Chapter One

The cold water sluicing down Trace Mitchem’s body chilled him to the bone, yet it didn’t wash away the remnants of last night’s erotic dreams. He’d hoped to freeze Cheyenne Bartell out of his mind. The cold shower didn’t work. Nothing blocked the thought of her these days, no matter what he tried. He swore softly, shut off the spray and grabbed a towel. A quick rub with it had him dry, and finger combing took care of his hair. Then he moved back to his bedroom where he pulled on briefs and a pair of jeans in an economy of motion.

Barefoot and bare-chested, he strode toward the kitchen and the smell of freshly brewed coffee. After pouring himself a large mugful, he opened the back door and stepped onto his redwood deck. The wood felt cool to his feet. The blistering heat of summer had finally given way to more comfortable temperatures. The air chilled his damp flesh, but he didn’t mind. It refreshed him more than the shower after a night filled with more dreams of Chey. He needed to cool his jets and clear his mind.

Leaning his hip against the railing, he drank his coffee and watched the west Texas sun brighten the sky over the small woods on his property. His property. The thought still amazed and humbled him. He’d come up the hard way, from a seriously dysfunctional family, to a stint in the military, to foreman of a multi-million-dollar ranch operation. He’d slaved and scraped and saved for years, but hard work and dogged determination had finally paid off with a ranch of his own. Just a couple hundred acres with a small, half-furnished house, but it belonged to him. He had his own little piece of Bridleton, the Bartell family’s massive ranching empire.

As he looked across the pasture, he envisioned a finished barn, a corral and a small herd of cattle grazing in the distance. He’d totally drained his finances with the land and house, but he’d keep working until he could afford the rest. For now, he felt proud and deeply satisfied with what he’d accomplished.

He’d expected to be supremely content once he’d moved into his new home, yet a curious restlessness still plagued him, a restlessness he was determined to ignore. He swallowed a mouthful of coffee and shouted “Come” when he heard a knock at the front door. “Out back,” he added after hearing the door open and close again. Expecting the ranch manager, Noah Courtland, he stiffened as Cheyenne stepped through the doorway and greeted him quietly.

“Trace.”

The sound of his name on her lips sent an unwelcome quiver over his naked flesh. The last person he wanted to see right now was the object of his passion-filled dreams. She haunted his nights, so he tried to avoid being alone with her during waking hours. But the beautiful, vivacious baby of the Bartell brood wasn’t easy to ignore. With dark gold hair and sea-green eyes, she stood out in any crowd. Her big sister, Andrea, had the fashion model body, but Chey’s trim frame came with ample, too-tempting curves.

He deliberately kept his tone bland and uninviting. “I thought you were Noah.”

“Noah’s having breakfast with Andrea and Aunt Nanette. Zack’s coming later, and they’re all excited about the big trip to New York. “

He pictured her family in the big house down the road. Nanette Bartell, in her eighties now, had raised her nephew’s children, devoted her life to them and the ranching empire. Zack lived in the city, but Cheyenne lived at home along with Andrea, who’d recently married the ranch manager.

“He sent you over here?”

Cheyenne shifted her gaze from his. She looked uncharacteristically self-conscious. He didn’t know how to put her at ease so he said nothing as she slowly walked toward him. When she stepped up to the rail, she dropped her hands on the top board. He saw her knuckles tighten with tension as she gripped the wood.

“Noah didn’t send me.”

Trace could smell her now. She stood a couple feet from him, but the sweet feminine scent of her teased his nostrils. Dressed in worn jeans and a T-shirt, she looked normal enough, yet she gave off waves of heat that always smacked him with tension. His body reacted to having her near like a stallion reacted to his favorite mare. He knew Chey would hate the comparison, but she radiated a sensuality that stirred him in the most primal way. Everything about her stirred his senses—her spirited nature, her sweet generosity, and the wounded innocence she’d hate to acknowledge. His body tightened with desire, an endless, burning need.

“Then why are you here?”

“I wanted to talk to you in private, and that’s hard to do when we’re working.”

Trace set his cup on the railing with unsteady fingers, then clenched his hands into fists. Yes, he did his best to avoid being alone with her. The sexual tension between them was volatile. His need for her continued to grow despite all efforts to restrain it.

