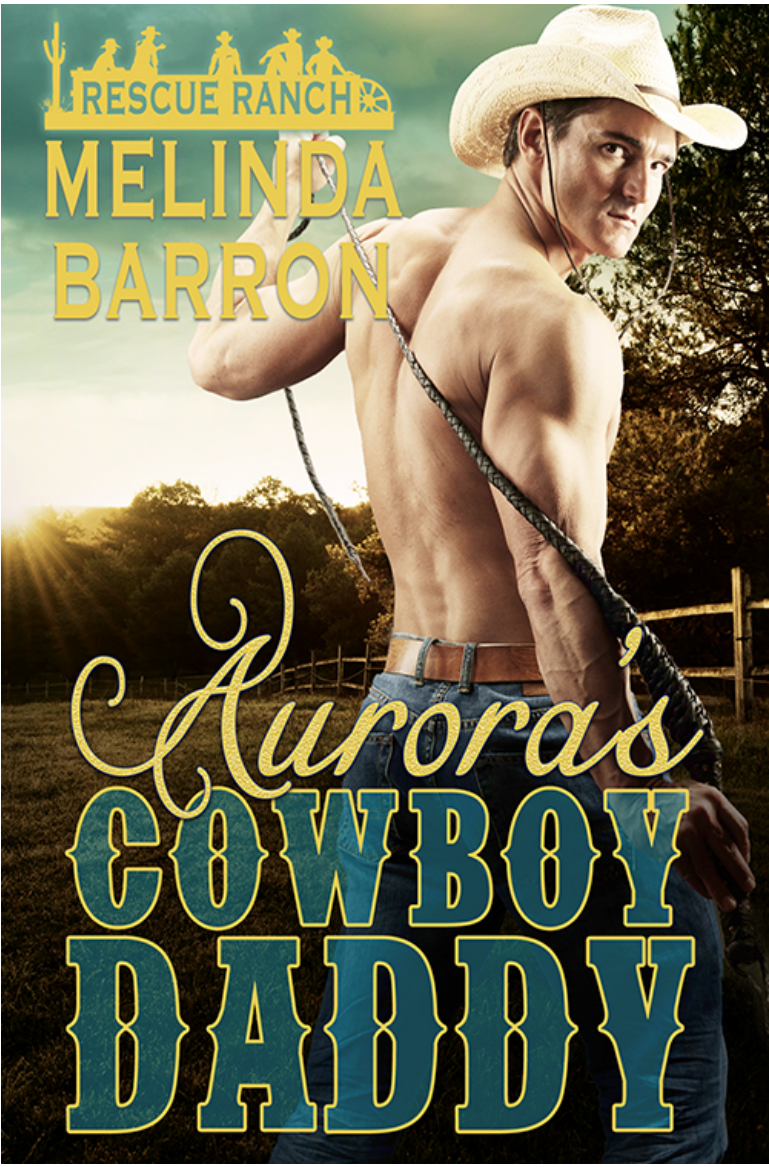




RESCUE RANCH

MELINDA
BARRON



Aurora's
COWBOY
DADDY

AURORA'S COWBOY DADDY

Rescue Ranch, Book One

MELINDA BARRON



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Melinda Barron
Aurora's Cowboy Daddy

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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Chapter 1

The delicious smell of trees hit Aurora square in the face as she stepped out of her borrowed car. It was the incredible smell of spring in the Texas Panhandle. There was the mixture of just mowed grass, wildflowers, and horses.

She glanced around. No one came out of the large ranch-style house to greet her. The house was huge, with a wrap-around porch on both the bottom and top level. Both of them were decorated with plants and flowers, and so many rocking chairs that Aurora didn't even stop to count.

A picture of sitting here after dinner, reading a book and enjoying some iced tea made her smile. But then again most things made her smile lately. She'd spent six months in prison, and had been on parole another two and a half years, but not able to set foot out of Rainwater County near Dallas until two months ago. Now she was free, and jobless. The house in front of her wasn't something she would be able to afford. But if they gave her the job she was here to interview for, then maybe she would be able to sit here and enjoy her tea at night.

