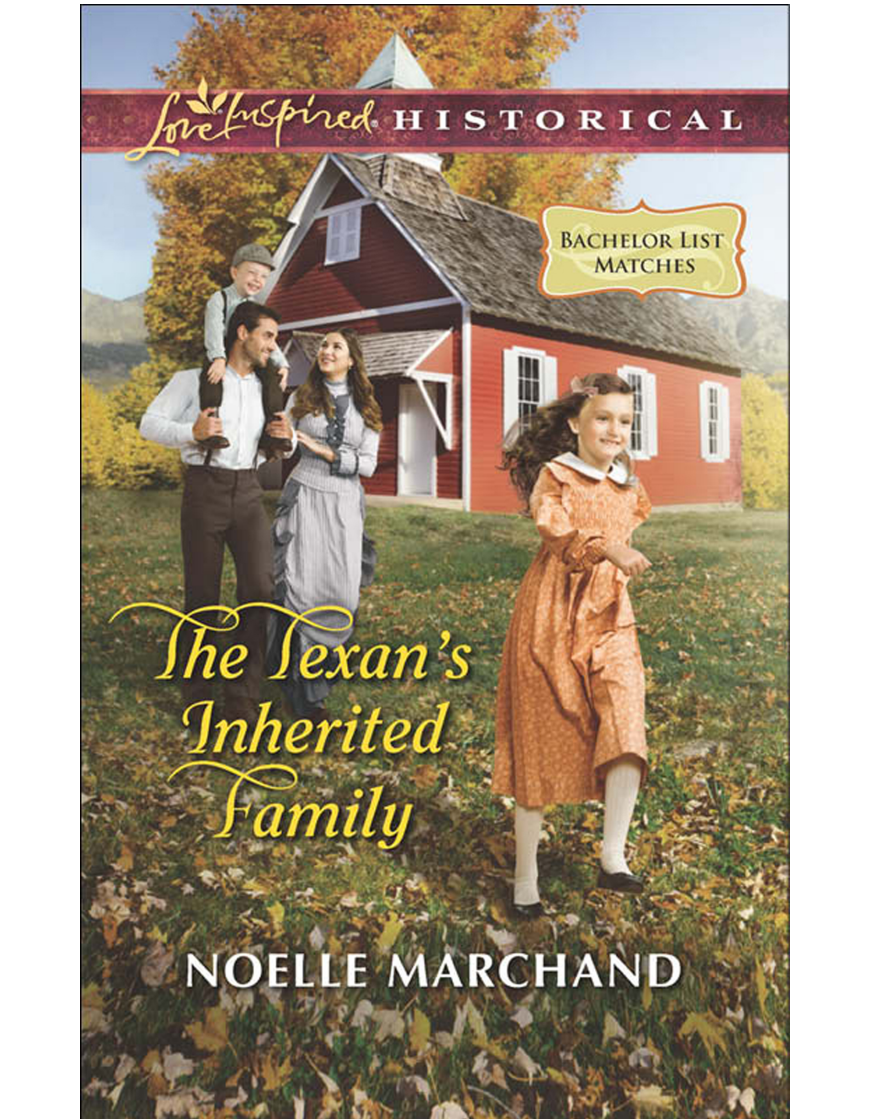


A family of four in historical clothing stands in a field of fallen autumn leaves. A man in a white shirt and dark trousers carries a young boy on his shoulders. A woman in a grey dress stands next to him. A young girl in an orange dress runs towards the camera. In the background is a red barn with a white cupola and yellow trees under a blue sky.

Love Inspired HISTORICAL

BACHELOR LIST
MATCHES

*The Texan's
Inherited
Family*

NOELLE MARCHAND

Noelle Marchand

The Texan's Inherited Family

Аннотация

A Father in the Making Busy Texas farmer Quinn Tucker is used to raising crops, not children. So when four nieces and nephews are left in his care, it's not long before he realizes they need a mother. But his search for a wife leads to the least likely woman for illiterate Quinn - schoolmarm Helen McKenna. City girl Helen has been told she'll never have children - and, it seems, a husband. So she jumps at the chance to be a mother to Quinn's little family. Though he is far from her image of an ideal husband, maybe a marriage in name will blossom into something more... Bachelor List Matches: A hand-picked bride for every bachelor in small-town Texas

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Bachelor List Matches: A hand-picked bride for every bachelor in small-town Texas

“Don't you want to teach?”

The vague feeling of discontent she'd been ignoring welled up inside her. “I certainly enjoy it. However, to be honest, it isn't really what I want to do.”

He frowned. “Then what do you want to do?”

I want to have a family with a husband and children of my own. She sighed and leaned back against the stair railing.

“Helen?” Quinn's use of her Christian name for the first time drew her full attention. “I need to talk to you. I know this probably isn't the right time, but I can't hold it in.”

“This sounds serious. Go ahead and tell me.”

“My eldest nephew and niece are always going on about you and I've noticed that you seem to care a whole lot about them,

too. That's true, isn't it?"

"It certainly is."

"Well, I'm doing my best for them, but anyone can tell that isn't good enough." He waved away her protests. "Now, that's just the plain truth and you know it. The fact is that they need a mother." She stared at him, wondering where this conversation was going before he spoke again. "I was wondering if you'd be willing to marry me—for the children's sake."

NOELLE MARCHAND is a native Houstonian living out her childhood dream of being a writer. She graduated summa cum laude from Houston Baptist University in 2012, earning a bachelor's degree in mass communications and speech communications. She loves exploring new books and new cities. When she's not scribbling out her latest manuscript, you may find her pursuing one of her other passions—music, dance, history and classic movies.

The Texan's Inherited Family

Noelle Marchand



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Instead of shame and dishonor,
you will enjoy a double share of honor.

You will possess a double portion of prosperity
in your land, and everlasting joy will be yours.

—Isaiah 61:7

This story is dedicated to my faithful friend Elizabeth Tisdale.
Thank you for always listening, appreciating my love for Disney
movies and encouraging me to have fun. Here's to all of the
adventures we've had and all that are sure to come.

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October 1888 Peppin, Texas

Quinn Tucker was not a smart man.

If he was, he would have realized he needed to get married as soon he'd found out he was going to be a foster father to a group of orphans. Three whole weeks had passed since then. Three weeks in which he'd struggled to be both father and mother to four children he hadn't even known existed until they'd been dropped on his doorstep by a stranger named Jeffery Richardson. The man had said the children had belonged to his brother, Wade, who along with Quinn's father, had gone off to seek a

fortune for their poverty-stricken family. Quinn had been eight years old at the time, so he'd been left behind to be raised by and eventually take care of his ailing grandmother. Nana had died when he was fourteen. Quinn had been on his own. Until now...

Now, he was afraid to be on his own long enough to visit the outhouse for fear that one of the children would get hurt or wander off in his absence. Not that he regretted taking in his own kin. He didn't. Each of them had become real special to him during the short time that they'd lived with him. It was just that their entrance into his life had changed everything faster than he'd imagined possible.

He was still trying to get his bearings, which must have been why it had taken him seeing his friends Lawson Williams and Ellie O'Brien exchange vows yesterday for him to realize that he needed a wife. After all, a wife was supposed to be a helpmeet and he needed help—desperately. There was only so much bathing, washing, mending, braiding, baking and cooking a man could handle on his own with a farm to run.

Maybe he ought to ask Ellie for some advice on finding a wife. The town's newest bride was also its most successful matchmaker. Even as busy as he'd been lately, Quinn hadn't been able to escape hearing all the ruckus she'd caused over the past two months by gradually compiling a list of the town's most eligible bachelors and the ladies Ellie saw as their matches. Her intent had merely been to find her own match through the process of elimination. However, it seemed everyone had been hankering

to get a peek at what had been deemed the “Bachelor List” to find out who their match was.

Quinn needed to know if he had one, but he wasn’t sure what qualified a man to be considered “eligible.” If it was looks, education or riches, he didn’t have a chance. Women never seemed to get silly or swoony over him—at least not that he’d ever noticed.

Of course, that didn’t mean one hadn’t captured his attention. Helen McKenna, the town’s schoolmarm, caught him watching her from across the crowd of folks who’d gathered for a good old-fashioned shivaree at the ranch where the newlyweds lived. Her mahogany eyes seemed to sparkle in the lantern light as she tilted her head inquisitively and stared right back at him. A blush spread just below her high cheekbones, making him wonder just how long he’d been staring. He sent her a nod as if that’s all he’d been trying to do in the first place, then glanced away.

He’d noticed her in church the first Sunday after she’d arrived in town, but hadn’t met her until he’d enrolled his eldest nephew and niece in school. That first meeting had confirmed everything he’d feared about the schoolmarm. She was beautiful, refined, intelligent and far too good for him. Every time he looked at her, Nana’s warnings rang in his ears. *Chasing after more than you deserve will only get you hurt or dead.*

Hadn’t his pa and his brother proven her right? No need for Quinn to follow their example. He’d best stay far away from Miss

McKenna—not that he actually had a chance with her, anyway.

Staying away from her tonight would have been a sight easier if she hadn't hung back to talk to him. The rest of the group followed Sheriff Sean O'Brien, who was the bride's brother and Quinn's closest neighbor, toward the cabin where the newlyweds lived. Quinn's grip tightened on the neck of his banjo in his left hand as Helen's generous smile set his heart thumping in his chest. Not wanting her to stumble in the dark, uneven field they traipsed across, he dared to place a cautionary hand near the small of her back. She angled closer to his side and chanced a whisper.

"I wasn't expecting to see you tonight. Who's with the children?"

"The groom's parents were kind enough to insist on watching them for me," he whispered back. "You can't get much better than the town doctor and Mrs. Lettie Williams for temporary caregivers. They even brought us supper."

Her lips tipped upward in a brief smile. "What about Reece? How is his black eye?"

"All right, I suppose, but it's turning an awful shade of green." Reece was Quinn's oldest nephew at nine years old and was the self-designated protector of the siblings. He hadn't taken kindly to one of the other schoolboys picking on his younger sister Clara. The seven-year-old was a true sweetheart and destined to be a heartbreaker with her rich brown curls and big blue eyes. "I'm not sure what to do. I don't want to encourage him to fight,

but I don't want Clara to be bullied, either."

She nodded with understanding and concern written across her face in a frown. "I've already spoken to the other student's father about it. Hopefully, the teasing will stop. As for Reece, I'm sure he'll settle in soon."

"I hope so. He's been through a lot with his father and stepmother dying in that boating accident on their honeymoon only two years after his mother died in childbirth. Then he traveled thousands of miles to live with an uncle he'd never even met."

"It couldn't have been an easy transition for you, either." The empathy in her tone wrapped around him like a warm blanket.

"I manage well enough." At least, that's what he kept telling himself. Helen started to respond but someone shushed them, so she just nodded. He counted about twelve or thirteen people creeping along beside her to where a cozy cabin for two sat at the edge of the woods. Even the katydids stopped singing. A snicker sounded above the soft rustle of grass but was quickly drowned out by more shushes.

