



For His Brother's Wife (Texas Cattleman's Club: After the Storm Book 7)

By Kathie DeNosky

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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.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

USA Today Bestselling Author, Kathie DeNosky, writes highly emotional stories laced with a good dose of humor. Kathie lives in her native southern Illinois and loves writing at night while listening to country music on her favorite radio station.

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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.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Heather Jones:

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