



The Cowboy Way: A Creed in Stone CreekPart Time Cowboy (The Montana Creeds)

By Linda Lael Miller, Maisey Yates

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Two unforgettable fan-favorite stories from two stars of Western romance—"First Lady of the West" Linda Lael Miller and *USA TODAY* bestselling author Maisey Yates

A Creed in Stone Creek

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When single attorney Steven Creed becomes guardian of an orphaned five-year-old boy, he trades his big-city law firm for a ranch near his McKettrick kin in the close-knit community of Stone Creek, Arizona. There he meets his match in beautiful, by-the-book county prosecutor Melissa O'Ballivan. It'll take one grieving little boy, a sweet adopted dog and a woman who never expected to win any man's heart to make this Creed in Stone Creek know he's truly found home.

Part Time Cowboy

Maisey Yates

Sadie Miller isn't expecting any welcome-home parades on her return to Copper Ridge. Least of all from part-time rancher, full-time lawman Eli Garrett. The straitlaced, impossibly hot deputy sheriff glares at her as if she's the same teenage hoodlum who fled town ten years ago. But running from her demons has brought Sadie full circle, ready to make a commitment at last. Not to a man, but to a bed-and-breakfast. On Garrett land. Okay, so her plan has a tiny flaw...



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Editorial Review

About the Author

The daughter of a town marshal, Linda Lael Miller is the author of more than 100 historical and contemporary novels. Now living in Spokane, Washington, the “First Lady of the West” hit a career high when all three of her 2011 Creed Cowboy books debuted at #1 on the New York Times list. In 2007, the Romance Writers of America presented her their Lifetime Achievement Award. She personally funds her Linda Lael Miller Scholarships for Women. Visit her at www.lindalaelmiller.com.

New York Times Bestselling author Maisey Yates lives in rural Oregon with her three children and her husband, whose chiseled jaw and arresting features continue to make her swoon. She feels the epic trek she takes several times a day from her office to her coffee maker is a true example of her pioneer spirit.

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Some instinct—or maybe just a stir of a breeze—awakened Steven Creed; he sat up in bed, took a fraction of a moment to orient himself to unfamiliar surroundings. One by one, the mental tumblers clicked into place:

Room 6. Happy Wanderer Motel and Campground. Stone Creek, Arizona.

The door stood open to the fresh high-country air, which was crisply cool on this early June night, but not cold, and the little boy—Steven's newly adopted son—sat on the cement step outside. A bundle—probably his favorite toy, a plush skunk named Fred, rolled up in his blanket—rested beside him, and the boy's tiny frame was rimmed in an aura of silvery-gold moonlight.

Something tightened in Steven's throat at the poignancy of the sight.

Poor kid. It wasn't hard to guess who he was waiting for. Matt was small, with his dad's dark hair and his mother's violet eyes, and he was exceptionally intelligent—maybe even gifted—but he was still only five years old.

How could he be expected to comprehend that his folks, Zack and Jillie St. John, were gone for good? That they wouldn't be coming to pick him up, no matter how hard he hoped or how many stars he wished on, that night or any other.

Steven's eyes burned, and he had to swallow the hard ache that rose in his throat.

Jillie had succumbed to a particularly virulent form of breast cancer a year and a half ago, and Zack had only lasted a few months before the grief dragged him under, too—however indirectly.

"Hey, Tex," Steven said, trying to sound casual as he sat up on the thin, lumpy mattress of the foldout

sofa—he'd given the bed to the child when they checked in that evening. Steven shoved a hand through his own dark blond hair. "What's the trouble?" His voice was hoarse. "Can't sleep?"

Matt looked back at him, shook his head instead of answering aloud.

He looked even smaller than usual, sitting there in the expanse of that wide-open doorway.

Steven rolled out of bed, shirtless and barefoot, wearing a pair of black sweatpants that had seen better days.

