



THE REBEL COWBOY'S QUADRUPLETS

Tina Leonard

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REBEL WITH A CAUSE? Mackenzie Hawthorne is looking for a ranch foreman, not a husband. Good thing, because marriage isn't in injured bull rider Justin Morant's future. He's happy to help save the ranch – and play stand-in father to the sexy single mum's four angelic new-borns. Mackenzie would be a fool to fall for the hunky cowboy, who wears his rebel status like a badge of honour. Justin's a natural with her daughters and at ranching...yet she knows he's eventually going to gallop off into the sunset. Unless, of course, the townspeople of Bridesmaids Creek, Texas get their hands on him!

Mackenzie smiled. “Babysitting isn’t part of your job description. But thank you.”

Warmth spread through Justin’s chest at her smile. He wondered if he’d ever met a woman he was so blindingly attracted to—and decided in a hurry that was a terrible thought to have about his boss. Definitely a dead end. There was no way on this planet he had any business being attracted to her.

“I’m going to get some coffee. You want a cup?”

“No, thank you. You go on.”

He nodded and turned to leave.

But he turned back around to meet her gaze. He started to say that minding her daughters hadn’t been work. He’d done it because he’d wanted to. Wanted to make her happy, to help her out.

It was a bad idea to make such a confession.

Dear Reader,

Justin Morant is in a pickle! He’s been sent on a mission to Bridesmaids Creek, Texas, and specifically to the Hanging H ranch, where he immediately realizes he’s been set up to work for a sexy mama with four tiny daughters at a ranch that was once a celebrated haunted house—not his idea of *How to End a Rodeo Career!* Falling for the boss lady was never part of the plan, but those little babies are trying to steal his heart. The thing is, maybe his heart was ready to be stolen, because he sure can’t imagine life without them, or their spunky, independent mother.

Mackenzie Hawthorne is stunned when the handsome ex-rodeo rider shows up on her porch to apply for the job of ranch foreman. She’s not happy when she finds out that her good friend Ty Spurlock has sent the rodeo rebel on a mission of marriage, essentially, but Justin is so sweet with her four babies that soon her heart is in serious danger of falling. She’s not interested in marrying again, but Justin seems in no hurry to leave her or the babies—is it possible that this time she’s found the man of her dreams?

I invite you to join me in Bridesmaids Creek, Texas, a small town of good-hearted people whose residents have created a man-friendly environment full of legends and so-called magic history to showcase Bridesmaids Creek’s many wonderful charms. I hope you’ll enjoy this first story, set in a place so mystical it could only be called “home.”

All my best,

Tina Leonard

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TINA LEONARD is a *USA TODAY* bestselling and award-winning author of more than fifty projects, including several popular miniseries for Mills & Boon. Known for bad-boy heroes and smart, adventurous heroines, her books have made the *USA TODAY*, Waldenbooks, Ingram and Nielsen BookScan bestseller lists. Born on a military base, Tina lived in many states before eventually marrying the boy who did her crayon printing for her in the first grade. You can visit her at www.tinaleonard.com, and follow her on Facebook and Twitter.

Much love and gratitude to the generous and supportive readers who have embraced my families and communities so enthusiastically—I have the best readers in the world.

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[Chapter One](#)

Justin Morant recognized trouble when his buddy Ty Spurlock texted him a link to a dating website. This was what happened when you had to leave the rodeo circuit thanks to a career-ending injury: your friends decided you needed a woman with whom to share your retirement, and maybe a spread to call your own because you were going to need something to do with your new spare time. The woman would run your life and the spread would rule your life, and maybe it was one and the same. You'd work hard, be tied to the land and the woman, never have two nickels to call your own. You'd have children and, suddenly, you were up to your neck in obligations and debt.

He'd seen it happen too many times. At twenty-seven, Justin was in no hurry to be fobbed off on a woman who was so desperate for a man that she'd use an online service.

He packed up his duffel, tossed it in his seen-better-days white truck and headed away from Montana, destination unknown, knee killing him this fine summer day.

His phone rang and Justin pulled over. This was a conversation that was going to follow him every step of his self-imposed sabbatical if he didn't stamp it out now.

"I'm not going to answer the ad, Ty," he said, skipping the greetings.

“Hear me out, big guy. I’m from Bridesmaids Creek. I know where the Hawthorne spread is. It’s the Hanging H ranch, or, as we locals fondly call it, the Haunted H. Go check out the place. You’ve got nothing better to do, my friend.”

