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In case you missed it, here's the book's description:

There's something odd about Kade Colton, and not just his refusal to taste Felicity Hammond's famous baking. Sure, he's the sexiest cowboy she's ever seen, but working midnights protecting the local ranch doesn't explain his aversion to daylight. Her father warns her to steer clear, but when a foreclosure notice threatens to close the family business for good, Felicity will try anything to save it—even answering Kade's scandalous questions.

Kade lives by two rules: work alone, and don't get involved. But it's easier to hunt a jackalope in Yellowstone than get information in Holly Hill without drawing attention. Even if it means breaking his rules, Felicity's connections are exactly what he needs.

But letting her in means revealing why he's really there. With bodies turning up in town, sharing his secret puts his life on the line. It's not his first go-round with monsters like these, but this one's big—and he'll need all the help he can get. And no matter how he tries to ignore it, there's something about Felicity that's got him feeling alive for the first time in years...

* * *

Her Midnight Cowboy

Keeper's Kin: Book One

Sample edition

by Beth Alvarez

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to real people or events is entirely coincidental.

HER MIDNIGHT COWBOY

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ONE

“MARSHALL MCCULLOUGH LOST another handful of cattle over the weekend.”

Felicity Hammond glanced up as her father tossed a newspaper onto the counter. “Was that in the paper?” She flicked her head, growling when the stray lock of brown hair in front of her eyes refused to move.

“Not yet, but I’m sure it will be. I ran into him at the gas station. Here, let me.” He tucked her hair behind her ear with a chuckle.

“Thanks, Daddy.” Elbow deep in a bowl of pastry dough, she didn’t have a hand to scratch her itching nose with, either. She rubbed her face against her shoulder, letting the coarse knit of her pink sweater do the job. “How many cattle is that, now?”

“Almost a dozen since Halloween, but they never seem to be able to get more than one or two away from the ranch. Whoever it is, they aren’t a good cattle thief, but they sure are persistent.” He sat down at the kitchen table with a sigh, helping himself to one of her finished treats.

Emmett Hammond had a quiet presence. Half the time Felicity didn’t notice whether he was home or not, but her odd schedule contributed to that as much as anything. Like her, he was slight of frame, though tanned and gray-haired. She thought he looked more tired every time she laid eyes on him. They ran the Hilltop House Bed and Breakfast together; Felicity had assumed her mother’s responsibilities after she passed. Even with the two of them, it always seemed they were falling behind. She often wondered how her parents had managed to raise her and run the place at the same time.

“A persistent thief is just as bad as a skilled one.” She scraped dough from the bottom of the bowl, making sure the flour was worked all the way through. “Maybe worse, since they still haven’t caught them.”

“He mentioned hiring new help to watch the herd overnight.”

“Who did? Mr. McCullough?” Felicity glanced up. “You better not be eating my pastries, Daddy. All these are already spoken for.”

Emmett licked his fingers clean, feigning innocence. “Miss Gertie won’t miss one. And yes, McCullough.”

Shrugging, she dusted fresh flour over the countertop. “Well, I hope it helps. It better, or he won’t have any cattle left before long.”

Her father made a sound of agreement. “I’m going upstairs for the night. You going to stay up a while?”

She laughed, gesturing to the spread of ingredients on the counter.

He waved a hand, laughing as well. “All right, then. Good night.”

“Night, Daddy.” Turning back to her baking, Felicity shook her head to herself. The only news out of Holly Hill these days was livestock theft. From large ranches like Marshall McCullough’s place to small hobby farms, everyone had lost at least a few animals.

She dropped a ball of dough onto the counter and dusted her rolling pin. She barely got one roll in before the back door swung open, a gust of icy wind stirring her skirts.

Gasping in the cold, Felicity spun to look at the clock before glaring at the bundled figure that shut the door and stamped feeling back into their feet. It was half past eleven.

“The inn’s closed,” she said, tempering her voice. Texas weather wasn’t normally so cold. The frosty temperatures made her snappish.

“I know,” a deep, masculine voice replied from behind a thick scarf. “That’s why I came through the back door. The front was locked.” He stuffed his gloves into his back pocket, rubbing his hands together. Then he pulled off his black Stetson and unwound his scarf from around his head.

Normally she would have chased him right back out the door and notified her father of a rude guest, but the cordial note in his voice made her pause.

Whoever he was, he wasn’t from Holly Hill. Six-foot-two and broad shouldered as he was, he would have been hard to miss even without his striking looks. He had a squared jaw and a hint of a dimple in his chin, which almost distracted from the dimple in his cheek when he flashed her a crooked grin. Hazel eyes glittered behind inky black hair, which he swept back with one hand. “I know it’s late, ma’am, I’m sorry. Name’s Kade. Just hired on at the McCullough ranch, but with his family visitin’ before the holidays, there ain’t room in the bunkhouse just yet. He sent me on over here.”

Felicity nodded, her displeasure fading. No wonder he’d been insistent on coming in. There weren’t any hotels in Holly Hill, which meant good business for them during the holiday rush. In all their years of operation, though, they’d never put up a relative of Marshall McCullough.

“Funny, we were just talking about him hiring more help. I’m Felicity Hammond.” She wiped her hands clean on a towel before offering one for a handshake.

Kade replaced his hat and stepped forward to take it. His hand was cold, but his grip was strong and grounding. “Pleasure to meet you. Still got rooms in this establishment of yours?”

“A few.” She tossed the towel onto the counter. “How long will you be staying?”

“Until space at the bunkhouse opens up, I’d reckon. Might want to put me near a door, in any case, since work’ll have me keepin’ strange hours.” He stuffed his scarf into the pocket of his coat, giving her baking tools a curious glance.

