

My Ranch, My Way

By

Misty Malone

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Chapter 1

Chase McDermott sat atop his gelding, Thunder, on a beautiful spring Sunday afternoon. He was riding the boundaries of his new ranch in Wyoming, acquainting himself with his surroundings. He'd been exploring the western part of his ranch and intended on going to the eastern edge next. As he neared the barn and buildings he saw activity in the corral. He went to investigate and saw three of his ranch hands, attempting to break a yearling.

"Morning, boss," Mack yelled as he approached. "You don't mind if Ryan and I show the greenhorn how to break a horse on our day off, do you?"

"If that's the way you want to spend your day off it's fine with me, as long as there's at least two of you. Next week we'll be breaking horses quite a bit, so if you want you can wait until then to teach him. You'll all get paid for it then." Chase smiled as he leaned forward in his saddle to watch. "That's some hard work to be doing on your day off."

"That it is," Ryan agreed. "But Clint's anxious to learn, so Mack and I told him we'd work with him a couple hours today."

"Good luck! Clint, these guys know what they're talking about, so listen to them. It's hard work and it's dangerous, so remember what I said before – safety first on this ranch. I don't ever want to see anyone - especially someone new at this - out working with a horse alone. But since there's three of you, have at it! Mack and Ryan, make sure you watch out for him. I don't want my time on this ranch to start off with an injury."

"We'll be careful, boss. Have a nice ride."

"Thanks." They waved as he left them and headed toward his eastern boundaries. He went a little ways, then stopped and watched his men a few more minutes. Mack and Ryan were doing a good job working with Clint. He was lucky to have such good men working for him, but it still felt odd to be called the boss on this ranch. A month ago Chase was living with his parents and helping his dad run their ranch in Texas. He inherited this ranch from his grandfather three weeks ago, and moved in a week later. It had all happened so fast the reality was just now starting to settle in.

He spurred the horse forward, his mind wandering as he rode in the direction of his new house and beyond to the east. He found himself going back over what all had happened in the last two weeks. Although Chase's father, Joe, grew up here, he'd bought his own ranch and moved to Texas about twenty years ago, shortly before Pete Anderson bought the neighboring ranch to the east. The two men had become friends during the visits Joe and his family made to visit Chase's grandfather, Wilson.

The day they moved Chase into this house Joe took him over and introduced him to Pete. He explained that Will had left the place to Chase on the condition that he maintain it as a successful operating ranch. Pete was real glad to hear that; he and the other neighboring ranchers were afraid Will would leave the ranch to Joe's brother, Ralph. They all knew that although Ralph lived there, he wasn't interested in the ranch and would sell it to the highest bidder, even if the highest bidder was a land developer.

Pete had welcomed Chase and promised them he'd do whatever he could to help Chase

get started. He was sure the other neighboring ranchers would welcome him as well, and be happy to hear the ranch would remain in the McDermott family.

As Chase and Thunder continued on their journey and Chase took in the beautiful scenery and the cattle grazing in the pastures, he recalled memories of his grandfather and the summers he stayed here. His attention was suddenly drawn to another rider approaching him, waving his arm. Chase was on alert, wondering who would be out roaming on his land. The horse was a pretty palomino, and he was pretty sure he'd recognize it if it was one of his horses or one of the hands who worked for him.

He approached the other rider cautiously. "Hello, there," he said when they were close enough to be heard.

To his surprise, the other rider was a woman. "You have exactly three seconds to tell me who you are and why you're trespassing on my land," she said with a scowl on her face.

"Whoa, little lady," he said, holding his hands up. "I think we have a misunderstanding here. My name's Chase McDermott and I believe you're the one on my land."

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"No, ma'am, I'm saying I believe we have a misunderstanding. But I'm sure we can get it sorted out. Let's go to my house and we'll talk."

"Oh, no you don't," she insisted. "You men are all alike. And the only misunderstanding here is why I haven't called Sheriff Green yet to have you removed from my land. But if you turn yourself around and get off right now I'll let it go this time."

"Ma'am, with all due respect, I think we need to talk about this and get it settled, because I have a deed at home that names me the owner. I'll be glad to show it to you if you want to see it."

