

Ride Me Cowboy

First Chapters Sampler

Clare Connelly

Beth

I came out here for a fresh start, one I desperately need. My husband is dead; he can't hurt me anymore. For the first time in years, I'm not looking over my shoulder. I'm finally safe, and I'm not going to let anyone jeopardize that.

Especially not rugged, sexy AF cowboy Cole Donovan. He watches me like he knows there's something I'm hiding, like he wants to kiss it all better, but letting this cowboy in could be a one way ticket to disaster. ***Or it could be the most satisfying thing I've ever done...***

Cole

I've spent my life fixing problems, and right now, the ranch's financial mess is the biggest one of all. My focus should be on that, not the new bookkeeper. I don't need any distractions—but Beth Tasker is one I can't seem to shake. She's closed off, skittish as anything, and it bugs the hell out of me. The more I try to keep my distance, the harder it gets to resist the pull between us. There's something about her that draws me in, something I can't fight.

Or maybe it's just that I don't really want to.

*This is the first book in a sexy, uplifting, wild and untamed cowboy series from best seller Clare Connelly, **perfect for readers of Elsie Silver.** Buckle up, it's going to be a wild ride...*

All the characters in this book are fictitious and have no existence outside the author's very-vivid, non-stop imagination. They have no relation to anyone bearing the same name or names and are pure invention (mwah-ha-ha).

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Dear Reader



Following are the first two chapters of **RIDE ME COWBOY**, a spicy, exhilarating new series set amongst the wild, untamed beauty of Northern Arizona. Coyote Creek Ranch is one of the oldest in the valley, the Donovan family having been there for as long as anyone can remember.

After the sudden death of their widowed father the year before this book starts, Cole, Beau, Nash, Austin and Cassidy Donovan—along with devoted friends Mack and Caleb—have their hands full keeping the place going. This series will track each of the siblings in their pursuit of happiness (and love) and I can't wait for you to read it. You can jump over and preorder the full book here, and if you enjoy it, please do take a second to leave a rating or review, as it really helps indie authors like me.

Please note, this book is in the final phases of editing, so what you're reading may yet undergo some minor changes before publication.

Love and happy reading
(yeehawww), Clare. xx





Chapter One

Cole

I DON'T KNOW WHAT I was expecting when Reagan told me her replacement was arriving this afternoon, but it sure as shit ain't this. Reagan, with her no-nonsense short hair, wranglers, and plaid shirts, is as much a part of Coyote Creek Ranch as I am. Well, almost. She's worked here since she was a teenager, a high school dropout, another one of dad's strays. When she told me she'd found the perfect fill in for her, I thought it would be someone *like* her. A Reagan version two point oh.

"It's three months, Cole," Reagan had promised, "and she's got a heap of experience. She's smart. You'll like her."

I'd snorted. "I don't need to like her. She just needs to be able to keep the books."

"You know I do more than that, right?"

I'd ignored the question. Of course, I know how indispensable Reagan is. What else explains the fact that my first

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reaction to her pregnancy announcement had been a sinking feeling of panic rather than happiness for the woman I think of like another sister?

But when she'd said she'd take over finding a replacement, I'd imagined something other than *this*. Coyote Creek Ranch isn't just a place, it's a vibe—it's in your blood. The people who work here get that.

Whereas, the woman I just watched gingerly step out of a small silver Prius looks like a rattlesnake at a town dance. She's wearing a black pant suit with a crisp white shirt—she clearly doesn't know nothing stays white out on the ranch for long—and her blonde hair is long and curled around her face, in a style that looks like it would be all the fashion in a place that cares about fashion.

If I'm thinking she looks like she took a wrong turn to get here, that same expression is mirrored on her face. Wide blue eyes and parted lips, cheeks that're slightly flushed, she stays right by her car door, one hand on the top of it, like she's halfway tempted to turn right around and bolt. Or like she doesn't want to move in case I bite.

I don't bite. I don't tend to get close enough for that—that's been my policy for as long as I can remember. This place is all I have time for, all I'm prepared to care about.

But I also don't have a lot of patience for time wasters, and if this woman thinks ranch life is something she can just drop herself into—dressed like this—then she's got another thing coming.

