

[PDF] Cowboy Dad

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Description:

About the Author For the past twelve years Cathy McDavid has been juggling a family, a job, and writing and doing pretty well at it except for the cooking and housecleaning part. Mother of teenage twins, she manages the near impossible by working everyday with her husband of twenty years at their commercial construction company. Besides work, they share of a love of all things western, living on a small ranch in Scottsdale, AZ.

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Natalie Forrester stood on the sweeping front porch and watched the old truck rumble down the long road, its tires kicking up a cloud of brown dust. The truck pulled a dilapidated horse trailer that rattled and banged as if it might fall apart with each pothole it hit.

As manager of guest services at Bear Creek Ranch, Natalie considered herself quite adept at

determining a visitor's purpose based on the vehicle they drove. This fellow, in his seen-better-days pickup, was either a local from nearby Payson or a cowboy looking for work. Since she didn't recognize the vehicle, cowboy got her vote. Her hunch grew stronger when the driver continued through the ranch in the direction of the barn and corrals.

Whoever he was, he'd be disappointed when he met Natalie's father, head of the resort's guest amenities. Bear Creek Ranch was fully staffed for the upcoming season, scheduled to begin in a mere ten days.

And speaking of the upcoming season, Natalie had a lot of work ahead of her. Break time was over. Her feet, however, refused to heed her brain's command to turn around and march inside. The weather was unusually warm for February, the afternoon particularly balmy. According to the thermometer hanging by the front door of the main lodge, the temperature hovered in the mid-sixties. Quite nice, even for the southern edge of Arizona's rim country, which enjoyed considerably milder winters than its northern counterpart.

Natalie leaned her shoulder against a column built from a tree that had been harvested in the nearby woods about the time President John F. Kennedy took office. The wood, once rough and unfinished, had been worn smooth through the decades by thousands of shoulders belonging to the guests of Bear Creek Ranch.

She never tired of the view from the front porch. Majestic pines towered toward wispy clouds floating in a sky so blue no artist could truly capture the vibrant hue. Behind the trees, the nearby Mazatzal Mountains rose, their stair-step peaks covered in snow much of the year. Bear Creek, the ranch's namesake, could be easily reached by foot from any of the resort's thirty-three cabins. Clear and clean, the creek teemed with trout and was a favorite with guests wanting to drop a line and test their luck.

Natalie had been born on Bear Creek Ranch, in the same cabin her parents occupied today. Like her younger sister, Sabrina, she'd grown up on the ranch. Unlike Sabrina, Natalie stayed on after reaching adulthood, learning the hospitality business from the ground up.

She wasn't related to the Tuckers, the family who owned the ranch and had since it was constructed back when the railroad still made a stop at the old Bear Creek Station. But she and her parents were treated like family in many ways, and her loyalty to the Tuckers ran deep.

The front screen door banged open, rousing Natalie from her woolgathering. Alice Gilbert, the ranch's office manager and Jake Tucker's personal assistant, popped her head out the door.

"I think Shiloh's awake." She wore the expression of a person who had no experience with babies and wasn't interested in acquiring any.

"Thanks."

Pushing off the column, Natalie hurried inside. Her shoes clicked softly on the highly polished hardwood floors as she crossed the lobby toward the front desk. Alice had already disappeared into her small office, which was situated right next to Jake Tucker's larger one.

Natalie didn't have the luxury of a private office. Her position required she be available to guests whenever she was on duty and sometimes when she wasn't. Since she stood—or walked or ran if necessary—more often than she sat while working, the compact computer station tucked behind the reception desk suited her needs just fine.

It was the supply room next to her computer station that Natalie entered, listening intently. No crying. Maybe Alice had been wrong. Tiptoeing, Natalie made her way to the portable crib in the center of the floor. A Mother Goose night-light provided just enough illumination for her to make out the tiny baby stirring in the crib.

Shiloh.

As always, Natalie's heart melted at the sight of her beautiful three-month-old daughter. How did she ever get so lucky? What had been a scary unplanned pregnancy turned into the greatest joy of her life. Not a day passed that Natalie didn't thank her lucky stars.

"Hey there, sweetie pie." She bent and reached into the crib. Lifting Shiloh, she put the baby to her shoulder, kissing a crown of feather-soft hair as she did. "You hungry?"

In response, Shiloh wiggled and mewed and made sucking noises with her tiny mouth.

"Let's go, then."

Natalie left the room and headed toward Jake Tucker's office. Her boss had given her permission to use his office when he wasn't there to nurse Shiloh in privacy. Alice didn't much care for the arrangement but she had no say in the matter. Jake had insisted.

