

## CHAPTER 1: SMALL TOWN COWBOY ROMANCE SAMPLE

ETHAN

"Got a fresh batch of responses to the nanny ad!" Bennett calls out.

The sound of the ranch hand's voice carries across the dusty yard. The dust and grass leading up to the big house of Dawson ranch looks hazy in my view as I glance up from wire fence I've been mending.

I make a mental note not ever give Bennett a bullhorn again. My father's oldest ranch hand is having way too much fun with it.

At my expense.

Half sun-burned and not in the mood for nonsense, I wipe a hand across my forehead and stand, smearing dirt and sweat together in the process.

I lower the tip of my straw hat, squinting at his jovial face. "Bennett, I swear to God, if you send me over a batch like the last one, I'm going to put you on manure duty for a month."

Bennett flashes a toothy grin, his tanned skin crinkling. "Come on now, Boss. You can't blame me for trying to help you out. It's not easy finding a good help these days."

"Don't I know it," I grunt in response, walking over to join Bennett at the picnic table where he's sorting through applications.

As I take a seat across from him, I can't help but feel like it's all too much. Taking over the family ranch these past six months since my father nearly lost it has been a whirlwind, to say the least.

It's been ten years since I've been part of the ranch in any real way—an entire decade. But now that I'm officially in charge, it's like everything has been dialed up to eleven.

The workload. The stress. The constant feeling of responsibility weighing on my shoulders.

Handling a ranch is almost as precarious as handling my five-year-old.

My daughter and keeping the wheels of business on the ranch rolling are the only reason I push through those long days and sleepless nights.

And there are too many of those to count.

"You know, you could always hire someone to help with the paperwork," Bennett says, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I snort. "Believe me, I've tried. But no one seems to understand ranching like we do."

"Ain't that the truth." Bennett hands me a stack of papers with a knowing look. "But things are looking up. I may have found someone promising this time."

I flip through the first few applications with a raised eyebrow, each one more baffling than the last. "Bennett, did you put 'circus performer' as a desirable skill on the nanny ad or what? This one claims she's a master at juggling. Literally, juggling—fireballs and toddlers, apparently."

"Hey, in this heat, those skills might come in handy. Plus, think of the entertainment value at parties."

I shake my head. The next application only adds to the circus. "Here's one who says she speaks fluent Martian."

"Martian, huh?" Bennett rubs his chin. "You know, that might not be a bad idea. Those Martians are tricky to negotiate with, especially when they start bickering over the best way to herd the cattle."

I toss the application back on the table, fighting a frown. "Oh, here we go. This one's a former opera singer. Because what every ranch needs is someone who can serenade the cows into submission."

"Well, you know Old Betsy. She's been a bit temperamental lately. Maybe some Puccini would calm her down."

We continue through the stack, and with each application, my hopes for finding a suitable nanny fall lower and lower. That is, until Bennett hands me the last one with a grin.

"Aha!" he exclaims. "You're going to like this one."

I read through the application, my eyes scanning the page in my hand. "She has no ranching experience."

"But she has a degree in animal science."

"She doesn't have any childcare experience."

"But she did volunteer at a daycare for a summer."

"Bennett, all her work experience is in Manhattan. That's New York City."

"But she grew up on a farm. And look, she even included a picture of her with a newborn calf."

I glance down, and sure enough, there's a photo of a young woman with her arms wrapped around a tiny calf. Dark waves of hair frame her pale face. And she has the bluest eyes I've ever seen.

I snort, handing Bennett back her resume.

"Well, she certainly looks like she's never stepped in cow manure before."

Bennett scoffs, shaking his head. "Come on, Boss. Give her a chance. Sure, she might be a city girl. But," he glances around the fields of grass, dirt and hay, "we could use a little bit of culture around here."

"Culture? Bennett, we don't even have a decent coffee shop within 50 miles."

"Shoot, maybe a city slicker could teach us a thing or two then. Maybe put us onto those fancy espresso drinks you see in the movies."

I consider his words, looking back at the photo of the young woman. Ava Foster, her name reads on the front.

She does seem to have a certain spark in her eye, and her unconventional background could bring a fresh perspective to the ranch.

It's not like it can get any worse. Dad made sure of that six months ago.

"Fine, I'll give her an interview."

Bennett beams, slapping me on the back. "That's the spirit!"

I point over at him, heading back towards the fence, hat low. "But if she can't tell a horse from a cow, I'm blaming you."

I head back towards the farmhouse, my boots crunching on the gravel path.

Inside, the cool air offers a stark contrast to the early summer heat outside.

I nod to my younger sister Charlotte, who's busy in the kitchen, before making my way to my office. Sitting down at my old wooden desk, I open up my laptop and type "Ava Foster, New York City" into Google.

The screen fills with images and articles, and I click through to her social media profiles.

Photos appear of Ava in lively city settings.

Brunching with friends. Capturing the skyline at sunset. And smiling in stylish outfits against brick walls and graffiti art.

She looks so carefree and young, apparently only twenty-six-years-old to my thirty-six years on this earth. Her complexion is pale, which contrasts with her vibrant blue eyes—eyes that seem to hold stories untold.

And those curves—sensuous and soft, visible even beneath the layers of fancy clothes.

I catch myself staring a little too long at one picture of her smiling, a hint of trouble lurking in their cerulean depths. Depths that beg me to dive in and explore.

As I click on another photo to do just that, my door swings open with a thwack.

In bursts Charlotte, her strawberry-blonde hair a mess and her hands covered in flour. "Ethan, I need your help with the pie crust!"

I jump up from my seat, startled out of my thoughts of Ava.

"For God's sake, Charlie. Ever heard of knocking?"

She thinks, humming. "Nope. Not really my thing."

"Clearly." I frown, still distracted. "What's wrong with the crust?"

Charlotte sighs dramatically. "It's too dry! And Dad will be here any minute for dinner."

I roll my eyes at her distress. My sister is a fantastic cook, but she always gets flustered when our dad comes over.

The way she behaves, you'd think Dad was visiting from a hut in Timbuktu. Instead, he's only coming over from the second, smaller house on the ranch property.

After I took over half a year ago, I moved into the main ranch house and he relocated into the smaller one.

He said it was so that I could spread my wings and take over as CEO of Dawson ranch. But I know different.

I know it's because his ego was hurting after he was basically forced to retire after mismanaging the ranch and almost bankrupting us.

Now Charlie, who lives with Jessie and me in the main house, insists on him visiting at least once a week, usually for dinner--an invitation to which he never says no.

It's like clockwork--my sister cooks a fancy meal, my dad

brings over a bottle of wine, and I make sure the meal doesn't dissolve into yet another argument between us all.

I shake my head, clearing away thoughts of my father. "Just...add more butter," I suggest.

"Ugh, you're the best, Ethan!" She starts to leave before stopping in the doorway. "What are you up to anyway?"

"Just doing a bit of, uh, research."

Charlotte's grin widens, clearly not buying it. "Still haven't decided on a nanny, have you? You know, I can always help with that."

"No way. You're not even responsible enough to remember to add enough butter to a pie crust."

"Ouch, that hurts!" She sticks her tongue out at me. "How many times have I told you, I'm a chef not a baker? Anyway, if you really want someone reliable, I can ask around my network. You know, for a small fee."

"Thanks, but no thanks, Charlie. I'll let you know when I need you to butt in." I glance back at one of Ava's smiling pictures. "As for finding someone reliable..." I lean back in my chair. "I have a suspicion I already have."