

THE
RANCHER
MEETS HIS
MATCH

Patricia McLinn

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The Bardville, Wyoming Trilogy:
A Stranger in the Family
A Stranger to Love
The Rancher Meets His Match

This book is dedicated to wonderful neighbors.
On ranches or farms, in small towns or cities,
good neighbors help make a place a home.

I've been blessed
with the best of neighbors
all my life, so this book is for
my friends and neighbors from
Halsted Road, Fox Hollow Drive,
Dickerson Street and
—where I first learned about good neighbors—
Craig Place.

GRW Maggie finalist

Chapter One

“A man’s got needs. Physical needs.”

Dax Randall heard the words coming from his mouth and fought back a groan. Sweat dotted his forehead and slithered down his back. And it wasn’t adjusting this forty-foot irrigation pipe that was making him sweat. He’d probably toted this hunk of aluminum the equivalent of around the world, sixty feet at a time. He didn’t need help. But asking Will to balance the other end while he lined up the lightweight pipe had been the best way he could think of to corral his son for this talk.

It was the talk that made Dax feel like a plague of grasshoppers had landed in his gut.

How in tarnation had he gotten into this?

He glanced over his shoulder to his fifteen-year-old son. Will rolled his eyes.

“Geez, Dad, you gave me this talk about a million years ago. And I already knew it all then. I’ve lived on a ranch all my life, you know,” he added with exaggerated patience.

Wishing it was just *the* talk he faced with his son—he’d much rather talk about the mechanics—Dax cleared his throat as he straightened, and pushed on. “I know. But it’s more complicated with a man and a woman than with a stallion and a mare. It’s not just physical needs. There’s more involved.”

Will frowned. “Like what?”

“Like companionship and liking and respect.” He thought a moment, then added, “And trust. That’s what a woman needs from a man. And vice versa.”

Hell, yes, he’d rather talk about the mechanics.

Will ducked his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“What do you mean, it doesn’t matter?”

“I don’t need to know all that stuff as long as I stay

away from females, and that's what I'm going to do."

Dax Randall looked at the tousled brown hair of his man-child and wished with all his heart that he could fold him into his arms and rock him the way he had when Will was a baby and had stumbled on to one of the million hurts the world had stored up for him. But even if this boy weaving between childhood and adulthood would let him, it would solve nothing.

Dax waited for his son to lower the far end of the pipe, then put his in place. With the couplings complete, he and Will met at the back of the pickup, where two more mended sections of pipe awaited their attention.

"All your friends are taking to girls, Will," he said softly.

And that meant they were leaving Will behind. Dax had seen it happening more and more. The picnics, the dances, the pool parties, the mixed groups going to movies or on trail rides. Will got invited, but never went. Since this past summer started, his son's isolation from his friends and his loneliness had become almost palpable. Dax had seen no improvement since school had started late last month.

"They're all butt-heads."

"Pete Weston, too?" Dax asked. Will idolized their neighbors' son, who was three years older, an accomplished baseball player and had been dating a local girl the past year.

Will said nothing, but the stubborn angle of his jaw didn't budge as he started to haul the next length of pipe out of the truck bed.

"Look, Will, I know your growing up's been some different from your friends', with just you and me out here. Not having a woman around might've made you wonder 'bout some things—"

"We do okay, the two of us."

"Yeah, we do. Still, it's natural, come a certain age, for boys to start looking at girls, and enjoying their company. To seek out being with girls, maybe one girl in particular."

Will raised his head then and looked his father right in

the eyes. “You don’t.”

Sweat collected on Dax’s forehead again, as he mentally swore a blue streak.

Hell and damnation, June’s right.

And he had to do something about it.

* * * *

“Of course I’m right,” his older sister, June, said with no surprise that afternoon. “All Will’s friends have opened their eyes and noticed there’s another creature on this earth besides horses, cows and dogs, and he’s being left behind. That’s what’s wrong with the boy.”