“What kind of a name is Haunted H?”

“The Hawthornes used to run a yearly haunted house for kiddies there, and folks remember that. It was bad to the bone, and rug rats to small-fry attended like bees at a hive. Mackenzie’s folks did everything they could to turn a dime with it. Her family raked in dough nine months a year with puppet shows, petting zoos, pony rides and lots of good treats.”

“Nine months a year?”

“Well, three months a year it was turned into Winter Wonderland at the Haunted H, to go with the town’s annual Christmastown on the square,” Ty said, as if Justin didn’t understand the importance of holidays. “You have to appreciate that a haunted house wouldn’t be as much of a draw as Santa Claus for the youngsters.”

“So what happened to the place?”

“Hard times hit us all, buddy,” Ty said, a little mysteriously for Justin’s radar. “Give Mackenzie a call. You’re burning daylight on this deal. Someone’s going to answer that ad, which will come as a shock to her because she doesn’t know what’s been done on her behalf.” Ty laughed. “The only thing I haven’t been able to figure out is why someone in Bridesmaids Creek hasn’t already gotten her to the altar. I’m not suggesting you try to do that, of course. Small towns usually keep their own pretty well matched up, and judging by her profile on the dating site, that should happen soon enough. Good luck, my friend.”

Ty hung up. Justin tossed his Stetson onto the seat with some righteous disgust and pulled back on the road.

He wasn’t going to Texas. Not to Bridesmaids Creek to a woman whose family had operated a haunted house.

Just because a man could no longer ride didn’t mean he had to make a laughingstock of himself.

* * *

MACKENZIE HAWTHORNE SMILED, looking at the four tiny babies finally sleeping in their white bassinets. “Whew,” she said to Jade Harper. “Thanks for the help.”

“That’s what best friends are for.” She arranged soft white blankets over each baby, protecting them from the cool drafts blowing from the air conditioner, which seemed to run almost constantly this baking-hot July. “Who would have ever thought Tommy possessed the swimmers to make four beautiful little girls?”

Mackenzie smiled at her adorable daughters, all scrunchy-faced in their tiny pink onesies. “Don’t talk to me about my ex. Every time I think about him dating that twenty-year-old, I want to eat chocolate. I’m trying very hard not to do that. Your mother keeps me busy enough with desserts I can’t resist.”

Jade laughed. “Tommy Fields was never right for you. What you need is a real man.” She hugged Mackenzie. “You rest while these little angels are asleep. Mom will be over this afternoon with dinner and to help out. I’ve got to get down to the peach stand and help make ice cream. ’Bye, darling.”

“Thanks for everything.”

Jade flopped a hand at her. Mackenzie was grateful for all the friends she had in Bridesmaids Creek. Everyone had been pitching in almost nonstop, bringing food, baby clothes, and giving their time so she could shower and even nap sometimes. She hated to be a burden, but when she mentioned that to anyone, she was reminded that she gave generously of her time to the community, as had her parents.

Mackenzie walked through the huge, heavily gingerbreaded old Victorian mansion, wondering how she was going to fix the fences that were rotting and sagging, not to mention the gutters on the

house. Never mind run the horse operation. With four-month-old babies, she was constantly running, taking care of them.

But she wouldn't trade her babies for anything. Tommy might have turned out to be a zero as a husband, but Jade was right: he'd left her with four incredible gifts.

And a lot of bills.

But her parents had been entrepreneurs, smart with money. She had a small cushion, if she was very careful with those funds. She wasn't destitute, thank God. Raising four children was going to take everything she had and then some.

She needed a miracle to keep herself from going into debt, and with no income coming in and no way for her to work until the babies were older, things could get tight fast.

* * *

JUSTIN WAS NOBODY'S idea of a miracle, certainly not from his point of view. If the little lady was looking for one, she was doomed to disappointment. Yet here he stood on the porch of the strangest-looking house he'd ever seen two weeks after Ty had tweaked him about it, wondering what in the hell he was thinking by letting his curiosity get the best of him.

The house hovered tall and white on the green hilly land several miles outside Austin. Four tall turrets stretched to the sky, and mullioned windows sparkled on the upper floor. A wide wraparound porch painted sky-blue had a white wicker sofa with blue cushions on it, and a collection of wrought-iron roosters in a clutch near a bristly doormat with a big burgundy H on it.