He crossed the scuffed linoleum floor, stepped over the threshold and sat down beside Matt on the step, interlacing his fingers, letting his elbows rest on his knees. There was enough of a chill in the air to raise goose bumps wherever his skin was bare, so he figured Matt had to be cold, too, sitting there in his cotton pajamas. With a sigh, Steven squinted to make out the winding sparkle of the nearby creek, sprinkled in starlight, edged by oak trees, with night-purple mountains for a backdrop.

Matt leaned into him a little, a gesture that further melted Steven's already-bruised heart.

Carefully, Steven put an arm around the boy, to lend not only reassurance, but warmth, too. "Having second thoughts about turning rancher this late in your life?" he teased, thinking he couldn't have loved Matt any more if he'd been his own child, instead of his best friend's.

In the morning, Steven would attend the closing over at the Cattleman's Bank, and sign the papers making him the legal owner of a fifty-acre spread with a sturdy though run-down two-story house and a good well but not much else going for it. The rickety fences had toppled over years ago, defeated by decades of heavy snow in winter and pounding rain come springtime, and the barn was unsalvageable. Yet something about the place had reached out to him and grabbed hold, just the same.

The small ranch had been a home once, and it could be one again, with a lot of elbow grease—and a serious chunk of change. Fortunately, money wasn't a problem for Steven, which wasn't to say there weren't plenty of other things to chap his figurative hide.

Sometimes, he felt just as lost as Matt did.

Matt's mouth quirked up at one side in a flimsy attempt at a smile, all the more touching because of the obvious effort involved. "I'm *only* five years and three months old," he said, in belated reply to Steven's question, in that oddly mature way of his. "It's not late in my life, because my life just got started." The little guy had skipped the baby-talk stage entirely; he hadn't even tried to talk until he was past two, but he'd spoken in full sentences from then on.

"Five, huh?" Steven teased, raising one eyebrow. "If you weren't so short, I'd say you were lying about your age. Come on, admit it—you're really somebody's grandfather, posing as a kid."

The joke, a well-worn favorite, fell flat. Matt's small shoulders moved with the force of his sigh, and he leaned a little more heavily into Steven's side.

"Feeling lonesome?" Steven asked, after clearing his throat.

Matt nodded, looking up at Steven. His eyes were huge and luminous in the predawn darkness. "I need a dog," the boy announced solemnly.

Steven chuckled, ruffled Matt's hair, gleaming dark as a raven's wing in the night. Relief swelled inside him, flailed behind his chest wall like a living thing doing its best to escape. A dog was something he could manage.

"Soon as we're settled," he promised, "we'll visit the animal shelter and pick out a mutt."

"Do they have ponies at the shelter, too?" The question cheered Steven; Matt was pushing the envelope, so to speak, and that had to be a good sign.

They'd already had the pony discussion—repeatedly.

"You know the deal, Tex," he reminded the little boy quietly. "The fences need to be replaced before we can keep horses, and the barn, too."

Matt sighed again, deeply. "That might take a long time," he lamented, "since you'll be working in town every day."

Steven fully intended to settle down in Stone Creek, build a normal life for his young charge and for himself. And to him, *normal* meant showing up somewhere on weekday mornings and putting in eight hours—whether he needed the paycheck or not.

He'd had to fight just to get through high school, let alone prelaw in college, and then earn the graduate degree that had qualified him to take the bar exam—a frustrating variety of learning disorders had all but crippled him early in his life. Although they'd been corrected, thanks to several perceptive teachers, he'd had a lot of catching up to do.

Still felt as if he was scrambling, some of the time.

Steven ruffled Matt's hair. "Yep," he agreed. "I'll be working."

"What about me? Where will I be when you're gone?"

They'd already covered that ground, numerous times, but after everything—and everybody—the little guy had lost over the past couple of years, it wasn't surprising that he needed almost constant reassurance. "You'll be in day camp," Steven said. "Until you start first grade in the fall, anyhow."