It's tough out here. Tough and dangerous. If you don't know how to obey the god given laws of the land, you're in trouble. And I don't have patience for babysitting either. Never have done, but especially don't now. Ever since dad

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died last year, I've been pulled in about a hundred directions, trying to keep this place going. Trying to keep it, full stop.

But Reagan's voice is in my mind as I stride out from my pickup, across the gravel that forms a sweeping drive at the front of the house, with lush green lawn to either side of it. My mom's roses—her pride and joy; honoring her memory is the only reason we spend money we shouldn't keeping them alive—burst with color behind this woman. I'm damned if I can remember her name.

As I get closer, it's not the roses I smell though, but something else sweet and addictive. A hint of this woman's perfume hits me in a way that almost brings a snarled curl to my lips. This ain't no place for perfume. Though I'm not gonna lie—some of my men could do with a bit of a hygiene spruce up, sometimes, but life out here is just the kind of thing to get you hot and dusty at the end of the day. Just the way we like it.

It's been more scorching than usual this summer and the dry air hits my skin in that way it has, so I wonder where she's from and if she's finding the heat uncomfortable. I tip my hat as I approach, and her crystal blue eyes follow the gesture.

"You're the bookkeeper?" I hear my voice, the gruff tones that could be mistaken for anger, and see her flinch.

I instantly regret it. The weight of the world is on my shoulders right now, but that's not this woman's fault. I was raised better than to take it out on a stranger; on anyone. The ranch's problems are mine alone to handle.

"I—I've been speaking to Reagan." Her voice, in contrast to mine, is soft and sweet, like her perfume, her accent

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difficult to place but if I had to guess, I'd say from somewhere like DC or New York. "Is she here?"

The hope in her voice almost makes me feel sorry for her. "The baby came early. She was planning to spend the next week showing you the ropes, but she can't."

"Oh." The woman—damn it, what's her name?—looks terrified. "So...you'll..."

In plenty of ways, I'm like my dad was. Not just in terms of looks, though there's that, too—I can't walk down Main Street without the old timers reminding me of the fact I'm like his twin. But I know the same streak of duty that flooded his spine is inside of me. A desire to help people. To serve. But having watched him take in stray after stray after stray, sometimes getting nothing in return but pain, I've learned not to take pity on every person I meet who's hard a hard life.

I want to fix things. I want to help people. Just not *all* people, all the time. And right now, the ranch needs me more than anyone else could.

Still, I'd have to be some kind of science fiction robot not to see that she's about two straws shy of a busted bale. "What's your name?"

She presses her teeth into her lower lip, like she's thinking about that, long and hard, then holds out a very delicate hand, with pale pink nails to boot. "Beth Tasker."

Right, that's it. Beth. "Cole Donovan. How do you do," I say, as I extend my own hand, conscious of every roughened callous, as well as the size of my paws, as I wrap one around her hand and shake it. She doesn't shake like my sister Cassidy, or Reagan, or any of the other girls I grew

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up with around here. She more just lets her hand go limp and be enfolded in mine for a second then quickly pulls hers away and wipes it down the side of her hip in a way she might think I won't notice. But I do. And again, my lips tingle with a hint of derision. Is she afraid of a little dirt? Worried she's going to catch ranch germs?

"This is—," she looks around, the blistering afternoon sun making her squint. I wait for her to finish the sentence, my own eyes trailing hers, trying to see the ranch that I know better than the back of my hand, from a stranger's perspective.

When I was a kid, the place was thriving. We had more than twice the cattle back then, and the staff to really run it right. It was my folks' pride and joy, and they both put their all into it. Mom was as at home in the kitchen baking for us as she was out wrangling or roping, but she was happiest of all in the garden around the house. She'd turned it into a green oasis, with cotton wood and spruce trees, lavender, gardenias and her treasured roses all mixed in with native flowers, like desert marigolds and their sunny yellow flowers, or Indian paintbrushes, spiky and orange. It's not quite as beautiful as it was when she was alive to tend it, but we all do our best.

The house itself is large and sprawling, one of the oldest in the area, it's got Spanish architectural influences in the arched windows, large so they can let in the evening breezes when the weather turns. The roof is red tiled, like the mesa in the distance, the flat topped mountain sparsely covered in a mix of pine and cottonwood trees. The walls are creamy, like the sun on a winter's day. Beyond the house, a little way off, sits the bunk sheds, once full to the brim and now used by only three of our staff. It's all I can

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afford to keep full time—but I’m lucky that there’s a good supply of seasonal workers in town, people always looking to pick up a bit of cash yet not wanting to be tied down.

