

Cowboy with a Cause (Cowboy Cafe Book 3)

By Carla Cassidy

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"I'D APOLOGIZE FOR KISSING YOU, BUT I'M NOT ALL THAT SORRY."

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Adam knows a little something about fresh starts. As for his beautiful neighbor, he doesn't see a wheelchair—he sees a woman who understands. But as the heat grows between them, he can't avoid the feeling that more than her big-city past haunts her—and that danger has been lurking, waiting to strike....

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Carla Cassidy is an award-winning author who has written more than fifty novels for Harlequin Books. In 1995, she won Best Silhouette Romance from *RT Book Reviews* for *Anything for Danny*. In 1998, she also won a Career Achievement Award for Best Innovative Series from *RT Book Reviews*. Carla believes the only thing better than curling up with a good book to read is sitting down at the computer with a good story to write.

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Adam Benson sat in his pickup truck parked at the curb and stared at the two-story house out his passenger-side window. It was a nice place, painted pale beige with rust-colored trim. A large tree in the front yard sported all the colors of autumn, with bright red and orange leaves beginning to group at the base.

The Room for Rent sign had been in the front window for a couple of months, and for the past few weeks each time Adam drove by the place, he'd considered the possibility of checking it out.

Shoving a hand into the pocket of his lightweight black jacket, he found the two small plastic chips inside and rubbed them together as he considered his next move.

There was no question that he was in transition. With two months of sobriety behind him and a ranch that no longer felt like his home, he knew it was time to make some significant changes in his life.

With a new decisiveness, he opened the truck door and got out. *Great location*, he told himself as he looked down Main Street. This house was one of the last on the block that hadn't been sold and torn down to make room for commercial property. From here he could easily walk the main drag of the small town of Grady Gulch.

He turned back to look at the house. The place had belonged to Olive Brooks for as long as he could remember. The older woman had been a fixture in town, working at the post office and involved in every charity event. Then about a year ago she'd become ill with cancer and her only daughter had come to town from someplace back east to nurse her. Olive had passed away and her daughter had remained in the house.

It was a little strange. Nobody around town that Adam had spoken to seemed to have seen Melanie Brooks since her mother's death, although he'd heard a few unpleasant rumors about her.

He jingled his sobriety chips once again. He knew personally about gossip and ugly rumors. In the past year he and his family had experienced enough of both to last a lifetime.

He finally sighed, irritated with his own hesitation. "Doesn't hurt to check it out," he muttered under his breath as he headed toward the front porch.

Next door to the house the pizza place was in full lunch swing, the scents of robust sauce and spicy sausage filling the air. Adam's stomach rumbled, and he decided that after checking out the room for rent, he'd head to the Cowboy Cafe for lunch. Although the pizza smelled great, at noon the place was usually overrun by high school kids grabbing a slice of pizza before their afternoon classes began.

Besides, the Cowboy Cafe was *the* place in town to get a hearty meal and a healthy serving of what people were saying and thinking. In the past couple of months it had felt more like home than the ranch where he'd grown up.

As he walked up the stairs to the porch, he noticed that the railing was more than a little wobbly and needed to be replaced. Up close the house paint wasn't quite as fresh as it appeared from the street. A little TLC was definitely needed, he thought, not that it was his problem. That was one of the luxuries of not owning where you lived: you weren't responsible for any of the maintenance.

He knocked on the door, and as he waited for a reply, he turned and looked back at the street where his truck was parked. Within an hour everyone in town would know that he'd been here. That was the way things worked in small towns like Grady Gulch. There were few secrets that could be sustained for any length of time.

However, there was one person in town who was keeping a dark, evil secret, a person who had murdered two women in their beds. So far law enforcement and everyone else had no idea who that killer might be and if or when he might strike again. The murders of two women who had worked as waitresses at the popular cafe had definitely put a gray pall over the town.

He shoved this disturbing thought aside and knocked again, this time hearing a woman's voice respond for him to hang on. The door finally opened and he got his first look at Melanie Brooks.

Stunning. She was absolutely stunning, with pale blond hair that fell to her shoulders in soft waves and eyes that were bluer than any he'd ever seen before. She was slender and wore a pair of black slacks, a black blouse and an irritated scowl that looked permanently etched onto her face. He couldn't discern how tall she might be as she sat in a wheelchair.

Adam swept his cowboy hat from his head, quickly raked his fingers through his dark hair and hoped his shock at her condition didn't show on his face. "Good afternoon. I'm Adam Benson and I'm here about the room for rent."

She blinked in obvious surprise and there was a long, awkward silence.

"You have a sign in your window? A room for rent?" he prompted.

She used her arms to move herself backward and then gestured for him to step into the foyer. "Adam Benson," she mused, her eyes narrowed as her gaze held his. "I heard you were a drunk."

Adam took a step back, stunned by her unexpected words. "I was," he admitted with painful honesty. "But I'm not drinking anymore. And the rumors I heard about you were that you're a sour, rude and cranky woman. The verdict is still out on that."

Her eyes narrowed even more. "You have a big ranch on the edge of town. Why would you need to rent a room?"

"My brother, his new wife and son have all moved into the ranch house and I'm looking for a change of address." His decision to leave the house where he'd grown up was far more complicated than that, but he figured Melanie didn't need to know the details. "So, can I see the room?"

"It's actually more than just a room. Follow me." She moved out of the foyer and into a large, airy living room with a staircase that led up to the second floor. She stopped at the foot of the staircase, the dainty frown still etched in her forehead.

For somebody who had had a sign hanging in the window for months, she seemed reluctant to allow him to see the space she was renting. Was her reluctance based on the fact that he was a male? Or was it specifically aimed at him personally? Certainly the reputation of all the Benson brothers had taken a beating in the past year, but over the past couple of months things had calmed down.

