

Confessing to the Cowboy (Cowboy Cafe Book 4)

By Carla Cassidy

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The Price of Deadly Secrets…

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For Mary Mathis, the crime is personal. Not only are the victims her employees, they may be a sign of something deeper. Eight years ago she came to Grady Gulch fleeing a violent past that has scarred her for life. Now she has to discover if that history is dooming the women who work for her. She already knows it has made new love impossible—no matter what she may secretly desire.

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Editorial Review

About the Author
Carla Cassidy is an award-winning author who has written more than fifty novels for Harlequin Books. In 1995, she won Best Silhouette Romance from *RT Book Reviews* for *Anything for Danny*. In 1998, she also won a Career Achievement Award for Best Innovative Series from *RT Book Reviews*. Carla believes the only thing better than curling up with a good book to read is sitting down at the computer with a good story to write.

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Sheriff Cameron Evans was tired of finding women dead in their beds. He stood in the doorway of Dorothy Blake's small bedroom and took in the tragic scene before him. It was definitely a bad start to a new week.

A light breeze fluttered the blue-flowered curtains hanging at the open window, blowing in the cold November early morning air.

Dorothy was clad in a pale pink nightgown and covered by a blue bedspread. Blood stained the spread around her neck but without that telltale sign it would appear that Dorothy slept peacefully. Her eyes were closed and her features showed no sign of stress.

Cameron tightened his hands into fists as two of his men wearing paper booties moved in to collect any evidence that might lead to a clue to the killer. He had little hope that they'd find anything. Two previous deaths in the same manner had yielded nothing. The murderer was smart and meticulous in his efficiency. Get in, slit the throat of a sleeping woman and then get out, leaving nothing behind for law enforcement to work with.

The window appeared to be intact, suggesting that it had been unlocked and had provided easy access. Cameron's frustration grew as he thought of the town hall meeting where he'd cautioned all women living alone to make sure their windows and doors were locked at all times. Apparently there had been some at the meeting who weren't paying attention.

"Where's the kid?" Cameron asked. He'd been told before he'd arrived on scene that the body had been discovered by a teenage kid.

"In the kitchen with the dog," Deputy Adam Benson said from behind Cameron. "He's pretty freaked out."

"I can imagine," Cameron replied. He moved past Adam and headed down the hallway to the kitchen. There was nothing more he could do in the bedroom. His team was well trained and the coroner stood by to move in after the crime-scene team had taken their photos and done their work. In the meantime he had to speak to Jeffrey Lawrence, the young man who had found Dorothy an hour earlier.

Dorothy's kitchen was painted a cheerful bright yellow, with white and yellow gingham curtains hanging at the window. Despite the day's chill the sunshine streamed into the windows with welcome heat that battled with the cold air drifting down the hallway from the bedroom.

Jeff Lawrence sat at the small, wooden kitchen table, his blue eyes red-rimmed as he hugged a wiggly, small furry mutt close to his chest.

"I can't get the picture of her out of my head," he said as he swallowed hard in an obvious effort not to cry. "It's like burned in my brain…all that blood and the smell."

"I'm sorry you had to experience that. What were you doing here so early in the morning?" Cameron took the seat opposite the young man at the table.

"It's my job…to walk Twinkie every morning before I go to school. I'm a senior and trying to save up some extra money for college." Twinkie whined at the sound of her name and licked the underside of Jeff's pointy chin.

"How long have you had this arrangement with Dorothy?"

"Since the beginning of summer. She and my mom are good friends and that's how I know…knew Dorothy." His eyes welled up with tears once again. "My mom is going to be so upset about all of this."

Cameron waited a minute for the kid to get himself back under control and then continued, "How did you enter the house this morning?"

"I have my own key. Sometimes Dorothy worked the night shift at the Cowboy Cafe and she'd sleep in late in the mornings. If she didn't answer when I knocked, then I used my key to come in and usually found Twinkie on the foot of her bed. Whenever Twinkie saw me she'd jump down and we'd go for our morning walk."

"Is that what happened this morning?"