June plunked another jar of strawberry preserves on the top shelf. Dax and Will mostly did their own cooking, cleaning and laundry, but June came out now and then with homemade treats, and she gave the house a thorough going over a few times a year. In return, Dax kept up repairs on the house June shared with their mother, now that they were both widows.

“Don’t look at me like that, Dax. You might like to pretend women don’t exist—except for your trips to Billings and Casper—”

“June,” he warned.

She wasn’t deterred. “But the female of the species isn’t going away. No matter if you told Will to steer clear of girls from—”

“I never told Will that.”

June snorted.

“You *live* it! And that boy’s starting to live it, too. He’s followed your footsteps close enough to be a shadow since the day he was born, and if you don’t do something, he’ll turn into the same sort of lonely, closed-off hermit his father is—only he’ll do it before he’s given love any chance at all!”

Angry words bubbled behind his tight-pressed lips, then sank back into his gut.

He’d learned long ago that love wasn’t for him, and if it would protect Will from the painful lessons he’d had, he’d roll in prickly pear all day, every day, for the rest of his life. But Dax had eyes, and he saw love worked for

some. He wouldn't deny his son a chance at that kind of life.

"Nothing to say?" Hands on her hips, June glared at him.

"You're a pain in the butt."

"Especially when I'm right. You've got to show Will it's natural and normal for a man to be around a woman—for more than a tussle between the sheets."

He glowered at her. An angular, raw-boned woman, she glowered right back. Twelve when he came along, June had been as much a mother to him as their mother had been. Probably more. She'd cut him no slack, ever. But she was one woman who had always stood by him.

"I'll talk to him again."

June threw up her hands, the dish towel she held nearly catching Dax across the nose. "Talk? You could talk yourself blue in the face, but he's as stubborn as you are, and won't listen any more than you ever have. What you've gotta do is *show* him. And you know it," she added shrewdly, "or you would've already done this additional talking to him instead of telling me about it."

Show him? Dax narrowed his eyes at his sister.

"I'm not sitting still for any of your meddling match-making, June. I'm not getting tied up with anyone, and that's final."

"Yeah, heaven forbid you fall in love and get married like a normal human being." June's sarcasm didn't fool Dax. "But all I'm saying is ask a woman out. Go to a few movies. Have dinner. Hold her hand. Maybe give her a good-night kiss. I wouldn't expect more of you than most fifteen-year-olds can manage—only enough to show Will how it's done and, more important, that it's okay that Will Randall does those things."

"And afterward?"

June's act of utter innocence sat incongruously on her strong features. "What do you mean, afterward?"

"You're thinking if I get a taste of hand-holding and movie-going that more would come of it. Any woman 'round here I asked out would think the same." He

leaned forward, almost nose to nose with his sister. “That won’t happen, June. And I’m not going to lead a woman on. Not even for Will. It’s not right.”

“A few casual dates wouldn’t mean—”

“Like hell it wouldn’t.” He leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. “It would mean plenty in Bardville, and you damn well know it.”

June drew the dish towel through her hands, over and over, while she stared dreamily at the calendar from the propane dealer on the refrigerator door. “So, what you need is a stranger.”

“Not a lot of strangers in Bardville.”

His sister didn’t heed his mutter. “Someone decent and nice, like the girls Will would meet. Someone for you to flirt with and show Will it’s okay to be interested in females, but who won’t get any ideas about long-term commitment.”

“None of that kind in Bardville.”

“I know just the person.”

A tickle of something like dread jittered along Dax’s backbone. “What?”

“Not what. Who. Flew in this morning. I rented her a car.”

June ran the sole car rental concession at tiny Bardville Municipal Airport. She lived so close she could be at the rental counter in five minutes, so she worked only when flights came in. The job added income to the benefits from Henry’s modest life insurance, and it kept her abreast of the area’s comings and goings.

“Who?”

“Hannah Chalmers. She’s staying at the Westons’ bed-and-breakfast.” June tipped her head to the northeast. “She works for Boone’s company in North Carolina—runs the advertising department—and she’s here for a two-week working vacation.”