Matt's chin jutted out a little way, the angle obstinate and so reminiscent of Zack that the backs of Steven's eyes stung again. Zack St. John had been his best friend since middle school, a popular athlete, excellent student and all-around good guy. Losing Jillie had been a terrible blow, knocking Zack for the proverbial loop—he'd gone wild and finally died when, driving too fast down a narrow mountain road, he'd lost control somehow and laid his motorcycle down.

"Couldn't I just go to the office with you?" the boy asked, his voice even smaller than he was. "I might not like day camp. Anyhow, it's summer. Who goes to day camp in *summer*?"

Steven sighed and got to his feet. "Lots of kids do," he said. "And you might just wind up thinking day camp is the greatest thing since 3D TV." He extended a hand. "Come on, Tex. Let's get you back to bed. Tomorrow might be a long day, and you'll need your rest."

Matt reached for the stuffed skunk, and wound up in the now-tattered blanket he always kept close at hand. Jillie had knitted that herself, especially to bring her and Zack's infant son home from the hospital in, but the thing had been through some serious wear-and-tear since then.

Steven supposed that Matt was too old to be so attached to a baby blanket, but he didn't have the heart to take it away.

So he watched as the little boy got to his feet, trundled back inside, took a brief detour to the bathroom and then stood in the middle of the small room, looking forlorn.

"Can I sleep with you?" he asked. "Just for tonight?"

Steven tossed back the covers on the sofa bed and stretched out, resigned to the knowledge that he probably wouldn't close his eyes again before the morning was right on top of him. "Yeah," he said. "Hop in."

Matt scrambled onto the bad mattress and squirmed a little before settling down.

Steven stretched to switch off the lamp on the bedside table.

"Thanks," Matt said, in the darkness.

"You're welcome," Steven replied.

"I dreamed about Mom and Dad," Matt confided, after a silence so long that Steven thought he'd gone to sleep. "They were coming to get me, in a big red truck. That's why I was sitting on the step when you woke up. It took me a little while to figure out that it was just a dream."

"I thought it was something like that," Steven said, when he could trust himself to speak.

"I really miss them," Matt admitted.

"Me, too," Steven agreed, his voice hoarse.

"But we're gonna make it, right? You and me? Because we're pardners till the end?"

Steven swallowed, blinked a couple of times, glad of the darkness. "Pardners till the end," he promised. "And we are definitely gonna make it."

"Okay," Matt yawned, apparently satisfied. For the moment, anyhow. He'd ask again soon. "Night."

"Night," Steven replied. Soon, the child was asleep.

Eventually, though he would have bet it wouldn't happen, Steven slept, too.

Melissa O'Ballivan whipped her prized convertible roadster, cherry-red with plenty of gleaming chrome, up to the curb in front of the Sunflower Bakery and Café in downtown Stone Creek, shifted into Neutral and shoved open the door to jump out.

It was a nice day, one of those blue-sky wonders, so she had the top down.

Setting the emergency brake and then leaving the engine running, she dashed into the small restaurant, owned and operated by her brother-in-law Tanner Quinn's sister, Tessa, and made her way between jam-packed tables to the counter.

Six days a week, Melissa breakfasted on fruit smoothies with a scoop of protein powder blended in, but most Fridays, she permitted herself to stop by the popular eatery for her favorite takeout—Tessa made a mean turkey-sausage biscuit with cheese and egg whites.

"The usual?" Tessa grinned at her from behind the counter, but she was already holding up the fragrant brown paper bag.

Melissa returned the cheerful greetings of several other customers and nodded, fishing in her wallet for money as she reached the register. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a face she didn't recognize—a good-looking guy with dark blond hair, a little on the shaggy side, perched on one of the stools in front of the counter. He wore black slacks and an expensive sports shirt that accented the periwinkle-blue of his eyes.

For some reason Melissa couldn't have explained, she was suddenly picturing him in old jeans, beat-up boots and the kind of Western-cut shirt most of the men around Stone Creek wore for every day.