Sean lit the lantern he held and gave a single nod. A cacophony of sound shattered the stillness. Quinn's lightning-fast fingers picked an out-of-tune melody on his banjo. On his right, Helen banged an old frying pan with a mangled metal spoon while her good friend Isabelle Bradley rang the bell that usually sat on the Bradley Boardinghouse's front desk. On his left side, his best friend, Rhett Granger, played a jumbled assortment of

chords on his harmonica before settling in on a single warbling note. Beside Rhett, Chris Johansen's fiddle screeched. Other folks added to the discordance by banging more pots and pans, whooping, hollering and whistling.

A cheer went up when the door opened a few seconds later. Lawson appeared, looking startled and drowsy but with a wide grin on his face. Ellie followed him out, laughing even as she covered her ears. In true shivaree fashion, the husband and wife were each made to sit in wheelbarrows. The ride ended on the banks of the farm's creek where the couple was finally allowed to stand. The noise and the music died down so that Sean's wife, Lorelei, could speak.

"Lawson and Ellie, this shivaree is to show you that your marriage has the full blessing of your family, friends and community." Lorelei gestured toward the creek. "As you take the plunge into married life, we take it with you."

Ellie eyed the creek then tilted her head and stared at her friends with calculating mischief. "Does that mean if we jump in, everyone else has to, as well?"

Quinn grinned at Ellie's exuberance. It was a pretty balmy night for mid-October. Of course, that didn't mean the creek would be anything but frigid.

Sean nodded. "That's the deal. Afterward, women will change in the cabin. Men will change in the barn."

Lawson gave a slow grin and winked. "Well, in that case..."

Ellie didn't seem the least bit surprised when Lawson lifted

her into his arms and barreled into the creek with what could only be described as a war cry. Pandemonium broke out as folks tossed their noisemakers on the ground and men started picking up whichever woman was handy to follow their leader into battle. Quinn spotted Helen backing away from the melee as he set his banjo in the cushioned wheelbarrow with the other instruments. He cut off Helen's escape, swept her off her feet and plunged into the creek.

Rushing water muted the sound of Helen's shriek and the rest of the hollering until Quinn resurfaced, gasping from the cold. Helen pushed away from him and immediately headed to the creek bank. A wave of water rushed over Quinn's head. He soon found himself embroiled in a water fight with Rhett and Chris. Once they'd had all they could stand of the cold, they staggered to the creek bank to follow the rest of the party in the rush toward warmth and dry clothes.

Quinn didn't make it very far along the path before he realized he hadn't seen Helen head for the trees. She was probably on the path ahead of him, but even with only three weeks of experience in the role, the parent in him already knew not to leave the creek without making sure she wasn't straggling behind the group. Quinn doubled back to the creek bank. Sure enough, she was staring at the ground as she walked back and forth along the bank of the creek. "Miss McKenna, what are you doing?"

"I'm looking for something."

"Well, you aren't going to find it in the dark."

She sighed. "You're probably right."

"You should change before you catch cold. You must be freezing."

"I certainly am." Her gaze swept the creek bank one last time before she joined him at the edge of the woods. "Thanks to you."

His caught her elbow to escort her onto the path. "Aw, I just gave you a little help getting in the creek, that's all. You would have jumped in eventually."

"Yes, but not quite so enthusiastically." Her smile flashed in the darkness before she gave him a stern look she must have perfected on her students. "Is there a particular reason why you seemed to take such sheer pleasure in throwing me into that creek?"

He couldn't help but chuckle. "Maybe I don't like schoolteachers."

"What did they ever do to you?"

"Plenty." He tugged her onward, hoping his grim tone would put an end to her question. It seemed to have the opposite effect.

She stopped and looked up at him. "Now I'm intrigued."

The last thing he wanted was to delve into that, so he angled a grin her way as he helped her around a fallen branch. "Truthfully, I hoped you would come out looking as messy as the rest of us. Of course, you didn't. Look at you...prim, proper and perfect as usual. Not a hair out of place. How'd you manage that?"

"Is that what you think I am?" She didn't seem to realize that she was leaning into him to share what little warmth their bodies

produced. Or maybe she was just too cold to care. “Prim, proper and perfect?”

A rush of heat tinged his face. It was too late to take back his words, so he just shrugged. “It sure doesn’t seem like you’re the type to ever let down your hair.”

They reached the edge of the woods, but she didn’t rush toward the cabin. Instead, she lingered with a hand on her hip. “I jumped in the creek, didn’t I?”

“I thought you said I threw you.” He winked as she seemed to scramble for a defense. “I guess I was just wondering what you’d look like a little mussed up, is all.”

“Is that so?” She lifted her chin along with her brow. “Well, I’ve been wondering what *you’d* look like with a haircut and a shave.”

He ran a hand over his thick beard. “That’ll happen the day you let down your hair and enjoy yourself.”

“Deal.” She released his arm and started fiddling with the fancy knot of hair on the back of her head.

Alarm prompted him to take a few cautious steps back. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Letting down my hair.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“No, but it’s what you said, so you can’t go back on our deal.” She shook her head until her hair tumbled from its style then slipped her hand into her thick dark hair and teased it into disarray. “Is that mussed enough for you?”

He stared at the dark waves of hair that framed her face and slid past her shoulders to stop at her waist. The only other woman he'd seen with her hair down had been his grandmother. She hadn't looked anything like Helen. The schoolmarm seemed to capture the sparkle of starlight in her mahogany eyes while the glow from the cabin caressed her delicate features and stained her hair with a subtle dusting of gold. His hand reached out of its own accord to slide through the thick locks that were slick and heavy from their recent soaking.

The sound of her breath catching in her throat brought him up short. Suddenly realizing just what he was doing and to whom, he extracted his hand from her hair and restored the distance he hadn't realized he'd covered. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I had no right to do that. Guess I just wasn't thinking."

She deftly twirled her hair and pinned it into a simple style. "You get that haircut and shave and we'll call it even."

"You must think I need them awful bad to go through all this."

Her expression turned innocent, though her eyes were full of mischief. "Well, you do remind me a bit of a bear."

"A bear, huh?" He glanced toward the cabin as the door opened and Lawson walked out with a bundle of clothes in his hand. Quinn urged Helen into the clearing. "You'd better go on inside before you catch a chill."

She complied, greeting the bridegroom as she passed him. Lawson lifted a skeptical brow as he met up with Quinn and they walked across the field toward the barn. "Did you two get lost

back there or something?”

Quinn shrugged. “I caught her dawdling by the creek, so I rounded her up and brought her in.”

“Well, don’t let her hear you describe her that way.”

“What way?”

Lawson’s eyes started twinkling. “Like a cow.”

“I guess it did sound kind of bad.” Quinn grimaced as Lawson laughed and clasped him on the shoulder. How was he ever going to find a wife at this rate? Lollygagging with a woman he didn’t have a chance with then talking about her like she was a heifer. It wasn’t a good start. He needed more than just an expert on love like Ellie. He needed divine intervention.

Being the last one into the tack room gave Quinn a moment alone to do what needed to be done. He bowed his head to whisper a prayer. “Lord, I might not be much and I may not deserve the finer things in life that other folks have, but I’m not asking for me. I’m asking for my children... All right, and maybe a little for me, too. Please send me a mother for them. Someone to be a helpmeet. That’s all I ask, Lord.”

“Quinn, everyone else has gone ahead,” Rhett called through the door. “I’m going to head to the cabin. You’d better get your banjo out the wheelbarrow and come on.”

“I’m coming.” Quinn finished dressing, then left the tack room. Rhett waited at the barn door jumping up and down to get warm while looking longingly across the field toward the cabin. Quinn found his banjo resting right where he’d placed it.

Whoever had been in charge of gathering the noisemakers from the creek bank hadn't been particularly careful in their treatment of his instrument. It had all manner of things piled on top of and around it. He pulled the instrument out only to find a stray piece of paper entwined in its string.

"Quinn, hurry up, will you? Lawson said Ellie was making some hot cider."

"Aw, stop your caterwauling. I've said I'm coming." Quinn tucked the folded paper into his pocket before joining Rhett. They ribbed each other all the way to the cabin, but Quinn's gaze kept rising to the starry sky that stretched above him. He could only hope that God had heard the pleadings of his heart and see fit to answer.

Fast.

* * *

Helen couldn't believe she'd lost the Bachelor List. That thought, along with the chill in the air, sent her snuggling farther into her covers the next morning. Amy, the oldest of the three Bradley girls at the boardinghouse where Helen lived, had begged off from the shivaree with a headache then entrusted Helen with a secret note for Ellie. Helen hadn't had any idea that note was actually the Bachelor List until she'd told Ellie about losing it at the creek. Hopefully, the matchmaker would have more success finding the list in the daytime than Helen had last night. She didn't understand why Amy hadn't just given it to Ellie herself later. Well, it was just one more thing that hadn't

made sense about last night—like her sudden attraction to Quinn Tucker.

“Attraction” was the only explanation for why she’d lingered in the woods with him despite her drenched condition. But why would she feel that way? She’d been telling the truth when she’d said he reminded her of a bear. Just like the one she’d seen at the circus when she was a child; Quinn was big, hairy, arresting and more than a little intimidating. She couldn’t help but wonder how he ate without getting things lost in that unruly-looking mustache and beard. His hair was also overly long. However, there was always that indescribable something about a man with hair that nearly reached his shoulders that made her want to chase after him...with a pair of scissors.

Raised in Austin’s high society, she was used to polished gentlemen who were always perfectly groomed. But she’d learned her lesson about the cold hearts that could be hidden by gentlemanly exteriors.

As for Quinn, she couldn’t stop thinking about the gentle, almost awed way he’d reached out to touch her hair. She ought to be outraged by his audacity, but then she’d have to be equally shocked by her own behavior. After all, she was the one who’d taken her hair down in front of a man who was practically a stranger. She ought to be ashamed of herself, but she wasn’t. He’d made her feel comfortable, accepted and precious. It was unnerving. More than unnerving—it was dangerous!

It was dangerous because she might actually start believing

what he'd said about her. Prim and proper she could handle since that was what every good schoolmarm should be, but she knew all too well that she was not perfect. Never perfect—especially not as a woman. Any doubts she'd had about that had been cleared away six months ago when she'd made the mistake of telling her fiancé, Thomas Coyle, that a riding accident she'd had at sixteen had left her unable to have children. Subsequently, their engagement had ended before the engagement dinner was over.

Helen had quickly studied to become a teacher then moved to Peppin in order to forget her humiliation. If only it was as easy to forget the dreams she'd cherished since she was just a child. Back then, she'd often been found playing house in her mother's dresses with at least one baby doll clutched in each arm. She'd thought being a teacher would be close enough to the fulfillment of that dream to keep her satisfied. Instead, it only fed the longing for the one thing she knew she'd never be able to have—children of her own.

