

His Firecracker

A Her Choice Story

By

Megan McCoy

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Chapter One

Cole Lyon pulled into the small, wooden bar. It didn't look like home. Why would it? He'd never been here before. But it felt like home and that made no sense at all. He shook his too long dark hair. His Chief would have been irritated, no Seabee had long hair, after all. Scratching his chin, he knew she wouldn't approve of his facial hair either. Too bad. His last day in the Navy had been a few months back, and he was glad to be done with that part of his life. Time to move on.

Climbing out of the truck he'd just purchased, he inhaled. Now that smelled like home and a wave of nostalgia slapped him in the face. The humidity felt so thick he could almost wring out his shirt, but smelled like pine. Pine and black dirt. He loved that smell and wished he'd never left here.

Well, he reminded himself, as he opened the wooden door to the bar, it wasn't his fault. He'd been a kid when he left.

Now, he was not a kid. He was a grown-ass Navy veteran adult who needed a place on this earth to call home. He hoped this was it. After a twelve-hour drive, he'd finally made it. Made it home? Who knew. He hoped, though. Tonight, though, all he wanted was a half dozen beers and then to crash in his truck till tomorrow. He'd go to Rose's Ranch, find Matt, and hope to hell he remembered him. Maybe Jeb would. He'd heard Rose had passed away and he felt horrible he'd not been able to attend her funeral.

Even if none of them remembered him, though, he could apply for a job. There was nothing he couldn't do. He'd done it all. Hopefully, they were hiring. If they weren't, well, he hadn't thought of anything beyond that. The bartender would probably know. The Lyon Ranch, formally known as Rose's Ranch, was the biggest employer in this town, and of course people knew everything that went on there. Small towns were like Navy ships, everyone knew everything.

Opening the heavy wooden bar door, he was surprised not to be hit by the smell of smoke. Just booze and bodies. No smoke rules must have arrived out here too. Oh well, he'd put

out his last cigarette in Afghanistan and hadn't picked up one since. Part of his old life. He wanted, no, would have, a new one. A better one.

Right now, all he wanted was a beer. Folding his six-foot body onto the bar stool, as if he'd done it too often, he motioned to the young bartender. "Whatever is ice cold and on tap, please," he said, when she came to take his order. Apparently, smoke was out, and purple hair was in. Whatever. She seemed makeup free, and her smile was real, though, as she gave him the once over. He ignored it, used to women looking at him. Apparently, as he'd been told, he was the classic, tall, dark, and handsome type. There could be worse things. He smiled back so she wouldn't spit in his beer and make sure it was kept well and properly filled.

"Gonna run a tab?" she asked, after putting down a coaster and then the tall frosty mug.

"Yes, Ma'am," he replied. "Planning on a few of these."

"I'm here till close, if you need a ride home," she replied with a saucy wink. "My name is Hope."

"Cole," he replied.

"Well, Cole, my house is close and I have a spare side of the bed," she grinned at him invitingly.

Okay, so the purple hair was growing on him. There could be better places to sleep tonight than the truck. He'd think about it for a few beers. Right now, he was just going to enjoy the atmosphere and try to relax a little while. Thinking of this town, the ranch, was the only thing that kept him going last few years. He finally made it here and he needed to unwind and just realize it. In his chaotic life, this was the only place he had ever remembered fondly and with love.

Looking around the quiet bar, he hoped it wasn't going to be as exciting as yesterday's lunch. He'd stopped at a busy thriving truck stop about 10-15 hours from here to eat and refuel. Hearing shouting from the parking lot, he'd wandered out with about half a dozen other customers to see what was going on.

In the middle of the jam-packed parking lot, he saw a curvy redhead, dressed in white, with a golf club in her hand, attacking a car window. What the hell? Striding over he'd heard her yelling something about a dog and asshole owners while swinging the club. Hell, she was going to break that window. Why wasn't anyone stopping her? Striding closer, he saw a couple running to the car, screaming almost as loud as the golf club swinging female yelled.

Must be their car, he deduced. From the way they were screeching he felt certain he was right about that.

He stopped and waited, knowing he could disarm the redhead in just a very few seconds if she lifted the club again or started to attack them. He hoped she wasn't a woman scorned. They could be hell on wheels.

