

Excerpt

Can't Conquer Love

Chapter One

Cole raised his head from the backrest as the limousine traveled slowly down the familiar street. He removed his sunglasses in an attempt to see more clearly out the tinted window. The ride from the airport wasn't long, but in Cole's anxiousness, it seemed to be taking forever. It was a long time since he was last home.

Flowering trees lined the streets of the posh neighborhood: home to many well-to-do people. The others, however, never attracted the attention Cole did, and still does.

His return home was hard to miss. It was like a circus rolling into town. Three stretch limos – carrying his usual entourage of managers, bodyguards, and a few chosen friends – followed a van that transported their personal items. Cole longed for privacy, but knew he'd miss the attention bestowed upon him.

He already spotted people lurking around his front gate. Despite the disturbances at the entrance, this was Cole's sanctuary. This was the one place he felt safe. This was where he could be like any other normal guy. Normal, he thought. Is that even a word? Or one that doesn't apply to me anymore? If it did, he no longer remembered how it felt.

He was deep in thought and didn't hear his driver the first time. He did, however, hear the repeated, "Cole, are we stopping today for you to sign autographs?"

"Not today, Henry. I'm tired and more than anxious to see Meme. I'll go out to visit with my fans later this week."

Henry phoned the guard at the gate. "Mr. Spencer isn't stopping this morning. We're driving straight through."

Cole loved his fans. He usually stopped out front. He felt he owed his supporters everything he had and everything he was. A handshake or an autograph seemed very little to give in return for their devotion, only not today. Today, he was exhausted and wanted to see Meme.

He felt no relief as they sped past his screaming adorers. His guilt diminished a little as he set his sights on the big, white mansion with the six pillars across the front. The view of the perfectly manicured lawn and the gorgeous flowerbeds and gardens helped ease his pain of not appeasing his fans.

Meme named the estate "Rosewood Gardens." Therefore, to make the name fit, Cole had variations of roses planted everywhere. They were Meme's favorite flower. Many different colors filled the gardens. White and pink climbing roses completely camouflaged the inside of the tall brick wall that kept out any would-be trespassers.

Cole was convinced there wasn't a yard or garden anywhere that matched the beauty of his estate. There were other mansions in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, but in Cole's eyes, none as beautiful. The serenity captured here filled him with a sense of peace, which he was unable to describe and never able to find elsewhere.

The limo continued down the long path towards the thirty-three-room mansion. As a feeling of comfort settled within him, Cole directed his attention to the pasture on the far side of the house where a couple of his horses grazed. Something wasn't right. Actually, it wasn't *something*. It was *someone*! A girl! A stranger at the corral was petting his prize horse, Pepper. What was she doing here? How did she get past the guards?

Cole hollered, "Henry, stop the car!" He faced his personal manager, Lou Simmons, and pointed to the pasture. "Looks like one broke through the front line."

Lou glanced in the direction indicated. "Do you want me to get someone to remove her, or are you suggesting I do it?"

Still feeling guilty for shunning his adoring fans, Cole replied, "No. I'll go. I'll give her an autograph and shoo her out. That's probably what she's looking for." Cole expelled an audible sigh. This was just one

more distraction keeping him from seeing Meme.

“What if she attacks you?” Lou joked. He turned to one of the bodyguards and commanded, “Alex, you better go with Cole.”

Cole held up his hand to stop him. “No. She doesn’t look too tough. I think I can take her.”

Lou laughed. “Yeah, take her ... right to your bed, huh?”

Cole couldn’t believe Lou joked about that. He knew Cole had a self-made rule. Even though he partied with them, he never took a fan or groupie to bed. They were all young, too young. He often warned his band members and bodyguards of such perils, but they could do what they wanted. Not him though. Not since he almost destroyed the career that took him eleven years to build. He would never bed a fan again.

“I told you, I’m partied out! I’m going to sleep for a week. I’ll be the only one in my bed today, tomorrow, and the next day.”

He hurriedly walked the half block or so to the corral. As he approached, he heard the pesky girl talking to Pepper. He loudly asked, “Do you expect him to answer?”

He knew he startled her, but as she turned to face him, he saw not even a smidgen of fear in her. For one fleeting moment, her beauty had him reconsidering his hasty pledge to do nothing in his bed but *sleep* for the next week.

In his mind, Cole started assessing her. Since he had a lot of practice, he considered himself an expert. Great shape. Pretty. About five feet five inches tall. Can’t be more than one hundred ten pounds. The most beautiful, green eyes he ever saw. They were indescribable. He thought he saw warmth and sadness in those eyes, too.

While Cole was sizing her up, the girl looked at him with a scrunched up face and asked, “Ah, are you okay?”

Cole almost regretted the tone in which the next words came out of his mouth. “How did you get in here?”

“I climbed over the fence.”

With a quick glance back towards the fence, Cole stated the obvious. “But that fence is ten feet high. It has security cameras all over it, and the roses ... how...?”

“Wow, you’re really gullible. I was kidding; I work here.”

“You work here! Ah, doing what?”

“Housekeeping,” she answered.

“Housekeeping,” Cole exclaimed. “You look like you’re about fifteen. How old are you?”

“Not a polite question to ask a lady. I’m twenty, and I’m very good at my job, thank you.”

The sudden sounds of a car motor revving made both of them turn away from the fence. On the road leading to the corral was a shiny, new, black 1978 Corvette.

Cole asked no one in particular and didn’t expect an answer. “Now, how did *he* get in here?”

“Oh, he’s on your list of *okays*. That’s my ride.”

Cole looked puzzled as he raised his eyebrows. “I have a list of ... *okays*?”

The girl was surprised. “Of course!” she dramatically mimicked Cole. “They don’t let just anyone in here. Actually, it’s harder to get in here than it is to get into Fort Knox. They have the very famous *Cole Spencer* to protect.” She paused. “And, uh, haven’t you been gone sixteen months; why aren’t you inside reuniting with Meme?”

Her question irked Cole. This girl knew who he was yet showed no signs of being impressed. She didn’t ask for an autograph or anything. Why that bothered him, he wasn’t sure, but it did. “Oh, sixteen months? Were you counting?”

“Ha! Not me, but Meme has mentioned it a time or two ... thousand. She’s missed you. You need to go and give her that big hug she’s been longing for. I have to go.” She smiled. “Oh, yeah, welcome home.”

Cole was tired. He yearned to give Meme that big hug, yet for some reason he couldn’t explain, he was reluctant to see this girl go. Actually, she annoyed him. Yet, to prolong their conversation, he said, “Your boyfriend has a really nice car.”

She quickly looked towards the car, gave the driver a wave, and replied, “He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Then what does your boyfriend say about this guy picking you up?”

She bent down to pick up some books off the ground. As she straightened up, she looked right into his

eyes, started walking backwards, and retorted, "You know, I really prefer the direct approach. If you want to know if I have a boyfriend, why don't you just ask? I have to go." She turned and started running to the car.

Cole was frustrated. She irritated him. Still, he yelled out after her. "Hey, what's your name?" She stopped, turned to face him, and called back, "Lilly."