No, Quinn wouldn't have called her perfect if he'd known the truth. Or, perhaps he wouldn't care that she'd never have children. He did have four of his own. She saw the two eldest every school day. She knew a teacher wasn't supposed to have favorites and she didn't let it show in the schoolroom, but the Tucker children's plight had paved their way straight into her heart.

She tossed the thoughts away along with her covers and dressed for the day. What was wrong with her? She knew better

than to let herself think things like that. Hadn't she learned anything from her fiancé's rejection? Yet, she could almost hear the comforting tones of her mother's voice in the aftermath of that disaster. *I promise you, my darling, if Thomas loved you—truly loved you—it wouldn't have mattered to him that you can't have children.* As pretty as those words were, Helen wasn't entirely sure she believed them.

She grabbed her teaching materials then hurried out of her room. A quick glance at the grandfather clock in the main hallway told her that she'd better hurry if she planned to get that cantankerous schoolhouse stove going before class started. She popped into the kitchen only long enough to glean a muffin from a rather tired-looking Mrs. Bradley, before heading out the front door.

A whirlwind of yellow-and-brown oak leaves swirled around her as she hurried down Main Street toward the schoolhouse—their chaos an apt visualization of her nervousness, which increased the closer she got to the schoolhouse. There had been a few minor disturbances early in the school term while she had been adjusting to teaching and the students had been adjusting to her. The president of the school board, Mr. Etheridge, had warned her that another incident of any kind would warrant a discussion of her fitness for the teaching position with the rest of the school board. Sending the man's son home on Friday with a black eye and bloody nose courtesy of Reece Tucker couldn't have helped matters.

Helen took a deep breath to calm herself down. Surely Mr. Etheridge must have understood from her note that she'd managed to de-escalate the situation quickly. If nothing else, he had to appreciate the fact that she'd kept the boys from hurting each other further and had even gotten them to apologize.

Feeling a bit more confident, Helen unlocked the schoolroom door and got the fire in the stove going just as students began arriving. A few called jaunty hellos, but most just silently stored their dinner pails in the coatroom then rushed out to play until she was ready to call them in. She had the school bell in hand to do exactly that when Violet, the youngest of Mr. Bradley's three daughters, met her at the schoolhouse door. "Helen, why didn't you stay for breakfast? You missed all the excitement!"

She ought to remind Violet to refer to her as Miss McKenna during school hours, but technically the bell hadn't rung yet, so Helen allowed herself to be drawn in by the fifteen-year-old's exuberance. "What excitement? What's happened?"

"Amy eloped last night!"

"Eloped?" Her mouth fell open. "I don't believe it. How? With whom? Why?"

"With Silas Smithson, of all people! I don't think you've met him. He left town over a year ago. He stayed at the boardinghouse while he was here, which is how he and Amy became sweethearts. He tricked us all into thinking that he worked with the railroad when he was actually an undercover Ranger. I guess Papa's pride was hurt by Silas's deception,

because he forbade us to have anything to do with him once the truth came out. That didn't stop Amy from corresponding with him in secret all this time. At least, that's what she said in the letter she left us."

Helen shook her head. "No wonder Amy asked me to give Ellie the Bachelor List. She wasn't planning to be around long enough to do it herself."

"*You* have the Bachelor List?" Excitement lit the girl's blue eyes. She caught Helen's arm. "What is it like? Where is it? Did you find out who your match is?"

"I *had* the Bachelor List. It was nothing grand—just a folded-up piece of paper. I didn't find my match because I didn't know the paper was the list until Ellie figured out what it must have been. By that point, I'd already lost it at the shivaree."

"You lost it? Oh, Helen. That's tragic."

Helen sighed. "It certainly is, and I feel horrible about it. Hopefully, Ellie will find it today. Meanwhile, I need to ring the school bell or we're going to start the day late."

"But I have so much more to tell you! This elopement is the most exciting thing that's happened to me."

"You'll have to tell me the rest at dinner. Now, hurry and put your things in the coatroom. I need to ring the bell."

Violet gave a dramatic sigh as she opened the cloakroom door then shut it immediately. She glanced back at Helen with wide eyes. "There's a man in there!"

Before Helen could do more than frown, Quinn Tucker

emerged, hands raised as though he was a victim of a holdup. "I'm sorry, ladies. There just didn't seem to be a good time to interrupt."

Helen held back a laugh at the guilty expression on his face and crossed her arms. "Yes, well, there generally never is when you're eavesdropping. What were you doing in there, anyway?"

"I was bringing Clara and Reece the dinner I ordered for them at the café." He slipped his hands into his pockets then glanced at Violet. "I won't tell anyone what I overheard."

"Oh, half the town has probably heard the story by now and the other half will know soon enough. Tell whoever you want. I don't mind." Violet gave them a quick smile before disappearing into the coatroom.

Quinn opened the schoolhouse door for Helen then gave her the same crooked grin Reece often used when he knew he was in trouble. "Does that square me with you, Miss McKenna?"

"I suppose it does." She glanced up at him when they reached the grass. "Of course, I'm still waiting for you to keep your half of the deal we made last night."

"I got suckered into that deal and you know it." He narrowed his eyes at the innocent smile she gave him and lifted a brow before setting his hat on his head. "Good day, Miss McKenna."

"Good day, Mr. Tucker." She rang the school bell as she watched him stride toward Main Street and wondered what it was about him that she found so attractive. In Austin, she'd preferred gentlemen with a certain level of suavity, affluence and ambition;

but those very qualities were the ones that had left her ringless at her engagement dinner. Quinn seemed to be a different sort of man—honest, unassuming, devoted and a bit desperate in his attempts to be a good uncle. Perhaps that was what she found attractive.

A small hand tugged at her skirt. She dropped her gaze to find Reece's sparring partner standing before her with a greenish-yellow ring around his left eye. She knelt down. "How are you, Jake?"

He shrugged. "Aw, I'm fine, ma'am. Pa told me to be sure to give you this."

She took the envelope he handed her then thanked him and sent him into the schoolroom with the rest of the children. She tore open the letter, which was so brief it was almost a waste of good paper. She was to dismiss the children thirty minutes early so that an emergency meeting of the school board could convene at the schoolhouse that afternoon.

She pulled in a calming breath. No need to panic. Despite all of her hopes to the contrary, she'd seen this coming. Perhaps it didn't have to be a bad thing. After all, this meant her job performance would be reviewed by *all* the members of the school board—not just Mr. Etheridge. The two other members had seemed nice and welcoming when she'd met them at the beginning of the term. But what if Mr. Etheridge was able to convince them that she was inept at her job?

She could always return home. Her parents had made sure she

knew their door was always open to her, but she didn't want to leave Peppin. In this town, she was known for what she did and who she was. In Austin, people knew her for what her family did and who they were in society. She'd received this teaching position based on her own merit, not on the influence of her family. She meant to make the most of this opportunity and that did not mean getting fired only five weeks into the semester. If Mr. Etheridge thought it would be easy to get rid of her, he had another think coming. She might not be able to be a wife and mother, but she had no intention of letting her replacement dream slip through her fingers without a fight.

Chapter Two

Please. Please. Please. Quinn's pleading matched the hurried rhythm of his steps as he left the schoolhouse behind. What were the chances that God had seen fit to answer Quinn's prayer for a wife only seconds after he'd spoken it? That could very well be the case if the paper that had gotten caught up in his banjo strings was the same one he'd overheard Helen saying she'd lost—the Bachelor List.

If Ellie had included him on the list, surely she would have matched him with someone who would be a good mother and wouldn't mind hitching up with the likes of him. Why, he might not have to do any courting at all if he showed the woman they'd been matched on the list. The children could have a mother by the end of the week if this panned out.

He waited until he could duck into the alleyway beside

Maddie's Café then pulled the list from his pocket, grateful that his lack of time to do laundry meant he had on the same pants he'd worn the night before. He unfolded the paper and pressed it against the side of the building to smooth it out. It certainly appeared to be a list of some kind. He ran his finger down the column of script, looking for the circle with the line through the side of it that would signify the beginning of his name. There it was. Q-u-i-n-n. Quinn. The only word he knew how to read and write.

“Thank You, God! I'm on the list.”

He threw a kiss heavenward to thank his grandmother for giving him the skills to figure out that much. However, as usual, it wasn't enough. He knew from all the talk he'd heard about the list that the name of the woman he was supposed to marry should be right next to his. That looked to be true, but whose name started with a letter that looked as if he was staring straight at a beefy Longhorn bull?

Folding the paper back in his pocket, he blew out a sigh and pounded the side of his fist on the wall. He was going to have to ask for help. There was no way around it this time.

Two years. He'd been in this town for two years and no one knew that he was illiterate. Never once had he needed to set aside his pride and admit defeat until now. What else could he do? The children needed a mother. *He* needed them to have a mother.

He knew just who to go to for help, even if it would be a bit humbling. He walked into Maddie's Café and waved his thanks to

the proprietress for keeping an eye on the two youngest children while he'd taken the elder two their dinners. Maddie offered him a distracted smile as she went about filling orders. Quinn realized it probably hadn't been a good idea to leave them with her since they were quietly drawing on *the table* with their colored chalk rather than the slates they'd been given. He wiped the evidence away with his sleeve the best he could before removing the chalk from their hands, which started Olivia wailing.

Quinn placed the eighteen-month-old on his hip then grabbed the hand of four-year-old Trent and hurried outside. The only blond in the family, Trent's brown eyes stayed as solemn as he'd been silent since soon after his parents' deaths. The boy's little legs chugged along as he frowned up at Quinn, who took that as a sign to slow down. Olivia stopped wailing long enough to push away from him and stare at a passing lady. The little girl reached out for the stranger. The woman saw her and smiled. It was a heartwarming moment until the girl's hand latched on to the fake red bird on the lady's hat. There was a struggle and when the woman finally managed to get away, she was missing the ornament. Quinn gently wrestled it from his niece's hand and offered it to its owner. "I'm sorry, ma'am."

The woman shook her head as she backed away. "She can keep it."

"Sorry!" Quinn called again then stared into Olivia's blue eyes as he gave the bird back to her. "The last thing I need is for you to start running off women."

The girl hugged the fake feathered ornament to her chest. Looking at him very intently, she said, “Doggie.”

“No. That’s a birdie.”

“Doggie.”

“Sugar, you can talk real good for your age, but most of what you say just isn’t right. Maybe I ought to get Miss McKenna to have a talk with you.” He reached down to grab Trent’s hand again but came up empty. He glanced down. There was no trace of the boy. Panic rose in his throat. “Trent!”

Something landed on his boot—a little hand, which was attached to a pudgy arm. That was all he could see because the rest of Trent’s body was underneath the raised wooden sidewalk. Quinn knelt down to haul the boy out of there. “What are you doing? How did you even fit under there? Now you’re covered in dirt.”