Of course; he’d be riding with the cattle overnight. “We have the old master suite open,” she suggested. “That might work best for you. It’s the only room with a private bath, and it’ll be nice and quiet during the day.”

He grinned. “That’d be a treat, so long as I can afford it.”

“We can give you a weekly rate. It won’t pinch your wallet too much, I promise.” Turning, Felicity motioned for him to follow her. She led him through the sitting room and into the foyer. A small reception counter sat near the wall, a worn-looking chair and ottoman nestled beside the open staircase.

He peeled off his coat as they walked.

She slid behind the counter, flipping open a small book. “Kade, was it?”

“Yes, ma’am, Kade Colton.”

“That’s a nice name,” she murmured, filling out his room information with a neat hand.

“Thank you, ma’am. My mama sure thought so.”

Smiling, she took an old-fashioned key from a box beneath the counter and jerked her head toward the stairs. “When do you start working for Mr. McCullough?”

“Tonight, after I put my things upstairs. He didn't want me lingerin' too long. Sounds like he needs someone in the saddle as quick as possible.” He followed close on her heels, his hand skimming the banister.

She caught a hint of cologne when she turned her head, something sweet and slightly spicy, rather than the stale old musk most of the local cowboys wore. It was a pleasant difference. “Did you have to travel far, Mr. Colton?”

“A bit, but it ain't so bad. Been bouncin' around the country for work for what seems like forever. Been up north a while, caught wind of more work down this way.” He followed her up the hall, shifting on his feet while she unlocked the suite.

“Well in that case, welcome to Texas.” Felicity offered a broad smile as she extended the key.

He smiled back, the dimple in his cheek deeper this time. “Thank you kindly, Filly.”

She tried not to snort at the nickname. “If you need anything, I'll be downstairs for a bit. If an emergency comes up, my room's the one off the sitting room downstairs. Breakfast is at eight, though I suppose that'll be dinner for you.”

“You run this big old place all by yourself?” Kade leaned to the side, surveying the suite. Pleased, he straightened.

“With my father,” she said. “His room's at the end of the hall if you need him. He tends most things during the day. I cover most of the night.”

“I'll try not to make too much noise, then. I'll just get my bags out of the truck and be out of your way for the night.” He touched the brim of his hat, bouncing the key in his hand.

In the kitchen downstairs, the timer for the pastries in the oven went off.

“Oh!” Felicity gasped, picking up her skirts. She was halfway down the stairs before she remembered her manners. “Have a good night at work, Mr. Colton. I hope you enjoy your stay.”

* * *

Kade didn't know what to expect from a run-down old bed and breakfast on top of a hill. He made a habit of avoiding small places, or anywhere people might be inclined to ask questions. This time, however, the work was too good to pass up. If everything went according to plan, he wouldn't be there long. Plus, luck was on his side this time around. The holidays were still a few weeks away, Thanksgiving right behind them, and that meant the little inn would be quiet a bit longer.

It wasn't a bad place on the inside, the walls in good repair and the air rich with the scents of cinnamon and vanilla. Warm, too, which certainly beat his truck.

Then there was the hostess, with her round face and long brown locks.

As a rule, he didn't get involved with locals while on a job, but that didn't mean he couldn't enjoy a bit of eye candy. Watching her scale the stairs ahead of him had been a treat, and something that hadn't caught his fancy in a long time. But watching was the only treat he had time for, he reminded himself, wiping his palm against his jeans as if to scrape away the feeling of her handshake. He had work to do, and thinking of those doe eyes and round hips wasn't going to get

it done any faster.

He didn't have a lot in his truck, just two bags of personal effects. He hefted them out and double-checked the console for anything important that might have made its way out of the bags, then paused to check on his horse in its trailer. His employers always liked that he brought his own mount, and having a familiar animal to work with made it easier for him.

Satisfied, Kade slung one bag over his shoulder and trudged back inside, toting his things up to the suite.

It wasn't a great room, sparsely furnished with just a queen-sized bed, nightstand and dresser. Odd that it didn't have a mirror—not that he thought he'd need it—but with the adjacent bathroom and its mirror over a wide sink for two, he supposed it wasn't needed. No artwork on the walls, but he didn't need that, either. It was a simple and functional space, and as long as it gave him somewhere to sleep, it'd do fine.

He didn't think much of the door locking with a skeleton key, a latch that was easily picked, but he figured Felicity would be up there daily to clean anyway. He wasn't in the practice of leaving anything incriminating in his lodgings, but he'd double-check before he left each night, knowing she'd have the chance to look around while he was gone.

Felicity said she'd be in the kitchen, so after bundling up again, he went out the front. Whether he was concerned about drawing her attention or himself getting distracted, he didn't know, and he didn't give it much thought. Work was waiting.

The McCullough ranch wasn't the smallest outfit he'd worked, but the rancher only held a couple thousand acres and a few hundred head. Were it not for the unusual circumstances of this job, he would've thought it beneath him. But the pay up front was generous, given the size of the ranch, and the fringe benefits meant a few weeks here would likely line his pocket well. The worst of it would be the cold.

His travels through Texas had shown him balmy weather in the past, but he'd never run this far north. Holly Hill was sandwiched between Dallas and Amarillo and it was colder than he thought it should be, though small talk with the locals at gas stations assured him snow and freezing temperatures weren't unusual for this part of the country. He shook his head, adjusting his gloves as he parked near the horse barn and slid out of the truck.

