

Not Just a House

By

Misty Malone

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Chapter 1

Tucker Myers started out the back door of the main house to go to his foreman's cabin, when he looked toward the road and stopped. "Hey, boss, you expecting someone?"

"Not that I can think of," Cord Michaels said. "Why?"

"There's a red Mustang coming up the lane."

"It never fails. Every time I'm exhausted and looking forward to a shower and a full night's sleep, someone comes around looking for a job, or trying to sell me the latest and greatest feed supplement that my cattle just have to have."

"Want me to get rid of them? You didn't get home from the auction until 3:00 this morning and got back up to do chores at 5:30. You need some sleep."

"Do you mind seeing who it is? If you can handle it, that'd be great. If you need me, come in and yell up the steps and I'll come down."

Tucker looked back outside and smiled. "Not a problem."

Cord looked at his friend and the goofy grin he had on his face. "Is she cute?"

"Oh, yeah," Tucker said as he strode outside.

Cord chuckled, shook his head and headed upstairs. He was beat. He heard the door bang on old hinges as Tucker went out around front to try to deal with the visitor. Cord leaned toward the open window, curious about who would be visiting him now, yet hoping that Tucker could handle it without his input. The visitor's voice was soft and sweet.

"Hi. I'm looking for Cord Michaels. Is that you?"

"Sorry, but no," his foreman answered. "Tucker Myers, Cord's foreman. May I help you with something?"

"Thank you, but I need to see Mr. Michaels. Is he here?"

Cord groaned. That shower was going to have to wait. The visitor wasn't going to go away any time soon, although Tucker still tried.

"He's here, but this isn't a real good time. Whatever you want to see him for, can it wait until tomorrow?"

"Well, it's pretty important that I see him, and time is of the essence. Will he be free later tonight?"

Tucker sighed. "What do you need to see him about? I'll go see if he has time to talk to you."

"Ken at Monroe Realty sent me out to talk to Mr. Michaels. I'd rather talk to him. Sorry, nothing personal."

Cord's interest peaked at the mention of his former employer. He splashed cool water on his face, ran a brush through his hair and headed back downstairs just as Tucker called up to him. Tucker gave him a sheepish grin and shoulder shrug, as if to say, "I tried."

Cord slapped his shoulder good-naturedly as he walked past. He stepped onto the front porch and extended a hand towards the petite woman in professional attire. "I'm Cord Michaels," he introduced himself.

"Lena Levensworth," she said.

Cord sank into a white wicker chair, just barely stifling a yawn. Now that would be professional. "So Ken sent you out here?" he asked, hoping to get down to business quickly.

"Yes, he did," she mumbled.

She didn't sound as relaxed as she had just moments ago while he'd listened at the window. If he hadn't been up half the night, he might have taken the time to make her feel more comfortable in true Southern hospitality, but right now his bed was calling and it was calling loud and clear. "I can't imagine why Ken would send you out here. What can I do for you?"

Cord saw her glance from him to Tucker. Maybe she was feeling a little overwhelmed. He and Tucker were both good-sized men, and she looked tiny sitting between them. When she didn't answer immediately, he looked to his friend and foreman. "Thanks, Tucker. I'll see you in the morning."

Tucker frowned, but took the hint. "Okay, boss. Nice meeting you, Lena. Maybe I'll see you around town."

"Maybe," she said. "It was nice meeting you, Tucker."

Once Tucker left, heading back to his house, Cord turned back to her. "Now, how do you know Ken, and what did he send you over here for?"

"Ken just hired me at Monroe Realty," she began.

Cord's eyebrows rose. "Congratulations. You must be a heck of a real estate salesman. I'm sorry, sales person," he corrected.

She chuckled at his correction. "Why do you say that?"

“Because Ken doesn’t hire rookies and he doesn’t hire people that don't take their job seriously. He has the leading real estate company in the area, and he hires people that have proven they can sell and have good people skills. That tells me a lot about you,” he added with a smile.

“And that tells me a lot about you, as well,” she said. “He told me you were one of his best sales people.”

