



## The Cowboy's Surprise Baby (Cowboy Country Book 3)

By Deb Kastner

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### Hometown Reunion

After years away serving his country, Cole Bishop finally returns home—with a newborn baby in tow. As a single dad, Cole needs help. But the last thing he expects to encounter at his new job is his high school sweetheart—all grown up and more beautiful than ever. Tessa Applewhite might have broken Cole's heart years before, but she's never forgotten him. And he can wrangle *her* heart like no one else ever has. But Tessa rejected him when the stakes weren't nearly as high. Can Cole trust her again—and in the process, form a forever family?

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### Editorial Review

About the Author

~Love Courageously~

Award-winning author Deb Kastner writes stories of faith, family and community in a small-town western setting. Deb's books contain sigh-worthy heroes and strong heroines facing obstacles that draw them closer to each other and the Lord. She lives in Colorado with her husband. She is blessed with three grown daughters and two grandchildren. She enjoys spoiling her grandkids, movies, music, reading, musical theater and exploring Colorado on horseback.

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Cole Bishop didn't know who'd originally coined the phrase "Home is where the heart is," but whoever it was, *she* should have been shot. Home was where the *heartbreak* was, and if it wasn't for the fact that his whole world was in an uproar, Cole would happily have never set foot in his hometown again for as long as he lived. Except maybe to visit his family, and there were ways to get around that obstacle.

Serendipity, Texas, was too small even to warrant a dot on the map, and its residents had minds like elephants and considered gossip a national pastime. He must be out of his mind for returning. His worst memories would be dredged up, and fast.

*A man's got to do what he's got to do. For his son.*

Truth was, he had nowhere else to go.

"Much obliged for the job." Cole nodded to Alexis Haddon of Redemption Ranch and curled the brim of his hat in his fist, tapping the dark brown Stetson against his thigh. He and Alexis had grown up together.

When she'd heard he was back in town, she'd immediately contacted him to see if he wanted to work for her. And he was grateful. Now that he had a son, he needed steady employment more than ever, and wrangling sounded mighty good after years serving on an aircraft carrier in the navy. Less structure, more open space.

Alexis leaned her hip against the corner of her neatly organized desk and beamed at him with happy eyes and a white-toothed smile. Her husband, Griff, kicked back in the desk chair, lacing his fingers behind his head and admiring his wife.

"That's my Alexis. Always thinking of others."

Alexis laughed and waved him away. "Don't be silly." She turned her blue eyes on Cole and used the same hand to flick her long blond hair off her shoulders. "It's a privilege. As soon as I heard you were out of the navy and moving back to Serendipity, I knew I had to snatch you up before some other ranch manager did."

It wasn't so much what Alexis had said, but something about the way she said it sent a ripple of forewarning down Cole's spine. He might have been imagining the feeling, except for the brief, surprised jerk of Griff's left eyebrow.

Cole swallowed hard. Something was brewing in Alexis's crafty female brain. He could see it in her eyes.

Whatever it was, Cole wanted nothing to do with it. His whole reason for accepting this position was to lose himself out on the range, where his biggest problems would be livestock and not people. With his background in naval intelligence, he was way over-qualified for the job, but that was the whole point. He could be working for the CIA or FBI, but all he really wanted to do was spend time on the back of a horse. He had more than enough of a challenge learning to be a single father to Grayson without adding additional stress—or a job that would take him away from home or put him in danger.

He might not like it, but Serendipity was the right place to be, if for no other reason than that he had the support of his family here. And the community.

Alexis shot her husband a warning look before turning a warm smile on Cole. "As I was saying," she continued, sounding miffed, as if Griff had verbally interrupted her instead of merely questioning her with a look, "Griff and I both want to thank you for your military service and welcome you back home."

Cole gave an affirmative jerk of his chin. He never knew what to do or say when folks thanked him for his service to the country. He appreciated the sentiment, but it made him feel uncomfortable.

"I—er—" he stammered and then cleared his throat. He lifted his hat until it hovered over the general area of his heart in a gesture of respect. "Like I said before, I'm grateful for the position."

"And we're blessed to have you." Alexis glanced at her watch and then at the door as if she'd suddenly realized she had somewhere else to be.

Cole took that to mean they were finished. "I'll be off, then."

"Our first staff meeting of the month is tomorrow at 2:00 p.m. here at the house. It's casual—we meet around our dining room table. It'll be your first official shift."

"Glad to have this afternoon off. That'll give me a little bit of time to settle in at my dad's house." He nodded at Griff and Alexis. "He says he's happy to watch Grayson during the days for me, but it's a lot of change at once and a steep learning curve for all of us."