Marshall McCullough had been waiting for him. The man moved across the gravel drive between the house and the barns with a long-legged stride, a pair of border collies trotting at his heels. "Bit later than I expected," he called. He didn't wear a coat and didn't seem to feel the cold. His long-sleeved blue dress shirt made him look like a businessman in spite of his tan cowboy hat and worn jeans. The dogs growled, territorial, but a gesture from the rancher silenced them.

"Blew a tire on the trailer comin' down 40," Kade replied easily, pulling off one glove to greet the man with a handshake. "Fine piece of land you have, Mr. McCullough. Farther north than I expected to see a ranch, though."

"Ah, there are enough farms out here. Started as a family thing, grew over the years. No sense movin' south when all the family's always been here." McCullough gripped his hand hard, his salt-and-pepper mustache twitching. "Colton, was it?"

"Yes, sir. Kade. Mind showing me where to put my horse?"

The rancher nodded, scratching his forehead with a thumbnail. "Right this way. We've got plenty more horses if you need 'em, but one should do you, most nights. It's twelve hours on, twelve hours off, six to six."

"Dex should be fine. We're used to long hours." Kade wriggled his fingers back into his glove, making his way to the back of the trailer. His tall bay gelding stamped and snorted, anxious to move. "Sounds like you've had a time fillin' that shift."

"Took some doing," McCullough agreed. "Get a lot of city boys out here these days who expect hour lunches and free wi-fi."

Kade gave a deep, hearty laugh. "Well, you won't have that problem with me. Don't eat much, anyway."

Chuckling, the rancher waved him toward the barn. "There's an open stall down here on the right, and plenty of space in the tack room for your things. Make sure it's labeled if you don't want the other boys using it, otherwise we share and share alike. Help yourself to anythin' you need, saddle soap or extra leads."

The other horses in the barn whinnied and stomped, tossing their heads and rolling their eyes as Kade led his mount past.

"Don't pay them any mind," McCullough said gruffly, striding ahead and opening the stall door. "We've all been a bit antsy about visitors the past bit. The animals feel it when the rest of us are antsy, sure as anything."

Kade waved him off. "Ain't no thing. Want me to saddle up for a tour?"

"Nah, he's had a trip too, let 'im rest. Let me grab some extra gas from the shed and we'll take an ATV."

Nodding, Kade unclipped the lead from Dex's halter, patting the gelding's neck before stepping back and letting McCullough close the stall. The rancher made his way back toward the house, the dogs trotting beside him. By the time Kade had his tack put up in the barn, the man was back with a mud-spattered 4-wheeler, a red fuel can strapped to the back.

"Little late for scouting fences, but we'll make do. Got a couple flashlights. Hop on and hang on tight." McCullough extended one steel flashlight, starting the ATV after Kade took it and clambered on behind him.

The low clouds in the sky made it hard to tell which direction they headed, but with the fence running for miles around the ranch's acreage it was impossible to get lost. They ran a long track around the ranch, sticking close to the fence when they could, McCullough pointing out landmarks and places cattle had gone missing.

"And here's where they got the last batch, near as we can figure." The rancher shut off the ATV and gestured toward a new section of wire in the electric fence.

Kade slipped off the 4-wheeler, shining his flashlight at the ground. Sure enough, there were tracks from cloven hooves and booted feet, all worked together in such a mish-mash it was hard to tell where they'd been headed, save that the trail led past the electric wire and disappeared into the field beyond.

He frowned. "Noticed anything unusual when the cattle go missin'?"

McCullough's mustache twitched. "Unusual how? Cattle goin' missing is unusual on its own."

“Any injuries in the rest of the herd or anything like that? If they’re only makin’ off with one or two at a time, I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re clumsy enough to rough ‘em up when they’re trying to lead them away.” Checking the tracks again, Kade worried his lower lip with his teeth. He’d expected something more remarkable than just boots. For a moment, he wondered if he’d misjudged the job. Then he caught it.

Scattered among the imprints left by hooves were something else, trampled to near-nonexistence. Not quite canine, the toes too elongated.

Jackpot.

Adjusting his hat, the rancher nodded. “Now that you mention it, the boys have noticed a couple of the cattle lookin’ roughed up. Doesn’t seem like it’d make much difference whether it happens or not, though.”

“Does it happen when I’m in the saddle,” Kade said. “Keepin’ people from makin’ off with your cattle might be the big part of the job, but I’m responsible for keepin’ them healthy, too.”

McCullough nodded again. “Fair enough. Have to say I’m partial to keeping the herd healthy and sound, myself. Ready to head back?”

“For tonight.” Kade strode back to the ATV. “You want me to replace whoever you got out there now?”

“Nah, not tonight. I’m sure you had quite a drive today.” The rancher fumbled with his flashlight, checking the fuel gauge as Kade climbed on. “They get you put up at Hilltop?”

“Sure enough. Mighty fine little lady workin’ in that kitchen, I gotta say.” Kade frowned after the words escaped, surprised at the interest in his own voice.

McCullough turned his head, giving him a warning look. “I’d be careful around Miss Felicity, if I were you. Emmett don’t take kindly to men sniffing around his little girl.”

Kade raised a brow. “She didn’t look so little to me. How old is she?”

“Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, somewhere thereabouts. Don’t really matter, though. A girl’s always a little girl in her daddy’s eyes, and Felicity’s all he’s got left in this world.”

“Well, thank you kindly for the warning,” Kade muttered, making himself comfortable for the ride home. It was starting to sound like his eye candy was more trouble than it was worth.

Then again, why did he care so much, anyway?

TWO

BELLS ON THE front door jingled merrily, announcing the first customer of the morning. Felicity jerked awake, blinking against the glare of sun. She didn't remember falling asleep, just sitting at the table in the kitchen to put on her gloves and pack up the pastries she'd finished overnight. Most mornings, her father woke her before people started coming and going.