Cord looked down. “That was several years ago,” he said, feeling his face flush. “Surely that's not why you're here, though?”

“No,” she confessed. “I have to find a place to live. I was driving around, trying to get a feel for the area. I passed a beautiful home that looked to be abandoned. I asked Ken about it and he said you own it. He said you bought it when you worked for him.”

“The house on Elm Street?”

“Yes. That's a beautiful old home.”

“It is,” Cord agreed. “Ken's right; I bought that when I was selling real estate. I planned on fixing it up to live in. But my plans changed. I inherited this ranch from my grandfather and moved here. I've been ranching ever since.”

“So what happened with the house; was it ever fixed up?”

“I started to, but I didn't get very far when my grandfather died. It kind of got put on a back burner. I haven't even thought about it in months.”

“Would you consider renting it?”

“It's not in any condition to be rented,” he said with a little chuckle. “You couldn't live in it the way it is right now.”

“Would it take much? I'd be willing to do some work on it.”

Cord's eyes widened. “It needs more than just a good cleaning,” he said, shaking his head.

“I assumed it needed more than just cleaned up,” she snapped. “I'm not a helpless idiot.”

His eyebrows shot up and he gave her a stern look that she found to be very intimidating. “I'm sorry,” she said quickly. “I didn't mean that to be nearly as rude as it sounded. What I meant is, I used to help my dad a lot when I was growing up. I know how to use a hammer and a wrench.”

He sighed. “I'm afraid that house needs more than a hammer and a wrench.”

Cord looked over at the pretty little woman, who obviously was not going to give up. She looked almost desperate.

“Could we at least go see it? I'd really like to see inside it.”

A damsel in distress that seemed so little and vulnerable was too much for Cord to say no to, especially in his sleep-deprived state. “Okay, but not tonight. I got two hours of sleep last night and I'm about to keel over. How about tomorrow night?”

“That'd be great.”

“Where are you staying?”

“The Holiday Inn in town.”

“How about if I pick you up tomorrow evening at 5:00. We'll go look at the house, then we can talk about it over dinner. Will that work?” He cleared his throat, a bit surprised at himself that he'd offered to take her out to dinner.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“Whoa, back up here,” he cautioned. “Like I said, that house needs a lot of work. That work would take a lot of time; time I don't have. I'll show you the house, but don't plan to live there. You need to find somewhere else to live.”

“Maybe,” she said with a smile. “We'll see. For now, though, thank you for seeing me tonight. I'll let you go get some sleep.”

“I'll see you tomorrow at 5:00 at the Holiday Inn. What room are you in?”

“I'll be in the lobby,” she assured him. She turned around and practically skipped back to her car. She turned around and waived before driving down the lane, faster than Cord thought she should have been going.

He stood there watching her leave, shaking his head. What had he gotten himself into? He had no intention of fixing that house up yet, but the pretty little blond-haired pixie had definitely gotten his attention. She certainly wasn't afraid to go after what she wanted, which he admired. She was persistent, another good thing, and seemed friendly. But she also had a bit of a temper, although that didn't scare him. He knew how to deal with a young lady with a temper. What really sparked his interest, though, was that she had a vulnerability about her. He couldn't help feeling she needed someone to look out for her. He found himself looking forward to tomorrow evening. But right now he was looking forward to a hot shower and his bed.

* * *

Tucker greeted him at the barn early the next morning. “So what did she want, Cord?”

“She wants to rent my house on Elm Street.”

“Rent it? You can't rent that out!”

“That's what I told her.”

“So you told her no and she left?”

“Well, not exactly,” Cord admitted. “I'm taking her to see the house tonight.”

“You aren't actually thinking of renting it, are you?”

“No, of course not. It needs way too much work before anyone could live in it. But she likes old houses, so I agreed to show it to her.”

Tucker looked over at his boss with a grin. “And take her out to dinner, by any chance?”

“You got a problem with that?”

“Nope, not me,” Tucker said. “It's about time you get off this ranch for an evening.”