"You're just determined to get me alone at your house, aren't you? Well, it's not going to happen. Not in this lifetime anyway. So unless you want me to make that phone call to Sheriff Green, turn yourself around and get off my land."

"Ma'am, I told you my name; I'm Chase McDermott. Can I ask what yours is, and why you feel this land is yours?"

"Cecelia Anderson, and if you'd look at the public records you'd find that my father owns this land. Now get off of it!"

Chase's eyebrows shot up at this little lady's attitude. He was a gentleman, but Miss Cecelia Anderson was sure pushing his buttons. Then it hit him. "Did you say Anderson? Is Pete your father?"

"Yes, he certainly is. And if you know him you should know that he owns this land. Now for the last time, get off, or I'm calling Sheriff Green."

"You can call Sheriff Green if you want. I met him a couple days ago and he seems like a nice guy. But you might want to call your father and talk to him before you call the sheriff. Your father used to own this land, but he sold it about three years ago to my grandfather, Wilson McDermott, and I inherited the ranch from him just recently."

She looked at him through narrowed eyes as she spat out, "I don't know what kind of game you're playing, but my father didn't sell his land. We still live on his land!"

"I agree totally, Ms. Anderson, you do. But your father changed the focus of his ranch a few years ago and started breeding horses, good stock horses, and quit raising cattle. When he did that he didn't need as much grazing land, and he sold some of his pastures off to my grandpa, who was expanding his herd at the time and needed more land for them to graze. This land we're on right now is part of that. If you don't want to go to my house to see the paperwork, I

understand, but I really think you need to talk to your father."

Cecelia froze when she heard this cowboy's explanation. It was entirely possible he was telling the truth. In fact, it even made sense. She'd been away at college the last four years and hadn't been on the ranch at all during that time. She and her father had talked two or three times a week, and he had said that he was getting out of the cattle market and concentrating on breeding horses. He wouldn't need as much land for the horses, so it was quite possible he had sold some.

However, she couldn't bring herself to accept that this piece of ground was no longer theirs. This had always been her favorite part of their entire ranch. There was a large creek flowing through the property, and it widened out here, where it made a jog. A small section of it didn't turn, making it a perfect swimming hole. There was a beach of sorts, although it was more small round stones and dirt than sand, but they were stones that were easy to walk on with bare feet. The water started out shallow and got deeper gradually, with a large area that was waist to chest high on her, before it met with the part of the creek that flowed faster as it went around the bend and on down through the meadow.

She'd spent many hot summer days here at her swimming hole, either alone or with her best friend, Lisa, who used to live down the road. In the spring the meadow was full of wild flowers, and it was gorgeous. The idea that the land had been sold bordered on painful.

Chase had been watching her reaction to his words and knew this was news to her, and he could tell it was upsetting to her. He wanted to get along with her, not argue, especially since she was Pete's daughter. "Cecelia, why don't you talk to your dad. Even if I now own this land, that doesn't mean you can't come here. Your dad brought me here a few days ago when we rode the boundary line together. I commented on how pretty it is in through here. He said his daughter used to swim here on hot days, and I assume that was you. This does look like a good place to swim, and you're still welcome here. The only thing I ask is you not swim alone."

"No, it's okay for me to swim alone," she protested. "Dad always said as long as I stayed out of the faster moving water in the creek, I could swim in the swimming hole. It doesn't get over chest deep there."

Chase momentarily pictured her in a bathing suit swimming over in the swimming hole, and was all for it. She was a very pretty little lady. Since she was on a horse, he couldn't tell how tall she was, but he guessed not more than a few inches over five feet. She had long blond hair with reddish gold streaks that seemed to shine when the sun hit them. She'd had a hat on when she rode up, but took it off and was holding it while she talked. As if she saw him admiring her, she plopped the hat back on. The blue and pink western-style shirt she wore brought out her bright blue eyes. A cute little pair of pink cowboy boots topped off the look. She was one pretty little cowgirl!

He shook his head to bring himself back to the business at hand. "I'm sure Pete had his reasons, and I'm sure they were good, but I'm new at being a landowner, and until I feel more comfortable with it I have to go with my instincts. Too many things can happen when you're swimming alone, no matter how good a swimmer you are. So my rule stands; you're welcome to come here swimming anytime with a friend, but not alone."