Peeling off her gloves and pressing a hand to her mouth to stifle a yawn, she dragged herself upright and crept to the foyer. The hunched old woman waiting at the counter was no surprise; Gertie was often her first customer of the day.

"Morning, Miss Gertie. I've got your order back in the kitchen." Felicity yawned again. "Oh, excuse me."

"Up all night again, sweetheart?" Gertie patted her arm sympathetically, herding her toward the kitchen.

"Not on purpose." Shuffling ahead, Felicity double-checked the number of pastries in the box on the table before turning to give it to Gertie. She always made extra, but it seemed her father always tried to sneak one or two off the pans when she wasn't looking. She always worried about coming up short. "Here you go. Half a dozen apple, half a dozen cherry. As usual."

Gertie opened the box, inhaling with a smile. "Smells as good as usual, too. You really ought to just open a bakery, hon. There's a storefront open on the town square, and—"

"And I know I'd never be able to afford that rent," Felicity said before she could finish. "Besides, how am I supposed to manage a bakery all by myself? At least here I can count on Daddy for help." She scooped dirty mixing bowls and measuring cups off the counter, piling them into the sink and turning on the tap.

The old woman laughed. "As if you let him lift a finger in the kitchen. Well, you think about it, Miss Felicity. You know there are a dozen people in Holly Hill who would loan you the money to get started."

Felicity started to reply, stopping short when the back door opened and Kade slipped in, his black Stetson pulled low and his scarf wrapped to his eyes. She straightened, putting on her best hostess smile. "Good morning. There are some fresh pastries by the fridge if you want them."

"Ain't hungry," he replied, barely giving Gertie a glance. He tucked his chin into his chest, brushing past them and disappearing around the corner.

Felicity blinked, listening to the thump of his boots on the stairs.

"Who was that?" Gertie asked, squinting over her shoulder.

Giving herself a shake, Felicity turned back to the sink, pouring dish soap into the running water. "Marshall McCullough's new ranch hand. McCullough's bunkhouse is full while he's got family visiting, so Mr. Colton's staying here until they head home."

"Manners could use a bit of work, couldn't they?"

"He was much nicer last night." Felicity shrugged.

Gertie rearranged her pastries and closed the box. "Must've been, to make you jump to attention like that the moment he walks in."

Felicity's eyes went wide, shades of crimson staining her cheeks. "I'm just trying to be a good hostess!"

"Now now, don't go taking offense. I don't mean anything by it." Gertie patted her arm, raising her box. "Thank you for the pastries, honey. I'll be back for another box of the same next week."

"Sure thing. Thank you, Miss Gertie." Felicity turned back to the dishes, still blushing after the old woman left.

She didn't jump for Kade any faster than she jumped for anyone else. She had to be friendly, that was all; especially to first-time visitors. Word of mouth could make or break a business, and she didn't want anyone to be disappointed by their stay. If she did things right, all they'd have to talk about would be fresh baked goods and fresh towels every morning.

"Oh, shoot." She jerked her hands out of the dishwater, drying them on her apron and hurrying up the stairs.

The suite's door was closed, but she saw a shadow move past the crack beneath it.

Rolling down the sleeves of her pink sweater and smoothing her white skirt, Felicity cleared her throat and knocked on the door.

A long moment dragged past before it opened. Kade stood there barefoot, his blue plaid shirt held closed with just one button, exposing enough of his sculpted, muscular chest to make the blush crawl back into her cheeks. His white undershirt was on the floor behind him.

"I'm sorry for bothering you, Mr. Colton," she started, forcing her eyes back to his face instead of letting them explore.

He met her gaze, his cheek dimpling with his smirk. She'd caught him in the middle of undressing, and he'd caught her looking. Her heart thundered in her chest.

"What can I do for you, Filly?" he asked, the nickname rolling off his tongue like a caress.

She clutched her skirt with both hands, staring back into his hazel eyes like a spooked deer. "I, ah . . . I just remembered we never worked out how you wanted housekeeping handled."

"I'll be out of your hair by six most nights. I think I work six days and get one off. You can poke in here in the evenings, when I'm gone." He paused, a crooked grin splitting his features. "Can't imagine you'd want to be in here durin' the daytime. Can't promise I'd be decent."

Her eyes widened, her ears and neck burning. She must've been red as a lobster by this point, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he kept grinning at her, leaning a shoulder against the door frame and hooking his thumbs in the pockets of his jeans. His shirt pulled open just a bit wider, exposing more of his chest, inviting her eyes.

She struggled not to give him the satisfaction. "Are you sure you aren't hungry?"

"Not for anything you're servin'." His eyes traveled down her form, and suddenly the entirety of her slight frame felt awash with heat.

"Sleep well, then." Spinning on her heel, Felicity marched back to the stairs, arms so stiff by her sides that she must have looked like a penguin as she walked.

Behind her, Kade chuckled before the door clicked shut.

In the kitchen, she attacked the bowls and pans in the sink with a new vigor, scrubbing until

the last of the flush in her cheeks faded away.

So he was attractive. There were thousands of attractive men in the world, even some in Holly Hill. Men other than Kade Colton, that was. That man was trouble, she could tell already. With his lopsided grin and obvious awareness of his own looks. The way he'd leaned in the doorway screamed womanizer.

She gritted her teeth and scrubbed a pan harder. She'd be a kind hostess, no doubt about that. But she wasn't about to let a man crawl under her skin.

"What's got you so worked up this morning?" Her father's familiar, soothing voice was just what she needed.

Felicity exhaled, releasing frustration before she turned to face him. "Nothing, Daddy."