“Whatever you have to say can wait until I’m dressed and ready for work,” he said dismissively. He started to turn away, but she caught his forearm. Fire licked over his skin at her touch. Blood made a heated rush through his body. He glanced down at her hand and then into her eyes.

“I don’t want to wait any longer,” she replied, returning his steady gaze.

Only then did he notice the dark circles under her eyes, the unusual paleness of her skin, and the slight tremor of her lips. His gut clenched.

“What do you want, Cheyenne?”

He saw her swallow hard and knew he wasn’t going to like whatever she had to say.

“I came to ask you for a date,” she whispered huskily.

His brow rose in surprise. His whole body tightened at the seductive vulnerability in her voice. “You what?”

Her spine stiffened, and she lifted her chin. “I’m asking you for a date. Just a few hours of undivided attention to explore this thing between us. You’re determined to ignore it, but I want a chance to see where it leads.”

Leave it to Cheyenne to catch him off guard. The request momentarily scattered his wits, and he said the first thing that came to mind. “It’s usually the guy who does the asking. I know you’re a liberated woman, but I’m still a guy.”

He’d let himself care for her late sister, Caroline. Their relationship had been brief and ended badly. The emotion had brought him nothing but pain and haunting regret. He didn’t plan to open himself to that kind of caring again.

“Why not?” she challenged. “I’m fun, good natured and reasonably attractive. I also have a wonderful personality if you’d give me a chance to prove it. You’re single, unattached and a long-time bachelor. We have chemistry.”

Trace crossed his arms over his chest. He couldn’t argue with the facts, but he sensed a deeper reason for her request. “We’ve known each other for years and worked side by side for months. What prompted you to come to me now? “

Chey’s gaze held a fleeting look of panic. She turned her attention to the pasture. A sick feeling settled in the pit of his stomach.

“Something must have spurred you into action. It wouldn’t have anything to do with the trip you made last month, would it?” Her recent reunion with college friends had played havoc with his peace of mind. He’d nearly gone crazy imagining her drinking and partying with preppy rich boys. She’d been unusually subdued since returning.

She didn’t look at him, but her voice quivered with uncertainty. “It was a nightmare.”

“You fell off the wagon?” he speculated grimly. Her great-aunt had sent her to rehab after college graduation due to an extended drinking binge. Chey had more than her share of insecurity and emotional baggage, but she’d chosen a dangerous way to deal with it.

“Yes, and it was a major wake-up call. I thought I could handle it, despite what they preached at rehab,” she confessed. “Just a couple drinks. That’s what I promised myself, but I lost count. It scared me, Trace.” She turned pleading eyes to him. “Really scared me how quickly I fell into the old pattern. I hadn’t touched alcohol for a year so it hit me hard and fast. The next thing I knew I was waking up in bed with some equally drunk frat guy.”

He clenched his jaw and forced himself to breathe deeply. Jealousy, hot and piercing, slashed through him. His chest muscles constricted. The possessive nature he kept on a tight leash roared to life. Thinking about her with other men ate at his very soul.

He tried to cover his fierce reaction with a barrage of heated questions. “You had sex with a total stranger? Sweet hell, how stupid is that? What if he was diseased?”

She shook her head, temper flaring briefly in her eyes. “I didn’t have sex with him. I still had on all my clothes when I woke up, and he looked too drunk to function, but what scared me the most was knowing how close I came to having sex with some anonymous boy when what I want is a real man.”

“I’m not promiscuous,” she swore. “I don’t sleep around, and I don’t do one-night stands. She swung her gaze to the pasture again. “But I can’t bear for the family to know about the drinking or…” she hesitated, “reckless behavior. They already think I’m near to worthless.”

“That’s not true!”

She looked him directly in the eyes again. “Maybe not right now, but I’ve worked hard to regain their respect, and I can’t stand the thought of losing it again.”

“You’re absolutely sure you didn’t have sex?” The thought made his stomach churn.

“Pretty certain, but I used a home pregnancy test for some peace of mind. It was negative.”

The pressure in his chest eased a little. He closed his eyes and stifled a moan as the past unexpectedly bit him in the ass. Caroline had been pregnant with his baby when she died in a fiery car crash. Condoms failed all the time. It had taken him years to come to terms with both losses. Now Cheyenne unleashed all the old hurt by pulling him into her nightmare.

“So why come to me?”

“I told you why.”

