranch but really wasn't, according to the new boss, had seemed like the best of a working vacation. She could learn new skills, which were always a good thing, get a tan and maybe make some new friends. It had just seemed perfect!

The fact that she was six hours away from her former, jerk of a fiancé, Tyler, was just a perk. Her finger still felt naked, even after a few months, without the honking big diamond he'd given her, and then asked her to return to him because it was a family heirloom. Supposedly. Too bad she hadn't sold it or pawned it, or thrown it of the roof, when she had the chance, when he'd gone radio silent on her. She wondered, just a little nastily, if he was planning to give it to the red head who'd caught his eye and made him want to 'rethink his life priorities.' Who said something like that aloud with a straight face? Tyler, apparently, and it was good she got away from him before she had to endure that pomposity every morning over breakfast. Or in bed. But working in a new and different environment for the summer would mean she wouldn't be thinking constantly about what could and might have been.

Learning was always tiring, and she hoped to wear herself out. Fresh country air supposedly did that for you, too, she'd heard. Not that she'd had much experience with that. She'd been born in Chicago, and other than a few trips for conferences and corporate meetings, she hadn't really left it much. The meetings, of course, basically meant she'd seen the airport in whatever town they were in, the ride from the airport to the hotel, and then the ride back. Not much in the way of sightseeing or fun on those meeting trips. Lots of balcony sitting in the warm climates, with a fruity drink in her hand. She loved watching the waves or even the pool.

In colder climates, there was always a friendly bartender and often a big roaring fire in a huge stone hearth. She'd learned to make friendly acquaintances wherever she went, no matter how short her stay. All the hotels were different, all the people. But, still, after a while they ran together, she did the same thing in the same way with the same excellent results. She found herself too fond of routine.

So, for something new and different, this summer, she'd chucked her heels and business suits, in exchange for jeans and sturdy work boots. Her job was to oversee an established, but growing, dining and housekeeping staff, and create some ongoing standards that their suddenly booming business needed for future years. She could do that with one hand behind her back. A

fun, non-stressful summer, then come back to her new hotel all done mourning Tyler and refreshed and ready for a big challenge. Yes that was her goal and she loved to set goals. Maybe she'd even learn to ride a horse while she was here. If she had time. What she'd do with that skill, she didn't know, but what girl didn't dream, growing up, of a few thousand pounds of strong warm flesh between her legs? That would be a nice change, after Tyler, too.

That wasn't nice, Cassandra, she scolded herself. Sometimes she just knew she deserved a good spanking. Another thing Tyler couldn't provide her.

Cassandra turned left at the dulcet tones of her guidance girl, and drove another half mile down a blacktopped road. Passing under a carved wooden archway that boasted a big wooden sign swinging and announcing she had arrived in the right place "Rose's Ranch" made her suddenly nervous.

Well, that was to be expected. Everyone from the dishwasher to the CEO had nerves on their first day of work. She knew she would do a good job, but still. Normal. Not to mention that her new boss, though a few years younger than she liked, or was, probably, was hot as hell. It had been a while since she'd had a no holds barred, sex only affair. Long before Tyler. It might be time for another one, even with that hot muscular cowboy. Like the country song said, she was old enough to be that boy's lover.

What was she thinking? No! Especially with her boss! That would be ridiculous. Not to mention it wouldn't look good on her resume.

Cassandra giggled, thinking of how to phrase that on her list of skills. "Laid the hot cowboy" "Slept with the boss" Nah, she'd have to do much better than that. Or not at all since she wasn't going to screw the boss man. A decision made.

But who knew, maybe there would be other hot cowboys around who weren't her boss. Matt Lyon hadn't looked like a cowboy, interviewing her in his suit and tie, up in her Chicago high-rise hotel, but he assured her he was. Again, Illinois had cowboys? Horse ranches? She'd lived in this state all her life. Who knew! Well, she didn't know much of what happened south of I-80, but she was going to learn and just couldn't wait to see what all she didn't know about life in her home state. Trying to not wiggle in her seat, she looked around as much as she could while still keeping her sweet car out of the potholes.

What Matt had called 'the home place' and 'the lodge area' came into view. Her breath caught, she hadn't been expecting this. The layout was gorgeous. There was a big two-story log

cabin building, with the most inviting gorgeous wrap around porch, with three, count them, three, porch swings as welcoming as she'd ever seen. There were what seemed to be flowerbeds all around, but of course, few green things growing now, though some brave tulips and daffodils were popping their heads up. She couldn't wait to see what it looked like in another month. Matt had told her that his mom, the Rose of the ranch, had planted many, many rose bushes, and in the summer, the air filled with their fragrance. She couldn't wait. She loved roses. Well, flowers of any kind, but roses were her special favorite. Maybe she'd be allowed to pick a few for her room now and again? She'd be sure to ask Matt or one of the other two managers before she did, however. Some places were very particular about things like that and she wouldn't want to step on toes, even boot clad toes.