He didn't look convinced, but he didn't press, instead planting a kiss on her temple and then crossing to the coffee pot to pour himself a cup. "I saw you checked someone into the suite."

"McCullough's new man," she replied. "Just until his guests are gone. He'll be out before we hit our Christmas peak."

"Well, I'll have to remember to thank McCullough for the business. What's the guy like?" He sat down at the table, perusing the basket of goodies she put out every morning.

Felicity huffed, this time sending her father an incredulous look. "He didn't want any of my pastries!"

Emmett blinked at her, then burst into laughter. "Is that why you're so angry?"

She felt heat creeping into her cheeks again. Lord have mercy, it was going to be a long day. "Everyone likes my baking," she muttered, returning to the dishes. "Gertie even mentioned the bakery again today."

Her father fell quiet.

"It's silly, of course," she went on hastily, rinsing the last pan in the sink and dropping the remaining dirty dishes into the suds. "I couldn't possibly manage something like that all by myself, and I'd never trust anyone else with my recipes."

"Felicity . . ." her father began, leaning back in his chair.

She shook her head. "We're not having this conversation again, Daddy. I don't care what you think. The Hilltop House isn't holding me back. I have everything I need right here." She waved a hand around. "This kitchen is perfect. It's laid out well, it's clean, certified for food preparation, and right around the corner from my own cozy bed. What else could I want?"

Shrugging, he took a cinnamon roll from the basket. "It's okay to want a life outside what you have here."

Felicity tried not to sigh. It was a discussion they'd had a hundred times. The closer she got to thirty, the more often they seemed to have it. "I need to step out and make a few deliveries this morning. Need to pick up a few groceries, too. Do you need anything?"

"Nothing that isn't on the list. I can finish the dishes for you if you want to get a head start."

"That sounds perfect." She dried her hands on her apron before peeling it off, checking the stack of boxes ready for delivery.

Halfway down the stack was a box of turnovers for McCullough's ranch hands. Two dozen didn't go far, but they ordered the same thing every week. The ranch was on the other end of town. She usually put it off, delivering it last, which meant they didn't get their sweets until late

afternoon. If she was going to wait that long, maybe she could just send it with Kade.

The thought put a vision of him back in her head, thumbs in his pockets, shirt gaping. Scowling, she moved that box to the top of the stack. She wasn't about to ask favors from him after that stunt. Besides, she was supposed to be the good hostess, and a good hostess didn't send their guests on errands.

Blowing from the north, the wind had a bit of a bite to it. Felicity was used to chilly winters, but the cold scent of snow hung on the air, and that was unusual for the end of November. A white Christmas was a pleasant thought, though, and she reminded herself to look for the boxes of decorations when she got home. There were garlands and bows for the wraparound porch somewhere. It was about time to brighten up the exterior, anyway. They'd want it to look as festive as possible before holiday guests started checking in.

The ranch looked the same as ever, the border collies waiting on the porch with wagging tails as she made her way up the drive with the box of baked goods. They followed her to the door, ever hopeful she might drop something, disappointed as always when their owner answered her knock without one of the sweets making its way to the ground.

"Morning, Mr. McCullough." Felicity held up the box with a smile.

The rancher grinned, stepping out onto the porch. "Well, now, that's a surprise. Early delivery."

She passed over the treats, tucking her hands into the pockets of her bright red coat. "Got a bit of an earlier start than I'm used to. Hope the boys enjoy them."

"They always do," McCullough chuckled. "Hope your start wasn't too early. I know my boy didn't get over there until late."

"Oh, no. I was still up baking when he checked in. I was a bit surprised he went right to work, but he sure seemed worn out when he came in this morning. Then again, I guess you do work your boys hard."

His smile wavered and he tilted his head. "Naw, I told him he wouldn't be starting until tonight. Figured he'd had a long day and would want a chance to rest. We only toured the ranch, then I told him to head on home."

Felicity fidgeted where she stood. "Well, that's odd. Wonder where he went." Holly Hill wasn't exactly known for its night life; the only thing that stayed open past nine was the gas station.

McCullough shrugged. "Explorin' with his night off? Who knows. Anyway, I hope he's not too much trouble for you. I'll have him out of your hair most of the time. I appreciate you havin' space for him when I don't."

"And we appreciate the business. Works out well for both of us, I suppose." She bobbed her head and stepped back. "Have a good morning."

Waving, she hurried back to her car.

The other stops weren't so interesting. No news was good news, but aside from McCullough's missing cattle, there didn't seem to be anything for the town to talk about. She had the same conversation with her half dozen other deliveries before stopping for groceries and heading home.

When she got there, her father was on the porch, dragging long, green garlands out of a card-

board box.

Felicity laughed, gathering as many plastic grocery bags as she could carry. She got them all in one trip, if barely. “How’d you know I was thinking that on my way out?”

Her father lifted both hands, showing off the impressive tangle in the middle of one garland. “Because we’re family, that’s how. You want to help me with this?”

She nodded. “After I get the groceries put away.”

“Oh. That reminds me. Ansel Fare wanted a platter of gingerbread men for this weekend. I told him you’d give him a call, I didn’t know how busy you were this week.”

“Never too busy for Mr. Fare’s office,” she replied.

Emmett met her at the door, holding it open for her. “Does that have something to do with his office being in charge of the lease on that empty storefront?”

Snorting, Felicity gave him a hard look. “Now, Daddy. If I had a hand free, I’d smack you. I’m doing my baking here, and that’s not going to change. Not today, not tomorrow, not two hours from now.”

“You never know,” was all he said.