She didn’t repeat her request, but their gazes locked and her expression took on an all-too-familiar challenge. He stared back at her, ignoring the gut-deep need to accept the challenge. If she had an inkling of the dark hunger he felt for her, she’d be scared spitless. Despite her college-girl recklessness, she had an air of sexual innocence that worried him as much as the strength of his primal cravings.

He repeated his favorite refrain for both their sakes. “You need to date someone your own age.”

The difference in their ages should have discouraged her. He’d used the age excuse six years ago when Caroline had hinted at marriage. He’d been a lot closer to her in age, but pride had driven him to end their relationship. If he’d had any idea she was pregnant, he’d never have rejected her. He didn’t want to consider a repeat of that mistake.

“I don’t want to date anyone my age.”

“I’m too damned old for you.”

She snorted softly. “You’re in your mid-thirties. I’m mid-twenties and that isn’t such a stretch at our ages. That excuse is lame, and you know it.”

Trace closed his eyes on a groan. Fate had a way of catching up with a man. Would Cheyenne be his redemption or the death of him? “Why do you think dating me will help?”

“Not just dating. I want to give our relationship a chance.”

His brows snapped in a dark frown. “We don’t have a relationship.”

“We don’t have *relationships*, period,” she emphasized. “Neither of us has a personal life to speak of and certainly not a romantic one. Why not try dating and see where it leads? If we realize there’s nothing but physical attraction between us, then we can move on. But I don’t see it happening as long as I can’t get you out of my head.”

Trace gazed into her beautiful eyes. They sparkled with emotion. A blush tinted her cheeks, and her lips pouted sensuously. She couldn’t get him out of her head? The thought caught him off guard again. His desire for her was tenfold, but he’d be a fool to let it matter or let her burrow deeper into his head.

“You’re mistaken about the attraction.”

“You’re going to stand there and tell me there’s nothing between us?” she demanded, propping her hands on her hips. The action thrust her full, rounded curves against the thin, cotton T-shirt. The fire in her eyes distracted him as well.

“Just because you do your best to ignore it doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist!”

He held her angry gaze with unflinching intensity, wishing he could delve the depths of all her fiery passion. He knew better. “You need to discuss your desires with someone besides me. I’m fresh out of relationship advice.”

“Don’t belittle what’s between us.” She stepped within arm’s reach and clasped his head firmly between her hands, searing his skin. “If you’re really so indifferent and don’t feel anything for me, then prove it.”

Her mouth settled on his, soft, but full of demand. Her sweet, feminine scent enveloped him. He reached out to push her away but his hands clasped warm, bare flesh where her T-shirt parted from her jeans. He flexed his fingers on the supple skin, and she swayed closer. His muttered sound of denial faded when her hot, moist tongue teased his lips. A tremor shot through him. Her teeth nibbled, and he opened to her.

When her tongue swept into his mouth, it challenged his to a long, slow, sexy dance. Minutes later, after pausing for the slightest of breaths, he responded by thrusting his tongue into her mouth. She sucked it greedily, and he felt the pull deep in his gut. Her sweet curves pressed more fully against him, and he tightened his grip on her waist. She wound her arms around his neck, crushing her breasts against his bare chest. He felt her body’s tightening response through the thin fabric of her shirt and blood rushed hotly through his veins.

He’d resisted temptation too long not to wallow in the feel of her. There were so many reasons why he shouldn’t get involved with her, but they faded into insignificance when he finally had her in his arms.

Sliding his hands to her hips, he lifted her higher and tighter against him. His brain shouted for caution, but his body wanted more, lots more. He’d denied the need and fought the attraction with all his strength. Kept a safe distance between them.

Trace closed his eyes and gasped for breath when their lips parted, but then she peppered his chin and jaw with sexy little kisses. Her hot, wet mouth melted his resistance even more.

In response, he gathered her closer until her heart pounded against his in a matching rhythm. He slanted his mouth over hers to deepen the contact. Plunging his tongue through her lips, he explored the inside of her cheeks, lapping at her sweetness. She tasted of citrus and forbidden fruit. Their tongues sparred, both greedy and demanding.

The hungry, mewling sounds Chey made had his body humming with arousal. His pulse throbbed with desire. She could entice him without touching him. Having her in his arms set him ablaze. How many times had he dreamed of holding her and touching her like this?