"Dogs die in this heat! Someone help me save this dog!" she yelled, and as Cole started to walk forward, the female of the couple ran around to the other side of a car and pulled an obviously overheated little dog out of it. The dog was panting and limp and in obvious distress.

"Get him some water! Who has a water bottle?" the redhead looked around the crowd and someone produced a water bottle, and handed it to her. She dumped half of it over the dog's head and grabbed his mouth to pour some down there.

Cole stood back, listening. "What were you thinking leaving him there in this heat? Dogs die in hot cars!" Pouring water over the dog's head and giving him another drink, didn't stop her from berating the dog's parents for leaving it in the car with the windows up. "I need another water bottle!" she yelled at the crowd, while the dog's owner just stood still and got soaked along with her dog.

But, no one seemed to be in danger, so situation deferred. He could go back to his burger, if the waitress hadn't cleared it away. Maybe he could get the dog savior to come and tell the waitress what for if she had. Grinning, he sat back down, watching the crowd disperse from the parking lot. He'd love to meet that fiery tempered dog lover, and almost got back up to go see if he could get an introduction, but realized, he was just passing through town. His destination was a day away. He didn't need any distractions, no matter how amply her ass filled her uniform pants, or how her temper made him curious. Nothing he loved better than taming a firecracker. Next time, he'd decided.

His mind drifted back to the bar, and he looked down as he noticed the bartender had refilled his beer. Good girl, he thought.

Two beers later, he decided that after a twelve-hour drive, his ideas of six beers and bedding the bartender were both grandiose. All he wanted was to pull his sleeping bag out, and sack out. He'd parked at the very back of the lot, near a grove of pine trees. He'd sleep in the back of his truck and smell the air tonight. He'd smell it alone, but that was okay.

Throwing down some money, he gave a wave to Hope, who looked disappointed, but she'd survive, and stepped back out into the now dark night. The parking lot was well lit but he noticed where he had parked, it looked black. Looking up, he saw no moon, and hoped he could see more stars when he got to the truck.

Heading to his truck, he noticed a couple guys walking toward him. One looked familiar, but not really. Well, that was bound to happen. He wasn't going to think too hard about anything right now, but his sleeping bag and sleep. Tomorrow would be here soon enough. Then he'd clean up somewhere and head to the ranch. Renew old acquaintances, and make a new life.

Less than ten minutes later he fell asleep.

* * *

Ten hours later, he walked out of the truck stop, eight miles up the road. He knew they would have a shower and some decent food, and he'd been right on both counts. No cute redhead running amok in the parking lot though. Dressed in clean jeans, his boots, and a khaki shirt, he climbed back in his dark green truck and headed to the ranch. The last time he'd been on this road, it had been all he could do not to sob. But he'd been a man, at least in his own mind, and wouldn't do it.

Now, it was excitement that drove down the tree-lined road with him. He remembered the small swells and rolling hills of this land. Covered with green this time of year, he knew it wouldn't be too long before it started turning into the vibrant autumn colors. He'd been here for a few of them, and loved the changing of the seasons. He couldn't wait to see the hills turn from green to the wonderful rust, yellow, and oranges. Then white when the snow hit. It had been over five years since he'd seen snow.

Turning off the highway, he still remembered how to get there. He'd not bought a GPS since he got back. He didn't really need one. His mind remembered what was important, and he still knew how to read a map. This he knew from his dreams though.

The wrought iron gateway with the wooden Rose's Ranch sign above it, looked the same but the road was now paved instead of gravel. It made a big improvement in the ride, but the ambiance wasn't quite as rustic. However, turning the last curve, heading into the last stretch he suddenly felt a bit of nerves. No. He wasn't nervous. He was anticipating, he told himself firmly. Men didn't get nervous. Real men ate nerves for breakfast.

There were a lot more cabins than he remembered. Few more barns and outbuildings too. Jeb had done well in the last decade or so. There were still all the rose bushes, now in full bloom. Inhaling, he felt a rush of memories come back to him, but he fought them down. Time to get a job. Following handy signs that pointed his way to the office, he didn't know who he hoped he'd see, but he wasn't leaving here without a job. He'd do anything. Muck stalls, mow, cook, hell, he'd clean toilets to get an in.