Beyond the bunk sheds, the stables form a two story rectangular shape against the skyline—stables downstairs, and what used to be an office and apartment for the stable manager above. Around back, hidden from view and obscured a little by the undulations of the land, are the cattle pens and barns.

The ranch is one of the biggest in the state, in terms of land, and it’s like a spur in my heel that we can’t run it with the staff it deserves. Our land reaches almost the whole way into town, cut in half by a fast-flowing river, lined on both sides by pines. In the distance, a forest wraps around the property, which is both a blessing and a curse, especially the latter when the mountain lions are around.

“It’s just what I imagined,” she says, catching me unawares. Firstly, by finishing the sentence she’d left hanging for at least a full minute, and secondly, by *not* being surprised by the ranch.

“Yeah?” I wonder what experience she’s had in her life to prepare her for life out here. Maybe I misjudged her after all?

“It reminds me of something from Yellowstone,” she says, unknowingly condemning herself, in my mind.

I make a grunting noise in acknowledgement. “Yeah, well, it’s nothing like a TV show.”

She flinches again, and I make a mental note to tone down my voice with her. She’s as damn skittish as a tumbleweed in a dust storm.

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“Reagan says you’ve got experience.” I jam my hands into the pockets of my jeans, wondering why I’m asking her this. Particularly wondering why I’m asking her out under the beating sun, when she doesn’t have a hat and clearly isn’t used to this heat.

Her cheeks flush a little—like I needed to feel any worse about my lack of manners.

“Come on,” I say, before she can answer. “Let’s get you inside.”

“Inside?” Her eyes fly to the house behind me and then her fingers are fidgeting with a delicate silver necklace she wears, running over it from side to side in a way that’s distracting, and not just because for a second, my gaze drops to her breasts, and I become conscious of the fact she’s a woman. Not like I wasn’t aware she was a woman, but I mean, as a man notices a woman.

How long’s it been since *that* happened? My hand shifts to my hat, touching the edge of it. It was before dad died. I was dating a girl from the nearest town—Goodnight. It wasn’t serious, and after he passed, the suddenness of it all, the fact this place became mine to run, I didn’t have time for her. For anyone. I haven’t had time ever since. Meaning it’s been more than a year since I’ve so much as looked at a woman, much less known the pleasure of one.

Which makes it particularly inconvenient to be thinking about Beth’s breasts right now, and the way they swell sweetly against her snow white shirt, the way her hand had been all soft like silk, or the petals of one of the roses behind her.

“The office is inside. Your bedroom, too, come to think of

it.” Now *that* is not exactly convenient, but it’s how Reagan organized it.

“She can’t sleep out in the bunk house, Cole, and you know it.”

I vaguely remember grunting some kind of agreement—at the time, I hadn’t particularly cared where the bookkeeper slept. There were plenty of bedrooms in the house, and plenty of space too. What would it matter if, for three months, some woman Reagan hired crashed in one of them?

Well, it felt like it mattered now. But even wracking my brains, I can’t come up with any alternative. It’s been a long time since the guest house was fit to house a person, though it was on my never-ending list to see to that. At one time, it had four bedrooms and its own kitchen and living area, not to mention sweeping views of the plains that led up to the mountain in the distance, with the creek running just behind it. But an ancient Cyprus tree had fallen and landed right on the roof a few years back, and by then, things on the ranch were tight enough to mean we just had to leave it.

“You got a bag?” I hear myself ask, glad that some part of my brain seems capable of going through the motions.

“Yeah, I can get it.”

I’ve grown up with tough ass women all my life, but I’m still a cowboy and a Donovan, and it’s not in my nature to leave a woman to carry her own bag if I’ve got a free hand.

“Nah, let me,” I say, moving to the trunk, and pressing the catch to open it. Inside is a small suitcase, more hand luggage size. Not what I had expected this woman—who gives off serious high maintenance vibes—to travel with.

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“This it?” I shoot her a glance, to find her fidgeting with that necklace again, looking from her bag to me. She nods warily.