"The Lord will bless your sacrifice, Cole," Alexis said, patting his arm. "I can't imagine how difficult this must be for you, but I believe a baby is always a good and perfect gift from God."

Cole pressed his lips together and nodded. *Difficult* didn't even begin to describe his life since the moment he'd discovered he was going to be a father.

"Now, let me just run down your job description for you and we'll be all set," Alexis continued.

Cole exhaled as stress eased off his shoulders. He'd be wrangling. How hard could it be?

"Honey, don't you think we ought to mention—" Griff started to say, but he was interrupted by two sharp raps on the open office door.

Alexis's eyes widened to epic proportions, and she caught her bottom lip in her teeth as if to stop herself from giggling. Griff's chair slammed upright.

A chill raced down Cole's spine and he turned on his heel.

"Alexis, I was looking over the background files for the incoming group of girls and it appears—" The auburn-haired woman's gaze rose from the pile of manila folders in her arms, and she gasped audibly.

"*Cole.*" She frowned and raised the files in front of her like a shield.

Ice filled Cole's chest. His lungs. His veins.

It would have frozen his heart if he'd had one—but the woman into whose enormous emerald eyes he was staring had stolen it from him long ago and had ripped it into shreds. It remained beyond repair even all these years later.

"Tessa." Cole stiffened. He clenched his jaw and both fists.

He hadn't expected to find her in Serendipity, much less at Redemption Ranch. Tessa Applewhite worked *here*? After he'd just signed on to do the same?

What kind of nightmare had he just stepped into? He hadn't asked anyone about Tessa's whereabouts, of course, and he had good reason not to. Broaching the subject of Tessa with anyone in Serendipity would have dredged up memories he most definitely wanted to forget. Not to mention it would likely have set tongues wagging again, no matter who he asked.

"I—uh—" Tessa stammered, her wide-eyed, questioning gaze flashing from Cole to Alexis and then back to Cole again. "What are you doing here?"

That was exactly the question he wanted to ask her. What had happened to becoming a lawyer? He never imagined she'd return home. There wasn't much call for legal help in Serendipity, and the town's one lawyer more than covered it.

But she had asked him first. Her eyebrows rose as she waited for his answer.

"Workin'," he answered reluctantly, tapping his hat against his blue jeans.

"*Here?*" Her voice, which Cole remembered as soft and lilting, sounded scratchy and strained, much as he imagined his own voice did. "Alexis? W-what—"

"We've just hired Cole on as a wrangler now that he's moved back to town," Alexis explained, her tone overly bright. "Surprise!"

Cole cringed. *Surprise? Seriously?*

Is that what Alexis had been thinking when she'd offered him the job? That he and Tessa would be glad to see each other after all this time apart? That she'd be acting as some kind of matchmaker between the two of them?

That was the furthest thing from the truth, at least for Cole. And judging by the distress lining Tessa's features, he guessed she was feeling the same way.

No need to prolong the agony.

He planted his hat on his head and adjusted the brim, then tipped it to both of the women as his mama had taught him to do when he was a youngster. He'd always shown respect to the ladies, although at the moment he wasn't keen on being in the room with either one of them. "If you'll excuse me, I have things that need attending to."

Like his son. Even though every single part of being a new father, and a single dad at that, was excruciatingly difficult for Cole, it beat standing here eye to eye with the one woman in the world he least wanted to see right now.

*Or ever.*

He started toward the doorway, intending to slip past Tessa and be on his way, but when he started to go by her, her arm snaked out, her hand pressing against his chest.

"Cole, wait."

Even through the cotton of his T-shirt, her palm felt blistering hot, and he wanted to jerk away. It was only a final, slim shred of dignity and pride that held him back. Or at least that was what he kept telling himself. In truth, he wasn't certain he could have moved if he tried.

It should have been easy for him to keep walking. Tessa was a little wisp of a thing, and even had she given it her best shot, she could not have physically held him back. But when their gazes locked, no matter how loud his mind screamed for him to keep moving, his body refused to cooperate.

He couldn't catch a breath. His chest ached and his throat burned. His pulse roared and thundered in his ears.

From the corner of his eye, Cole saw Griff come out from behind the desk and take his wife's elbow. Clearly Alexis had schooled Griff on Cole and Tessa's rocky past. "Why don't we let these two have a moment alone together?"

It was more of a statement than a question, and although Alexis looked ready to argue, she wasn't allowed the opportunity to do so. Griff herded her through the door, shooting an apologetic grin over his shoulder.