Parking his truck in front of the office, he took a deep breath and got out. He noticed the sign above the office door that said Lyon's Den and one on the door that said Office Come In. So, he did.

A beautiful woman with short blonde hair sat behind a small desk. Wearing jeans and a dark shirt with the logo Rose's Ranch on her considerably gorgeous chest, he dragged his eyes away and looked into her deep gray blue eyes. Damn. Is this what they were hiring here now?

"Hi! My name is Cassandra. Do you have a reservation?" she chirped at him.

"No, Ma'am," he said. "I came looking for Matt and a job."

Looking at him critically she asked, "In either order?"

"Pardon?" he asked, confused.

"Hang on," she said and quickly texted something.

Damn, again, he needed a phone. He'd pick one up as soon as he could. "Yes, Ma'am," he said.

"What kind of job are you looking for?" She asked him a second later.

"I'm good with my hands. I can fix anything, I can take care of horses, fix fence, work the gardens, hell, I can cook you the best steak you've ever had." Had he said too much?

Cassandra's head flew up from the paper she'd been taking notes on. "Can you cook anything else besides steak? I'm in desperate need of a temporary chef."

"Well, I'm not a chef, but I know my way around the kitchen. I'd be willing to fill in, while you found a permanent one. I'd prefer to be in the barn, but like I said, right now, I just need a job."

"What kind of cooking experience do you have," she asked. "I have a chef coming in two weeks, but she can't get here till then and my regular chef, who's retiring, told me she's leaving this afternoon to fly to California to be with her daughter who's having emergency surgery."

“I did ten years in the Navy, Ma’am, and five of those was in the mess,” he replied. Okay, this was starting to sound promising. He could cook two weeks.

“Navy, huh?” She looked at him sharply. “Where were you stationed?”

“Afghanistan for six of those years, and California for two and on the USS Preble for the other two,” he said.

She shook her head. “Sorry. Got a friend who got home from Afghanistan not too long ago. You okay?”

Cole wasn’t sure how to answer that. What did okay even mean? He didn’t answer because the door to the office came open and Matt walked in.

“Candy, you needed me? Dad’s on his way, too.”

Oh, maybe this was Matt’s wife? Cole turned slowly and looked at Matt. He’d turned into a man, but he’d know him anywhere. Would Matt recognize him?

“No, Matt, I did,” he said, holding out his hand, to shake.

Matt looked at him for a second and then grabbed his hand. “Cole?”

“Yeah, glad to see you,” they hugged like guys do, awkwardly and briefly, but Cole suddenly felt right for the first time in years.

“Candy, this is my brother, Cole,” Matt said. “Cole, this is my mom, Candy.”

“Mom?” Cole said.

“Brother?” Candy breathed and looked to both the men. “Jeb never told me about more kids.”

“Oh, baby, I got kids coming out of the woodwork,” Jeb said, coming up behind her. He’d come in through the kitchen door, Cole surmised. “You know that no one can resist me.”

Candy-Cassandra-Mom glared at him and then turned. “So?”

“I was Jeb and Rose’s foster kid for over five years,” Cole said, simply. “This was the only home I’ve ever really known.”

Jeb stepped up, around the desk and hugged him. “He’s my brother’s kid,” he told Candy. Then turned back to Cole. “They wouldn’t tell me what happened after your mom came back,” he said. “Rose and I tried, really hard.”

“I know,” Cole replied, hugging him back. He wanted to say more, but he couldn’t breath and couldn’t swallow. Suddenly, he didn’t feel like a man, but like a teenager again.

Jeb stepped back. “You’re home now, boy, and you’re a man. No one can take you from us again. Candy, this is Cole Lyon. Technically, he’s my brother’s son, but I’ve always considered him mine. He was here as much as I could have him, growing up, till his mom took him from us.”

Matt stepped closer, too. “Brother,” he said and Cole fought to fight back tears then stepped back, feeling too overwhelmed. He couldn’t believe this was happening. After everything that had happened to him and in his life, he was finally home.