Warily?

Look, I’m a big guy, I know that. I’m easily six and a half feet, and I’m broad, strong, because you need to be out here, doing the work I do. I can calm a bull long enough to stay on for a good stretch, ride a horse for days, outrun a coyote if I have to. Okay, maybe not quite, but you get my drift. I guess I cut an imposing figure but most people around these parts know me well enough to know I’m also the last person on earth to be afraid of. I’m the guy who saves you, not scares you.

This woman looks like a greenhorn at its first rodeo—terrified and trembling, like a slight breeze would knock her down. She nods though, as though she’s steeling herself, and when I tilt my head towards the house and start walking that way, I notice she stays a good few feet to my left, as though she doesn’t want to risk accidentally touching. Which suits me fine.

I pull open the door for her and watch as she enters, her expression a mix of uncertainty and curiosity. Those ice blue eyes roam the large entrance way, cluttered with family photos my parents hung over the years that no one’s dared touch since mom passed. She always had cut flowers on the antique hallstand—you wouldn’t believe the smell on a summer’s afternoon. It filled every single room. Jasmine, gardenias, it was heavy in the air. And back then, when mom was alive, the house never had a speck of dust.

A hint of something like shame curdles in the pit of my

belly, because on the list of things I care about in a day, the state of the house is pretty low down.

Don't get me wrong, I clean up after myself, but that's about all I do. I notice now that the walls could do with a fresh coat of paint, and there's grime along the baseboards.

"Which way?" She turns back around to face me and despite the way she was keeping her distance outside, somehow, we're almost toe to toe now, so I see the way her blue eyes fleck with something like silver and her lashes, long and dark, fan her cheeks as she blinks.

"Kitchen's through there," I nod towards an archway and hang back a bit as she walks off, quickly, her high heels making a clicking noise against the wide, terracotta tiles. High heels! Has the house ever seen a pair of those? Somehow, I doubt it. My mom wasn't really one for dressing up, and my sister Cassidy's more at home in boots than heels.

The kitchen is a large, open space plan with a heap of windows showing a view of the ranch. She gravitates towards them, looking first to the hills in the distance and then towards the garden right near the house.

In the hutch under the kitchen counter, Boots flicks an ear lazily and opens one eye. He's mostly retriever, mixed in with Collie, we think, because he's got rusty red fur all over, except his feet, which are a creamy white—hence the name. He's eleven now and spends most of his time flopped on the floor, wherever he can find the sun. Never mind that he's not supposed to be in the house. That rule got broken a long time ago and none of us has ever bothered to enforce it.

"It's so peaceful here," Beth says, in a way that almost seems to come from the deepest parts of her soul. Like

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she's never known peace before. Like she's been craving it her whole life.

"Where are you from?" I ask with a good attempt at a relaxed, conversational tone, as I move into the kitchen and flick the coffee machine to life, reaching down to scratch the top of Boots's head.

She glances across at me, hesitation in the lines of her face, as though I've just asked her for the nuclear codes. "New York," she says, finally, glancing back to the windows, but not before I catch a hint of pink in her cheeks.

"I mean, more recently." I grab out two mugs and hooking one under the machine, pressing a button so the kitchen fills with the aroma of coffee beans.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand?" she says, walking towards me now and hovering on the other side of the kitchen island.

"This is a long way from New York. I presume you didn't uproot yourself for a three-month contract."

"Oh." Her eyes fall to the coffee cup in the machine. "Yes, I—," her tongue darts out and swipes along her lower lip. I somehow manage not to let that get under my skin, not to notice it in that annoying way I'd noticed her breasts and her soft, smooth skin. She lifts a hand and pulls her long hair over one shoulder, toying with the ends. "Sorry," she says, dropping her hand away immediately.

I frown. "What for?"

Her eyes pierce mine for a second before she fixes her gaze on a point over my shoulder.

"Is it—does anyone else live in the house?"

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“Besides me, you mean?” I prompt.

She nods quickly.

“My brothers Beau and Austen are here most of the time. My other brother Nash is in Phoenix, but he comes back a fair bit. My sister Cassidy is studying in Utah, but she’ll be home later in the summer, and there’s Mack—Mackenzie. An intern.”