The boy didn’t respond. He never did. Instead, he just frowned even harder and lifted a bright red feather that obviously belonged to the bird’s tail. The sight melted Quinn’s heart and it was all he could do to remain firm, when he wanted nothing more than to hug the boy close. “Thank you for picking that up for your sister, but you must not do that again. Do you understand?”

He waited for Trent to nod before wiping the dirt from the boy’s face and combing the mussed blond hair into place. “That’s good because you scared me. I thought I’d lost you. Hold on to my hand and don’t let go. We need to cross the street. Are you ready?”

With Trent dutifully clutching his hand and Olivia on his hip, Quinn made it across the street into the blacksmith's shop. Rhett Granger glanced up from whatever he was pounding on at the iron. "Be right with you, Quinn."

Quinn put Olivia on the counter and set Trent beside her, caging them in with his arms and body. Olivia was too busy playing with her ill-gotten gains to care, but Trent immediately started wriggling. "Hold still, son. This will only take a minute."

Rhett tucked his work gloves in the pocket of the leather apron he was wearing. He approached the counter with smiles for the children, who completely ignored him. "How can I help y'all?"

"Rhett, you're one of the most trustworthy men I know and a real good friend."

His friend's amber eyes lit with surprise. "Thanks, Quinn. I could say the same about you, but you didn't just come in here to shower me with praise, did you? Not that I mind if you did..."

"No, and I don't have the time or the patience to beat around the bush, so I'm going to come out with it." Quinn reluctantly allowed Trent to slide to the floor since the boy was trying to climb down his body, anyway.

"That's always a good policy."

Quinn looked around to make sure they were alone then leaned forward. He kept his voice low. "I have the Bachelor List."

"*You* have it?"

"Yeah, and I'm willing to give it you if you will just read it to me."

Rhett stiffened. "I've already been told who my match is. Since that woman ran away with someone else last night, I'm not particularly interested in the list."

"Amy? Your match was Amy? I didn't know. You didn't tell me. I mean, I knew you were sweet on her, but..." Quinn shook his head, searching his friend's face to see how hard the news of Amy's elopement had hit him. "I'm real sorry. How are you holding up?"

Rhett shrugged. "I don't know. To tell the truth, I didn't know her that well since our conversations mostly consisted of me tripping over my tongue like an idiot while she looked at me in confusion. Other than that, all we ever exchanged were a few looks and smiles. I guess my heart might not have been quite as involved as I thought it was."

"But you're disappointed."

"Yeah." Rhett sighed. "I'd hoped she was the one—especially since we were paired on that list."

"Well, this might not be much of a comfort, but I'm sure there's someone else out there. Perhaps someone you'll be able to talk to without being nervous around."

Rhett lifted a skeptical eyebrow. "I'm not sure how likely that is since my brain seems to abandon me anytime a relationship turns romantic. I'll tell you one thing, though. If there is another woman out there for me, I won't find her with the Bachelor List. You'd be wise to give it back to Ellie and find a woman on your own."

Quinn grimaced. "I hate to point this out, but Ellie has gotten every other match she's ever made right, so I'll take the chance. Please read it to me."

"Rub that in harder, why don't you?" Rhett narrowed his eyes and leaned against the counter. "If you're so interested, why don't you just read it yourself?"

"I would if I *could*." He stared Rhett in the eye and waited for confusion to turn to enlightenment then pity. The pity never came—only compassion—which was almost as bad, except it didn't leave quite as awful a taste in Quinn's mouth.

"I'll read it for you. Have you got it on you?"

"Yeah." Quinn laid the list on the counter between them and pointed to the only word he recognized. "My name is right there. I know that much, but whose is next to it?"

Rhett glanced down at the spot Quinn indicated before folding up the list and handing it back as if he couldn't get rid of it fast enough. "Ellie put you with Helen McKenna."

The words reached his brain then fell flat as the pancakes he'd tried to make that morning. "Come again?"

"The schoolmarm. Helen McKenna."

"That isn't funny." Quinn tried to give the list to Rhett again. "Read it right."

Rhett held his hands up and refused to take it. "I'm telling you, Quinn, it says Helen McKenna. I wouldn't joke about this."

Quinn closed his eyes and lowered his head in defeat as the hope that had flared in him burned out like a faulty matchstick.

What had Ellie been thinking? Helen McKenna was far too good for him. She'd been nice to him—friendly, even—but she'd never consider him as a marriage prospect. He had nothing to offer a woman like her.

A tiny forehead braced against his. He opened his eyes to see Olivia blinking up at him from inches away, her big eyes nearly crossing in the effort. He kissed her tiny nose then straightened to his full height. He may not be Helen's first choice in a man. However, judging by the way Reece and Clara talked about her nonstop, she'd probably be the children's first choice in a mother. That was enough for him. "She might not love me, but I dare her not to fall in love with my kids. She'll marry me, if only because of that."

Rhett looked dubious. "Are you sure that's best for them? For you to marry a woman you don't love?"

"A mother is what's best for them. She'll be a good one. Ellie must have thought the same thing. Otherwise, she wouldn't have matched us up." He put the paper back into his pocket. "I'll need this as proof. I promise I'll give it back to you as soon as possible."

"Don't bother. I have no use for it. Besides, I've had enough woman trouble to last me a good while." Rhett gave him a nod of silent encouragement. "I'll be praying for you, man."

"Thanks. I'll need it." He scooped Olivia back onto his hip, reached down for Trent's hand...and came up empty. He pulled in a deep breath. "Trent!"

A head poked out from beneath a bench in the waiting room. Quinn strode over and held out his hand. "We just talked about this, son. You are not allowed to crawl under anything that puts you out of sight without letting me know first. That includes benches."

Quinn opened the door with his shoulder then stood outside trying to figure out what to do next. He should probably get the haircut and shave that Helen seemed so particular about. He'd need to find someone to watch the children for an hour or so to get that done. Maybe the doctor's wife? He hated to impose on her again so soon, but she had said she'd be happy to help if he needed someone to watch the children again.

He frowned as he rubbed a hand over his thick beard. He could hardly expect a schoolmarm to accept the proposal of an illiterate man who reminded her of a bear. While he couldn't do anything for his lack of book learning, he *could* get rid of some of his wildness.

He shook his head. Helen McKenna. He might as well be reaching for the moon. He might not deserve her, but his children did and that's exactly who they were going to get.

* * *

Mr. Etheridge reminded Helen of a thundercloud with his snapping gray eyes, prematurely silver hair and commanding voice that filled the schoolhouse with a confidence that dared anyone to disagree with him. "Miss McKenna, you have demonstrated a concerning inability to maintain proper

discipline during school hours. The school board overlooked the troubling pranks that took place at the beginning of the school term, but now our students are brawling in the schoolyard.”

A frown etched across the face of Mr. Johansen, whose youngest son was in the fifth grade. “I heard there has been fighting.”

Mr. Etheridge’s pacing steps in front of her desk seemed intended to slowly, deliberately sever any connection between her and the two other members of the school board. “My son, Jake, finds himself in constant need to defend himself from the aggressions of his fellow student Reece Tucker, who is treated with blatant partiality. While my Jake was sent home from school on Friday with a black eye and bloody nose, Reece was allowed to stay at school for the remainder of the day.”

Nathan Rutledge’s gaze locked on Helen’s. The final member of the three-person school board was Ellie’s brother-in-law and the father of a little boy in the same class as Reece Tucker. “Is it true that you only sent Jake Etheridge home, Miss McKenna?”

Helen forced herself to adopt a more pleasant look as she straightened her back and lifted her chin. “Yes, but—”

“You see?” Mr. Etheridge turned to face the other members. “I think it is quite obvious that Miss McKenna lets favoritism get in the way of good discipline. Despite her high recommendations, her inexperience is detrimental to the welfare of our students.”

The indignant flush rising in her cheeks from Mr. Etheridge’s

interruptions and the urge to defend herself faded into confusion. “High recommendations?”

Mr. Johansen nodded, though he didn’t take his gaze from Mr. Etheridge. “He means the letter from the governor.”

Her hands tightened into fists. “The governor recommended me for this position?”

“Yes,” Nathan agreed. “It was the deciding factor that led us to choose you over the local candidate—Mr. Etheridge’s daughter.”

Everything suddenly became clear. No wonder she’d been placed at a school so quickly after taking the teaching exam despite having no former experience. She’d thought it was a sign from God that she’d made the right decision in giving up on the impossible to focus on the attainable. Instead, it was simply a sign that her loving, overprotective parents had asked a favor from the governor, who had been a friend of the family for years.

“My daughter was unable to find another position and would be willing to replace Miss McKenna should the need arise.”

She stared at Mr. Etheridge, finally able to understand the reason for his attitude toward her. No doubt he saw her as the interloping city girl who’d stolen the position that rightfully belonged to his daughter. Maybe that’s exactly who she was. Maybe she’d stolen some other girl’s dream. She had no right to do that just because she wasn’t woman enough achieve her own. She shook the thoughts away and forced herself to focus on the situation at hand. Nathan Rutledge was watching her with concern. “Is there anything you would like to say in your defense,

Miss McKenna?”

She swallowed and tried to remember the charges Mr. Etheridge had laid against her. “I think any teacher would have been subjected to the same pranks I was at the beginning of the semester. They were harmless and I put an end to them as soon as I could. I can’t deny that Reece and Jake have been fighting. Jake seems to have a bit of an unrequited crush on Reece’s sister Clara and often teases her to the point where Reece feels compelled to defend her.”

“That isn’t true.” Mr. Etheridge interjected.

“I’m afraid it is, Mr. Etheridge.” Turning back to the other members of the school board, she continued, “I didn’t send Reece home on Friday because I thought he lived too far out of town to walk home alone in his condition. If that’s showing favoritism and poor discipline, then I suppose I’m guilty.”

Mr. Johansen gave a weary sigh. “Will you please step outside so that the board may talk privately?”

She nodded and stepped down from the platform. The rustle of her skirts was the only sound that filled the room until she stepped outside and closed the double doors behind her. Only then did she hear the muffled sound of men’s voice rise inside. She stared at the schoolhouse door. That had not gone at all the way she’d planned. She’d practically given up. What was wrong with her?

“Miss McKenna?”

Startled, she spun toward the deep voice. A steadying hand

stilled her forward momentum in time to keep her from tumbling down the schoolhouse steps. Words of gratefulness stalled on her lips as she glanced up to the stranger who'd lunged up the stairs to catch her. Her gaze slid from the chiseled angles of his jaw to the thick golden-brown curls of his close-cropped hair before settling on his vibrant blue eyes. Everything else went blurry as a strange weakness filled her knees. He steadied her once more. She shook her head, blinked and refocused. "Mr. Tucker?"