He saw the fire in her eyes and added, "If you don't have anyone to swim with, call me. I love to swim, especially on a hot day. If I can get away we can both go swimming."

What he had hoped was a peace-making gesture turned out to be anything but.

"I bet you would like to go swimming with me, alone. Once again, not happening, buster. You are sure determined to get me alone with you somewhere, aren't you? You're just like all men – disgusting!"

With that, she turned and flicked the reins, sending her horse away in a hurry. As she sped off, Chase stared after her, shaking his head. She had him totally baffled. Pete was friendly and easy going, but his daughter certainly wasn't. She had an attitude that just didn't quit.

He thought about Cecelia on his way back to his house. The more he thought about her the more things about her upset him. Her constantly insinuating he was trying to get her alone was the biggest insult. Chase would never mistreat a woman. He had to wonder if something happened to her at some point that caused her to behave like that. Maybe a man somewhere in her past had taken advantage of her somehow, or had broken her heart. He hated the thought of someone using her, but maybe with time he could get her to see he had no intentions of doing anything like that. Maybe Pete could help her realize she could trust him. Maybe he could shed some light on her attitude, as well. As friendly as Pete was, Chase just couldn't believe his daughter would be like that normally. He would give her time to learn to trust him.

He was willing to be patient, although he knew that would be difficult. He thought of the way she'd spurred her horse into a full gallop too quickly. The more he thought about that, the more it seemed to him that her making a point that way was a sign of either a spoiled little brat, or a temper tantrum, or both.

Chase knew just how to handle such a spoiled little brat, except that this spoiled little brat was cute as a button, and lived on the next ranch over. She was also Pete's daughter, and he didn't want to upset him right away. He'd just have to draw on all the patience he had when he was around Cecelia, at least until he could get a handle on why she was treating him the way she was.

Chase had swung around and was heading back to his barn when he saw a pickup coming up the lane. He turned Thunder toward the house to meet whoever it was. He smiled as he saw the man he'd just been thinking about, and went to greet him. "Good afternoon, Pete."

"Hey, new neighbor. I thought I'd stop in and see how you're doing. Anything you need yet, or any questions?"

"Not yet," Chase answered, "but I appreciate you stopping to ask. I was just riding the boundaries, trying to acquaint myself with the ranch, and found myself going back over how my life has changed over the last month."

"That's got to be almost mind-boggling, Chase. According to your dad, you had no idea you were going to inherit your grandfather's ranch. Is that right?"

"Not a clue. I visited him here every summer when I was younger and I loved it, but I had no idea it would some day be mine."

"I didn't know he was going to leave it to you, but I'm not surprised. He's told me several stories about when you came to visit in the summer and would stay a few weeks. He said you would always jump right in there and help feed the chickens or try your best to fix fences, or anything else that needed done. When your dad bought his own place and you started helping him, he was disappointed that you didn't have time to come more often. Will was proud of you when you went to college, but he missed having you here. He kept saying some day you'd be running your own ranch, and you'd do a fine job of it."

Chase smiled at his neighbor. "Grandpa really said that?"

"Of course he did, and he meant it. He was so proud of you." Pete smiled as he continued. "And he was proud of this ranch. Wilson McDermott had the respect of all the ranchers around. He kept this ranch looking nice and running smoothly. We all hated to see it go downhill when he got sick. That's why I'm glad he left the ranch to you instead of Ralph. You'll bring it back up in no time."

"I hope I can," Chase said. "I hope I can make Grandpa proud of me."

"You've already done that," Pete said.

"But I mean I hope I can make a successful ranch out of it. If I can't and I have to sell it, Uncle Ralph gets half."

"I think that's why Will set it up that way. Can you think of any better incentive to make a go of it?"

"It certainly is an incentive, for sure."

"I think you'll do fine. I wouldn't worry too much. It was nice of your dad to let you hire his foreman. That'll be a big help."

"I agree. There's another good man who's been working under Ty for about four years and Dad's going to make him his new foreman. I'm sure he'll do fine, too, but letting me hire Ty was very generous, and I'm glad Ty was willing to move up here with me. Ty's been Dad's foreman for five years, and he and I worked together that whole time, except the first two years when I was in college. He's a good foreman, he and I think and work a lot alike, and having him here's been like a piece of home. He's been a huge help."