“Oh, okay.”

She relaxes a little, even offering a tight smile. “Great.”

And even though I don’t make a habit of rescuing people the way my dad did, I hear myself say, “You don’t need to worry, Beth. I ain’t gonna bite.” Her eyes widen and she looks stricken and relieved all at once.

What the hell has Reagan gotten me into?



Chapter Two



Beth

I'M NOT AFRAID OF him biting. I'm not really even afraid of him, as much as I am the ghost of my husband. Which is really stupid, because Christopher is dead—he has been for three months. He can't hurt me anymore. I'm safe.

I'm safe.

The thing is, it doesn't matter how many times I tell myself that, how much I replay the moment of his death, and the fact it equaled my freedom, I don't know if I'll ever stop looking over my shoulder. Once you've gotten used to living like that, it's a hard habit to shake.

The man standing across the island bench from me is so handsome he looks AI generated. Like if you typed in

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‘square jaw, moss green eyes, stubble, tan cowboy’, you’d get something like him. He’s built too: strong. He looks like he could choke one of those huge bulls I saw across the paddock on the long drive to the house with his bare hands, but that doesn’t mean he will. First impressions can be deceiving—that’s a lesson I learned again and again and will never forget.

Before Christopher, I would have looked at this rugged man mountain Cole Donovan and probably felt my stomach fill with butterflies, because he’s absolutely gorgeous, with all those pure alpha male vibes, from the way he looks in those faded, old jeans to the button down shirt, the fact he tipped his hat like a real cowboy, and removed it the second we stepped indoors, to the way he stands, all tall, proud and broad. Yeah, a few years ago, I would have given him a bright smile and flirted with him in the hopes he’d ask me out. I might have asked him about his ranch and his life, and I might have had some fun with the whole thing. But that version of me is like a whole other person, one I haven’t known for years. Not since I was twenty-one and met Christopher and learned that letting your guard down with the wrong person—who could be anyone—can lead to disaster.

So I stand here, arms braced at my side, whole body braced for anything and try to think of something to say in response to his reassurance.

“Coffee?” He slides it across the bench to me, like he knows it’s my Achilles’ heel. The dog near his feet lifts his head a little.

“Thanks.” It smells good. Nutty and strong. I take a sip, closing my eyes and letting it work its magic.

“So, Raegan told you what the job is?”

“Keeping the books straight,” I say with a nod, glad to be on solid conversational ground. Numbers I can talk about. Numbers I’m good at.

“Right. She’s pretty fussy about it, so she has some systems—,”

“I’m sure I can work it out.”

His eyes hold mine for a second, speculatively, like he’s trying to see something I usually keep hidden. I make sure to keep my face passive, revealing nothing. I’ve had a lot of practice with that. One wrong look at Christopher could set him off, so I’m careful out of habit.

“Raegan seems to think so; she reckons you’re over-qualified for the job. So why come all this way, Beth?”

The way he says my name sends a warm breath down my spine. Not a shiver—I know the difference. It makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end though, but in a way that I like. I tamp down on the feeling. “Why not?” I say with a careless shrug, like any other twenty-five-year-old woman might shrug to signal she’s footloose and fancy free. No one here needs to know the truth.

No one here needs to know I’m a widow.

That I was married to a man who took out his anger on me.

That I fell in love with someone who didn’t exist, who was a lie, designed to trap me.

“It’s a long way from New York.”

“That was part of the appeal.”

“Because you want to be in an episode of *Yellowstone*?”

My lip twists in something like a smile. “Something like that.”

His lip furrows. “Ranch life isn’t something you just stroll into.”

“I’m not planning to.” I try to resist the impact of his words, the way they make me doubt myself. It’s not hard. If you live with someone who tells you, all the time, that you’re not good at anything, it really starts to take hold. I draw in a deep breath. “I’m here to keep your books, not go throw a rope around a horse, or whatever.”

I’m suddenly tired. Wearier than I can say. Three months of playing the part of the grieving widow, protecting the awful truth of Christopher’s abuse even after his death, has taken its toll. “If you show me where the office is, I’ll get started.”