* * *

Sweet aromas struck his nose the moment Kade opened his door. He gave his room one last look-over from the doorway, then put on his black Stetson and headed downstairs.

The smell of sugar and spices grew as he crept into the kitchen. Felicity stood at the counter, scraping gingerbread men off a cookie sheet and arranging them on a rack to cool. She glanced up as he came in, smiling at him in a way that made his belly tighten.

She certainly was a pretty thing; her hair glowed like honey in the early evening light, her big brown eyes glittering with her good mood. She wore another loose skirt and bulky sweater—peach, this time, instead of pink—and his eyes traveled over her frame without painting any idea what was underneath. It frustrated him more than it should have.

A woman on his mind was the last thing he needed.

“Evening.” She pulled off her oven mitts, hanging them on a drawer knob. “Want a cookie? I made extra.”

“I ain’t a fan of sweets.” He didn’t give the cookies a second glance, opening cabinets until he found the glasses. He filled one with water from the tap and lingered at the sink to drink it.

The corners of her mouth twitched. “We have coffee made, if you’d like that.”

He put down his glass. “Ain’t a fan of coffee, either.”

That made her laugh. “What kind of cowboy doesn’t like coffee?”

Indifferent, he shrugged.

Felicity eyed him, her cheery smile fading to a look of frustrated puzzlement. Then she turned to check the oven. Another sheet of cookies waited inside, nearly done. She poked one with the tip of a butter knife, then straightened and closed the oven door. “Did you have time to take a look around town square last night?”

“Too busy working,” he said, regretting it almost immediately. Her head snapped back around, her eyes narrowed.

He cleared his throat. “Dex gets antsy on long trips. Took a ride to cool his heels, scope out

the ranch on my own. Get familiar with where I'll be workin', you know."

"Dex?"

"My horse."

Her mouth formed a silent "o." Then she leaned past him, dropping dishes into the sink. "So a long trip, huh? You mentioned that last night. Where are you from? I'd guessed somewhere close, based on your accent."

There she went with the questions. Kade hated that, but he tried not to let his annoyance show. He didn't have the head for keeping track of lies. Truth made it easier to keep people from being suspicious, but it left an easy trail to follow if anyone tried to trace him. "Grew up outside of Nashville," he said honestly. He'd been far enough north for his last run that he didn't think he'd be easily tracked. "Suppose I do got a bit of a drawl."

"I've heard it's beautiful out that way." Her smile came back, giving him uncomfortably pleasant thoughts. "I always thought I'd like to see it in person."

"You've never been?" He shifted the conversation away from himself, grateful for the chance. Most people liked to talk about themselves, he'd found. Then they'd even thank him for listening. Having people know you was a problem. Having them like you was beneficial.

"No. Can't say I've traveled much at all. Vacations are expensive. And who'd watch the bed and breakfast, besides?" Felicity motioned toward the ceiling, as if that constituted the whole house. "But it does mean I know a lot about Holly Hill. Makes me a decent tour guide, if you'd like one before you head to work?"

Kade glanced out the window, checking the position of the sun before looking at his watch. "I dunno, Filly. I gotta be there by six."

"It won't take long. I don't know if you've noticed, but this isn't exactly a big town. Besides, it's tradition for us to show our out-of-state visitors around town." She blinked those big eyes at him with a sweet smile, her dark eyelashes brushing her cheeks.

He hesitated, looking at the sun again.

"Besides," she added, "we can walk. It's a quick trip from here. You can jump in your truck and be on your way as soon as we're done."

"All right." He thumbed the brim of his hat. "Let me get my coat."

Felicity's face lit up. "I'll get my shoes."

He couldn't imagine she really wanted to walk with him. After the way he'd made her blush that morning, he was surprised enough she could look him in the eye. But she had her shoes and coat on when he came back, and the last pan of cookies sat cooling on the stovetop.

"All set?" She pulled her hair out of the collar of her coat, letting it tumble over her shoulders in loose waves.

Drawing his scarf and gloves from his coat pockets, he inclined his head. "Lead the way."

She shut the door behind them, watching as he draped the scarf around his neck. "I'd have thought a cowboy would be used to the cold."

"Bein' used to it doesn't mean I gotta like it." Jamming his fingers into his gloves, he followed her to the edge of the road.

The rural streets were barely wide enough for two cars, roughly paved and lined by grass or gravel through most of the town. The square was only a few short blocks away from the bed and

breakfast, which perched on a swell hardly big enough to call it a hill. The handful of major streets that formed the square boasted sidewalks and proper curbs.

Kade touched her arm as they turned the corner and stepped up onto the sidewalk, positioning himself between her and the road.

She glanced at his boots, then smiled up at him. "So here we are. This is Second Street. First is back there behind us. I couldn't tell you why the town grew up on Second, I suppose because the courthouse is over here." She pointed at a stately but featureless building across the street. It took up most of a city block on its own, though a portion of the spread was green lawn and a white gazebo with green garlands twisted around its rails. "The square runs around it. The police station is in the back of the courthouse, that little door with the hitching posts."

He snorted a laugh. "You still get a lot of horse traffic out here?"

"No, but the officers have a couple. I think it's for their convenience." Felicity cleared her throat, leading him down the street. "This is the coffee shop. They sell donuts, too, so I guess I won't find you here."

"Nope." He was amused she paid that much attention, but it meant he'd have to be careful what he said, too. He tucked his hands in his pockets, letting his eyes wander ahead.

"We've got two banks. This one, and there's one over on the other side of the square, we'll pass that in a minute. Here's the furniture shop, then that next one is the drugstore. Here, we can cross over now." She stepped out between parked cars and glanced both ways before leading him across the street. "Any questions yet?"