Quaint. The place was homey in a well-worn sort of shabby way, and he'd be sure to tell Ty that he didn't appreciate him sending him out here to see a doll's house in the middle of nowhere. Miles and miles of green pastureland badly in need of mowing surrounded the house, wrapped by white-painted pipe fence so it wasn't totally hopeless, but still. No man would live here willingly.

The door opened, and a petite brunette stared out at him. She didn't come up to his chest, not totally. Brown eyes questioned why he was taking up space on her porch, and he asked himself the same. She was cute as a bunny with sweet features and a curvy body. The matchmaking ad had probably gotten hundreds of interested hits. Not to mention the nice breasts—and as she turned to answer someone who'd asked her something, he noted a seriously lush fanny—yeah, her ad would get hits. He wondered if she knew what Ty had done on her behalf with the dating ad and pulled off his hat, telling himself he'd just introduce himself and go.

This was no place for him.

“Can I help you?”

“I'm looking for Mackenzie Hawthorne. My name's Justin Morant. Ty Spurlock sent me by.”

“I'm Mackenzie.”

Her voice was as pretty as she was. Justin swallowed. “Ty said you might need some help around here.”

Pink lips smiled at him; brown eyes sparkled. He drew back a little, astonished by how darling she was smiling at him like that. Like he was some kind of hero who'd just rolled up on his white steed.

And, damn, he was driving a white truck.

Which was kind of funny if you appreciated irony, and, right now, he felt like he was living it.

Sudden baby wails caught his attention, and hers, too.

“Come on in,” she said. “You'll have to excuse me for just a moment. But make yourself at home in the kitchen. There's tea on the counter, and Mrs. Harper's put together a lovely chicken salad. After I feed the babies, we can talk about what kind of work you're looking for. Mrs. Harper will love to pull your life story from you while you eat.”

She made fast introductions and then the tiny brunette disappeared, allowing him a better look at that full seat. Blue jeans accentuated the curves, and he figured she was so nicely full-figured because she'd just had a baby.

Damn Ty for pulling this prank on him. His buddy was probably laughing his fool ass off right about now, knowing how Justin felt about settling down and family ties in general. Justin was a loner, at least in spirit. He had lots of friends on the circuit, and he was from a huge family. He had three brothers, all as independent as he was, except for J.T., who liked to stay close to the family and the neighborhood he'd grown up in.

Justin was going to continue to ride alone.

Mrs. Harper smiled at him as he took a barstool at the wide kitchen island. "Welcome, Justin."

"Thank you," he replied, not about to let himself feel welcome. He needed to get out of there as fast as possible. The place was a honey trap of food and good intentions. Another baby wail joined the first, and Justin's ears perked up. Two? Maybe she was babysitting. He looked at Mrs. Harper, worried.

Mrs. Harper laughed. "Yes, she probably does need a hand," she said, misunderstanding the question on his face. "Run on in there and help her out for a second, and I'll serve up a lunch for you that'll take the edge off any hunger pangs you've got." She pulled a fragrant pie from the oven—an apple pie, he guessed—and his stomach rumbled.

Okay, he could go check on the little mother for the price of lunch. But then he was heading out, with a "Sorry—this job doesn't fit the description of my talents," or something equally polite.

He was going to kick Ty's butt hard, over the phone, which wouldn't be nearly as satisfying as doing it in person. He'd driven a day out of his way to apply for what he'd thought might be bona fide employment.

He walked into the den, guided by the baby cries. Mackenzie glanced at him from the sofa. "Don't be scared—they'll calm down in a moment," she said, but he was anyway, unable to stop staring at the four white bassinets, three babies tucked into them like pink-wrapped sausages working free of their casings. Mackenzie held a fourth writhing baby close to her chest, and Justin realized she was nursing.

Holy crap. She had four babies. He backed up a step, belatedly removed his hat. "I'm not scared. I'm something else, but I'm not sure I can identify the emotion." He looked at the three squalling babies, clearly deciding they all wanted their mother's attention at once. "What can I do?"

He hoped she'd say nothing, but instead she pointed him to a bottle. "If you're sincerely asking, Holly's next in line."

Holly? He glanced back at the baskets. Tiny nameplates adorned the bassinets, which for some reason reminded him of the carved beds of the seven dwarves. Only Mackenzie was no Snow White under an evil spell, and he was certainly no handsome prince.