His eyes narrow thoughtfully but before he can respond, the door slams and I jump halfway out of my skin. I feel Cole’s eyes linger on me and wish I’d been able to disguise the reaction, but my nerves are permanently frayed. Another AI cowboy strides in. He’s got darker hair and darker eyes but the same square jaw, chiseled cheekbones and broad shoulders.

“Hey bro,” he says, whacking Cole hard on the shoulder, his eyes trained on me. “I didn’t know you were entertaining or I woulda knocked.”

Cole throws him a sidelong glance. “Beth, this buffoon is my brother Beau. This is Beth—Reagan’s replacement.”

Beau makes a show of looking me up and down. “Not from where I’m standing,” he says, chewing on something

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on the side of his jaw, so a deep dimple digs into his stubbled cheek. He comes around the counter and I have to take a deep breath to stop from stepping backwards, from putting space between us.

I'm safe. I'm safe.

But he's so big, just like Cole—strange that Cole's presence is sort of reassuring, despite his size. Maybe because Reagan spent so long extolling his virtues, I feel a little like I know and like him already.

Beau holds out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am," he says in what I'm pretty sure is an exaggerated drawl.

I hesitate a few seconds before lifting my hand to his, letting him shake it, and then quickly pulling it away, putting it behind my back, feeling like under the intense scrutiny of these two ridiculously handsome men I might crack.

I realize he's waiting for me to say something. "Um, yes. You too."

His grin only widens. "You don't sound too sure about that, now, but that's only 'cause you don't know me yet. How 'bout we work on that later today?"

My eyes widen. Is he...flirting with me? I toy with my necklace, before I can hear Christopher's voice telling me to *stop fidgeting*. My heart is in my throat though—like it always is when Christopher's voice floods my brain.

Maybe Cole sees the color drain from my face because when he next speaks, it sounds like a growl. "Leave her alone, man. She just got here."

Beau winks at me. “Reckon she can speak for herself, don’t you?”

Cole stares down his brother though, and I realize there’s something about Cole that Beau yields to. Strength, authority or the fact he’s older, I’m not sure, but Beau shrugs, shoots me another grin then moves over to the coffee machine and pours himself a cup.

“So, where you from, Beth?”

“New York,” I say, a little softly, then, louder, “Manhattan.”

Beau lets out a low whistle. “Fancy.”

I force a smile, like it’s a joke and I’m in on it, but the truth is, my old life *was* fancy. Upper-east-side-penthouse-apartment fancy. On-the-board-of-multiple-charities fancy. A wardrobe-full-of-couture fancy.

I shudder, because that might all sound really nice but let me tell you, it came at way too high a price.

“Why don’t I show you your office,” Cole offers, his voice less growl now, more gentle. But there’s still a rawness to it that makes my pulse tremble.

I nod, curling my hands around my coffee, reluctant to relinquish it.

“You can bring it with you,” he says, like he’s read my mind. “Reagan pretty much always has a cup at the desk. Hell, she usually takes the whole damn pot, which, to be frank, we don’t love.”

My smile feels less forced now. “Got it. No stealing the coffee pot.”

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He nods, rather than smiles, and even though there's a brusqueness to him, a cool distance, I'm way more comfortable with that than Beau's over the top friendliness.

"You can take the coffee pot, Manhattan. We can always come find it."

I throw Beau a wave as we walk out of the kitchen, into a long, wide hallway with more terracotta tiles on the floor and cream-colored walls. The photos that adorned the entrance way are conspicuously absent here, and I find myself wondering about that. It's a great canvas, an enormous blank space that would look so nice with a splash of color, some wallpaper and prints. It's naturally bright, though, courtesy of the sky light, and there's an overall warmth to the house. We pass a large family room with well-worn brown leather sofas, a low coffee table, big TV and a huge bay window that looks out onto the rose garden and then approach a darkly wood-paneled room lined with books. There's another window in here overlooking the same roses, and a small desk is placed right there. A larger desk sits on the wall at a right angle.

"This is the office," he says, hands in his pockets as he nods towards the space. He's left his hat in the kitchen, but it doesn't matter. I think I'll always see Cole as I did when he first got out of his pickup and swaggered towards me like a cowboy fantasy brought to life.

Suddenly my mouth is dry as I remember what it was like to shake his hand, and I take a step into the office just to escape the overwhelming maleness of him.