Since Cambria Weston and Boone Dorsey Smith’s wedding last summer, they had split time between his log-home designing business in North Carolina and the home they were building here on land bought from his

in-laws. Several of his employees had flown to Bardville in the past two summers for combination business and pleasure.

“Two weeks,” June repeated. “So there’s no worry about leading her on or having her think you’d break down and make a commitment. You won’t ever see her after the two weeks are up.”

“But—”

“She’s very nice. Attractive. Thirty-one. Unattached. Cambria says Hannah divorced a few years back and hasn’t been involved since. She’s been raising a younger brother and sister since their parents got killed. Twins. Off to college now. Lost their parents in a small-plane crash. Terrible hard it was on all of ’em. But now—”

“Did you get her social security number and blood type while you were at it?” Dax asked, half-amused and wholly alarmed by his sister’s knack for discovering details of people’s lives.

“I thought you should know a little about her before you meet. You can start tonight—at the Westons’ cookout for their B-and-B guests. Irene Weston’s always telling me how she wished you and Will would come. I’ll introduce you to Hannah, then you take it from there.”

Dax’s jaw tightened and he wished he could refuse. The memory of two words stopped him.

You don’t.

That’s what his son had said. Behind those words came a whole train of other thoughts.

You don’t, so I won’t.

You don’t, so I shouldn’t.

You don’t, so I couldn’t.

From the moment of Will’s birth—hell, even before—Dax had struggled to make himself an example for his child. Not a pattern for Will to repeat but a foundation he could rise above.

Being lonely and isolated from his friends sure wasn’t what Dax wanted for his son. He wanted better for Will.

Dax’s life hadn’t included much real love—only June

and Will. He wanted better for Will there, too.

Flirting with some perfect stranger was a small price to pay.

* * * *

“This is my brother, Dax Randall,” said the friendly woman from the airport’s car rental. “Dax, this is Hannah Chalmers, visiting from North Carolina.”

Hannah turned from June Reamer to the man beside her. He stood maybe three or four inches taller than Hannah’s five-seven, with broad shoulders and chest above narrow waist and hips. He wore a white Western shirt, jeans, boots and requisite cowboy hat, as well as a tight-lipped expression.

“Hello, Dax. How do you do?” She held out her hand.

“Pleasure, ma’am.”

As a large, work-roughened but scrupulously clean hand surrounded hers, Hannah peered up through the shadows cast by twilight and his hat, and into grim brown eyes. If this was his idea of pleasure, she’d hate to see him displeased.

But she didn’t look away. And he didn’t release her hand.

Her hand felt odd. Tingly, as if the nerves had fallen asleep and now were waking up. Must be from all the handshaking she’d done since arriving at the Westons’ ranch and meeting Cambria and Boone’s friends and family.

The sensation spread to between her shoulder blades, and that got her moving.

“Uh, excuse me.” She eased her hand from his grip. He let go with a jerk.

She started to say something more to June, but the woman had disappeared. Turning back to Dax, she faced a man with his hands jammed in his front jeans pockets, his mouth pressed tight and his eyes not quite meeting hers.

Silence ticked away between them like a bomb waiting to explode.

She cleared her throat. “Your sister was wonderful this

morning when I rented the car. A personal tour guide and chamber of commerce all rolled into one. I couldn't have asked for a warmer welcome."

His eyes came up, meeting hers for a second, intensifying the sensation between her shoulder blades. Behind the grimness she saw something else. A glint of affection for his sister? Yes. And amusement? Yes, that, too, though dry enough to qualify as the powdered form.

All he said, however, was, "Yeah, that's June's way."

But not his way, clearly.

Hannah glanced over her shoulder. Cambria and Boone stood by a camp fire encircled by stumps and smoothed boulders where several guests had taken seats. A quick "excuse me" to this taciturn man and she could return to people she knew.

For crying out loud, Hannah, it's about time you got back into the social whirl. When was the last time you flirted?

Hannah smiled at her sister's voice in her head. Not even Mandy, who at seventeen saw romantic possibilities in every meeting between the sexes, could construe this encounter as anything more than prosaic and awkward.