"I've been impressed with both of you. I can already tell Ty respects you, which is very important. If the foreman doesn't respect the owner, the men don't generally have much respect for either one of them. It's easy to tell the men respect you and Ty both, so I think you'll be fine. A good rapport with the men is invaluable, and you already have that."

Pete paused, then chose his words carefully. "So, I understand from your dad that Ralph was a little upset when you inherited this ranch?"

"Yes, he was anticipating receiving it himself, I guess," Chase replied, understanding the man's curiosity. Surely there must be talk among the other ranchers. "According to Dad, he assumed Grandpa would give the ranch to him since he lived here his whole life. I guess he even talked to an attorney about challenging the will. He openly admitted he intended to sell it, though, and the ranch meant a lot to Grandpa."

"Yes, it did. He wanted it to stay in the family." Pete paused a little before continuing. "I just hope he doesn't try to cause you any problems."

"Yeah, that's what Dad said. But I'd hate to think he'd be out to get his own family."

"I agree, but your dad says Ralph's not too ambitious, and he'll have to go get a job unless you sell the ranch. I told him we'll keep our eyes open, just in case he tries to start trouble."

"Good idea. He thought since he's lived here his whole life he was at least entitled to continue living here, even if I did inherit it, but Dad insisted he move. Just between you and me, I'm glad he's off the ranch," Chase said. "I want to start off running this place the way I feel it should be run. It would be harder with him here giving suggestions. I'd probably be second guessing everything I do."

"Yes, you probably would, and that wouldn't be right. You deserve a fair chance from the start. It's your ranch, you run it your way."

"My ranch, my way," Chase murmured. "I'll have to remember that."

"So where did your Uncle Ralph go?"

"He talked my Aunt Helen into letting him move in with her, saying a widow needs a man around the house. Dad says she won't let him sponge off her like Grandpa did. He'll have to find some kind of job and help her with the expenses, and he won't like that much."

"Your Aunt Helen's local," Pete said, shaking his head. "We'll keep an eye out for any problems. Give me a call if you need me."

"Okay, Pete, I will. Thanks again. Speaking of local family, I didn't know you have a

daughter here."

Pete looked at Chase and sighed. "You've met Cecelia?"

"Just a little bit ago."

Pete shook his head. "Do I owe you an apology on her behalf?"

Chase had to chuckle. "Why would you ask that?"

"Because I'm not sure what exactly her problem is lately, but she's been in one heck of a mood ever since she got back from college."

"Is she just home for the summer?"

"No, she graduated. She had plans for after college, both a job and a man she'd been seeing for several years, and all of a sudden, right at graduation they both fell through." He shrugged. "Or maybe one fell through and she canceled the other. She says she isn't ready to talk about it yet, so I'm not sure what exactly happened. The one thing I do know, though, is she's certainly not the daughter I had when she left for college."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Chase said. "That does explain our encounter a little bit, though."

"Was she rude beyond belief?"

Chase searched for words, but before he found the ones he wanted, Pete said, "The silent pause says it all. I'm sorry, Chase. She's not really like that normally, but she's sure been trying my patience since she's been home. I'm starting to see glimpses of the old Cece pop out now and then, though, so I'm hopeful."

"Thanks for explaining that to me, Pete. To answer your question, she tried to chase me off my land, saying it was your land and her old swimming hole. I told her I thought there was a misunderstanding, but she didn't see it quite that way. She'll probably be asking you about it when you get home."

"Uh-oh. That was her favorite spot on the ranch. I had no idea she'd ever move back home or I would have kept it."

"I told her she was welcome there, but she seemed upset that you may have sold it."

"Sorry, Chase. I better get home so I can explain it to her. Hopefully she'll see that she owes you an apology."

"Don't worry about it, Pete, or try to force it. If someone's mistreated her I can understand her mood. Give her time to work through it."

"You're a good friend and neighbor, Chase McDermott. I better get home and face the music. She's probably waiting for me, mad as a wet hen."

"Could be," Chase agreed with a grin. "Good luck."

"Thanks. I'll probably need it," Pete said as he headed out the lane.