He didn't release his hold on her arm but stepped closer, his brow lowered in concern. "I'm real sorry, Miss McKenna. I sure didn't mean to scare you like that. You didn't hurt yourself, did you?"

"I'm fine." She eased back slightly as she allowed her gaze to trace his features again. "You look...nice."

A sheepish grin flashed across his lips, carving a shallow set of dimples into his cheeks. "Thank you. My own kin didn't recognize me when they saw me like this, so I reckon you were right and I was overdue for a shave and a haircut. I picked up some new duds, too, but that isn't important right now. What's going on in there?"

"In where?"

He pointed to the sign hanging from the doorknob that read Private Meeting. "In the schoolhouse."

Land sakes! How could she have forgotten about that? A sinking sensation filled her stomach so she sank along with it to sit on the top step. She rested her chin in her hand with a heavy

sigh. "It's possible that I might be getting fired."

"Fired?" Quinn frowned at the door then sat one step below her. "Why would they want to fire you?"

"Apparently there are several reasons."

"But you're a great teacher."

She gave a short laugh. "You still say that after your nephew went home with a black eye last week?"

His eyes narrowed. "Is that what this is about? I'll go tell them it wasn't your fault."

He moved to stand but she placed a stilling hand on his shoulder then lowered her gaze to avoid his questioning look. "No. Don't. Perhaps it's for the best."

"The best?" He stared at her then shook his head. "Why? Don't you want to teach?"

She shrugged as the vague feeling of discontent she'd been ignoring welled up inside of her. "I certainly enjoy it. However, to be honest, it isn't really what I want to do."

He frowned. "Then what *do* you want to do?"

I want to have a family with a husband and children of my own. She sighed and leaned back against the stair railing thinking about how foolish she'd been. Of course, teaching school wasn't anything like having children of her own. She'd been reminded of that at the end of each day when the students all rushed out the door, leaving her behind.

"Helen?" Quinn's use of her Christian name for the first time drew her full attention. "Do you mind if I call you that?"

Surprised, she offered a quizzical smile. "I suppose you might as well. Many of the other students' parents do."

"I need to talk to you. I know this probably isn't the right time, but I can't hold it in much longer."

"This sounds serious." She crossed her arms on top of her knees and nodded. "Go ahead and tell me. We may have a few moments before they call me back in."

He sent a speculative look toward the door. "My eldest nephew and niece are always going on about you and I've noticed that you seem to care a whole lot about them, too. That's true, isn't it?"

"It certainly is."

"Well, I'm doing my best for them but anyone can tell that isn't good enough." He waved away her protests. "Now, that's just the plain truth and you know it. The fact is that they need a mother."

She stared at him, wondering where this conversation was going as he unfolded a piece of paper she hadn't realized he was holding. He handed it to her. She didn't bother to look at it. She couldn't have if she'd tried for his gaze held hers captive with its intensity. "I prayed for a helpmeet and God sent me the Bachelor List. It says you're my match. I was wondering if you'd be willing to marry me—for the children's sake."

Her gaze finally dropped to the paper unseeingly as she tried to make sense of what he'd just said. "Will you repeat that please?"

His hand covered hers. "You're my match. My nieces and nephews need you. I need you. Will you please marry me?"

The schoolhouse door opened startling them both as Mr.

Eldridge stepped outside. “We have reached a decision, Miss McKenna. Please, come in.”

Quinn helped her stand murmuring, “I’ll wait here.”

She gave him a brief nod then stepped inside. The grim faces of the school board members spelled out her not-so-surprising fate. She glanced down at the paper she held. Her attention caught on the sight of her name printed as clear as day next to the name of the man who was waiting for an answer to his proposal.

“Miss McKenna,” Mr. Etheridge began in a cadence that seemed unnaturally slow juxtaposed by her racing thoughts. “On behalf of the school board and the citizens of Peppin—”

Quinn was offering her exactly what she’d always wanted. Well, not exactly—but the closest she was likely to get to the marriage and children she longed for.

“—I would like to thank you for the kindness, energy and time you have devoted to the children of this community.”

Quinn hadn’t mentioned love in his proposal. Of course, she could hardly expect him to since they barely knew each other. Who was to say that it wouldn’t turn into love eventually? Her parents had an arranged marriage and they’d grown to love each other deeply.

“I would also like to apologize for any behavior on our part that would make you doubt our gratefulness—specifically my own.”

Most important, there were the Tucker children to consider—children to whom she could give so much love and care. She and Quinn wouldn’t be able to have children of their own, but

she'd learned her lesson and would keep that bit of information to herself. What could it hurt? With four little ones of his own already, he might not have time to notice.

"We would be happy to have you stay with us through the rest of the school year per our original agreement."

Quinn wanted her. Quinn *needed* her. She had a chance with him—with *them*—that she might not have ever again. She wouldn't walk away from that. She *couldn't*.

Her gaze snapped up from the Bachelor List as Mr. Etheridge's words finally registered in her brain. "You want me to stay?"

"The school board has concluded that I might have been a bit hasty and overprotective as the matters concerned my own children." The poor man looked as if he'd swallowed a marble. "We will honor our original agreement with you concerning the position."

"That's wonderful!" Her smile was returned by the other members of the board then she bit her lip. "You did say that your daughter is willing to start immediately, though. Didn't you, Mr. Etheridge?"

"Well, yes, I did."

"In that case..." She took a deep breath then couldn't stop the smile that spread across her face or the way her chin rose with pride. "I resign."

Chapter Three

Quinn paced in front of the schoolhouse steps waiting for

Helen to return. He felt nervous and even a little light-headed. Of course, that might be from the haircut and shave he'd just had but it was uncomfortable nonetheless. He rubbed his hand over his clean-shaven jaw as he remembered the shocked look on Helen's pretty face at his clumsy proposal. He'd done the best he could. That didn't mean it would be good enough. It certainly didn't mean she'd agree to marry him. Why hadn't she just outright told him no and put him out of his misery?

He stopped pacing long enough to stare at the schoolhouse door then across the schoolyard to where his children were playing with the Rutledge boy. Reece's eyes had been as wide as plates when he'd seen Quinn with his new haircut. Clara had turned downright shy. Olivia had started crying. Even now, Trent kept sending him suspicious looks. Helen couldn't refuse him after he'd alienated his children just to please her. Besides, there wasn't any other woman in town he'd have a chance with. Not that he personally had a chance with Helen, but the children did.

Please. Please. Please, he prayed again. *I know I don't deserve her, but she isn't for me. She's for them.*

He jumped when the schoolhouse door opened. Helen was nowhere in sight as the members of the school board clomped down the steps. A grin flashed across Mr. Etheridge's face and he reached out to pump Quinn's hand up and down. "May I be the first to congratulate you? What a wonderful surprise!"

Quinn could only respond with a confused grunt.

Mr. Johansen winked. "She's waiting for you inside."

Nathan Rutledge clapped him on the back. "I wish you and Helen all the happiness in the world."

"Me and Helen—" Quinn stopped breathing. His heartbeat pounded in his ears. He stammered some sort of reply though what it was he'd never know. The men left him at the bottom of the stairs staring up at the schoolhouse door. Could it be possible? It certainly seemed likely. What else could they have meant?

He grabbed hold of the banister and took a tentative step up, then surged up the rest of the stairs into the schoolroom. Helen stood at the front of the room cleaning the day's lessons from the blackboard. His noisy entrance caused her to turn and meet his gaze with a smile. Quinn swallowed, cleared his throat and jerked his thumb toward the door. "They said— I mean, they told me...congratulations. Does that mean that you're saying yes? That you're going to marry me?"

Her mahogany eyes sparkled. "I suppose it does."

"You mean it? For real, now?" He strode forward until he stopped at the edge of the teacher's platform. "You aren't joking, are you?"

Her voice turned gentle as she met him there. "Quinn, I'd never joke about something like that."

"You're going to marry me." It wasn't a question this time. It was a statement even if his tone did hold a hint of disbelief. Trying those words on for size, he found that he liked the way they fit in a terrifying sort of way. He stepped back a little just in

case a bolt of lightning struck him in holy retaliation for daring to marry a woman so far above him in every respect. He wouldn't want it to hit Helen by mistake.

"Yes, I am." She stepped down from the platform and lifted her face to stare up at him. "Well, isn't there anything you'd like to say or do about it?"

His attention honed in on her lips which offered a smile far more tempting than anything she could have intended. He'd never kissed a woman before and today wasn't the day to start him. He'd already pushed the Almighty far enough in asking for what he had no right to claim. Besides, she wasn't for him. She was for the children. That's what he'd promised God and he'd be smart to remember that if he wanted to have any chance of actually marrying her. Realizing he was leaning toward her, he pulled himself back. He took her hand to pump it up and down in a fair impression of what Mr. Etheridge had done earlier. "I'm real glad about it, Helen. Real glad."

A hint of confusion marred her brow as she glanced down at their hands before she pulled hers free with a funny little frown. "Good. I have to finish out this week of school, but we can be married anytime after that."

He watched her gather papers and books from her desk. "I reckon I'd better talk to the preacher about performing the ceremony."

"And the judge. We'll need to start the paperwork for the marriage license right away."

He held back a groan. The marriage license. He'd completely forgotten about that part of the process. Anxiety rose in his gut. "Do we have to do that? I mean, wouldn't it be all right if we just let the preacher hitch us up?"

She set the stack she'd gathered on her hip and cocked her head at him. "Not if you want it to be legal."

"Of course, I do." He ran his fingers through his close-cropped hair, hating that he'd made himself look foolish. "Guess I'll talk to Judge Hendricks tomorrow then."

"We can go together."

"Great!" Even to his own ears, his reply was a little too enthusiastic to sound genuine. He couldn't help it. With her along, he wouldn't be able to ask for help with the reading and writing even if he had a mind to humble himself enough before the judge to do so. She'd be right there watching, expecting him to know something when he didn't know much of anything.

"I'm sure it won't be too laborious and, after all, it must be done."

Looking into her intelligent eyes, he couldn't help wondering if he was making a mistake. They had to be the most mismatched pair in town. However, they *were* a pair and they were going to stay that way as long as he could help it so he took the load from his intended's hands and followed her outside. He stashed her things on the seat of the wagon he'd parked nearby. "I'll drive you to the boardinghouse after we tell the children."

"Oh, it isn't far. There's no need—" Her eyes widened. "You

mean we're going to tell them right now?"

"Sure we are. You don't want them to hear it from someone else, do you?"

"No. I just..." She glanced over at the children, smoothing her hair as if she could make herself look more perfect than she already did in her cranberry colored gown.

Somehow her nervousness set him at ease—mostly because it meant he wasn't the only one feeling that way. His shoulders relaxed, his breath came a bit easier and he felt more like himself than he had all afternoon. Catching her hand in his, he smiled. "I'm sure they'll be as pleased as I am."

She sighed when he tugged her forward. "I certainly hope so."