She looked away quickly—but not quickly enough, going by the slight grin that tugged at a corner of the stranger's mouth as he studied her. Who *was* this? Melissa wondered, while she waited impatiently for Tessa to hand back change for a ten-dollar bill.

Just somebody passing through, she decided, completing the transaction and noticing, somewhat after the fact, that the mystery man wasn't alone. A small boy sat beside him, busily tucking into a short stack of Tessa's incomparable blueberry-walnut pancakes.

Melissa accepted her change and her breakfast and turned on one high-heeled shoe, consulting her watch in the same motion. Her meeting with Judge J. P. Carpenter was due to start in just fifteen minutes, which meant she'd have to gobble down the sandwich instead of savoring it at her desk while she listened to her voice mail, as she usually did on Fridays.

Even without looking, she knew the stranger was watching her leave the café; she could feel his gaze like a heartbeat between her shoulder blades, feel it right through her lightweight green corduroy blazer and the white cotton blouse and lacy bra beneath.

Outside, Alice McCoy, the oldest meter maid in America, by Melissa's reckoning, had pulled up beside the roadster in her special vehicle, a rig resembling a three-wheeled golf cart. A yellow light whirled slowly on the roof as, ticket book in hand, mouth pursed with disapproval, Alice scribbled away.

"Not another traffic citation, Alice," Melissa protested. "I was only gone for two seconds—just long enough to pick up my breakfast!" She held up her sandwich bag as evidence. "*Two seconds*," she repeated.

Alice bristled. "This is a no parking zone," she pointed out firmly. "Two seconds or two hours, it makes no never-mind to me. A violation is a violation." She made a little huffing sound and tore off the ticket, leaning to snap it in under one of the windshield wipers, even though Melissa was standing close enough to reach out and take the bit of paper directly from the woman's hand. "You're the county prosecutor," Alice finished, still affronted. "You should know better." She shook her head. "Leaving your car running like that, too. One of these days, it's bound to get stolen and *then* you'll be piping a different tune, young lady."

Melissa sighed, retrieved the ticket from her windshield, and stuffed it unceremoniously into the pocket of her blazer. "This is Stone Creek, Arizona," she said, knowing this was an argument she couldn't possibly win but unable to avoid trying. She was, after all, a lawyer—and a card-carrying O'Ballivan. "Not the inner city."

"Crime is everywhere," Alice remarked, with a sniff. "If you ask me, the whole world's going to hell in a handbasket. I shouldn't have to tell *you* that, of all people."

Melissa gave up, climbed into the sports car and set her bagged breakfast on the other seat, on top of her briefcase. She drove to the single-story courthouse, a brick building that also served as the local DMV, town jail and sheriff's office, parked in her customary spot in the shade of a venerable old oak tree and hurried inside, juggling her purse, the briefcase, and her rapidly cooling sandwich.

Melissa's official headquarters, barely larger than her assistant Andrea's cubicle, opened off the same corridor as the single courtroom and the two small cells reserved for the rare prisoner.

Andrea, at nineteen, wore too much eye makeup and constantly chewed gum, but she could take messages and field phone calls well enough. Because those things comprised her entire job description, Melissa kept her opinions to herself.

Dashing past Andrea's desk, Melissa elbowed open her office door, since both hands were full and her assistant showed no sign of coming to her aid, set the bag from the cafe-bakery on her desk and dropped her purse and briefcase onto the seat of the short couch under her framed diplomas and a whole slew of family photos. She ducked into her tiny private restroom to wash her hands and quickly returned, stomach grumbling, to consume the sandwich.

Andrea, popping her gum, slouched in the office doorway, a sheaf of pink message forms in one hand. Her fingernails were long and decorated with what looked, from a distance, like tiny skulls and crossbones. A sparkle indicated that the design might include itty-bitty rhinestones.

Users Review

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