But the lady did need help; that much was clear. She was in over her head by any reasonable metric, whether it was the ranch (which she probably would lose, if he were a betting man) or these tiny babies (which would require an army of assistants that he figured she couldn't afford—again, no hard bet for a man who liked betting on sure things). This would only take an hour, he figured, and an hour he certainly did have, damn his torn PCL.

Justin studied the nameplates to make certain he picked up the right baby. Holly, Hope, Haven and Heather. All chosen, no doubt, to go with the Hanging H of the ranch, which was sort of a hopeless exercise because they'd all get married one day and their last names would change. To Thomas or Smith or whatever. Then he remembered that Mackenzie's last name was Hawthorne, and she must not have ever changed her name when she got married.

If she'd been married.

Gingerly he picked up Holly, who had a pretty annoyed wail going, grabbed one of the bottles off a wooden tray and slipped it into her mouth. Oh, yeah, that was exactly what she wanted—food—and what he wanted—golden silence.

"Thank you," Mackenzie said. "They all decide they want to eat at once, every time."

He sank onto a sofa, carefully holding the baby. “My brothers and I were the same. It lasted through our teens and drove our parents nuts.” He glanced at the other two babies, who were now occupying themselves with listening to the adult voices in the room. “I guess these are all yours.”

She smiled, and he noticed she had very shapely lips. He avoided staring at the blanket at her breast, not wanting to catch an accidental glimpse of something he shouldn't see. He was a gentleman, even if he found himself at the moment feeling like a fish out of water.

“They're all mine.” She smiled proudly at her children. “We're still working out some things, but the girls are coming along nicely now. They have a little better routine, and the health issues are more manageable.”

He turned his gaze back to Holly so the doubt wouldn't show on his face. The overgrown paddocks, the sagging gutters and the chipping paint stayed on his mind. These four children—was the father totally useless? Did he not care about the state of his property? Or these four sweet-faced babies? Not to mention the sexy mother of his children.

“Their father is in Alaska,” she said, somehow reading his thoughts. “Working on an oil rig. And when he's not working, he's otherwise engaged. We don't hear from him,” she said. “Not before the divorce or after. I'd been on a drug to help me get pregnant, and he was unpleasantly surprised by the results.” She put a now-content baby into the empty basket marked “Heather,” diapered her, kissed her and picked up Hope. “This one was born with lung issues, but we're slowly getting past that. And Holly has struggled with being underweight, but time has been the healer for that, too.” She smiled at Justin, and he saw how beautiful she was, especially when her face lit up as she talked about her children. “So tell me what kind of work you do, and we'll see if our needs match.”

He held in a sigh, wondering how to extricate himself from this dilemma. He could help this woman and her brood, but he didn't want to. Justin glanced at the four babies. They had calmed some as they were getting either bottles or a breast—there was a thought he had to stay away from.

Mrs. Harper bustled in with a tray of food for him and took the baby he was holding. “I heard you say that you need to talk business. I'll feed this one, and you eat. Your plates say you're from Montana, so you've come a long way to talk about work. I know you're starved.”

No, no, no. He needed a job, but not this job. And the last thing he wanted to do was work for a woman with soft doe eyes and a place that was teetering on becoming unmanageable. From the little he'd seen, there was a lot to do. He had a bum knee and a bad feeling about this. And no desire to be around children.

On the other hand, it couldn't hurt to help out for a week, maybe two, tops. Could it?

He ate a bite of Mrs. Harper's chicken salad, startled by how good it was. Maybe it had been too long since he'd had home cooking. He smelled the wonderful cinnamon aroma of apple pie, and his stomach jumped.

Mackenzie bent over to put the fed, diapered and happy baby she was holding back into the bassinet. He watched her move, looked at her smile, admired her full fanny and breasts—stopped himself cold.

He had no business looking at a new mother. He really had been on the road too long. Glancing around him, Justin took in the soft white-and-blue curtains, the tan sofas, the chairs in a gentle blue-and-white pattern that complemented the drapes. A tan wool rug lay under a blocky coffee table, the edges rounded and perfect for children who would be learning to pull themselves up in a few months.

Taking another bite of Mrs. Harper's delicious meal, he focused on the food and not the homey atmosphere. That's what was wrong: this felt like home. It could draw in a man who wasn't careful, who wasn't aware of the pitfalls.