He stopped at the fenced-in lawn that was shaded by a large oak tree. His nieces and nephews were the only ones left in the school yard, but they didn't seem to mind a bit for they were completely involved in playing kick the can. Quinn waited, not wanting to interrupt as Reece held Trent back and Clara helped Olivia take a turn at kicking. A squeal erupted from Olivia once her little foot set the can spinning a short distance and Quinn couldn't help but grin at the sight. "Good job, Olivia! Y'all come on over here now. Miss McKenna and I have something important to tell you."

Helen stepped a bit closer to his side as the children approached. Trent arrived first, huffing and puffing from all his misplaced exertion. Clara came next with her sister in tow. Finally, Reece joined them with apprehension dogging each slow

step. "I didn't do it, Miss McKenna. Honest."

Quinn glanced over at Helen for explanation. She shrugged in confusion before turning back to the children. "You didn't do what, Reece?"

"I don't know, but I've been trying hard to be good so if something's messed up, it wasn't me."

Amusement warmed Helen's voice. "Reece, you aren't in trouble. Your uncle has an announcement to make, that's all."

Clara tilted her head, her wide blue eyes ripe with curiosity. "What kind of announcement?"

"Miss McKenna and I are going to be married."

Clara gasped. Reece frowned. Trent's brow furrowed. Olivia stuck her thumb in her mouth and leaned into her sister's side. The three eldest exchanged glances then their expressions settled into varying degrees of confusion, fear and sadness. Their reaction stunned him. They must not have understood him correctly. Quinn tried again. This time he used more enthusiasm. "That means she is going to be your aunt! Isn't that exciting?"

Reece crossed his arms. "Does that mean she won't be our teacher anymore? I like having her as my teacher."

Helen placed a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder. "Oh, but being an aunt is so much better than being a teacher."

Clara looked nothing if not doubtful. "Why?"

"Because, I am going to live with y'all so that I can love you, and laugh with you and help take care of you." Helen caught Clara's free hand. "Don't you see? Having an aunt is kind of like

having a Ma—just like having an uncle is kind of like having a Pa. I want to be that for you more than anything in the world.”

Longing filled the children’s eyes for an instant before Reece shook his head. “I still think you’d better stay our teacher.”

“Me, too. Besides, Uncle Quinn takes care of us really well. He doesn’t need help.” Clara looked to him for confirmation. “Isn’t that right, Uncle Quinn?”

“No, it isn’t right, Clara.” He frowned at them out of confusion and concern more than displeasure. “I don’t understand. I thought you would be pleased. You *should* be pleased. I am. I want what’s best for you and that’s Miss McKenna, which is why I’m going to marry her.”

Trent bowed his head as his shoulders shook in silent sobs. Before Quinn could blink, Helen was on her knees in the grass with his youngest nephew cradled in her arms. She looked up at Quinn with a myriad of emotions darkening the usual spark in her eyes. “Oh, Quinn, maybe we shouldn’t—”

“Yes, we should.” He sat in the grass beside her then gave a gentle tug to first Reece then Clara to compel them to do the same. His arm tightened around Olivia as she scrambled into his lap. He split his focus between Clara and Reece. “Do either of you know why Trent is crying?”

Clara scooted a little closer into their huddle. “He just a little upset seeing how y’all are going to die and all.”

“What?” he and Helen exclaimed together.

Reece pulled at a blade of grass beside his boot. “Getting

married is what killed Pa and our new Ma.”

Clara nodded. “We don’t want that to happen to you and Miss McKenna, too.”

Nonplussed, he gladly let Helen handle that one. She hugged Trent tight. “Oh, darlings, nothing bad is going to happen to your uncle and me just because we are getting married. Tell them, Quinn.”

A single nod was all he could manage. He wasn’t worried about Helen. She would be fine. She didn’t know how far below her due in terms of status, intelligence and sophistication she was marrying. He wasn’t going to tell her, either. Not now. Not ever if he could help it. He wasn’t afraid of facing the consequences of his decision to reach for far more than he deserved—not since he knew how much it would benefit the children. If something did happen to him as a result, at least they would have her.

“What happened to your folks was an accident.” Helen wiped Trent’s tears away with a soft-looking handkerchief. His brown eyes watched her intently as she spoke. “We may not know the reasons why it happened. However, we do know getting married doesn’t mean you’re going to die immediately.”

Reece’s face was full of cautious hope. “How do we know that?”

“Look at all the married people still alive just in this town—not to mention the whole world. There’s nothing for y’all to worry about.” She placed a hand on Quinn’s knee as her eyes sent a silent encouragement for him to assure them. “Is there, Quinn?”

“Not a thing.” He made sure to look the children in the eye as he said it. All the while, he tried to ignore the warmth spreading from Helen’s hand into his knee.

“Your uncle and I are going to be perfectly fine. We’ll be better than fine, actually, because we’re all going to be a family...if you’ll have me.”

Reservations gone, Clara gave Helen a hug including Trent out of necessity. “Of course we will.”

Quinn cleared his throat. “What do you say, Reece? Are you going to make your aunt feel welcome?”

“Yes, sir!” Reece’s enthusiasm was reflected in his grin.

“Trent?”

The silent boy gave a grave nod.

“Good. Now, let’s drop off Miss McKenna at the boardinghouse and get ourselves on home.” He set Olivia on her feet so that she could toddle toward the wagon with the other children. “Helen, I sure am sorry about how they responded at first.”

“It ended well and that’s all that matters.”

“I reckon you’re right.” He stood and reached down to help Helen to her feet. He made sure to release her as soon as she was steady. He’d told the children that there was nothing for them to worry about. There wouldn’t be so long as he remembered that he was marrying Helen to be his children’s mother—not his wife. That would be a whole lot easier if he kept his distance.

* * *

Helen waved goodbye to the Tuckers. Quinn tipped his hat and sent her a quick grin before leaving her behind on the sidewalk in front of the boardinghouse. She barely resisted the impulse to break into a jig right then and there. Wonder of wonders! She was getting married! Not to just anyone, but to Quinn Tucker—a man with a ready-made family. It felt as if she had wandered into her favorite daydream. She could only hope to be lost in it forever.

“Who was that?”

Helen yelped at the sound of Isabelle Bradley’s voice. She’d been staring after the Tuckers’ wagon so fixedly that she hadn’t heard her friend’s approach. “Where did you come from?”

“The post office.” Isabelle’s narrowed green eyes didn’t waver from the retreating wagon. “Was that Quinn Tucker? I heard he got a haircut, but goodness me who knew it would make such a difference. He actually had a face under all that wild hair and a handsome one at that! It was nice of him to drive you home. Violet told me about the school-board meeting. What happened?”

Helen leaned against the cold rod iron of the Bradley’s waist-high fence to push it open for her friend. “The other members of the board made Mr. Etheridge apologize.”

“Good for them.” Isabelle trotted up the porch steps and opened the door for Helen. “So does that mean you no longer have to worry about keeping your position?”

“Yes and no. I resigned.” She had time to place her

schoolbooks on the front desk and her coat on the rack before Isabelle's shock wore off.

"Why," Isabelle began, extending that one word into several syllables, "did you do that?"

Helen shrugged. "You have to resign if you're going to get married."

Isabelle's mouth dropped open then curved in an incredulous smile. "You're getting married? To whom? When? Why do I never know about these things? Helen!"

She laughed. "Yes, I'm getting married. On Saturday, I think. You're the first to know besides the school board and his children."

"His children?" Isabelle's eyes widened and flashed in the direction Quinn's wagon had gone. "Quinn Tucker's children?"

She nodded. "All four of them."

"But, I didn't even know the two of you were courting."

"Well..." She leaned against the front desk, straightening the stack of books she'd brought home. "We didn't court...exactly."

Isabelle sat on the stool behind the desk. "What does that mean?"

Helen rolled her eyes. "It means we didn't court at all, but it doesn't matter. There will be plenty of time for that after we marry."

"Well, then." Isabelle lifted a brow. "Would it be safe to guess that this isn't a love match?"

She shrugged. "It is in a way. I love his children."

“But you don’t love him.”

“I could. I will...one day. I’m certain of it. He’s kind, Christian, hardworking—”

“—suddenly handsome—”

Helen laughed. “I was attracted to him even before the haircut and shave. Besides, he makes me feel...”

“He makes you feel...?”

Whole. He makes me forget that I’m a little bit damaged. She smiled and settled for, “Pretty.”

“You are pretty.”

“Thank you. Besides, what *is* love, anyway? It isn’t just a feeling. It’s a commitment. It’s endeavoring to understand and appreciate someone for who they are. Even if it was just a feeling, feelings are controllable.” She shrugged at Isabelle’s doubtful look. “Perhaps I come at it from a different perspective than most. You see, my parents had an arranged marriage and they love each other very deeply now. I don’t see why I should expect anything less.”

“What can I say to that? As long as you’re sure, Helen. I’ll support you.”

“I’m sure, and I’d like you to be my maid-of-honor.”

“I’d love that.”

Suddenly realizing that retrieving and sorting the mail was normally Amy’s job, Helen froze. “Oh, Isabelle, Violet told me about Amy. Have y’all had any more word from her?”

Isabelle shook her head. “Nothing as yet. Father has gone

to search for them mostly to assure himself and Mother that Amy's new situation is suitable—whatever that means. Mother seems hurt that one of her daughters would do such a thing—hide a relationship and then run off like that. Violet is all aflutter thinking she's in an Austen novel or some such nonsense.”

“I never should have lent her my copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. All through dinner she explained to me the parallels between this situation and Lydia's with Wickham. I believe Violet has convinced herself she's Kitty.” She laughed at her friend's grimace then regarded Isabelle seriously. “And how are you dealing with all of this?”

“To be honest, I'm more than a little annoyed with Amy, as much as I love her.” Isabelle sighed. “Amy's elopement isn't a problem for Amy. It's a problem for me. My parents are determined not to make the same mistake twice, so I'll be the one facing more restrictions and tougher discipline. In the meantime, I'm trying not to be offended by mother's suspicious looks.”

“You really had no idea?”

“Amy didn't confide in me on this one at all.” Isabelle shrugged. “What's done is done. It's a good reminder that each decision we make not only effects ourselves but may have unintended consequences in other's lives. I suppose we just have to pray about our options, follow God's leading and be ready to live with the consequences of our choices whether good or bad.”

“You have a good head on your shoulders, Isabelle. I'm sure your parents will recognize that once the excitement dies down.”

“I hope so.” Isabelle frowned as she went back to sorting the mail.

“I guess I’ll see you at supper.” Helen hurried from the foyer down the hall to her room. She closed the door behind her, but couldn’t shut out the wisdom of Isabelle’s words.