She snorted in derision as she slammed her door. She'd interviewed for so many jobs over the last few months, and none of them had gone well. When potential employers heard she was a convicted murderer they usually thanked her for coming and said they'd get back to her. They never did.

For this job she'd talked to Holt Coleman on the phone. His voice had been deep and reassuring and he'd asked her to drive to Bookman Springs, about one hundred miles southeast of Amarillo. It was almost two hundred miles from where she was bedding with friends outside Dallas. Since it was so far she made sure there would be no surprises.

"Just so you know, I'm a convicted murderer," she said.

"Don't worry about getting a hotel room in town," he'd said as an answer. "We have lots of room here for you at the ranch. You can stay here and have dinner with us and meet my brothers, too."

She'd been so shocked at his response she had almost dropped the phone. "Did you hear what I said?"

"Convicted murderer, yeah, I heard. Please be here around two tomorrow."

Aurora pulled her phone from her pocket and checked the time; ten minutes after two. She put it back in her pocket and walked toward the front door. Before she could mount the stairs the screen door flew open and a handsome cowboy stepped out.

"Hello, darling! Welcome to the Rescue Ranch." He hurried down the stairs and held out his hand. "Austin Coleman, at your service."

Aurora laughed as she shook his hand. "Aurora Bickman. I'm here to see Holt."

"Yeah, about that."

Aurora's heart fell. Her words from last night had obviously set in, and Holt didn't want to see her. The jerk had let her drive all this way. She tried to pull back her hand, but Austin held it tight.

"Holt is out helping to settle a new filly. I'm supposed to offer you tea and tell you he'll be here as soon as possible." He finally let go of her hand. "So come in the house, we'll fix a drink, and well, I'm sorry to say, you'll have to wait."

He turned and went up the stairs as fast as he'd come down them. Aurora guessed his age to be around twenty-five or so. He had the screen door open before she reached the top. She went inside to see an immaculate house full of wooden furniture and walls decorated with western art. The far wall was floor to ceiling glass, with French doors in the middle that were open, letting the smell that had greeted her outside float in.

"Beautiful," she said.

"Mom and Dad designed it," Austin said. "Their room is downstairs, and the six of us have rooms upstairs."

"Six of you?" Aurora asked. "And your parents live here, too?"

"They use this as their permanent address, but right now they are living out of an RV, traveling the nation. We haven't seen them in forever." He took a step and then turned back around. "And yes, six of us: Holt, Hawkins, the triplets Reed, Kyle, Wyatt, and then me. I'm the baby."

"Which is why you got stuck with me," she said.

"I volunteered," Austin said. "It's my night to cook dinner, and I need the time to put steaks in to marinade and let them soak up the flavor. I make a great steak. You're going to love it." He waved his hand around the room. "Take a gander, and I'll get you that tea. Sweet? Or unsweet?"

"Sweet, please," she said.

"Good girl," he said with a smile before he headed to the left and disappeared through a doorway. "Make yourself at home," he called out.

Aurora took advantage of her alone time to examine the room. Near the glass walls there was a staircase that disappeared up to the second floor. There was also a hallway on the other side

of the room. In between the two was a large fireplace that showed signs of being used in the last few days. She wanted to explore, to see what was at the top of the stairs, to see what was down the hallway.

But like a good little inmate she stayed exactly where she was; she was so used to being told where to go, and when to go, that she had problems thinking for herself.

“What are you doing?”

Aurora looked to where Austin stood, two glasses of tea in his hand.

“Waiting for you to come back,” she said.

He smiled, then said, “Have a seat.”

“Where?”

“There’s lots of them here,” he said, moving his hand in the direction of the two sofas and several chairs sitting in the middle of the room.

Aurora took a seat in a large wingback chair. She accepted the glass of tea he offered her before he sat down on one of the sofas.

“You a Texas girl?” he asked.