There were half a dozen small cabins dotting the area and three or four bigger buildings that looked like strip motels with character. They were all... what? Oak? Some kind of lumber, log cabin-y looks. Whatever they were, she liked the rustic feel and hoped to hell they all had running water and a flush toilet and a nice shower, especially in her room. She didn't need much! Well, she was accustomed to much in the way of luxury in her life, but this summer was all about adapting and learning. Although she was used to all the amenities a four and five star hotel had to offer, she knew there would other perks here. At least she hoped so. Like hot available non-boss cowboys.

At the very least, it would be an adventure. She deserved an adventure. Craved one. All her life, she'd done the straight and narrow path thing. Made good grades, gone to a great college, majoring in hospitality management because she knew she wanted to live in the ambiance of fancy hotels, high-powered people, and top-notch restaurants. Growing up in the suburbs, Cassandra had always wanted a big city life, and even as a little girl, knew how to get what she wanted. Work hard and take an interest in people, from the CEO's to the busboys. Everyone needed a smile and a boost, and both those things had done well for her. Her name in the business seemed golden, and opportunities dropped in her lap now. Once this little vacation was over, she'd be ready to head back to her heels and power suits.

She'd always enjoyed the stress, the atmosphere, and the lifestyle that hotel life had to offer. This was her first taste of real country life, and being just a little lowbrow and laid back. Maybe she would find some hot male excitement here to enjoy and then leave behind. Something to laugh and talk about over cocktails with her friends, who'd all thought she was nuts for

coming out here. After her break up with Tyler, though, a little nuts sounded good, even if they came with real squirrels in real trees.

But, she decided firmly, no adventure with Matt. She'd look around, and see who might be fun to use and discard at the end of summer. Why not? Men did it all the time. She could too. Maybe. She hoped. It was a good plan, anyway! But not with her boss, who could at some point give her a recommendation should she ever need one. *Never burn your bridges*, she reminded herself. *Always leave them with a smile*.

Where was the Lyon's Den? Matt had told her there would be a sign on one of the buildings that said Lyon's Den, and that was where she'd be staying. She'd have her own small apartment, but in the same building as the rest of the family. It was their home, apparently, as well as the office for the guests to check in and out of, and had what he called an efficiency behind the kitchen. She hoped she'd stayed in worse.

There it was! Cute little sign, with a spray of vine twined roses on either side of the wording. Were there roses everywhere in this place? That was not a bad thing at all. She pulled into the small circle drive in front of the building, got out and stretched. Long ride. She needed a bathroom. Hopefully there would be someone here to greet her, and show her the way to one in the next few minutes. Otherwise she assumed that the woods were fair game. She remembered using that at summer camp. When she was nine. Not wanting to revisit the past, she marched up to the front door and knocked. No buzzer, no doorbell. She knocked, again. What else was there to do?

No answer. Now what? Well, the usual, of course. She got out her cell phone and called. She could hear the phone ring inside the office. Well, that wouldn't work. Oddly enough, someone answered it. "Matt here," the deep voice she remembered answered.

"Matt, its Cassandra Carter. I'm here at the lodge," she trailed off, wondering what else she should say.

"Okay. I'm out with the horses, door should be unlocked. Your room is the one off the kitchen. I'll send Blaze over to help you. Hey, Clint! Hey, see that colt?"

Cassandra looked at her phone, realizing he'd hung up on her. Okay then. She picked up her overnight bag and went to look for the kitchen and then the bathroom. Hopefully there was one in her room! She hadn't thought that there might not be. Surely, an efficiency apartment had a bathroom.

The door was unlocked, just as he'd said, and she wondered if that was usual or if they were waiting on her. Didn't matter, she was sure she'd find out soon enough, and she'd stayed in enough hotels, that she knew how to make her own room safe if need be.

Okay, kitchen was where? This was obviously a cozy living room, office combo. Was this where the guests checked in? Seemed a little intrusive for a family but she guessed that bed and breakfast innkeepers did the same. There were two doors off this room, besides the outside door. She picked the one that seemed to have natural light streaming behind it and found the kitchen. Thank goodness. She'd look at it later. Two doors again off the kitchen. One led to a pantry, and the other to a small hallway. The first door she opened in the hallway was a storage room, the second, close to a back exit door, had to be her new home.