Though Mandy would be sure to notice Dax Randall's broad shoulders and muscled thighs. His jeans were as clean as his hands, but worn nearly white in spots, including the center front.

Hannah swallowed and redirected her gaze and thoughts.

Come to think of it, she dealt with prosaic and awkward encounters all the time in her work. As long as she kept this meeting in that category, it should be a snap. It was flirting and the social whirl that churned her stomach.

She pinned on the professional smile she would have used on a layout man giving her trouble over the typeface on an ad, and tried again.

"Flying in today was amazing. To see all that expanse of land, miles and miles of that dusty gray-green with not

even a road breaking it, and then the deeper green of the Big Horn Mountains—how spectacular. People kept talking about how much smaller the Big Horns are than the Rockies, but they were quite impressive from the air.”

“From the ground, too.”

His voice was low, gravelly. Maybe that was why she didn’t catch the words immediately. Or it could have been being distracted by getting her first clear view of his face when he raised his head enough for the firelight to reach fully under the hat brim.

Oh, my.

He had a bone structure rough-cut from granite, then honed by tempests. A face suited to a Louis L’Amour hero come to life.

High, sharp cheekbones. A blade nose—sharp, thin and faintly curved. Deep lines cut from each corner of his nose to below the corners of his mouth.

Any advertising person with an ounce of instinct would use that face to stand for integrity, pride, stubbornness, independence. And there wasn’t a soul who wouldn’t believe it.

Most women would want to trace the stark lines with their fingertips and hope their touch would ease the tightness there.

Hannah swallowed again. It didn’t help. She felt as if a blender had clicked on in her stomach. “What?”

“From the ground. The mountains are impressive from the ground, too. You ought to see ’em while you’re here.”

The blender kicked up from low to medium. “I’d like to.”

Would he volunteer to guide her? Oh, Lord, it had been too long. She was too old. Too unaccustomed to this gut-level turmoil. Too—

“Yeah, well, you should. Nobody knows ’em better than Cambria.”

The blender eased back to neutral, with relief and yes, an ounce of disappointment sloshing around in its wake.

“I, uh, I hope she’ll take me, then.”

Dax Randall's gaze dropped to his boots, came back to her, then darted off to the left. He cleared his throat.

"So, you're visiting from North Carolina."

"Yes." June had covered this, but as the only conversational lifeline he'd offered, it sure beat drowning in silence. Hannah grabbed hold. "I had some things to go over with Boone about next year's advertising. I work for Boone's company."

Her voice rose at the end of the sentence in a hint of a question. He made a brief sound that confirmed he knew that. He said nothing, his interest apparently snagged by something over her shoulder.

"I told him we could have handled this over the phone and by fax, but he and Cambria insisted I come for a full two weeks." She twisted her neck to look behind her. She saw a casually dressed group of friendly people, the locals standing out from the B-and-B guests mostly because their tans reached layers-deep from years of outdoor work. "A few days more than two weeks, actually."

"Uh-huh."

"They said I should see Wyoming." He hadn't heard a word. "In case I wanted to buy it. Or open a Buddhist monastery here."

"Uh-huh."

Hannah turned fully around this time, pushing her wind-whipped hair out of her face to track Dax Randall's intense stare to a teenager on the opposite side of the circle of seats around the fire. The boy stood alone, several yards from a half-dozen boys and girls about the same age who jostled and joked like young roosters and preening hens.

"Is something wrong, Dax?"

His eyes jerked to hers. A frown dropped his straight brows low. His eyes bored into hers as if she had some answer he wanted.

She looked away from that intense connection. The blender muttered at the pit of her stomach. If this was an example of the social whirl Mandy and others insisted

she plunge back into, no thank you. Her stomach couldn't take it.

"That's my son."

She glanced from Dax to the boy and back. She saw the resemblance in coloring and bearing. Something else, too . . .

A separateness. How sad, she thought. Then she determinedly shook off the reaction. She had probably read way too much into subtle signs from a pair of strangers.

"He looks like a nice boy."

"He is."