“Oh, come on. It's not like I never go anywhere.”

“Uh, yeah, boss, it is.” He turned to Cord with a serious expression. “Look, I know you've been busy learning how to run this ranch and keeping it going, and I commend you for that. But you have it under control now. You've taken it from what your grandfather had let it get down to while he was sick, and you've built it back up. You have four times the cattle he had, you're now farming all the land instead of letting half of it just set, and you have five more men working for you. It's running smooth now, and he'd be proud of you, I know it. But you need to take some time once in awhile and go enjoy yourself. I don't know of even one lady you've taken out since you've been here.”

“I just haven't met anyone I wanted to date,” Cord said.

“I know, but much of the reason for that is because you won't look for someone. You know what they say about all work and no play?”

“Thanks for your concern, my friend, but stop worrying about me. You know me, and you know I'm not interested in a one-night stand. I haven't felt like I had any extra time, and a relationship takes time I agree that things are under control now, though, and I'll even admit that something about Lena has gotten my attention. We'll see what happens.”

“Good luck, and I mean that.” Tucker grinned and added, “But she's awful pretty. If it doesn't work out, she's fair game; right?”

Cord growled. “Get to work.”

* * *

Lena woke up excited. She'd been working five years to get to this point. She went to school to get her real estate license with the hope of someday working for Monroe Realty. She knew it was the prime real estate office in the area, and she knew it wasn't easy to get hired in. She got her license and worked hard to get her credentials up to the standard she knew she needed.

She was sure working for Monroe Realty would help her get what she was after. She'd done her research and knew the house she was interested in had been sold through Monroe. She had the name Cord Michaels as the owner, but faked ignorance the day before when she'd talked to Ken about it. She told him that she'd driven by and was taken with the beauty of the old home. He told her who owned it, and she was surprised to hear he used to work for Monroe. She asked if he thought Cord would rent it to her, and Ken suggested she go talk to him.

He gave her Cord's address. She didn't want Ken to get suspicious, so she stopped the questions then.

Being able to tell Cord that Ken sent her was a plus. It had gotten his attention last night, and she was able to talk him into at least going to see it tonight. Now she just had to convince him to rent it to her. She'd only been in the house on one occasion, but she had to get back in there when she had enough time to do some searching.

She took a moment to think about last night, and the two men she'd met. Tucker looked to be about her age or a couple years older, but he was a large, intimidating man. He was very good looking, with dark blond hair and brown eyes, and muscles – lots of muscles. She'd grown up in a city, and city boys didn't have that kind of muscular build. It was obvious he worked hard during the day, not just as a pencil pusher.

When Cord came outside, she'd felt a bit overwhelmed. He was just as large, just as muscular, and just as handsome. He had darker hair and dark brown eyes, and was just as intimidating on first sight, as well. Again like Tucker, though, once she started talking with him, he was very nice. Cord had a stern demeanor about him, but his smile lit up his face and softened his hard edges. It was an interesting mix, and she was eager to get to know him better this evening.

She got dressed and had some breakfast. She drove around town trying to get a feel for her new environment. Her next stop was at a little shopping plaza that had unique little

boutiques. As she was leaving, she picked up a real estate magazine so she could get an idea what houses were selling for in the area and what was available.

A Dairy Queen was calling out to her, so she stopped there and got a milkshake. She was sitting outside at a picnic table drinking her milkshake and looking at the magazine when an older lady stopped at her table. “Are you expecting someone?”

“No,” Lena assured her. “It's just me. There's plenty of room, please, join me.”

“If you're sure I won't be interrupting,” the older lady said.

“I'm positive. I'd love having the company. My name is Lena.”

“Hi, Lena. My name is Edna Grant.”

She sat down and Lena closed her magazine. “Nice to meet you, Edna.”

“Likewise.” Edna glanced at her magazine. “Are you hoping to buy a house?”

“No. Well, eventually, sure, but not now, no,” Lena stuttered. “I'm new to this area and just got a job selling real estate, so I was looking at what's out there and the prices.”