Jeff's head bobbed like one of those big-headed dolls people put on their dashboards or desks. "Everything was the same as usual. I knocked on the door and when Dorothy didn't answer I went ahead and let myself in. I walked down the hallway to her bedroom and Twinkie was curled up at her feet, just like usual. But this morning Twinkie didn't jump off the bed when she saw me. She just whined and whined and I thought maybe she was hurt. So, I walked over to her and that's when I noticed the blood…and the smell. I didn't touch Dorothy, I knew she was dead. I just grabbed Twinkie and left the room and then called 911."

"You did the right thing," Cameron replied. There was no way Jeff was involved in the crime, at least not at the moment. The kid had the green cast of somebody on the verge of puking. He petted the dog as if the silky fur were the only thing holding him together.

"What's going to happen to Twinkie? Dorothy doesn't have any family, and I can't take her. We already have a big dog, Zeus, who would eat this little girl for lunch." Jeff looked distraught. "Twinkie is a great dog, friendly and well trained. I mean, I'm sorry about Dorothy, but you need to find a good home for Twinkie." Jeff looked at him pleadingly.

Great, Cameron thought. Not only did he have another murder to try to solve, he also had the faith of a softhearted kid depending on him to find a tragically orphaned mutt a good home.

"Gather up all her doggie stuff, and I'll see what I can do," Cameron said. "Then go home. We'll probably have more questions for you later, but right now I'd prefer you not talk to anyone about this crime except with your parents."

Jeff nodded and got up from the table. As he began to gather up all things Twinkie, Cameron went back

down the hallway where he met the coroner, who told him what he already suspected.

Time of death was between one and three in the morning, cause of death was a quick, clean slice across the throat. Dorothy's hearing aids were on the night-stand. She'd never heard her screen being removed and the unlocked window sliding open. She'd never heard her killer's approach.

"It's just like the other two," Deputy Benson said. "Three women killed in their beds, their throats cut."

"And all three worked as waitresses at the Cowboy Cafe," Cameron added. He frowned, thinking of how this latest murder would affect Mary Mathis, the owner of the cafe.

He couldn't help the way his heart softened as he thought of her. He'd had a thing for Mary since she'd taken over ownership of the cafe five years before and for the three years prior when she'd worked as a waitress there…unfortunately it was an unrequited thing.

He couldn't think about that now. He had plenty of other tasks ahead of him to find this killer who was tormenting his town.

Throughout the afternoon, his men canvassed the neighborhood to find anyone who had witnessed anything unusual, but Grady Gulch was a typical small Oklahoma town where most people were in their beds and sleeping in the wee hours of the morning.

Twinkie spent part of the day either snoozing on the rug in the living room or being walked by one of the deputies on scene. Cameron had already decided he'd take the pooch home with him for now and in his spare time try to find her a good home.

As Cameron attended to his duties overseeing the crime scene and directing his deputies, he couldn't help but think of the other two victims. Candy Bailey had been a young woman killed in her bed in a small cottage behind the Cowboy Cafe. Shirley Cook had been a middle-aged woman murdered in her bed in her home.

Now Dorothy, sixty-four years old and looking to retire and putter in her garden after years of waiting on other people, was instead murdered while she slept.

He tamped down the unexpected rage that threatened to build inside him, a rage directed at the killer, who moved like a shadow in the night, who sought out the vulnerable and killed them without remorse and left no clues behind.

Who was this person? A native of Grady Gulch or one of the new members of town who had brought with them a dark soul and an evil directed at the waitresses of the popular cafe?

Before the night was over he needed to have a sit-down with Mary. It was something he dreaded, first telling her that another of her waitresses had been killed, although by the time he got to her she probably would have already heard. But he wanted to pick her brain as to why somebody might be targeting these women who worked for her.

The fact that the first two murdered women had worked at the cafe he might have written off as a strange coincidence, but three dead waitresses made a definite pattern that had to be explored. A serial killer, just what he needed, some creep who had chosen this place—his town—to play out some murderous fantasy or whatever darkness was in his mind.

He stepped outside on the front porch and looked around the neighborhood. It was late afternoon and everything that could be done here had been done.

Despite the grimness of the situation he couldn't help the small smile that curved his lips as he watched Adam Benson holding Twinkie's leash and heading toward him up the sidewalk.

Cameron had a feeling when Adam joined the force a month ago he hadn't considered that one of his official duties would be walking a dainty little dog named Twinkie.