Only, this room is sheer 'guy'. From the Arizona Cardinals calendar on the wall to the selection of ranching maga-

zines to the heavy, dark wood, I can feel Cole's presence in here as though he'd breathed himself all over the walls.

I move to the smaller desk, guessing—correctly—that it will be mine. Which means...

"As in, we'll share an office?" I ask, wishing my voice would come out a little less tentatively.

"I'm mostly in here at night," he says with a nod. "So don't be worrying about me getting in your way."

"I wasn't," I say, honestly. "I just..." the words trail off, as I turn to look at the rose garden. How do I tell him I came here because I needed something to do, something to occupy me, whilst simultaneously being left completely alone to process everything that's happened over the last few years, and particularly the last few months?

If I'm honest, I came here hoping to heal, and that's something I intend to achieve all on my own.

"Thank you," I finish, lamely, glancing across at him to find his eyes resting on me in that 'sees too much' way of his.

"Reagan's left you some notes in the top drawer."

I go to reach for them, but his voice stills my hand.

"Why don't you leave it for now? You're still getting settled in. I'll show you your room."

At his words, which my past makes me perceive as a reprimand, I startle a little but cover it, I think.

"Sure," I say, over-bright, compensating. "Lead the way, boss."

Ride Me Cowboy

His lips twist in something like a smile. “Cole will do just fine.”

It’s an interesting comment, as though he doesn’t like being reminded, he’s in charge. Curiosity fires inside of me before I can control it; before I can remind myself that this is temporary, and so are these people. I don’t care about them, or this ranch. This is a job, pure and simple.

No, it’s an escape hatch. I’m going to hole myself away here for just as long as I can, because one thing’s for sure: I was never going to get the breathing space I needed to recover in Manhattan. Not with Christopher’s family breathing down my neck, checking up on me all the time, doing their darn best [PR1] to support me.

The house is larger than I assumed from outside. I realize there are two wings, built around a central courtyard that’s got large, bluestone pavers with grass in between, and a huge pine tree right at the center. I’d seen the top of it from outside but had presumed it was behind the house, not at its core.

“Yeah, our great, great, great grandpa built the house. The tree was big, even then,” he says, slowing his pace a little to eye it off.

“Why build around it, rather than choose another site?”

He looks at me, expression impossible to discern. “‘Cause this is the best spot on the ranch,” he says, simply. “The high point, to get the breeze, close enough to the creek out back to fish and fetch water, back in those days, not to mention a view of the road in case some highway robbers came out looking for trouble,” he adds, lips twitching in something like a smile.

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I feel my own smile responding, ever so slightly.

“My mom always loved it,” he says, voice a little lower, before he clears his throat and starts walking again, his hips swaggering in that way that makes his butt look ridiculously good. Muscled and toned and...*stop thinking about his butt.*

My goodness, what the heck has happened to me?

“This side of the house is pretty deserted,” he says, with a hint of apology, when this is great news for me. “This is Mackenzie’s room—the intern,” he gestures to a closed door on our right. “She’s been here a couple of years now.” He hesitates, slows, then turns to look at me. “She’s a good kid, but she’s...rough around the edges. She can be prickly. Don’t take it personally if she snaps at you. She snaps at everyone. In fact, it’s a sign of trust.”

“Got it,” I say, halfway tempted to tell him that if walking on eggshells was an Olympic sport, I’d be a seven times gold medalist. “I’ll give her a wide berth.”

His frown etches deep parentheses lines on either side of his mouth.

“I didn’t mean that. You just seem like someone who’d take Mackenzie’s brand of humor to heart. Don’t.”

I try to ignore the fact that he’s already gotten a read on me and just nod to signal my understanding.

“Great.” We walk past another door, but he doesn’t say anything about it. Then another. At the end of the hallway, he gestures to the last one. “This is you.”

The minute I step inside, I realize that this room has something the others don’t: windows on three sides, showing an

almost complete panorama of the ranch. The beautiful garden, then the landscape this part of Arizona is known for, with those dramatic, flat-topped mesas in the background and a lush, overgrown pine forest in the front, and then, a pair of timber French doors that open out onto the courtyard.

There's a double bed in the middle of the room, a small desk, and an old rocking chair.