"Look, Ms. Brooks, I just need a place to hang my hat. I'm not looking for any trouble. I'll pay the rent on time and be a respectful tenant. Speaking of rent, what are you looking to get each month?"

She told him a figure that seemed a little high and he wondered if she'd done it on purpose to chase him away or if she'd intended to ask for that kind of money from anyone who showed an interest.

"Sounds good," he replied.

"I'm actually renting the entire second floor. I'm certainly not using any of the rooms upstairs." A touch of bitterness laced her voice. "Go on up and have a look around."

Adam nodded, and as he climbed the stairs, he wondered what had put her in the wheelchair. He reminded himself that it—that she—was none of his business. He was simply looking for peace and quiet, for a haven where he could gather himself together and figure out what exactly he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

The upstairs was comprised of three bedrooms and a bathroom. One of the rooms was set up like a sitting room, with a sofa, a television and an overstuffed chair with a reading lamp behind it. Adam could easily visualize himself in that big chair in the evenings, leisurely reading the newspaper or a novel.

The view from the window was of Main Street, and he stood for a moment and looked outside, trying to get a feel for the space.

The bedrooms were decorated in earth tones, making them feel neither masculine nor feminine but simply functional. The larger of the two bedrooms was located next to the sitting room and also had a view of Main Street out the window. Everything was neat and tidy and it all felt oddly right to him.

He wasn't sure what Melanie might have heard about him or his brothers, and she appeared to be the cranky sort, but surely they wouldn't have much interaction if he moved in here.

It was just a room, not a relationship, he reminded himself as he walked back down the stairs. Melanie had remained where he'd left her, at the foot of the stairs and she watched him solemnly as he hit the lower landing.

"We'd share kitchen space," she said. "You'd get the upper cabinets and I use the lower ones. You buy your own food and cook it and clean up the mess afterward." She said the words resolutely, as if she'd come to some sort of decision about him while he'd been upstairs. "It would be a month-to-month lease. I can get rid of you or you can move out with thirty days' notice. If you drink, you're out. If you're a messy pig, you're out, and if you think I'm rude or whatever, then you deal with it or move out."

He watched her closely, seeking any sign of a sense of humor lurking in her amazing blue eyes, but there

didn't appear to be any. It was almost as if she were daring him to move in, confident that within thirty days he'd either want to move or she'd have a good reason to kick him out.

"I'll take it," he replied. "I'm assuming you want first and last months' rent along with a deposit of an additional month?"

She nodded. "When would you want to move in?"

"Tomorrow morning around nine?"

She released a deep sigh, although Adam couldn't tell if the sigh was of relief or apprehension. "That would be fine," she replied as she headed back toward the front door.

He followed behind her, noting how her hair shone in the sunlight that danced in through the windows. As they reached the front door, he turned and faced her once again.

Once again he was struck by her beauty. Her features were classic, high cheekbones emphasizing the slenderness of her face and her straight, perfect nose. She had a generous mouth, which might have been incredibly sexy if the corners weren't turned downward. Those lips would be inviting if she'd just smile a little bit.

For just a moment as he gazed at her, he saw a hint of vulnerability in the depths of her eyes, and a surge of unexpected protectiveness welled up inside him. How did she manage to live here by herself?

He mentally shook himself. She obviously didn't need a rescuer and that wasn't his role here. Besides, he had a feeling that if he expressed any desire to help her, she'd kick him to the curb before he'd managed to hang a shirt in one of the closets upstairs.

"Then I guess I'll see you in the morning," she said as they reached the front door. "In the meantime I'll write up an agreement for you to sign when you come back tomorrow."

"That sounds good," he replied agreeably. He started to step out on the porch but paused and turned back to her as she said his name.

"This is all new territory for me, sharing my space. I'm sure we're going to have some kinks to work out, and I forgot to tell you I don't allow music. If you must listen to a radio or whatever, then either get earphones or make sure it's low enough that I can't hear it down here."

He placed his hat back on his head and offered her a smile. "I guess we'll figure it out as we go."

It wasn't until he was back in his truck that he wondered if he'd made a mistake. Although she'd agreed to him renting the space, it was obvious she wasn't thrilled about it. And what was the deal about music? Odd. Very odd.

But the ranch house where he'd been alone for so long now once again held the sounds of a happy family. Nick, Courtney and little Garrett filled the spaces that had been empty for so long, their love lighting areas that had been full of darkness.

The truth of the matter was for the past two years Adam's heart had been filled with the darkness of loss and

betrayal and shame, and he wasn't at all sure he was ready to leave that darkness behind.

His brother and his family would be better off if Adam wasn't there. They needed time to build their family without him being a third wheel.

This was the right move to make, he told himself. He clicked the two chips together in his pocket and then started the truck and pulled away from the house and headed down the street toward the Cowboy Cafe.

All he knew was that he needed a space of his own to figure out who he was aside from a man still grieving for the sister who had been killed in a car accident two years before, a man still fighting the desire to lose himself in the bottom of a bottle of booze.

Finally he had to come to terms with the guilt and a faint simmer of apprehension that threatened to grab him by the throat when he thought of Sam, the older brother he loved, who was currently in jail, facing charges of attempted murder.

Now Adam was moving into a house with a woman who obviously had issues of her own. Once again he wondered what had happened to her that had placed her in a wheelchair and why nobody in town seemed to know much about Melanie Brooks despite the fact that her mother had been a resident of the small town all her life.

He frowned and reminded himself that no matter how pretty he thought she was, Melanie Brooks was a mystery he definitely didn't need to explore.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Amy Davis:

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