* * * * *

Cecelia left the handsome cowboy and went back to what she knew was still their land, where they still pastured horses. She had to calm down before she went home. She was angry with her father for selling that part of their land, and for not telling her he'd sold it, and she was angry at Chase. Face it; right now she was angry with the world. When she thought about it, though, she had to admit her father had every right to sell land he wasn't using, and it wasn't Chase's fault that it now belonged to him. She headed back home, needing to talk to her father

Her mind wandered back to Chase McDermott. He looked to be a big man, at least six feet tall. And he was obviously comfortable on his big gelding, controlling it with ease. He looked muscular, but the type of muscles you get from working, not from a gym. If he inherited the ranch from his grandfather she guessed he'd been working on a ranch somewhere. It wouldn't make sense for his grandfather to leave it to him if he didn't think he could run it.

Thinking about it, she didn't think he'd simply been one of the hired men on a ranch. As a rule, ranch hands weren't as polite as Chase seemed to be. He took his hat off as soon as he saw she was a woman, and no matter how rude she was to him, he never raised his voice. That got her thinking about her own reaction to him. She had been pretty rude. There was no other way to describe it. But why?

It didn't take much for her to answer that question. Tom Weiss. She and Tom had been an item for almost four years back in Maryland, where she'd gone to school. They met their freshman year and had become practically inseparable. She and her friends were all sure the two of them were headed for marriage after graduation. But two days before graduation they'd had a long talk. What happened next had totally devastated her, and she'd sworn off men forever.

She wasn't about to give any other man a chance at hurting her like that again. Especially him, she thought, thinking back to Chase. When she used to dream of men - before deciding they were all scumbags - the man of her dreams was nothing like Chase. She liked men who were handsome, which she had to admit Chase certainly was, but she liked sophisticated and well-dressed. He was too tall and muscular, all brawn and no brains. Then there was that unruly blond hair she longed to run her fingers through.

Wait ... where did that stray thought come from? She shook her head to clear those thoughts. She wouldn't be running her hands through any man's hair ever again. All she planned to do was get along with him as a neighbor, since she was sure they'd be seeing each other occasionally. He talked about her father as if they'd already become friends, which wouldn't surprise her; her father was friends with just about everyone he met. He wouldn't approve of her being rude to him, that was sure.

By the time she got home she'd decided she would apologize and try to be civil.

She rode to their barn and handed her horse, Ginger, off to one of their hands, and went to find her father. She found him in the office in the barn, talking on the phone. She waited until he was done with his call before speaking her mind.

"Did you really sell my favorite spot on this whole ranch?"

Cecelia's blunt question caught him offguard, and he sat staring at her a few moments. "Did you by chance meet our new neighbor, Chase?"

"Dad, I can't believe you sold it!"

Pete shook his head. "Honey, I honestly didn't know you liked that spot that much. And once you left for college I didn't think you'd come back here to stay. If I'd have known either of those facts I would have kept it. But it was right in the center of the land I sold Will."

Cecelia sighed. "I know, Dad. You had every right to sell it, and I'm sorry for the way I reacted. And you're right, I didn't plan on moving back home. I still don't plan on staying, so it's not a big deal. I guess it just surprised me to see a man on what I thought was our land. Then when he told me it was his land—"

She let her sentence hang, which Pete picked up on. "Cece, were you rude to our new neighbor?"

When she still didn't respond, he sighed. "Honey, what is wrong with you lately? My sweet little girl who was full of smiles went off to college and has returned as a young lady with an attitude toward the whole world. What happened? I wish you'd talk to me about it. Maybe it'd make you feel better. Maybe not, but at least I'd know what happened. I feel like I'm walking on eggshells around you, honey. I never know what to say, or what will set you off. I know something happened with you and Tom. You're obviously not together any longer, but I have no idea what it was, or if that's even what has you in this bad mood all the time any more. I do know

one thing, though."

She looked up at him. "What's that?"

"You need to either lose the attitude and straighten up, or talk to me about it. I think I deserve that much." Without waiting for an answer he got up to leave. "And I hope you weren't too rude to Chase. He's a nice guy and he and I have the start of a nice neighborly relationship. And if you want to make it in this business, you need to have a good relationship with your neighbors."