# Cowboy Motel

By

## Misty Malone

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Published by Blushing Books®,
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ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901
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Malone, Misty Cowboy Motel

eBook ISBN: 978-1-62750-447-8

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics and Design

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### Chapter 1

Clint McFarland put his cowboy hat back on his head as he strode out of the house after lunch, along with his foreman, Adam Nichols. He glanced over to his right and saw his sister, Tiffany, waving at him. "Go on out, Adam," he said. "I'll be right there. It looks like Tiffany needs something."

He headed over in her direction, thinking back over the past 24 months. Their parents had died in an automobile accident, leaving them the ranch. Tiffany liked living on the ranch, but wasn't much into ranch work. She'd just graduated from college with a business degree and was anxious to use that degree. Clint was willing to run the ranch and split the profits with her, but understood that wasn't what she wanted. She wanted to start a business and earn a living for herself.

Clint loved ranching and was proud of his work. He could easily understand his sister's desire to find a business of her own to love and be proud of. Since the ranch had been left to both of them and this was the only home either had ever known, it was important to him that she use the ranch in some way and start a business on ranch property. It had taken a lot of brainstorming by the two of them to come up with the idea of a Cowboy Motel, but once they did, Tiffany had run with it.

She took over roughly fifty acres close to a large pond and a creek not far from the main house. She built ten cabins with a common area in the center. The common area included a swimming pool, a walking/running track, two tennis courts, and a large place where she had a bonfire every night. She had fishing gear for the creek and the pond, and canoes, kayaks and rowboats.

She had done a great job advertising it as the ideal spot for people to get away from the city and enjoy fresh air, blue skies, rest and relaxation, all on a working ranch. Guests were allowed to watch the cowboys on the ranch as they worked around the barn and corrals, as long as they stayed in marked areas. Unlike at a dude ranch, however, which Clint absolutely refused to allow on his ranch, the guests did not participate. They were allowed to ride certain horses, which Clint had hand-picked, after Tiffany was sure they were experienced riders and she or another employee was with them so they didn't wander off into dangerous areas.

The Cowboy Motel was on its way to being a success, and Clint was proud of Tiffany. Six more cabins were under construction presently, as the concept had proved itself. His little sister had taken on the whole project, planning it, designing it, and overseeing the whole construction of it.

"Hey, Clint, do you have a minute?" Tiffany called, as Clint drew near. "I need your advice."

Since The Cowboy Motel opened a little over six months ago, she'd only asked him for help or advice on a couple occasions, so he would definitely help her if he could. "Yeah, I've got a minute. What's up?"

"I've got a guest that says she grew up on a ranch, but her father got sick when she was in high school and her family lost the ranch. She wants to know if she can rent a horse and go riding alone for a while some day. She says she has a decision she needs to make, and she used to be able to do her best thinking if she went riding. She said she liked to ride hard for a short time, not just an easy trot, and clear her mind. Then she'd sit down under a tree with no one around and think while the horse rested. What do you think?"

"What's your impression of her? Does she seem like she did grow up on a ranch?"

"She seems sincere to me, Clint. She's nice, she seems honest, and she seems to know what the hands are doing when she glances out at any of them that are working close."

Clint sighed. "Okay, let me take her out after supper tonight and see what kind of riding skills she has, then I'll decide."

"Thanks, Clint, I appreciate it." Tiffany leaned up to kiss her brother on his cheek before turning to go back to her office.

Clint smiled and went to the barn.

Tiffany ate supper with Clint and Adam that night. Clint asked some questions about the guest he was to meet with shortly. Tiffany offered, "Here's what I know about her. Her name is Joella Peterson, but she goes by Jo."

"Joella? I haven't heard that, but it's a pretty name," Clint commented.

Tiffany smiled as she said, "She's a pretty lady."

"Don't get any ideas, little matchmaker."

"I know, I know. I'm just saying. Anyway, she says she grew up on a ranch in Oklahoma. They moved off of it her senior year of high school, into a small apartment near the hospital, and her father died shortly afterward. She and her older brother and mother came here to Texas and lived with her mother's parents while their mother pulled herself together and got back on her feet. She and her brother were off at college much of that time, but she knew her mother had a rough time for awhile there, coping with losing her husband and their ranch."

Clint's eyebrows were drawn together. "You seem to know an awful lot about this lady."

"We had a good talk a couple days ago. Someone at the campfire one night mentioned they'd recently lost their father. I don't know why, but it caught me off guard and I teared up. I didn't think anyone noticed, but the next day Jo asked me about it, wanting to be sure I was all right. She said she noticed it because the same thing happened to her, so she wondered if I'd recently lost a parent. We talked a bit."