Pray about our options...follow God’s leading...be ready to live with the consequences. She hadn’t prayed about the decision to marry Quinn. How could she have with everything happening so quickly? That didn’t mean she wasn’t following God’s leading. After all, how many times had she prayed for a husband and children of her own? Well, not that many because she hadn’t thought it possible. However, this was a blessing—an undeniable, pure, simple blessing. She’d be a fool not to run full speed toward it and Helen McKenna-soon-to-be-Tucker was no fool. She’d be more than happy to live with the consequences of her decision. They could only be good ones even if she didn’t know her husband very well yet. Or, have much experience running a home. She’d been a teacher for almost half of a semester. How much harder could it be to be a wife and mother?

Chapter Four

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God and in the presence of these witnesses to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony...”

Those sure were some highfaluting sounding words. Thankfully, all Quinn had to do was make sure he said *I do* at the right time and he’d be married to a woman too sweet, too

intelligent and too attractive for his own good. He swallowed against the nervousness roiling in his stomach. He pulled at the fancy shoestring tie that went with the rest of his getup.

He wished someone had prepared him for how expensive it would be to buy a ready-made suit. Of course, that was only a drop in the bucket compared to what it would cost to feed and clothe four children until they were grown up and on their own. And it could be even more than that if he and Helen added to their brood.

He winced, hoping God hadn't heard that last thought. How could he and Helen have children if he was half afraid to touch her hand for fear of making the Almighty angry? The deal was that Helen would be a mother—not a wife. The distinction was already blurring in his thoughts and the ceremony wasn't even over.

Maybe he ought to have gotten a better handle on that before he asked Helen to marry him. Maybe he ought to have figured a lot of other stuff out, too. Like how to read. Fat chance of that happening, though.

He'd managed to get her to fill out the paperwork for the marriage license by pleading poor penmanship. He'd even put off signing the license in front of her so she wouldn't see that pitifully written signature comprised of only his first name. That didn't bode well for the future. What if he got too comfortable around her and let his secret slip? How would she react if she found out the truth about him?

He shook the thoughts from his head. He didn't even want to consider such a thing happening. Especially not in the middle of the ceremony. But it was already too late. His heart started racing. His palms began to sweat. Maybe he'd keel over right now and be done with it. Helen would take care of the children even if they hadn't been officially married.

He slowly became aware of the oppressive, awkward silence filling the church. Pastor Brightly cleared his throat. "You *don't* wish to take Helen to be your wife?"

"I—" He stopped and stared at the preacher realizing that wasn't the question Quinn had prepared himself to answer. "What?"

"You shook your head. I thought..."

"Oh, no." Quinn waved his right hand dismissing the action he'd done during his lapse of concentrate.

Helen's left hand slipped from his as the preacher's brow furrowed in confusion. "No' what?"

Quinn frowned at Helen and took her hand in his again as a nervousness seemed to spread from him to the folks gathered in the chapel. Helen wasn't going to leave him at the altar, was she? "Where are you going?"

"I'm not—" Her words stumbled to a halt. She looked flat out bewildered. "Quinn, are you going to marry me or not?"

"Well, I'm trying to, honey. The preacher here can't seem to get the question right."

A chuckle sounded from the audience. Quinn turned in time

to see Ellie Williams smack her husband on the shoulder for the outburst before glaring at her sister-in-law, Lorelei, who sat on her other side shaking with silent laughter. Quinn glanced at his best man for help. Rhett just shook his head. Helen leaned into Quinn's side to whisper, "Pastor Brightly already asked you once."

"Oh." He almost admitted he'd been distracted then stopped himself in time to keep from getting into more trouble. He nodded at Pastor Brightly. "I reckon you'd better ask me again."

Pastor Brightly looked decidedly nervous as he cleared his throat. "Will you take Helen Grace McKenna to be your wedded wife—"

"I will."

"—to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony—"

"I will."

Pastor Brightly took in a deep breath and somehow managed to say the rest without pausing even a second for Quinn to answer. "Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, keep yourself only unto her, so long as you both shall live?"

Finally, realizing he'd been interrupting the minister, Quinn hesitated before adding one final. "I will."

It was Helen's turn. She answered Pastor Brightly only once and not until the end, but the surety in her voice was worth the wait. Then it was time to exchange rings. He made sure to pay

close attention so that he could say *I do* at the right time to endow all of his worldly goods upon Helen—such as they were. Quinn’s heart had managed to calm down somewhat by the time Helen slid the ring he’d picked up at the mercantile onto his finger...until he realized there was only one thing left to do.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. Quinn, you may kiss your bride.”

He froze in panic. Sending a quick glance heavenward, he turned to his bride. *What else is a groom to do? It’s expected.*

He glanced down at her smiling lips and wished more than anything that he’d kissed her in the schoolhouse first, lighting bolt or no lightning bolt. Now he had an audience and no idea how he was supposed to do this. He leaned down slowly to make sure he had the right trajectory. He brushed his lips across hers. That didn’t seem quite right. He tried again, lingering this time. She tilted her head and did the rest.

A lightning bolt hit him, all right. It traveled from his lips down to his soul. It blocked out everything in a flash of light and heat except for the woman before him. He pulled away to stare down at her. A hundred questions battled for answers within him. Had she felt the lightning, too? More important, who had taught her to kiss like that and how soon could he get his hands around that man’s neck? Finally, maybe if Quinn was real good about everything else, would God mind if he tasted lightning at least one more time before he died? He wasn’t anticipating a long wait seeing as he had not only chased after but caught more than he

was entitled to.

Nope. A wedding kiss was acceptable. He'd better play it safe from here on out. That's what a smart man would do. He'd never professed to be one before, but he'd married the schoolmarm. He had to at least try to use his wits if he wanted to keep her.

And he did. For the children. *Only* for the children.

* * *

Sean and Lorelei O'Brien had insisted on keeping the children at their neighboring farm overnight. Helen sorely missed their company, for the evening seemed to stretch on interminably without them. She tried to present a picture of unselfconscious comfort by tucking her feet under her and snuggling into the settee with a copy of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, but an undercurrent of unease seemed to crackle in the air along with the soft roar from the logs in the fireplace. Even the crisp notes of Quinn's banjo couldn't drown it out, though he wasn't above trying—bless his heart.

After announcing that he hadn't had much of a chance to practice lately, he'd settled on the rug-covered floor across from the settee and started playing...and playing...and playing. It seemed as though he'd been strumming for hours, pausing for only an instant between songs, if that. At first, she'd enjoyed it. He was a very talented musician, after all. He'd even gotten her toe tapping a time or two. Now, she was getting concerned and a bit frustrated.

It was their wedding day, for goodness' sake! Didn't he even

want to talk to his new wife? She certainly wanted to talk to him. She'd been counting on this time to get to know the acquaintance she'd just married. She'd be downright mad at him for ignoring her if he wasn't so attractive while doing it.

Book abandoned, she stared at him, since he wasn't paying her any mind, anyway. The firelight caressed his jaw with golden fingers that swept up to his cheek and back down again as he bobbed his head in time with the music. His strong arms curved around the instrument while his left hand slid back and forth across the neck of the banjo and his nimble fingers coaxed music from the strings. His brow furrowed slightly in concentration. She bit her lip to hold back a sigh. *Talk to me.*

He glanced up and caught her watching. His fingers stalled. She smiled her entreaty. His lips curved upward in response. He went back to playing. She closed her eyes in annoyance then opened them to find his gaze fixed on her again. Progress! She'd better do something while she had his attention. His piercing cobalt eyes rendered her mind a complete blank. She reached for something sensible or meaningful to say then dared to speak over the music. "This is a nice room."

Really? That's the best that I could come up with?

It seemed to take Quinn off guard a little, too, for he glanced around as though with new eyes. The furnishings of the living room weren't fancy, but they were comfortable and of good quality. The floors were the same rather worn oak that seemed to stretch through the entire house. The burgundy rug on top of it

reflected the red brick of the fireplace, which was cooled down by the hunter green and dark blue in the settee and matching chairs. Having finished his inspection, Quinn offered her a nod. "I'm glad you like it."

Her mind scrambled for something else to say. What could she talk about? The ceremony? She wasn't eager to discuss the fact that he'd made her a nervous wreck by originally accidentally refusing her. The children? All she could think about was the fact that they wouldn't return until tomorrow. Leaving her alone. With her husband. Who had only just discovered that she was in the same room with him.

Realizing they hadn't stopped staring at each other while he played, she wanted to look away but was afraid she wouldn't get his attention again. To be honest, she was tired of trying. It had been such a busy few days with her finishing up at school, packing her things and moving them into her new home. She was worn out. Perhaps she ought to just call it a night and hide until the children returned. She stood.

The music stopped. Quinn looked up at her expectantly. Her mouth opened then closed as she realized that, though she was ready to turn in, she had no idea where to turn in *to*. She'd been so distracted by laying out the wedding supper their friends had sent home with them that she hadn't seen anything of the house besides the kitchen and living room. After supper, Quinn had been too involved with his banjo to offer a tour. He stood, watching her with a concerned frown. "Something wrong?"

“No.” Without her permission, her gaze strayed to the banjo which he still clung to rather tightly. “I’m just tired, that’s all. I’m ready to go to bed, but I’m not sure where I’m supposed to sleep.”

He carefully laid the banjo in its case. “I already put your trunks in my room. It’s the first door you’ll come to in the hallway.”

“*Your* room?”

Her words were infused with just enough panic and disconcertion to jerk Quinn’s head up. His eyes were already widening when they connected with hers. A flush spread just above his well-shaven jaw. “I didn’t— I mean—I’ll be sleeping in the boys’ room from now on.”

“Oh.” A wave of relief washed over her, but ebbed with confusion. He’d asked her to marry him because he needed a mother for his children. However, since he’d never specifically said that their marriage would be in name only, she’d assumed it would become like any normal marriage after they fell in love. Was he ruling out that prospect? If so, did that mean he was also ruling out the far more important possibility of falling in love with her?

She really ought to ask him to clarify the issue. After all, she had a right to know exactly what she’d gotten herself into. She paused with the question on her lips. Did she want to know the truth? Absolutely. Did she have the nerve to ask? Certainly not.

Instead, she wished him a good night and easily found the right bedroom. The door was heavier than she’d expected so she

pushed it open only far enough for her slim frame to slip through. Ready for bed, she tried to sort through the myriad emotions tangling in her chest. This marriage had not started out at all as she'd imagined it would. Even the ceremony had been a bit flubbed. She had to admit that Quinn had been rather frustratingly adorable in that moment. He'd been so serious, so confused, so desperate to make things right. He'd even called her "honey." Then he'd kissed her and she'd felt a sensation similar to the one she'd felt at the circus when she'd placed her hand on a glass ball that conducted static electricity—only more powerful. Of course, he'd followed all of that up by ignoring her the whole evening.