Dax studied her as if he could read some answer in her face. That tingling started up between her shoulder blades again.

He drew a deep breath. "Hannah—"

"Oh, there you are, Hannah!" Irene Weston bore down on them like a welcoming tornado. Cambria Weston Smith provided the business sense of the bed-and-breakfast operation that supplemented the Westons' ranching income, but her stepmother, Irene, provided its hospitable heart. "I hardly saw you standing off here in the shadows talking with— Why, Dax, how wonderful to see you."

Surprise and pleasure weighed evenly in Irene's voice. She stretched up to kiss Dax's cheek. Hannah could have sworn his lean, smooth-shaven jaw flushed red.

"Hope you don't mind my coming by and bringing Will."

"Mind? Of course not, Dax. You know you're welcome anytime. And I've been inviting you to our cookouts for a month of Sundays."

He muttered something about "busy."

"Of course you are. But even running a ranch, you can't keep so busy you don't eat, Dax. So you go right on over and help yourself to those burgers Ted's taking off the fire, while I make sure this young woman has a chance to meet all our guests. Especially old Zeke,

who's visiting us from his granddaughter's in Miles City. Zeke worked for Ted's grandpa as a boy and remembers Arnold Weston's stories about bringing cattle up from Texas."

"It was nice to meet you, Dax," Hannah said as Irene led her away.

They'd gone maybe two yards, when a hoarse, "Stop," came from behind them.

As they both turned around, Hannah met Irene's eyes for an instant, and saw there a surprise equal to her own.

Dax stood where they'd left him. Now that he had their full attention, he didn't seem eager to use it

"What is it, Dax?" Irene asked.

He muttered under his breath—from the tone, a curse. "Hannah, I wondered if you'd . . . if we could, uh, talk more. Later." He made the last word sound like a reprieve.

Hannah felt Irene's eyes on her, but she didn't return the look. She had a hard enough time trying to return words.

"Okay."

Uninspired, but at least it was intelligible.

He nodded once.

"Of course you two can talk later," Irene said. "Right after I get Hannah introduced around and you get some food, Dax. Get that boy of yours some, too. Get plenty of my special sauce, I know how you've always loved it."

Dax nodded again and headed in the direction of his son.

Irene reclaimed Hannah's elbow with an energy that belied the gray outnumbering the strands of red in her hair and started her off. "Well, Dax Randall." Irene hummed a bit under her breath. "That's surprising."

"I don't know why he wants to talk later, he hardly said two words together before." And Hannah didn't know why she felt she had to defend herself.

"He's not one to waste words. He's not one to socialize much, either. Especially with women."

Again, Hannah felt the older woman's speculative gaze on her.

"Don't get me wrong," Irene continued, "he's a good man. A good heart and dependable as they come. Out here, a good neighbor's the best security you got, and Dax is the best. He's done a fine job of raising Will on his own, too." She smiled. "Oh, and he loves that boy of his something fierce. But he's been hurt by . . . by life. He's spent a long time with just him and his boy alone at that ranch. A long time."

"His sister doesn't . . . ?"

"No, June lives in town. She and Sally—that's Dax and June's mother—moved into town, oh, must be thirty years ago now, and left Dax and old William living on the ranch. After June got married, Sally had her own house. But since June's Henry passed on, and with Sally's health not real strong, she's moved into June's place. Works out well for them, but it leaves Dax and Will alone at the ranch, like it once was with old William and Dax."

Hannah gave a noncommittal murmur as she tried to finger-comb her tousled hair. Expressing the flash of compassion she'd felt at the image of Dax Randall living so isolated a life, as boy and man, was out of the question. She didn't know him. She had no right trying to change his ways—even mentally.

"Well, enough of my gossiping tongue," Irene continued briskly. "What I want to know is how you're handling this empty-nest syndrome they talk about, what with Cambria telling me your younger brother and sister are gone to college now. I tell you, I'm not sure how I feel about it at all, with my Pete off to Arizona. You want them to grow up, but it surely is hard to watch those fledglings fly away from the nest."

