

# ***The Rancher's Baby* by Maisey Yates**

**\*First Chapter Excerpt\***

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*My fake ex-husband died at sea and all I got was this stupid letter.*

That was Selena Jacobs's very dark thought as she stood in the oppressive funeral home clutching said letter so tightly she was wearing a thumbprint into the envelope.

She supposed that her initial thought wasn't true—strictly speaking. The letter proclaimed she was the heir to Will's vast estate.

It was just that there were four other women at the funeral who had been promised the exact same thing. And Selena couldn't fathom why Will would have made her the beneficiary of anything, except maybe that hideous bearskin rug he'd gotten from his grandfather that he'd had in his dorm at school. The one she'd hated because the sightless glass eyes had creeped her out.

Yeah, that she would have believed Will had left her.

His entire estate, not so much.

But then, she was still having trouble believing Will was dead. It seemed impossible. He had always been so...so *much*. Of everything. So much energy. So much light. So much of a pain in the ass sometimes. It seemed impossible that a solemn little urn could contain everything Will Sanders had been. And yet there it was.

Though she supposed that Will wasn't entirely contained in the urn. Will, and the general fallout of his life—good and bad—was contained here in this room.

There were...well, there were a lot of women standing around looking bereft, each one of them holding letters identical to hers. Their feelings on the contents of the letters were different than hers. They must be. They didn't all run multimillion-dollar corporations.

Selena's muted reaction to her supposed inheritance was in some part due to the fact that she doubted the authenticity of the letter. But the other part was because she simply didn't need the money. Not at this point in her life.

These other women...

Well, she didn't really know. One of them was holding a chubby toddler, her expression blank. There was another in a sedate dress that flowed gently over what looked to be a burgeoning baby bump. Will had been too charming for his own good, it seemed.

Selena shuddered.

She didn't know the nature of those women's relationships to Will, but she had her suspicions. And the very idea of being left in a similar situation made her skin crawl.

There were reasons she kept men at arm's length. The vulnerability of being left pregnant was one of them. A very compelling one.

As for the other reasons? Well, every woman in this room was a living, breathing affirmation of Selena's life choices.

Heartbroken wives, ex-wives and baby mamas.

Selena might technically be an ex-wife, but she wasn't one in the traditional sense. And she wasn't heartbroken. She was hurt. She was grieving. And she was full of regret. She wished more than anything that she and Will had patched up their friendship.

But, of course, she had imagined that there was plenty of time to revive a friendship they'd left behind in college.

There hadn't been plenty of time. Will didn't have any more time.

Grief clutched at her heart and she swallowed hard, turning away from the urn to face the entry door at the back of the room.

The next visitor to walk in made her already battered heart jolt with shocked recognition.

Knox McCoy.

She really hadn't expected him to come. He had been pretty scarce for the past couple of years, and she honestly couldn't blame him. When he had texted her the other day, he'd said he wouldn't be attending the funeral, and he hadn't needed to say why.

She suspected he hadn't been to one since the one for his daughter, Eleanor.

She tried to quell the nerves fluttering in her stomach as Knox walked deeper into the room, his gray eyes locking with hers. She had known the man for more than a decade. She had made her decisions regarding him, and he...

Well, he had never felt the way about her that she did about him.

He looked as gorgeous as ever. His broad shoulders, chest and trim waist outlined perfectly in the gray custom-made suit with matching charcoal tie. His brown hair was pushed back off his forehead, longer than he used to keep it. He was also sporting a beard, which was not typical of him. He had deep grooves between his dark brows, lines worn into his handsome face by the pain of the past few years.

She wanted to go to him. She wanted to press her thumb right there at those worry lines and smooth them out. Just the thought of touching him made her feel restless. Hot.

And really, really, she needed not to be having a full-blown Knox episode at her ex-husband's funeral.

Regardless of the real nature of her relationship with Will, her reaction to Knox was inappropriate. Beyond inappropriate.

"How are you doing?" he asked, his expression full of concern.

When he made that face his eyebrows locked together and the grooves deepened.

"Oh, I've been better," she said honestly.

A lopsided smile curved the corner of his mouth upward and he reached out, his thumb brushing over her cheek. His skin was rough, his hands those of a rancher. A working man. His wealth came from the chain of upscale grocery stores he owned, but his passion was in working the land at his ranch in Wyoming.

Her gaze met his, and the blank sadness she saw in his eyes made her stomach feel hollow.

She wondered if the ranch still held his passion. She wondered if anything did anymore.

"Me, too," he said, his voice rough.

"Will is such an inconsiderate ass," she said, her voice trembling. "Leave it to him to go and die like this."

"Yeah," Knox agreed. "His timing is pretty terrible. Plus, you know he just wanted the attention."

She laughed, and as the laugh escaped her lips, a tear slid down her cheek.

She'd met Knox at Harvard. From completely different backgrounds—his small-town Texan childhood worlds away from her high-society East Coast life—they had bonded quickly. And then... Then her grandfather had died, which had ripped her heart square out of her chest. He had been the only person in her family who had ever loved her. Who had ever instilled hope in her for the future.

And with his death had come the trust fund. A trust fund she could only access when she was twenty-five. Or married.

The idea of asking Knox to marry her had been... Well, it had been unthinkable. For a whole host of reasons. She hadn't wanted to get married, not for real. And her feelings for Knox had been real. Or at least, she had known perfectly well they were on the verge of being real, and she'd needed desperately for them to stay manageable. For him to stay a friend.

Then their friend Will had seen her crying one afternoon and she'd explained everything. He had offered himself as her solution. She hadn't been in a position to say no.

Control of her money had provided freedom from her father. It had given her the ability to complete her education on her own terms. It had also ended up ruining her friendship with Will. In the meantime, Knox had met someone else. Someone he eventually married.

She blinked, bringing herself firmly back to the present. There was no point thinking about all of that. She didn't. Not often. Her friendship with Knox had survived college, and they had remained close in spite of the fact that they were both busy with their respective careers.

It was Will. Whenever Will was added to the mix she couldn't help but think of those years. Of that one stupid, reckless decision that had ended up doing a lot of damage in the end.

For some reason, she suddenly felt hollow and weak. She wobbled slightly, and Knox reached toward her as if he would touch her again. She wasn't sure that would be as fortifying as he thought it might be.

But then the doors to the funeral home opened again and she looked up at the same time Knox looked over his shoulder.

And the world stopped.

Because the person who walked through the door was the person who was meant to be in that urn.

It was Will Sanders, and he was very much alive.

Then the world really did start to spin, and Selena didn't know how to stand upright in it.

That was how she found herself crashing to the floor, and then everything was dark.