“Oh, good for you,” Edna said.

The two of them started talking, and Lena quickly felt like she was talking to an old friend. She learned that Edna had lived here her whole life. When Lena asked a few questions about the area, Edna gave her a bit of a history lesson. Lena absorbed all the information like a sponge. She loved hearing it, and she loved talking with Edna. Before she knew it, she'd spent several hours talking to her new friend. “Oh, my goodness, Edna. I'm sorry, I didn't realize how late it is. I've got to get going.”

Edna had a warm, but mischievous smile on her face. “Hot date tonight?”

Lena about choked on the last sip of her milkshake. “Edna!” She laughed, but then admitted, “Kind of, yes. If I don't get going, I'm going to be late.”

“We can't have that. You get going now. Don't make the nice man wait.”

Lena drove back to the motel, thinking back over her afternoon. Edna was a gem. She'd thoroughly enjoyed spending time with her and learning about the area.

She got back to the motel and took a quick shower, dried her hair, slid into a sundress and applied a minimal amount of makeup, then hurried down to the lobby. She'd only been there a few minutes when her big handsome cowboy walked in. He removed his hat as he entered, and looked around. He gave her a wide, friendly smile when he saw her, and walked over to her.

“You look really pretty tonight. Are you ready to go?”

“Does this look okay, really? I didn't want to get dressed up too much to look at the house, but I didn't want to wear old jeans out to eat. Will this be okay, wherever we go?”

His smile seemed genuine, which gave her a warm feeling. “Lena, trust me, you would look fine in that dress anywhere you went around here.” He led her to the door with a gentle hand on her back. “But I understand what you're saying, and you chose well. It should work fine for both outings tonight.”

He held the door to his SUV while she got in, then closed it and went around to the driver's side. She couldn't remember the last time a man did that for her. It felt nice.

“How long have you been selling real estate?” Cord asked, as he pulled away from the curb.

“Almost four years. How about you; how long did you sell it?”

“About the same, the last two with Monroe. What made you decide to sell real estate?”

She paused a moment. “I'm not real sure, exactly. I like people, and I love looking at houses, especially old houses with unique architecture or character that you don't see in newer homes.”

“I agree with you there,” he said. “Old houses are charming.”

“Why did you sell real estate? Isn't it quite a jump from that to ranching?”

“My first love is ranching, always has been. After college, though, I moved back home, but Dad and I kind of butted heads. I'd learned some new ideas that I wanted to try, but Dad was stuck in his old tried and true methods. It's his ranch, so I bowed out. I decided to sell real estate, specializing in farms and ranches, hoping to save some money so when a ranch came on the market that I could afford, I could jump on it.”

“And that's what you were doing when you inherited your ranch?”

“Yep. Grandpa and I always got along real well. He respected my decision when I moved out so Dad and I weren't at each other's throats. He offered me a place to stay and a part-time job on his ranch so I could save the money I'd need for a down payment. He'd planned all along, I found out later, to leave me the ranch, and he figured it would be easier for me if I was already living there and knew how it worked.”

“I'm sorry about your grandfather,” Lena said. “I mean, it's nice that you inherited the ranch, but I'm sorry you lost him.”

“Thank you. The odd thing is we had just talked about my quitting real estate and running

his ranch. He was getting older and had scaled back by the time I got there. He couldn't do it all, and he hadn't found a good foreman. I thought Tucker would make a good foreman and introduced him to Grandpa. He suggested I take over the ranch and hire Tucker. I'd agreed, and had just talked to Ken to give him my notice the day before Grandpa got sick. Grandpa went quickly. All of a sudden I was running the ranch, building it back up like we'd planned, but I was doing it alone."

"It's a beautiful ranch," she said. "I was really impressed. Is that your doing, or did your grandfather keep it looking like that?"

"He kept it looking nice. Even when he scaled down, he may not have used all the buildings, but he kept them looking nice. He hired a landscaping service to keep the lawn mowed and weeds out of the flowers, and I've kept the same service."