"Ah," was Clint's only comment.

Tiffany added, "Anyway, that's about all I know about her, other than I like her."

"You do?" Clint looked up to see his sister's answer to that simple question. When she assured him that yes, she did like Jo, it meant something to Clint. He knew Tiffany was a good judge of people, and she doesn't normally take to most people quickly. It wasn't that she disliked

them; she just had to know them awhile before she felt they were worthy of being considered a friend. On the flip side, once someone was a friend of Tiffany's, they were generally a good friend, and that was not easily changed. So the fact she liked Jo right off was worth thinking about.

Clint finished eating and said, "Okay, let's go meet Jo and I'll take her out riding."

Adam asked, "Do you want help?"

Clint looked over at his foreman and saw the big smile on his face. "No, thank you, Adam. I saw your ears perk up when Tiffany said she was pretty. I think I can handle one lady on a horse."

The three of them were laughing as Adam headed to the foreman's house and Clint and Tiffany went to Cabin No. 3.

Tiffany knocked and a bubbly little redhead came bounding to the door. Clint looked at her and decided pretty was an understatement. She was a petite little thing, and cute as a button. Her blue jeans fit her to a T, with no extra room anywhere that he saw, and she wore a western style shirt with snaps. The snaps were open just far enough that Clint could easily see the ample cleavage, but not far enough to be slutty. She wore her reddish blond hair down around her face, and the bouncy curls seemed to match her outgoing personality.

"Hi, Jo," Tiffany said. "This is my brother, Clint. Clint, this is Jo."

The cute little lady held out her hand. "Hi, Clint, nice to meet you. Thank you for agreeing to meet me and consider my request. I appreciate it."

From the moment she'd opened the door, Jo had been checking out Clint. Tiffany said she'd bring him by after supper, but he was nothing like Jo had been expecting. Clint was a big man, she was guessing a couple inches over six feet, and obviously strong. That didn't really surprise her since most ranchers worked hard and had muscles to show for it, but Clint was not only a big man with big muscles, but he was a showstopper. His dark chestnut hair had just enough curl to be gorgeous on him, and he had dark brown eyes that she knew could pierce a soul. But what really drew her to him was his air of assurance. It was borderline arrogance, but more assurance. He was very sure of himself, and she loved it! In her opinion, too many men these days were wimpy, questioning everything they did. She liked a strong man who wasn't afraid to make a decision and stand by it. One look at Clint and she knew he was that rare man.

Clint and Jo were quiet for several moments, and Tiffany saw the looks on both their faces. She smiled. This could be very interesting. Women were constantly trying to get Clint's attention, but not many had succeeded. The ones that had were only temporary. Clint had never dated anyone seriously for any length of time. But she'd never seen a look like this on his face before, either. Interesting.

Clint seemed to come out of the trance first and answered, "It's no problem, Jo. Let's go up to the barn and get a couple horses."

Tiffany didn't really think they heard her as she said, "Well, you don't need me, I'll let you two go see what happens." She giggled after they left, now positive they hadn't heard her. Clint would have given her a stern look if he'd heard her comment.

Clint took Jo to the barn, leading her with a gentle hand on her back. When they walked in, he watched her interaction with the horses carefully. She immediately went to the first horse that came to the edge of her stall, looking for attention. She scratched the horse's neck as she said, "Aren't you a pretty thing." She talked to the horse a minute or two before going to the next one. She was obviously comfortable around horses.

When they got to Clint's horse she paused, looking at the horse. Looking over at Clint, she asked, "Is this your horse?"

"It is," he answered. "How did you know that?"

"He's beautiful. Look how strong he is, and how well taken care of. All these horses have been taken care of well, but especially him. And look how he holds his head. He's special, and he knows it." She was thinking to herself, just like his owner, but she refrained from saying it out loud.

Clint smiled as he said, "He is special. You obviously know horses."

"I've always loved horses, and I miss being around them."

"Let's find you a horse and go for that ride."

He headed toward a mare two stalls down, but Jo went to another gelding in the stall after the mare. "I'll bet you'd be fun to ride," she told the horse, stroking his neck as he nuzzled next to her.

Clint told her, "He is, but only once you've earned his respect. If you let him set his own pace he'll be a handful right from the start. If you rein him in and make him mind you from the moment you leave the barn, he'll do anything you ask him to. Let's get you onto this mare tonight and see how you get along."

He could see she was really interested in taking the gelding out. He was half expecting an argument, but she gave the horse one last look before saying, "Okay, sure."