"Yeah, how come it's called Holly Hill? The whole town's practically flat, and there ain't any hollies."

Rolling her eyes, she pointed back the way they'd come. "That's the hill. Where Hilltop House is. The holly used to be there, too, but it died and was cut down before I was even born."

"Oh, so there was a holly. I thought it was just one of those names that made no sense." He smirked, nodding toward the row of storefronts to their left. "What's this one?"

Felicity turned to look, slowing to a stop, her face falling.

Kade halted a few paces ahead, following her gaze. There was nothing on the other side of those dirty windows; just an empty building. "Filly?"

She swallowed, tearing her eyes away and forcing a smile. "Well, whoever gets to put something in there is pretty lucky, I suppose. Perfect place for a shop, right in the middle of everything." She started forward at a brisk pace, hurrying away from the empty storefront.

A raw nerve, apparently.

He closed the distance between them in a few strides, looking ahead, feigning disinterest. "What would you put in there?"

Felicity laughed nervously. "What makes you think I have any ideas?"

Shrugging, he kicked a cigarette butt off the sidewalk and into the gutter. "Don't know. Looked like you saw something when you were lookin' at it. Something that might be, you know?"

She tried to smile, but her lips quivered. "Just old dreams. That's all."

"Ah." He gave a slow nod, walking in silence for a moment before giving her a sidewise smirk. "A hat shop."

Felicity blinked. "What?"

"I'd make it a hat shop. Them big frilly bonnets like the ladies wear to the derby."

She blinked again, then laughed. "Would you really?"

"Why not? It's got big windows. Needs somethin' pretty in them, don't it?" Kade flashed her a grin.

"You're right." She bowed her head, scuffling her feet against the concrete. "I'd make it cakes, I think. Big wedding cakes."

"Somewhere to do your baking, huh?"

Felicity blew out a long sigh. "I used to think I'd have a bakery. I like being able to use the kitchen at home, but having a real shop would be something special, you know? Me and Michael—" She stopped short, squeezing her eyes closed.

"Ah. I see." He tugged his scarf away from his mouth, tucking it closer beneath his chin. No wonder it struck a nerve.

"That was a long time ago," she murmured. "But I have the bed and breakfast, so I'm happy."

"Ain't nothin' wrong with growing where you're planted." He tugged up his sleeve, twisting his wrist to look at his watch. "I hate to cut you short, Filly, but I'm out of time."

She smiled bravely. "Go ahead. I think I'll stop and sit in the gazebo a minute. It's my favorite place in town."

"Thank you kindly for the tour." He crossed the street beside her, watching her climb the grassy slope. "I enjoyed it." And oddly enough, he had.

"Have a safe night at work, cowboy," she said.

Kade tipped his hat before starting back toward the hill and his dirty red pickup. He glanced back once, pausing to look at her. She sat in the gazebo with her ankles crossed and her head tipped back, watching the first stars peek out in the night sky. He could picture her sitting there with fireflies dancing in the summer twilight, and the thought made him frown. Tearing his eyes away, he continued on toward his truck.

Whether or not he could envision it, he wasn't planning on staying that long.

THREE

IT FELT GOOD to be in the saddle again after weeks off the job. Kade imagined he'd take that back by the time his shift was over, but for now he enjoyed the swaying motion of Dex's easy stroll. The bay champed at his bit, whuffing and pulling against the reins. His enthusiasm would wane too, but there was no harm in letting him dance a little now.

Kade loosened his grip on the reins, clicking his tongue and twitching his heels against the gelding's flanks. The horse leaped into a relaxed canter and Kade turned him toward the herd, gripping the saddle horn and squinting against the rushing cold of the wind.

Cowboys weren't as common as they used to be, facets of the job replaced by electric fences and men on 4-wheelers. But there was no beating the old fashioned way for some things. ATVs were noisy, unreliable, and demanded fuel. They were limited in use when it came to crossing creeks or rivers, and despite the moniker, muddy or steep terrain could stop them in their tracks. Horses were an all around better option and half the fun of the job, besides.

Not that herding cattle was the point of him being out there.

Dex slowed to a trot, then a walk as the herd came into view. Kade checked his bags while the gelding ambled onward. He hadn't brought a lot with him, just a flashlight and a notebook, along with a few heat packs to keep his fingers thawed enough to make writing easy. The cold wasn't bitter yet, but it was just after six, the earth still clinging to what warmth the sun had given it. He loved the long winter nights, but he could do without the freeze.

Skirting the edge of the herd, Kade reined his mount to a slower walk. The cattle were resting, some laying down, and he didn't want to disturb them. The beasts ignored them for the most part, a few heads turning their way, though with it being just another man on a horse they seemed to decide he wasn't worth notice.

A short way ahead, another man in a hat swung onto his horse, nudging the animal into motion, riding to meet Kade halfway.

"Glad to head home?" Kade raised his voice to make up for the way his scarf muffled it. His breath was still warm enough that it felt good. The thick wool was pulled almost to his eyes, meant to hold in as much of the heat as possible.

"Wish I could," the other cowboy called back. He nudged his hat upwards, though whether it was to expose his face or get a better look at him, Kade didn't know. "Marshall's new guy?"

"Yup. First night." Kade offered a hand. The other man drew his horse close enough to grasp it for a firm shake.

"Glad to have you. I'm Charlie."

"Kade," he replied, struggling not to frown. Charles was his father's name. Hearing it in any form made him prickle. "And I appreciate the work."

"Well, we appreciate you being here. The rest of us have been taking turns riding nights since the last theft, but it's hard to switch night and day like that. Hope it'll be an uneventful night."

Charlie drew back his horse.