"Take as much time as you need." Griff closed the office door behind him.

Cole winced. He didn't need any time at all. Not one single second. He had nothing to say to Tessa. They might have had something to say to each other years ago, but now there was nothing.

Still, there was no sense standing in front of the closed door. He used his free hand to pry her palm from his chest, feeling as if it were glued there. He removed his hat and tossed it onto the desk, eyeing the chair Griff had vacated. At least that would put some distance between them—distance he desperately needed right now.

He'd thought all it would take to put Tessa behind him was time. Time and the distraction of serving on a United States Navy aircraft carrier.

But looking into her eyes, he might as well have been in high school all over again. His gut flipped and his head spun, just as they had when he'd been a foolish teenager who'd imagined himself in love.

What was *wrong* with him?

Tessa had caught him off guard, that's what it was. And then she'd gone and cornered him in this office. It was no wonder his thoughts were bouncing around like a loose racquetball in a closed court.

What did she expect him to say now that she had him penned in here?

*Hey, how are you? What's been happening since we last saw each other?*

He scoffed. He had nothing—*nothing*—to say to her.

He crossed his arms, rocked back on the heels of his boots and waited.

And waited.

Tessa looked equally uncomfortable, shifting her weight from foot to foot as her gaze darted everywhere except him. Tension mounted between them, the strain thick and palpable and tight as a wire.

He shook his head. She looked as if she didn't want to be here, and he most certainly did not. One of them was going to have to break the silence, and if she wasn't going to do it, then he would. Better to get this unexpected confrontation out of the way. He had much more important things to do than stand here waiting for her to collect her thoughts.

He narrowed his gaze, growling the question that was highest on his list.

"What do you want, Red?"

Tessa's heart skipped a beat and it was all she could do not to gape at him. She hadn't heard that nickname since the last time they'd been together. A lifetime had passed since then.

One look at Cole confirmed he felt the same. Gone was the smiling, blond young man whose luminescent blue eyes made her feel as if she was the most beautiful woman in the world and the only one for him.

In its place were hard angles, raw muscles, rough edges. He stood with his legs braced and his arms crossed over his massive chest in a universally defensive position. His gaze was cold and hard on hers, his scowl low and ominous. The tic in the corner of his jaw suggested he wasn't happy about waiting for her to answer his question.

Only she didn't *know* the answer. She'd been caught so completely off guard when her eyes had first met Cole's that every thought had flown from her head. He'd made no apology when he'd tried to excuse himself, clearly anxious to be rid of her. And for some reason she couldn't explain even to herself, she'd held him back.

What *did* she expect?

Nothing. Not from Cole Bishop.

Maybe it was the knee-jerk reaction of her more sensible, professional self, already trying to work out the sticky details of this new challenge. Better that than the sheer, foolish impulse on her part of wanting to be

near him, if only for a few more seconds.

Nope. She'd go with the rational explanation.

As unfortunate as it might be, their lives had once more intersected. He was working at the ranch now, side by side with her. They'd be forced to interact with each other on an almost daily basis. She couldn't think of anything more potentially disastrous. With their history...

Sparks were bound to fly. And not the good kind, either.

"So you'll be wrangling here," she blurted out, a fact already confirmed by Alexis. But she had to start somewhere.

"Yep." His gaze narrowed even more.

Well, that was helpful. Tessa tried again.

"You've been discharged from the navy?"

He frowned and jammed his fists into the front pockets of his worn blue jeans. "Yep."

She was beyond frustrated at his cold reception, but she supposed she had it coming. She could hardly expect better when the last time they'd seen each other was—

Well, there was no use dwelling on the past. If Cole was going to work here with her, he would have to get over it.

So, for that matter, would she.

She'd always known there was the possibility Cole would return to Serendipity, but he'd made the navy his career, and she'd assumed that by the time they finally met again, they would both have moved on, would have had spouses and children. He must have returned to Serendipity a few times over the years to visit his family, but he'd obviously gone to great lengths to stay off her radar.

The fact that she hadn't been able to connect with any other man long-term was irrelevant—as was the way her heart had skidded the moment her eyes met Cole's.

"I was given to believe you were making a career out of the military," she said, alluding to the question she wanted to ask without really putting it out there.

"I was." His brow lowered. There was that tic in his jaw again, the period at the end of his sentence. Clearly he didn't want to talk to her about himself or the navy, but the questions lingered in her mind.

Why hadn't he reenlisted at the end of this particular tour of duty? Why had he left the service before he had enough years to draw a pension? What had changed?

She had no right to ask.



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