Sitting in the overstuffed leather chair behind Jake's desk, she swiveled to face the window. Shiloh was a good baby in most ways, a blessing considering her unusual day-care circumstances. Natalie nursed the baby and contemplated the changes she'd need to make soon.

The Tuckers had been generous to her since Shiloh's birth. They'd given her six weeks' maternity leave, with pay, and then allowed her to use the storage room as a makeshift nursery after she returned to work. Natalie's mother, who'd retired from Natalie's job two years ago, watched the baby for a couple hours in the morning. Jake's oldest daughter helped out when she got home from school.

It was those hours in between that were the problem. Natalie couldn't keep Shiloh with her during the day when the ranch reopened for the new season. Hiring a part-time nanny made the most sense, but finding a trusted candidate she could afford on her modest budget wouldn't be easy.

Balancing Shiloh in her lap, Natalie rubbed the baby's back and waited for a burp. When Shiloh showed no more interest in nursing, Natalie buttoned her blouse. Not an easy task with a baby in her lap. She started when the door unexpectedly opened, hurrying to smooth her disarrayed clothing. Shiloh gave a fussy cry in response.

"Just a second," Natalie said, feeling her cheeks flush. Although she had permission to be there, she was nonetheless embarrassed. She stood up and turned around, Shiloh cradled in her arms, an apology on the tip of her tongue.

Only it wasn't Jake Tucker who stood just inside the doorway. This man was a complete stranger.

"May I help you?" Her voice squeaked slightly.

"Sorry to disturb you, ma'am." He removed his battered cowboy hat. "The lady out front didn't tell me anyone was in here."

"Not your fault." Natalie mustered her best be-nice-to-the-guests smile. Alice's oversight may or may

not have been intentional. No point getting upset about it.

"The fellow down at the stables told me to wait here for Tucker."

Two things about the man's statement struck Natalie as odd. First was the fact her father sent the cowboy to the main lodge.

Even if they were looking to hire another hand, her father didn't need Jake's approval for that.

Second, no one Natalie knew or had ever met referred to Jacob Tucker by his last name alone. Family and close friends called him Jake. Everyone else, including Natalie except when they were in private, called him *Mr. Tucker*.

"Did Alice phone him for you?"

"If that's the lady out front, I believe she did. Said he'd be right along."

He smiled at Natalie then, and she was surprised to find herself thinking what an attractive man he was. Dark brown eyes and even darker hair hinted at a Hispanic heritage. His shoulders were wide but proportionate to his height and well muscled. This cowboy, in his faded jeans and worn-at-the-elbows work shirt, was accustomed to hard physical labor. It was a look he carried well.

"All right then." Natalie took a step toward the door, intending to leave. Her curiosity was definitely piqued, but this man's meeting with Jake was none of her business.

"Your baby's very pretty."

His words stopped her. She received many compliments on Shiloh, but rarely from men and never from men who were strangers.

"Thank you."

His smile warmed, and Natalie relaxed. She met all types of people in her line of work. Though appearances could be deceiving, she was a quick and fairly accurate judge of character. This cowboy didn't strike her as a troublemaker or a creep. If anything, she sensed the opposite in him. There was a quiet sadness underlying his pleasant manner. Subtle, but definitely there.

"Her father must be very proud of her," he said.

"I wouldn't know." Her response came unexpectedly. She didn't reveal much to anyone about Shiloh's absent father, preferring to dodge questions rather than reply.

"His loss," the man said simply.

"Yes, it is," Natalie said and automatically held a dozy Shiloh closer. "I'd best go."

He inclined his head. "Maybe I'll see you around the ranch."

There was nothing flirtatious about his statement, but Natalie still kept her tone professional. "If you're staying, that's likely."

"I'm staying."

"You sound very sure."

"It's taken me two years to get here. And now that I am, I'm not leaving. For any reason," he added.

"I see." Another odd comment, Natalie mused. But then everything about this man and his visit was out of the ordinary—and interesting, she silently admitted.

In the ten months since Shiloh's father left—with the same abruptness he'd come into her life—Natalie avoided encounters with the opposite sex. So why pick today to lower her guard? And with someone she'd met in a less than comfortable situation only moments before?

Hurried footsteps echoed in the lobby.

"Mr. Tucker's here."

The man gave an unconcerned shrug and if she wasn't mistaken, his sad eyes twinkled with the barest hint of amusement.

In the next instant, Jake burst through the door. A fine sheen of perspiration covered his forehead, and a lock of hair hung limply over his brow. Natalie couldn't help staring at her boss's uncustomary disheveled state.

"Oh." He appeared taken aback to find her in his office. "You two have met."

"Not exactly..."

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