One labored sigh later, she slid under the covers of her new bed. At least, she tried to slide in. Her legs would only go so far. She kicked and pushed and wiggled to no avail until one overenthusiastic effort sent her careening toward the floor. She landed with a loud thump, clamping her lips shut a second too late to smother a startled scream. She groaned in a mixture of pain from her soon-to-be-bruised hip and pure, honest-to-goodness frustration. The pounding of bare feet sounded in the hallway. The door flew open, setting off a popping sound as an avalanche of rice covered her concerned husband.

Helen burst out laughing. Quinn ignored the sticky rice clinging to his body in his hurry to kneel by her side. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head even as she winced at the stitch in her

side that came from laughing too hard. “I just hit the floor a little hard.”

He helped her up. “How did you end up down there?”

“Try to get in the bed.”

He glanced from her to the bed then down at himself. “But I’m covered in rice.”

“Doesn’t matter. Go ahead and try.” She smirked as she watched him lift the covers as though they were going to bite him. “Scaredy-cat.”

He narrowed his eyes at her then jumped under the covers. His long legs had nowhere to go. He fell out of the bed, but managed to control his fall with catlike grace. He grinned up at her from the floor. “Helen, I reckon we’ve been shivareed.”

“I hope that’s the extent of the troublemaking.” She shook her head. “Interesting how it isn’t quite so fun when you’re on the receiving end. I think I’d better get a broom.”

“You can put the rice in the slop pail for the pigs. Meanwhile, I’ll see how they rigged up the bed and undo it.”

By the time she returned, he’d pulled back the quilt completely from the bed to reveal their saboteur’s handiwork. The fitted sheet seemed untouched, but someone had tucked the top sheet into the head of the bed so that it looked like the fitted sheet. They’d then doubled it over so that it also appeared to be a normal top sheet. Lastly, they’d tucked in the sides so the sheet became sort of an impenetrable envelope.

Quinn quickly remade the bed correctly, shaking his head the

entire time. "I made this bed myself this morning with new sheets and all. It kind of gives me an eerie feeling to know someone was prowling around the place, causing mischief when I was gone. I've a mind to go into town on Monday and get a better lock for the doors around this place. There. All fixed. I'll take the trash you have with me when I leave."

"Thank you for coming to my rescue." She swept the last of the rice into the dustpan and emptied it into the slop pail.

"I'm just glad you aren't too badly hurt."

She watched him plump the pillows for her as she sat on the edge of the bed. "You don't have to do that."

He shrugged. "I'm done now. Good night."

"Good night." She moved to the head of the bed as he grabbed the slop bucket, broom and dustpan. She'd just blown out the lamp when the sound of him softly calling her name made her turn to find the silhouette of his broad-shouldered, slim-hipped frame lingering at the door. "Yes, Quinn?"

"You looked beautiful at the wedding today. I hope I told you that."

He hadn't and she hadn't realized how dearly she'd missed the compliment until now. The sincerity in his voice caused a small smile to curve at her lips. "Thank you."

"I'll let you get some sleep." He stepped away from the door.

She moved to the far end of the bed. Clutching the footboard, she called his name. He reappeared in an instant. She bit her lip. Somehow the darkness helped her find her courage. It didn't

stop the blush from rising in her cheeks. “Quinn, I think it’s only fair of you to explain what you meant when you said you’d be sleeping in the boys’ room ‘from now on.’ Does ‘from now on’ mean forever?”

His shoulders tensed as she spoke, and his gaze dropped to the path of light that led toward her. “I don’t know, Helen. Maybe. Probably.”

She nodded then waited for him to close the door behind him before sliding under the covers. She even went so far as to pull them over her head. It wasn’t enough to shelter her from the doubts that stalked her thoughts.

She’d married Quinn thinking that it would be easy to fall in love with him one day. However, she hadn’t considered the possibility that he might not be inclined to return the favor. Judging by tonight, that might very well be the case.

It would be wise to guard her heart and not place too much faith in love making the difference. If he did fall in love with her and they decided to have a normal marriage, how long would it be before he figured out there would be no baby coming? Would he realize she’d known she was damaged all along? That she’d hid it from him?

It didn’t matter. It *wouldn’t* matter. Quinn had married her to take care of the four children he already had. Surely her worth as his wife was secure in that. She didn’t need to think that far ahead, anyway. Right now, their marriage was only a matter of convenience to him—no matter how much more it might mean

to her.

Chapter Five

The dusky-blue light of dawn crept down the hallway where Quinn paused outside what used to be his bedroom. He tapped on the door and listened for any sounds of his wife stirring. Hearing none, he tapped a little harder. Still nothing. With a frown, Quinn eased the door open and immediately wished he hadn't. Something just didn't seem decent about being in a lady's bedroom while she was sleeping. Yet, he couldn't take his eyes off her as he rounded the corner of the bed and knelt beside it.

She was cuddled under the covers with her hand resting beside her cheek on a hunter-green linen pillowcase. The color complemented the roses in her cheeks and lips. Her rich brown waves tumbled over her shoulder. Quinn felt his brow furrow in confusion. How on earth had he convinced this beautiful creature to marry him?

He'd be a lot more comfortable with this situation if she were a little more plain, slightly dumb or just flat-out boring. She wasn't, though. He'd never been more aware of that than when he'd found himself alone with her for an entire evening. He wasn't completely dense. He knew that his banjo playing had bordered on excessive. He'd felt the annoyance rolling off his bride in waves. He just hadn't known what to do about it. He was afraid to talk for fear that she'd realized she'd been bamboozled into marrying a man so much dumber than her. He was afraid to look at her because that made him forget he didn't deserve her.

Touching her was completely out of the question.

He'd lain awake for hours with his thoughts spinning in circles inside his head. They mostly revolved around the fact that he barely knew the woman he'd just given his last name. He knew plenty *about* her, but he didn't know her personally. He could count on one hand the number of times they'd spoken to each other and most of those conversations had occurred within the past week. That should make for an interesting married life, especially since he had little idea about what one was supposed to be like. His mother had died when he was Trent's age and his father hadn't remarried, which meant Quinn had never seen a marriage modeled in his own home. Townsfolk in Peppin seemed pretty fascinated by making matches and marrying people off, yet no one ever said anything about how to build a good marriage after the match was made.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been kneeling beside the bed thinking and watching Helen sleep before her sooty lashes began to flutter. He suddenly realized how close he was to her and tried to move away, but he was too late. Her eyes opened, locked on his and widened. Gasping, she bolted upright in bed and scrambled away from him. "Were you watching me sleep?"

Quinn figured his best tactic was evasion. "I was just about to awaken you. We've got chores to do."

"Chores?"

He nodded. "I need you to milk the cow, feed the chickens and gather the eggs. We'll have to hurry to get everything done,

dress, pick up the children and still be on time for church.”

She blinked. “Milk the chickens?”

She must be one of those folks who was slow to wake up. He didn’t even try to hide his grin, though he quickly rubbed it away. “I’d like to see you try that.”

“Try what?” She corralled her hair so that it pooled over one shoulder.

“Milking the chickens.”

The teasing in his voice must have gotten through her sleep-fogged state, for a dangerous glint of humor warmed her brown eyes. “I bet you would. Repeat the list for me again.”

He braced his elbows on the edge of the bed and ticked off each chore on his fingers. “Milk the cow. Feed the chickens. Gather the eggs. The milk pail and egg basket will be on the worktable in the barn with the bin of chicken feed beside it. All of that will be on your left side as soon as you walk in. You can’t miss it.”

She nodded. “Right.”

“No, left.” He pointed to his left, which he realized too late would be her right.

She tugged his hand down with a laugh. “No. I meant, ‘right,’ as in ‘I understand.’”

“Oh, right.” He glanced at her hand still covering his and wondered how the deal he made with God applied when she was the one reaching out. Yes, sir. He and God had some things they needed to hash out. Until then, he’d better not chance it. He

disengaged his hand from hers as he stood. "Better get moving. The animals don't like to wait."

* * *

The man had no shame. It was obvious that he'd been watching her sleep for some time, yet he didn't even have the grace to look the slightest bit embarrassed at being caught. Then, as if she hadn't been disoriented enough by awakening in an unfamiliar place, he'd knocked further off balance with his teasing before delivering the final blow to her sensibilities. Chores.

She should have known that living on a farm would mean that she'd have farm chores. She'd just gotten so wrapped up in the idea of being a mother and having her impossible dream come true it hadn't crossed her mind. That and the fact that chores had never really been something she'd ever had to consider before. Growing up, she'd been responsible for keeping her room tidy. However, the maids had taken care of any real cleaning. And there had been no animals to care for.

Her move to Bradley's Boardinghouse hadn't necessitated any real change on her part since the Bradley family handled most of the mundane responsibilities for their boarders. Of course, she'd been in charge of keeping the schoolhouse in order. That had consisted of encouraging the children to clean up after themselves, giving the floor a good sweep and cleaning the chalkboard. There was nothing too strenuous or demanding about that.

Still, how hard could it be to take care of a few basic farm

chores? She was an intelligent woman, after all. Surely she'd catch on to her responsibilities quickly. She tied her hair back with a ribbon, put on a light coat and buttoned up her boots. There would be time to dress later. The important thing was to heed Quinn's admonishment to hurry.

The sound of Quinn splitting wood behind the house rang through the brisk autumn air as she stepped outside. She gave a little shiver and gathered her coat closer before setting off across the open field toward the barn. Her right hip reminded her of last night's unfortunate tumble out of bed by protesting each step she took with that leg. It didn't help that she continually had to jerk the heels of her kid-leather boots out of the thick grass. By the time she arrived at the door of the large red barn, the hem of her nightgown was wet with dew and clinging uncomfortably to her bare legs. Next time, the animals would have to wait for her to dress more warmly.

The smell of the barn stopped her in her tracks. It was a mixture of sweet hay, musk from the animals and the sharp, acrid scent of dung. She rubbed her cold nose. It wasn't so bad. Surely she'd get used to it in a few moments. Since she was already in the barn, it made sense to milk the cow first, so she grabbed the milking pan. Two horses neighed as she passed their stalls. She couldn't tell whether it was a welcome or a warning. Finally, she found the right animal.

Whoa. She'd seen cows from a distance before, but she'd never gotten this close to one. She hadn't realized they were quite

so...large. The animal swung its head toward her and stared. Not threatening exactly—just slightly intimidating. Helen bent her knees to get a look at the teats attached to the bulgy sack on its stomach. In theory, that's where the milk came from. She knew that. She just wasn't entirely sure what was required to procure the milk from that into the bucket. Oh, well. What had she told her students? Learning begins with the decision to try.

She unhooked the gate, closed it behind her and did exactly that. She tried...and tried...and tried to milk that blasted cow. It wasn't as easy in reality as it was in theory. That was for sure. Even when the cow stood still long enough for Helen to set up the stool and reach under its belly to get a hold of its bulgy contraption, nothing came out. Out of breath from the chase as much as the struggle, Helen decided that the cow just didn't want to share her milk today, so she traded in the milking pail for the chicken feed and egg basket.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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