Maybe Ty hadn't sent him here because of Mackenzie's ad. Maybe she simply needed a grievous amount of help, and Ty had known he needed employment.

He could do this job—or at least he was comfortable with the work he could see that needed to be done.

But he needed to know.

“So about your ad,” he said, and Mackenzie and Mrs. Harper looked at him curiously. “On the dating website.”

She shook her head. “What dating website? I didn’t advertise on a website. I talked to some friends about the position for ranch foreman.” She straightened. “Are you saying you came all the way here from Montana because you think I’m looking for a man?”

Chapter Two

Mackenzie planned to give Ty a piece of her mind at the first opportunity. A phone call to express her dismay at his ham-handed matchmaking was tops on her list.

The cowboy who’d clearly been sent on a mercy mission seemed supremely uncomfortable at the outraged question.

“I thought you were looking for help around here,” Justin said. “So, yes, I was under the impression you were looking for a man. Though not in the manner in which you may have mistaken.”

“Ty put me in a dating website, and you show up here. How would you feel if you were me?”

Mrs. Harper drifted from the room with a baby in her arms. Mackenzie was too upset to cool her temper.

“Probably grateful that one of my friends cared enough to reach out to try to get me some help. Incidentally, I haven’t seen the ad. Didn’t look.” He shrugged, dismissing it.

That was a man for you. It was all about the practicalities, when the mousetrap was perfectly clear to her. You didn’t live in Bridesmaids Creek and not know that people plotted to get you married. Always done lovingly in your best interests, of course.

Which was how she’d ended up married the first time—not that Tommy hadn’t been a sinfully gorgeous, totally lazy man more interested in pleasure than anything resembling work.

There was a lot of work to be done around the Hanging H, so named when one of the Hawthorne H’s had partially fallen off the sign. The name had stuck—though she knew very well that Daisy Donovan—one of the town’s most notorious bad girls—liked to say the ranch was called the Hanging H because the Hawthornes were barely hanging on. Mackenzie did need help, which would have been quite obvious to the handsome cowboy meeting her gaze without hesitation. Tommy might have been handsome in a hedonistic sort of way, but this cowboy had him beat for raw sex appeal.

“You’re right. If you’re here just for work, and not because of a matchmaking website, I’d like to talk to you more about the position.” She decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. Hazel eyes stared at her, unblinking. Justin didn’t look like he had romance on the mind. Broad shoulders complemented a trim waist, the sinewy body of a man who spent his time actively. He had a square jaw that hadn’t been shaved today—or maybe even yesterday—and shaggy dark hair that hadn’t seen a barber in many months.

All in all, the kind of man who would turn women’s heads.

“I’d be interested in hearing more about the kind of help you’re looking for,” he said.

She looked at her babies, tried to turn off the zip of sex appeal that was overruling her ability to think clearly. “Why would you want to work here? There must be a lot of ranches hiring.”

He nodded. “I’m sure I can find a job if this doesn’t work out. But Ty seemed to think you could use a foreman.”

“A foreman position would be a long-term proposition.” She looked at him, curious. “Somehow you don’t strike me as a long-term kind of man.”

“Things change.”

Okay. She’d noticed he had a bit of a limp, and there was probably a story to that. In fact, there was no doubt a story to Justin in general, but she wasn’t looking for a colorful background. She needed help here, and the fact was Ty’s reference counted for a lot. There was no doubting that Justin didn’t want to answer a lot of questions about himself, which was fine because she could ask Ty whatever she wanted to know. She could simply negotiate an open-ended employment offer with Justin.

“Yes, things do change. Thanks for helping out with the babies. If you give me ten minutes to get them settled and grab the books, I’ll go over the job requirements with you.”

He nodded. “Thanks.”

She gazed into his hazel eyes, seeing nothing there but appreciation for a chance of employment. No attraction, no flirtation; just level honesty.

Whatever it was she’d felt from the moment he’d walked into the room, he didn’t seem to be affected by it.

Which was fine.

She went to find Mrs. Harper to watch the babies while she talked to Justin. If she hired him, she was going to call Ty.

Whether Mackenzie thanked him or yelled at him about the cowboy in the other room remained to be seen.

* * *

TWO WEEKS HAD gone by, and Mackenzie hadn’t seen much of Justin since he’d moved into the foreman’s house. But evidence of his presence was obvious: the gutters no longer hung sad and neglected, the paint on the house gleamed, the paddocks were mown and hay was bundled into round bales that studded the landscape outside her window.