“Born and raised in Lubbock,” she said.

“Ah, the dust bowl capital of Texas,” he said, right before he drained his tea.

Aurora took a sip from hers. It was cold, sweet, and delicious. “Where were you born?” she asked.

“All six of us were born here in Bookman Springs.” He crossed his legs. “Our parents have always been big on supporting local businesses, which includes doctors and the hospital here.”

“Do all six of you work at the ranch?” she asked.

“Yup.” He stood. “Need more tea?”

Since there was barely a sip missing from her glass, Aurora shook her head.

He turned to leave and then said, "Oh, looks like you're saved from me."

Aurora stood and turned toward the windows Austin was looking through. A large man was dismounting a horse. He tied the reins around a hitch, then started up the stairs, taking them two at a time. He took his hat off as he strode through the door, and Aurora thought her heart would stop.

He was, without a doubt, the most handsome man she'd ever seen. She imagined him to be in his late thirties. He had dark, close-cropped hair and several days of dark stubble, mixed with a little gray, on his chin. He wore a denim button down shirt, jeans, and chaps.

"Aurora," he said as he stuck out his hand. "Forgive my rudeness, and welcome to the Rescue Ranch. I'm Holt Coleman."

"Thank you," she managed to say. She shook his hand and could have sworn she felt a jolt of electricity from his touch.

"Well, I'm going to go work on dinner," Austin said. He started to leave, but stopped when his brother asked him to bring another glass of tea—no, make that a pitcher—to the back deck. "Sure, sure," Austin said. "At your service."

When he was gone, Holt chuckled. "Austin feels put upon because he's the youngest. Come on, let's go outside and we can talk." He put his hat on the coffee table, then indicated she should precede him out the French doors.

There was one table on the deck. Holt hurried over and held out a chair for her. Aurora sat down, shivering a bit when he touched her shoulders as he pushed the chair toward the table.

"We work as hard as we can to keep to a schedule here, but sometimes things happen unexpectedly." He sat down next to her. "We had to rescue a filly this morning from up near Borger. We left the house at four, and got back around eleven. She was anxious, so Kyle, Hawk, and I were getting her settled."

"An abused horse?" she asked.

“Yes, starved and beaten.” She could hear the anger in his voice. “If the sheriff there hadn’t already arrested the guy I would have busted his lip.”

“That’s awful,” she said. “Was he arrested for animal cruelty?”

“For that and for doing the same thing to his wife,” Holt said.

Austin appeared and placed a tray on the table. “I added cookies.” He mock curtsied and then went back in the house.

“Like I said, he thinks he’s put upon.” Holt poured himself a glass of tea. “So, tell me about yourself. But before you begin, don’t tell me about why you were in prison. I want you to tell all of us tonight at supper. It’s best for everyone to hear that story firsthand.”

“All right,” she said. “Um, born and raised in Lubbock. I’m single. I have no brothers and sisters. My parents don’t talk to me because I’m an embarrassment to them. I have a few friends who stuck by me through the whole ordeal.”

Oh, and my late husband’s brother wants to kill me. She kept that part to herself.

“I can’t even get a job at a convenience store.” Her hands shook as she took a sip from her tea. “I-I...” She knew she should be honest, but she didn’t know how much to tell him. “I’ve lived with Dana and Jake since I got out of prison. They’re being very generous with me, but I know they want their lives back. I’ve been there two and a half years. That’s a long time to have someone in your house.” She cleared her throat. “I had some money, and I’ve been helping with utilities and food and the like, but it’s almost gone now.”

“Where did you get the money?” he asked.

“I had an aunt who died while I was in prison. She left her estate to me.” Aurora stared into her glass. “I was named after her. She was my mother’s sister, and she hated Mom for abandoning me. It wasn’t a lot of money, but it helped more than you would know.”

Tears built up in her eyes and she wished she could blink them away. When they fell down her cheeks she was surprised when he patted her hand.

"I can only imagine how hard it's been on you," he said. But he didn't keep on the subject of her family. Instead he turned to business. "I need to talk to you about this job."