"It's lovely," I say, genuinely. I mean, it's *nothing* like my room back home, with the sweeping views of Central Park and the deluxe, professionally decorated suite of furniture, but it's homey and comfortable, and right now, what I want more than anything is to be comfortable.

I expel a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

"My brothers and I are on that side," he says, tilting his head across the courtyard. "When Cass is home, she's in the room next door to yours, but she's not here for another month or so yet."

"Got it," I say, not particularly bothered by who sleeps where, only needing to know that this is my room, my private space. Something I haven't had a whole lot of and need to start getting used to.

"So, any questions?"

I bite into my lower lip. "I mean..." But I hesitate. I'm so used to Christopher. How I hate that man and what he's turned me into. I vaguely remember the woman I was before him. Confident, funny, relaxed, smart. But a week or so after our wedding, I started to learn that asking questions was one sure fire way to get on his last nerve. I dig my

nails into my palm, my voice just a whisper when I say, “How does this work?”

His brow furrows. “How does what work?”

“Being on the ranch. Can I cook my own food? Or do I cook for everyone? Or do I eat in here? Do I keep to set hours or can I work at night if I want to?”

He drags a hand over his jaw. “Reagan always worked from early morning to just after lunch, but that was because of her kid. It suited her. I don’t have a problem with you choosing your own hours.”

I nod.

“You can cook your own food. Help yourself to anything in the fridge. You’re not a vegetarian, are you?” He looks totally aghast at the idea, so a laugh bubbles in my throat.

How long has it been since I’ve just spontaneously *laughed*? I immediately snuff the sound—it’s so rare it almost frightens me. “No. I eat everything.”

“Great.” He visibly relaxes. “I mean, you do you, but I don’t reckon my guys here would let you hear the end of it...”

“When you say ‘your guys’, you mean... your brothers?”

“The staff,” he corrects. “You’ll meet them over the next few days, I’m sure. They’re teddy bears,” he says, as though he knows I need to hear that. “Gruff, about as smooth as a barbed-wire fence, some of them, but they’re salt of the earth, decent men. Any of them give you trouble, though, you let me know.”

“No women?”

“Other than Mackenzie?”

I nod.

“Nah, but that’s just the way it’s happened. We don’t discriminate. Some of the best ranchers I’ve ridden alongside have been girls.”

Something warm floods my chest at that. And I’m not sure why I ask it, but hear myself say, “Your mom?”

Surprise briefly flexes his features, but then he’s back to the impenetrable, tough guy mask. “Yeah.” It’s a quick admission, and it definitely doesn’t invite any more questions. Duly noted. Hey, if I plan on being a closed book then surely, he’s allowed the same thing. I make a mental note not to ask anything else I don’t need to know.

“We tend to lunch together,” he continues. “Down at the sheds. The cook usually serves food at noon. Breakfast and dinner is up to you.”

“Oh. Do I have to eat lunch with everyone?”

He drags a hand through his hair. “You can do what you want, remember? But the offer’s there, if you’d rather come on over. I can show you the way, if you’d like?”

“That’s okay,” I say, quickly, because I know I’m not going to sit around with a heap of cowboys and share a meal. I’m here to be alone, after all. “I’ll let you know if I change my mind,” I say, to forestall any insistence he might be about to make. The question for today is moot, anyway. It’s the middle of the afternoon. Lunch has been and gone.

“Reagan left her number in the office but we’re trying not to bother her, you know, given the whole new baby thing. So, any questions, come to me, first.”

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My mouth goes dry at that, but I nod. “Got it.”

“Okay then, Beth.” He stays standing there, though. “Need anything else?”

I look around the room then shake my head. “No, thanks,” I say. “I’ll settle in then get down to work. Thanks...for the tour.”

He pulls a face. “It was hardly a tour. Just holler if you want to see the ranch proper.”

I nod.

“I’ll get back out there,” he nods to the window that frames a view of the wide, sweeping plains, the mountains and despite my best intentions not to be interested in anything about this life, I find myself wondering what it must feel like to conquer a landscape like this. To saddle up, or whatever it is exactly that a cowboy does, and just ride like the wind. Ride, feel the power of the horse beneath you, the sheer untamed strength of nature.

I glance back to say something like that to Cole but luckily, he’s already left.

RIDE ME COWBOY releases June 30th. You can pre-order here.

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