Kade cast a glance over the herd. "You stayin' out here?"

"Figured someone oughta be out here to show you the ropes. Glad I won't have to ride another overnight after tonight, though."

"I appreciate the thought, but it ain't my first time chasin' steers." Kade chuckled. "Don't think McCullough would've hired me if that were the case. If you're tired, you can head on back."

Charlie hesitated.

Shrugging, Kade shifted in the saddle. "Sides, McCullough already gave me the tour. Me and Dex had a good ride 'round the pasture last night. I think we've got this."

The other cowboy offered a tentative grin. "Well, if you're sure, I won't fuss about the extra sleep. You all set?"

Kade nodded. "Think so, but I guess we'll find out. Get a good night's rest."

Charlie nodded back and adjusted his hat again, turning toward the ruddy glow the farmhouse lights cast against the night sky. "Take it easy, Colton." He kicked his horse up to a trot, cutting across the rolling field.

Kade waited until he was out of sight to dismount and drop Dex's reins to the ground. The gelding pricked his ears forward, but stayed put.

A few standing cattle shifted as Kade slipped between them and examined them one at a time. He hadn't had a chance to look at the cattle the night before, studying the tracks left around the range instead.

For the most part, the animals looked sound; a few had scrapes or cuts on their legs or sides, but nothing that couldn't be explained by stumbles or brushes with wild brambles. Glad as he was that the rancher's livestock were healthy, it wasn't helpful, and he returned to his horse with a frown.

Climbing back into the saddle, Kade settled in to wait. Charlie had wished him an uneventful night, but he was hoping for just the opposite. Judging by the tracks he'd seen with McCullough the evening before, he didn't think it'd be long before they had visitors again.

It only took a few hours to prove him right.

The cattle grew restless, the whole herd on their feet, milling and mooing. Even Dex seemed antsy, tossing his head and stamping his hooves. Kade hushed him, patting his neck, scanning the horizon. He would've loved to have the kind of sixth sense animals did; his hearing and eyesight were good, but aside from the way the beasts around him stirred, he couldn't tell anything was amiss.

He checked his watch. Almost twelve thirty. As close to dead in the middle of the night as they could get, but still a little early for bandits.

That was one thing he hadn't been able to figure. There was no mistaking the boot prints in the mud alongside those of the stolen cattle. But those big canine-looking prints didn't strike him as those of a working dog. The thing would've been as big as a horse, for one. That didn't sound right for any dog he was familiar with—or any critter that left that kind of tracks, for that matter.

The low hum of an engine caught his ear and he turned toward it. East, the far side of the herd, the same side of the ranch the rustlers had come from before. Either they thought hitting

the same spot twice was unexpected, or the east side gave them easy entry from . . . wherever they came from. That or they were plain stupid, which seemed just as likely. The ground was dry, but trucks were heavy and tire tracks were easy to follow.

Kade kicked his horse into a trot. If they were regular thieves, making himself noticeable would drive them off. Halfway around the herd, he flicked on his flashlight, training it on the ground between him and the cattle.

Sure enough, the truck stopped, still too far away to make out in the dark. Shadowy figures climbed out, too far off for their voices to be heard, but Kade felt their eyes. Then they vanished, swallowed by the shadow of the truck. A moment later he saw a silhouette against the sky, standing on the vehicle's roof.

Kade narrowed his eyes. That was unusual, but he didn't get a chance to stare.

A loud, metallic thud echoed through the night and the herd exploded into panic.

Spurring his horse into motion, Kade swung wide around the cattle as they tried to scatter. He redirected them south, toward the ranch house and safe barns that waited. He only turned a hand-ful before something gray streaked in front of him. Dex spooked, rearing with a shrill whinny.

In the next breath, Kade was on the ground.

So much for enjoying being back in the saddle. He grimaced, rolling onto his stomach, a steer's hooves coming down where he'd been.

His flashlight was in the grass ahead, shining right in his eyes. He scrambled forward, snatching the light and thrusting himself upright.

Cattle bellowed in distress, running in every direction. Again he caught a flash of gray, something running between the animals. No matter how fast he turned his light, he missed it. Then came the agonized scream of a wounded cow and the frenzy of hooves stampeding away from it.

Kade stood, shining the flashlight straight ahead.

Bigger than any of the cattle in the field, the creature dragged its prize back toward the truck, its eyes glinting red in the beam of his flashlight. Bony shoulders and hips jutted out at strange angles and quills ran down its spine, all casting weird shadows down its already misshapen sides.

Bending to take his hat from the ground, he watched helplessly as the gray-skinned monster retreated. Then it slipped beyond the reach of his light, though the thumping of it dragging the dead steer into the back of the truck echoed in the dark.

Slowly, Kade put his hat back on his head. "Well, now," he breathed. "Don't that beat all."

He dusted off his front and went to catch his horse.

* * *

Ready to read more?

That's it for this preview of *Her Midnight Cowboy*. I hope you've enjoyed the sneak peek! The full version of the book will be released on September 19.

Looking forward to reading what happens next?

Tap or click here to preorder your copy now (<http://getBook.at/HerMidnightCowboy>)!

* * *

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* * *

About the Author

Beth Alvarez has enjoyed writing since childhood and is a ravenous reader.

Having studied fine arts in college, Alvarez has worked as a freelance web designer, graphic designer and illustrator. When not writing, she enjoys drawing, playing video games, driving, and sewing for her unusual collection of Asian ball-jointed dolls.

Raised in southern Illinois, she now resides in the suburbs of Memphis, Tennessee with her husband and daughter, their Siberian husky, and a very mean cat.

For the latest updates, blog posts, and free stories, visit her homepage:
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