She followed him to the tack room, where she looked around. "You have some nice saddles, and again, they're all maintained well. That tells me that the buildings on this ranch all look nice for a reason. I wondered if it was for show, for the sake of the motel guests, but looking at how the horses and equipment are maintained, I'd say everything on this ranch is maintained well all the time. Very impressive, especially in this day and age."

"Thank you," Clint said. "My dad always said if something was worth having it was worth maintaining so you'd have it for a long time. It was good advice the first time I heard it, and I still try to follow it." He watched as Jo picked up the blanket and saddle from the area marked Jess and headed back to the mare. He was impressed, but quickly took the saddle from her hands.

"I can take it," she objected. "I always saddled my own horse. I prefer it."

"I don't blame you; I feel the same way. But that saddle's almost as big as you are, and although I'm sure you're quite capable of carrying it, I was raised with the understanding that a man helps a woman and takes care of them all they can. It's a whole lot easier for me to carry this than you, so on my ranch I'll be carrying it. I'll let you fasten it, though, so you know it's done how you want it."

Jo was a bit shocked. He didn't give that little speech in an arrogant way, but just in a way that would make it awfully hard to argue with. And he didn't appear to be in any way trying to show off, or putting her down at all. He was simply being a gentleman. How unusual, but totally sexy!

She followed him back to the mare's stall. As they approached, she asked, "May I open the gate for you?"

"If you want, sure." He thanked her as he strode in and put the blanket and saddle on the mare. He turned to her and asked, "Do you want any help?"

"No, thank you, I can get it." He waited a few moments and watched as she started fastening straps. Convinced she knew what she was doing, he saddled up his gelding, Thunder, and walked him down to her stall, where she had her mare ready to go. He opened the gate and watched as she walked the horse out. They walked them to the door at the end of the barn.

Once outside he asked, "Ready to go?"

She had a huge smile on her face as she said, "More than ready. I've really missed this." She put her foot in the stirrup and easily swung up onto the horse and patted her neck as she held onto the reigns. Clint quickly mounted and headed off out across the pasture, with her right beside him.

After a few minutes it was easy to see she was comfortable in the saddle, so he started a conversation with her to distract her a bit. "So, you live somewhere here in Texas?"

"Just outside of Wichita Falls."

"I was just over to Wichita Falls a couple weeks ago."

"At the cattle auction?"

"Yes."

"Buying or selling?"

"Buying. What do you do in Wichita Falls?"

"Right now I'm teaching."

"Right now? Are you thinking of changing that?"

"I'm looking around for something else, yes."

"Don't like teaching?"

"Not so much. Parents today don't raise their kids; they just babysit them when they're home. They don't make them mind at all, so the kids are used to doing whatever they want, whenever they want. Then they give them to us during the day and expect us to be able to keep their attention and teach them, but won't allow us to lay a hand on them if they act up or give us problems."

Clint nodded and said, "I personally think if you'd bring the paddle back to the classroom you'd solve a lot of that, and right quick."

"Oh, without a doubt," she agreed. "You wouldn't even have to use it much. Just once in awhile when one of the kids got a little too rambunctious. All the kids would know you can and will use it, and that's all it would take."

"I agree completely." Clint smiled at the little lady beside him.

She went on, "They say you can't do that to kids now, or they'll be scarred for life. That's ridiculous."

Clint chuckled. "When we were growing up, if Tiffany or I did something we shouldn't have, my dad didn't hesitate to spank our behinds but good."

"Mine, either."

Clint laughed a bit as he said, "He used to say, 'I don't know what you were thinking, but let me see if I can't straighten out your thought pattern a bit.' It always got our thought pattern straightened out, but I don't see that it scarred us for life."

The two of them laughed as they rode on further. Clint took her to a clearing, and reined his horse in as they topped a knoll. She stopped her horse and sat still, taking in the scenery below. "This is beautiful, Clint."

"I think so, too. Tiffany said you wanted to bring a horse out by yourself to do some thinking, so I thought I'd bring you here. It's straight up along the creek so you don't have to worry about getting lost, and I come up here a lot when I have to think. It's peaceful and quiet."

"Thank you. It looks perfect."

"I don't know what kind of decision you're trying to make, but this is a good spot for thinking."

"I have to think about what I want to do with my life," she said quietly, almost to herself.

Clint's eyebrows rose. "That sounds like a pretty big decision. If you want to think out loud, I'm a good listener."

"Thanks for the offer, but I need to think it through."