Aurora sniffled. She could tell from the sound of his voice he was about to deliver bad news, and that meant she was going to be unemployed when she drove back home tomorrow.

"You've been totally honest with me, and I haven't done the same with you."

Aurora turned her gaze toward him. His look was gentle, yet she could see hesitation there.

"I told you we needed someone to be a sort of den mother, but it's not for us."

She looked at him in confusion. "Austin said your parents were doing the RV thing."

"Yes," he said.

"If you want me to help with the horses, I don't know that much about them."

He took a healthy swig of his tea before he said, "How are you with abused women?"

This was not going according to plan. He'd wanted her to meet his brothers, all of them, before he told her about the Rescue Ranch, that it wasn't only about horses, but about women, too. But he had such a good feeling about this woman, about what she'd been through and how she'd come through it. He'd done a lot of research on her, and called her parole officer to talk about her.

From what he'd heard, he knew she wanted to pull her weight, to get back into society. Her parole officer said she was

emotionally vulnerable. But she held it inside; she probably hid it from everyone she met. He imagined taking care of her, holding her in his arms while she cried, and stroking her hair until she fell asleep in his arms.

“I don’t think I understand,” she said.

Holt toyed with his tea glass. Then he picked up the pitcher, filled his own glass and topped off hers.

“To members of the public, we rescue horses. We bring them back to health, then find them new homes. To the state of Texas, we rescue more than that. We are a licensed home for abused women. We have six cabins toward the back of the land. Five of them are for ladies who are seeking a new life. One of them is for the den mother. That would be you.”

The shock on her face made him wish he’d taken it just a little slower. Finally she said, “So I wouldn’t be cooking, and cleaning?”

“Not for us. We have a regular lady that comes in and does the cleaning twice a week, and we cook for ourselves. Although some of that cooking involves take out and pizza.”

The smile on her face made him grin back.

“I like the idea,” she said, “but if you’re licensed by the state of Texas, you have to know they won’t approve an ex-convict as an employee.”

“The wheels are already in motion, in case you wanted the job,” he said. “We need you pretty quick.”

“May I ask what happened to your last den mother?”

“She has cancer,” he said. “She’s still working for us, but as the treatments progress she won’t be able to. She’s thirty, single, and like you an abused woman.”

Her body stiffened, and Holt fought the urge to take her hands in his.

“Her name is Mercy,” he said. “She told me this afternoon that if you’re uncomfortable staying in the house with six men

you don't know, that only one of the cabins is occupied, and you could stay down there."

She nodded. He noticed she did that quite a bit, using her body to answer questions instead of speaking. He'd have to work on that with her.

"I've given you a lot to think about," he said.

Once more she nodded.

He was going to have to work on her verbal skills, make her talk.

"Do you ride?" he asked.

She frowned, and he waited for her to answer. Finally she said, "Ride what?"

"Horses," he said. "This is a horse ranch after all."

"No."

One-word answers were not going to work either.

"Have you ever ridden?" he asked.

She shook her head, and he cocked his head and said, "I prefer spoken answers."

"Um no, I've never ridden a horse."

"We'll have daily lessons for that," he said. "We have UTVs that can take you between here and the cabins, which are about two miles out."

"That's a long way," she said.

"We sell horses here, and we want to make sure the cabins are not seen from the stables. You don't have to walk there."

She nodded once more, and when he cocked his head, she said, "That's good."

"Why don't we take your things down to the cabins," he said. "I can give you the nickel tour and you can rest until supper."

"Sounds good," she said.

He stood and offered her his hand. She took it, and when they were both standing he said, "You're going to have to work on your vocabulary."

"Yes, sir," she said, and then she actually smiled.

Holt's jeans tightened as his cock stirred. He hadn't had this reaction to a woman in a long time. They had a standing rule at the Rescue Ranch that the brothers didn't get personally involved with the ladies who came through. But there was no rule about the den mothers, and Holt was very happy about that.