The Benson family had been to hell and back in the past two years. Adam's sister Cherry had been killed in a car accident, his eldest brother Sam had tried to kill a woman and remained in jail awaiting trial on attempted murder charges. Adam's youngest brother Nick had left town soon after Cherry's death, leaving Adam alone to deal with the family ranch and emotional baggage that had sent Adam into the bottom of a bottle for a brief period of time.

Nick had come home and reunited with his girlfriend, Courtney, and their child, Garrett, and Adam had moved into a rented room upstairs in a house owned by a wheelchair-bound woman who he'd eventually fallen in love with.

The Benson men, except Sam, who remained in jail charged with attempted murder, had found love and were in the process of building lives with the women who had captured their hearts.

Adam had shown himself to have all the qualities of a good lawman when Melanie Brooks, his handicapped girlfriend, had been kidnapped by one of his own deputies. That man was in jail and Cameron had offered Adam a job on his team. In the month that he'd been working for Cameron, Cameron had never questioned his decision to hire Adam. He'd proven himself to be intelligent, hard-working and detail meticulous.

"As I recall this wasn't in my job description," Adam said good-naturedly as he approached where Cameron stood. "Have you figured out what you're going to do with the little pup?"

Cameron released a sigh as he looked at the tiny dog that appeared to be smiling up at him. "I suppose I'll take her to my place for now until I can find a suitable home for her, unless."

"Oh, no," Adam quickly protested. "Melanie would kill me. We're in the middle of planning a wedding and we've already decided that pets are out of the question for us." He handed Cameron the leash as if he couldn't get rid of it fast enough.

"Guess I'll run her by my place and then head to the cafe. I need to talk to Mary. There's got to be a reason this guy is killing her waitresses."

"And if we can figure out the 'why,' maybe we can identify the 'who,'" Adam replied.

"Exactly," Cameron said. "For now I want you to find out the names of all of Dorothy's friends and set up interviews. I'll be back in the office later this evening to check on progress." He leaned down and picked up Twinkie in his arms. The friendly little beast snuggled against him as if she were already home.

Minutes later Cameron was in his car and headed to his place. Home was a comfortable ranch house on five acres of land. He had a couple of horses, but no cattle. The horses were strictly for riding and not for business.

It was a nice place but also a lonely place for Cameron who at thirty-five had assumed by now it would be filled with a wife and a couple of kids.

Unfortunately the minute he'd seen Mary Mathis in the cafe, he'd also seen her in his mind as the woman who belonged in his home. Equally as unfortunate, Mary had made it clear that she didn't belong in his home, on a date or in any other space with him beyond friendship.

By now Mary probably would have heard that she'd lost another waitress. The grapevine in Grady Gulch was strong and healthy and it had been hours since Dorothy's body had been discovered.

A frustrating part about these crimes was that Cameron didn't know how to anticipate who might be next. He didn't know what to do to keep other women safe.

After the last murder he'd held a press conference and warned women who lived alone to make sure they kept their doors and windows closed and locked, to be aware of their surroundings and if they felt threatened at all to call 911.

He had a feeling that nobody in town had taken his warnings seriously. Candy Bailey had been a young woman and initially her boyfriend, Kevin Naperson, had looked good for the murder. Cameron still had his eye on the young man, but couldn't tie him to Shirley Cook's murder.

If Cameron was perfectly honest with himself he'd admit that he had no viable suspects for any of the murders. He had a couple persons of interest, but nobody who popped to the top of the pathetic list.

Several tall trees stood sentry on either side of his house and a nice-sized pond glittered in the not-so-far distance. The barn was located behind the house and the entire back acreage was fenced to keep the three horses where they belonged.

Once he was in the house it didn't take him long to set up space for Twinkie in the laundry room. The dog not only had her own little wardrobe, but also food and water bowls and a tiny four-poster bed that appeared to have never been slept in.

With the dog settled, Cameron left the house once again and headed toward the Cowboy Cafe and a talk with Mary. As always when he drove toward the cafe, myriad emotions filled his head.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Steve Duran:

The actual book Confessing to the Cowboy (Cowboy Cafe Book 4) has a lot of information on it. So when you make sure to read this book you can get a lot of advantage. The book was published by the very famous author. This articles author makes some research ahead of write this book. This particular book very easy to read you can find the point easily after looking over this book.

Susan Romero:

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