Hannah wouldn't have labeled Irene's talk as gossip—it held too much honest concern—but she was grateful the conversation had turned away from Dax.

"I don't think I'm a good one to talk to, Irene," she said with a small laugh. "Most times I feel more as if I were the one booted out of the nest. Mandy and Ethan were

forever telling me to get out more, even before they left home.”

“As well you should,” added a new voice. Cambria frowned fiercely at Hannah at the same time she tucked her arm around Irene’s waist.

From the way Cambria had spoken of her stepmother last winter, when she and Boone had lived in North Carolina, Hannah had suspected they were close. Now she saw their great affection.

“You’ve spent the past four years being a mother to the twins,” Cambria added, “now it’s time to go out and have fun for yourself.”

“I have had fun,” Hannah protested.

“Being the youngest member of the PTA? Chaperoning dances for kids not much younger than yourself? Being seated with the parents old enough to be *your* parents?” Cambria clearly didn’t buy that Hannah hadn’t minded any of those things. “What you need is a little excitement in your life. Romance. Sizzle.”

Tom between embarrassment and amusement, Hannah laughed. “Oh, Lord, you’ve been taking to Mandy, haven’t you?”

“We did have a conversation before Boone and I came out to Wyoming in the spring,” Cambria said with great dignity, though devilment lurked in her eyes. “She strikes me as a very intelligent, perceptive girl.”

“She could have been the tour director for Noah’s Ark,” Hannah said. “She sees everything as two-by-two.”

“That’s not all bad,” Cambria murmured, and Hannah noted that she looked across to where Boone helped his father-in-law, Ted Weston, cook hamburgers on the grill. Cambria patted her eight months’ pregnant stomach and added, “Of course, sometimes two-by-two turns into two-by-three.”

“It’ll be wonderful to have a grandchild,” Irene said with satisfaction.

“And then you’ll have another fledgling in your nest, won’t you, Mama? At least for the summer months when we’re here in Wyoming. Did I tell you—” Cambria turned

to Hannah. "Irene's coming to North Carolina when we have the baby. Dad, too."

"That's great," Hannah said with a smile for both women.

"Ted and I wouldn't miss it for anything in this world," Irene said.

"And Boone wouldn't let you miss it, bossy man that he is. Maybe that's what you need in your life, Hannah," Cambria added.

"What? A bossy man? I already have one, thank you. Remember? I work for your husband."

They exchanged a grin, knowing how hard Boone Dorsey "Bodie" Smith had worked at curing his bossy tendency and giving his employees more responsibility and authority at Bodie Smith Enterprises.

"I meant a baby," Cambria clarified.

Irene spared Hannah the necessity of trying to unlimber her frozen tongue. "She needs a husband first," she said as matter-of-factly as if discussing a recipe. "It makes things so much easier that way, because—"

"Irene! Where's the sauce?" Ted shouted from behind the grill.

"It's right there," Irene called back to her husband.

"Where?"

"I'll be right there, dear. I'm sorry, Hannah," she added. "I haven't been much of a hostess. Cambria, I've been promising to introduce Hannah around, especially to Zeke. Will you see to that?"

"Of course."

"And then, Dax said he'd like to get to know Hannah better. So find them a good place to sit for the singing."

"*Dax?*"

Cambria didn't sound merely surprised, she sounded amazed. Cambria turned to Irene, but she'd already started toward the grill to solve the mystery of the missing sauce, so her questioning gaze shifted to Hannah.

"We were talking before and got, uh, interrupted," Hannah said. "I don't know why he'd . . ."

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She let it die when she saw Cambria's gaze return to her husband, then slide to a nearby couple. Cully Grainger had come to Bardville to visit Boone, but was staying to run for sheriff because he'd fallen for Jessa Tarrant. The falling clearly was mutual.

Cambria was still looking in their direction when she murmured, "I suppose stranger things have happened."

Then Cambria's gaze shifted, and Hannah followed it to where Dax Randall stood at the fringe of the shadows beyond the firelight.

"But not much stranger," Cambria added.

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