It was beginning to look like the Hanging H of old, which brought back a lot of happy memories.

Jade came into the kitchen, peering over her shoulder at the paddocks. “Looks like a postcard, doesn’t it?”

Mackenzie nodded. “Maybe I should have thanked Ty for sending Justin my way.”

Jade laughed. “You didn’t thank him?”

“I was too annoyed when I found out he’d put my name in a dating registry.”

“To be fair, that was a tiny fib on his part. He didn’t really do that. It was just a little intrigue he threw in for Justin’s sake.”

Mackenzie shook her head and returned to the babies, who sat in carriers, all four of them, on top of the wide kitchen island. They gazed at different things around the room or their toes, content for the moment. “Ty can get a little crazy at times. But, yes, I should thank him now. The ranch looks like it’s in recovery mode.”

“And then there’s other kinds of recovery,” Jade said, still staring out the window. “Is this your daily view?”

Mackenzie turned to see what Jade was goggling at.

Justin. Hot, dark skin gleaming with sweat, bare to his blue-jeaned waist. Muscles for miles. Mackenzie stared at the man wearing a straw Resistol, amazed to feel her heart beating like mad. “Actually, no. That’s never been the view.”

“Too bad.” Jade laughed. “If it was, I’d be eating lunch over here every day with you.”

“You do eat lunch with me almost every day. You make the lunch.” Mackenzie tore her gaze away from Justin and sat at the island. “I’ve been meaning to tell you that I feel like things are much more under control. You and your mom don’t have to come over here every day anymore to help me out. I’m going to be okay.” She smiled at Jade. “You’ve been amazing friends. You and everybody who’s sent food over.”

“Pooh,” Jade said. “Don’t think you’re going to run me off now that you’ve got a bona fide beefcake on the ranch. I’m single, you know.”

Mackenzie held Heather’s tiny foot in her hand. “By all means, come by if you want to. I just hate to keep taking up your life.”

“Believe me—this is a joy and pleasure. And it would kill Mom if you cut off her visiting privileges.” Jade stood beside her. “She dotes on these babies. Says they may be the only grandchildren she has because I’m so slow about finding a husband.”

“You could try Ty’s matchmaking registry.”

Jade laughed. "I'll meet my handsome prince when it's meant to be." She went back to staring out the window. "Did you notice his limp?"

Mackenzie sighed. "Yes. It's more pronounced when he doesn't know I'm watching him, which tells me he doesn't want to talk about it. So I don't ask." She tucked the blankets around the babies and smiled. "He does his job. I don't see him. He came into the kitchen last Friday, and I handed him an envelope with his pay in it. Your mother gave him a lunchbox, so I think she's feeding him. That's the relationship we have, and now you know everything I know."

Maybe that would settle Jade's curiosity.

"You have to wonder about that matchmaking story, though. Something brought that handsome stud here. He could have gotten a job where he came from, right?" Jade asked, curiosity clearly not abated.

"Don't ask me. I took Ty's word as a reference and didn't ask too many questions. As you may have noticed, I needed help around here, and if he was looking for a job, I was happy to give him a try." It had nothing to do with the fact that he was, as Jade mentioned, quite handsome. Sexy. Breathtaking, if a woman was looking for a man.

But she wasn't.

"I had a husband," Mackenzie said, looking at her babies with adoring eyes. "And while I wouldn't say I wish I'd never met Tommy—I have him to thank for my sweet children—I can't say a husband is something I'm looking to put on my shopping list. But speaking of shopping, I'm taking you up on your offer to babysit while I go into town to grab some things."

Jade gave up watching Justin and picked up a baby. "I was hoping you were still going to let me babysit. An afternoon out will do you good. And my first-timer's nerves will be calmed."

"You'll do fine! You've helped me almost every day with the babies." Mackenzie hugged her friend.

"My nerves are due to my suspicion that you might not be able to leave your babies for the first time," Jade said, laughing. "Mom's coming by for backup. We have everything under control. Go."

A knock sounded on the kitchen door, and Jade pulled it open. "We don't knock on the back door—just come on in," Jade said, and Justin entered. Even a little sweaty and a bit dirty, he was a sexy, handsome man—just as Jade had noted.

"Ladies," he said, removing his hat.