Dropping her bag, she ran to the open bathroom door inside the small room, and quickly felt relieved in more ways than one. The little she'd seen of her room looked nice, and there was an exit to outside that didn't involve going through the kitchen and office. All good.

In here, there was a big walk in shower, a nice sink with lots of storage under it. No bathtub to soak in, but oh well. She could make do with a duel headed shower for the summer, as long as there was lots of hot water. First world problem. She'd decided she was only going to be upset over things that weren't first world problems in this job, because this wasn't a hotel, and one of the reasons she was here was for the entire experience. Including a bit of roughing it, if need be, and dammit, she'd do it with a smile.

As she walked out of the bathroom, into what would be her room for the next few months, she noticed a small efficiency kitchen that looked completely serviceable, considering there was a big, airy, kitchen right outside her door and another one across the lot where they would be feeding the crew. These people were serious about their food preparation, weren't they? There was a fridge, a stove with four burners and an oven, a microwave and yes, ever a small dishwasher. She opened a couple cabinet doors, and saw they were filled with everything she would need to cook or eat from.

Double bed covered in what looked like a handmade quilt, and quite cozy looking, and a dresser with a mirror were tucked into an alcove. Right outside the alcove sat a small loveseat and an overstuffed chair in front of a small TV, and under the TV shelves held neatly lined up books of a few genres. She appreciated they all weren't Louis L'Amour, and that she had everything she'd need, it looked like. Even a fancy coffee pot that looked every bit as nice as the

one her mom had given her. She could have coffee all day and all night, if she wanted. No wine fridge, but hey, this girl was roughing it, happily, she reminded herself.

"Hello?" a male voice called out for her. "Ms. Carter?"

Yes. It was for her. Cassandra opened the door to her room and called back, "If you're looking for me, I'm in here."

A young man, probably late teens, early twenties, strode down the hall from the kitchen, a welcoming smile, and a hand held out. "Hi, I'm Blaze Lyon. You must be Ms. Carter. Welcome to Rose's Ranch. My dad sent me to help you unload your car, then show you around."

Cassandra smiled at him. Matt's kid? Matt didn't look old enough to have a kid in his 20s, but who knew. "Oh, thanks! Call me Cassandra, please. I only have a load or two, but I'd really appreciate the help. You work here too?" She followed him through the kitchen and back out into the damp spring air.

"Yeah, Grandpa is the real boss, Dad is his right hand man, and I get to do everything they tell me to do. But man, just look around. It's a great place to be, isn't it?"

Popping her trunk, she looked around again at the greening up vista in front of her. It was very different from the Chicago landscape. Nothing towering but the trees. No traffic noise at all, though there were... nature sounds. Birds. Other things. She imagined she'd know what they were in a few days. Or weeks. Or not. But, yes, it was a great place to be, for the moment at least.

"Here, I can carry another bag," Blaze reached his hand out and she gave him another small suitcase. "I hope you brought decent shoes." He looked pointedly down at her feet.

Cassandra laughed. "Yes I did. I read the online information for guests. Sneakers, boots, and serviceable working shoes. But, aren't these pretty?" She looked forlornly down at the sparkly sandals she didn't know when she'd wear again. Next spring? By the time she got back to Chicago, it would be too cold for them. Good thing she didn't outgrow her shoes anymore, as much as they cost.

"Yes, Ma'am, they are very pretty," he said seriously, making her laugh again. "I'll carry the last of the stuff in, if you want to put on different shoes while I'm doing that, and we can look around a bit."

"That sounds great." Cassandra frantically wondered which suitcase held her serviceable shoes. That one? No, there it was! He'd just carried it in. Good. Why she didn't want to

disappoint the boy by not having the proper shoes was silly. But there you go. Maybe because technically he was her boss? Well, her boss's kid? Her boss's boss's kid? Oh my, she'd never worked in a place without proper designated titles for people. They probably had them, she assured herself, and just hadn't told her yet. Hers was supposedly general manager over non-stable personnel, or some such thing. When she'd told Matt she rather liked working with stable people, he'd stared at her a second, then took the contract back, crossed out the word stable and wrote in 'horse related'. She laughed until she'd cried.

Shoes. They needed tied. She sat on her bed and managed to get that done before Blaze—what kind of name was Blaze anyway—came back in with the last of her bags and boxes. He had some guns under that t-shirt, all right. Maybe she would see him without a shirt soon.

Reminding herself that she was old enough to be his mom, and that he was her boss—boss's kid, boss's grandson, no, not this again—she followed him out the door, and into the big new world of not-dude ranching.