Clint was off his horse and held hers while she slid down, as well. He tied the horses loosely to a tree and led her over to the big rock where he did his thinking from time to time. As they sat down he asked, "Does this have something to do with what you were saying earlier about being a teacher for now?"

She smiled as she said, "You're very observant. We talked about a lot of things; I'm surprised you remembered that. Yes, it does. I'm just not happy teaching any more, but I'm not sure what else I'd like to do instead."

"Do you have any ideas?"

"Not really. I just know I don't want to teach any more."

"What kind of things do you like doing?"

"Riding horses," she said quickly. She thought a bit. "About anything outside. So all I have to do is find a job where I can ride horses outside all day." She looked up at him and grinned as she asked, "Know of any openings for a job like that?"

"It sounds like you've got some thinking to do," Clint said, chuckling. They talked awhile longer before Clint said, "If you want to let the horses run a bit, we better go now before it gets dark. I don't like to let them run that fast after dark."

Her eyes perked up. "Really? You'll let me?"

"For a bit, tonight while I'm with you. If you want to bring her out tomorrow alone I'd rather you not let her run. I don't mind if you canter for a bit, but I'd rather you not let her run

when you're alone. I don't want anyone getting hurt on my ranch, especially when no one's with them."

"I understand. Thank you for letting me go out some on my own. I really appreciate it." "You're welcome. Let's get the horses if you want to let them run."

Half an hour later they were back at the barn, brushing down the horses, talking and laughing while they worked. As they put the horses up he told her, "Okay, Jo, tomorrow after lunch you can take Jess, the horse you've been riding, out alone, if you'll follow my rules. Stay in the area we were in today, please. I don't want you roaming around on the ranch alone for a few reasons, but you'll be fine if you stay where we went tonight. I want you back by supper so I don't have to worry about you getting lost as the sun goes down. If you agree to those stipulations, you can go out alone tomorrow."

Jo studied Clint a few seconds. He sounded awfully bossy, although she didn't actually see it that way. It was more like he knew what he wanted and meant to get it. She thought back to her earlier assessment, where she thought he was very sure of himself. She had to admit his restrictions made sense, especially considering he'd never met her before today. She quickly agreed. "I understand. I'll be back by supper."

\* \* \* \* \*

Clint thought about Jo several times the next day. He would very much like to spend more time with her, something that was unusual for him. He knew he had no business getting to know her better because she would be returning home in a few days, but he felt drawn to her somehow and was contemplating asking her if she'd like to go riding with him again before she left.

Adam and Clint had just finished supper when Tiffany came in the back door. "Clint, I'm sorry, but I've got another problem. Jo's not back yet. She promised me she'd be back for supper, which was half an hour ago."

Clint bolted out of his chair and headed for the door. He grabbed his hat and shoved it on his head as he walked out. "Come on, Tiff, you can come with me," he called over his shoulder. "We'll check where I told her she could go. If she's not there, Adam, I'll contact you. If she's missing, I want you to get as many of the hands as you can and we'll split up in groups of two and try and find her before dark." His long strides got him to the barn quickly. He and Tiffany quickly saddled their horses and set out.

"I told her to stay along the creek, so I'll go close to it," Clint said. "You go over a little further from the creek, head north, and keep calling. Watch for any sign of her or her horse. I took her to the knoll, so we'll meet up there."

She turned and headed west, while he went over toward the creek. He alternately called, then listened carefully for any response, until he got to the knoll. Tiffany got there shortly after, without finding Jo. He called Adam and had him send the ranch hands out, with orders to call Clint if anyone found anything suspicious.

He sent Tiffany back down to the barn along the creek. She needed to be there for her other guests, and in case Jo returned. He went further out, again calling.

It was an hour later and it was starting to get dark before he heard her horse. He followed the sound, and sure enough, there was Jess tied to a tree. He called for Jo again, but didn't hear any response. Assuming she had to be close by, he tied Thunder to a tree as well, and set out on foot looking for her, searching the area carefully for any sign of her.

He'd looked for half an hour and was starting to worry. She wasn't answering when he called, and he wasn't seeing any sign of her, or even of any kind of struggle. Finally, he topped a little hill and saw what could be her, in a heap under a tree in a meadow on the other side of a little brook. He yelled, "Jo, are you okay?" When he got no answer, he hurried over to her, running through the creek.

Clint never got a response from Jo, though he called to her several times. He hurried to her to see what happened, and if she was hurt. When he got there he did a quick visual check before moving her, in case she'd been hurt. Not seeing any obvious injuries, he carefully reached down and placed his hands gently on her shoulder and carefully turned her over while asking, "Jo, are you okay?"