"It looks real nice."

"Thank you. Here we are," he said as he pulled in the lane. He got out and went around to open her door, but she jumped out just before he got there. "Next time wait for me," he said casually, but before she could question him, he led her to the front door.

He got out his key and unlocked it. "Be careful in here," he said as he took her hand to lead her in. She walked in and looked around in awe. It was so different from the last time she'd been in it.

It was in deplorable shape, but as she looked closer she saw the special traits she remembered that made it such a pretty old house. "Look at the crown molding around the ceiling. And the ornate woodwork around the doors. Can't you just picture this when it was first built?"

"I can. And I think it could look nice again sometime, but it would take a lot of work."

"I agree," she said, "but the work would definitely be worth it. This would be beautiful."

She started walking toward the door to the next room, but he held her back. She'd forgotten he'd taken her hand in his. "Whoa," he said. "Let me go first. I don't want you getting hurt."

She rolled her eyes. "You worry way too much, cowboy. I'll be fine. It's just a house."

He frowned and tightened his grip on her hand. "It's not just a house; it's an old house in bad shape. I haven't been in here in quite some time. I don't know what critters might be in here or how bad a shape it's in. Stay with me so I can make sure you're safe."

She sighed, but since he was leading her toward the door she tried to go to, she didn't

argue. They went into the next room, which she remembered as the dining room. “Wow, look at that gorgeous chandelier,” she said.

“Look how dusty and dirty it is.”

“Yeah, but you could clean it up and it would be so pretty.” She looked around the room again. “Cord, will you please rent this house to me?”

“No.”

She froze. “No maybe, or let me think about it?”

“No,” he confirmed. “This house is in no shape to be lived in.”

“It could be fixed up, though.”

“It could, but it would take a lot of time. You need a place to live fairly soon, I'm assuming. When do you start at Monroe?”

“In three weeks, but we could get it in good enough shape by then, I'm sure.”

“We?”

“I'll help. Cord, I really want to live here.”

“I understand, Lena, but it would take too long.”

“If you start fixing it up now, though—”

“It will take months at the minimum to get it in a livable condition. And that's from the time they start working on it.”

“But I could—”

“Let's finish looking at it, then we'll talk over dinner.”

Lena knew she wasn't getting very far at all here, so she agreed. She could use the extra time to come up with a plan. She had to find a way to get in this house alone.

The rest of the house was much like what they'd already seen. It needed work, but most of it was cosmetic in nature. It could be a truly beautiful house again, she was sure.

Cord held her hand the entire time they were in the house, and had to hold her back twice when she tried to run ahead. The second time he frowned at her. “You have a problem listening, don't you?” Again, before she could answer, he took her where she'd been headed, so she didn't pursue it.

They finished their tour and he took her back to the SUV, where he again helped her in. Once he was in and they were heading to the restaurant he asked, “Are you hungry?”

“Yes, I am,” she admitted. “I didn't have much lunch.”

“What's not much mean; what did you have?”

“A milkshake,” she said, with a bit of a giggle.

“A milkshake? That's it?”

“I met a lady and we talked all afternoon. I guess I forgot to eat.”

“Does that happen often?”

“I don't meet a lady and talk all afternoon often, no.”

He frowned at her. “Do you skip lunch often?”

“Not all the time, but it happens occasionally, sure.”

“That's not a good habit to get into,” he said, but again he quickly changed the subject. By the time they got to the restaurant she'd forgotten about his statement. He pulled into the parking lot and casually said, “Please wait for me this time.”

He didn't sound at all upset, but it seemed like an odd statement to her. He was at her door before she had time to think much about it, though, and he had her door open and offered her a hand. She took it, again surprised but not upset when he helped her out of the SUV, and once again used a gentle hand at her back to guide her into the restaurant.

All she could think about was how to convince him to rent her his house. Not only did she need time alone in that house without him knowing why, but she was starting to really like this cowboy's manners. Though she did admit a couple of his comments were rather odd and merited a bit of thinking about later.