"Hi," Jade said. She poured him a glass of tea from the pitcher on the counter. "I'm going to put these babies down for their nap."

She left the room carrying Hope. Mackenzie smiled at Justin as he put the empty glass back on the counter. "Would you like some more?"

"No, thank you."

He had the most amazing eyes, the nicest hands—

Mackenzie pulled her gaze back where it belonged. "The house looks great. And it's nice to see the lawn mowed. Thank you."

He nodded. "I was going to head into town. I figure there's a hardware place and maybe a tractor supply in town so I can get some parts." He glanced at the remaining two babies on the kitchen island after Jade came in and removed Heather. "I thought I'd see if there was anything you need."

Him, maybe? "Thank you. Actually I'm being sent into town myself."

"That's right," Jade said, sailing into the kitchen to pick up Haven, cuddling the baby to her. "It's high time my friend got out. She's a wonderful mother, but everybody needs a break. Although I'll believe that she leaves these babies behind when I see it. Try to help ease her out the door, will you?" She grinned and left.

Justin shrugged. "I can drop you off in town."

Mackenzie hesitated. "That's all right. I can drive."

"I could use a tour."

She looked into his eyes, surprised. "Haven't you been into Bridesmaids Creek?"

"Just ran in to grab some feed for the horses."

There was a lot of lore in Bridesmaids Creek. She was half tempted to go with him so she could tell him all the wonderful stories.

On the other hand, she was tempted to go with him simply because he was the hottest man she'd ever laid eyes on.

Which wasn't the best reason, but it was a reason. She could feel herself melting under his gaze. He seemed so solid, so strong...so unlike Tommy.

"I really—"

"Go," Jade said, coming back into the kitchen to collect the final baby. She cradled Holly as Mrs. Harper came in the back door bearing a pie.

"Hello, everyone," Mrs. Harper said. "I brought something for Justin because I know how much he likes apple pie."

"Yes, ma'am," Justin said. "I can find room for that."

Jade handed Holly to her mother after she put the pie on the counter. "Justin and Mackenzie are just leaving."

"Oh, good," Mrs. Harper said. "That will give me time to make up some fried chicken to go with it for later."

"I think we're not getting any of that pie until we get our chores done," Justin said, his gaze turning to Mackenzie again.

"I think you're right." She also sensed a heavy helping of matchmaking, too, but forewarned was forearmed. She gave Jade a wry look, who returned that with an innocent look. When Justin opened the kitchen door, Mackenzie went out, telling herself that all the matchmaking in the world wasn't going to make her fall in love again.

* * *

"AFTER HEARING TY sell Bridesmaids Creek," Justin told Mackenzie as he drove into town, "I'm anxious to get the tour. Ty brags about the Bridesmaids Creek swim, he talks about the Best Man's Fork, and a few other bits of lore, but I was never sure if he was just pulling my leg or not. Ty likes to hear himself talk, and talk big."

"There's a lot of history in BC," Mackenzie said. "Some good, some bad. Just like any place, I guess."

He nodded, pulling his truck into a parking spot in the wide-set, clean town square. Families with kids milled in front of the shops, but not as many as one might expect to see if one were in a city.

Still, it felt like a comfortable town where everyone knew each other, celebrated each other's hopes and joys. "The Wedding Diner?" Justin peered at the white restaurant with its pink-and-white-striped awning, big windows and flashing pink Open sign.

"Home cooking, and, if you're interested, Mrs. Chatham will tell your fortune for you."

Justin grunted. "I don't believe in fortune-telling."

"Oh, she doesn't do read-your-palm kind of stuff. Mrs. Chatham has a completely different method." She got out of the truck and he followed suit, meeting her on the pavement.

"So, shall we meet back here at four?" Mackenzie asked. "I know you said you wanted to go to the feed store. By the way, Ralph Chatham, Jane Chatham's husband, runs that."

"Does he tell fortunes, too?" Justin asked, telling himself to relax and enjoy the small-town ambience.

"Not exactly. But he does do a Magic 8 Ball kind of thing where you pay a small fee, his steer drops a cowpat on a square for you and you win a prize. Or you can trade the prize for one of Mrs. Chatham's sessions."

Justin laughed. "Cow-pie-drop contests are done in lots of places."

“You laugh,” Mackenzie said, “but Mr. Chatham’s steer is well loved in this town. The steer’s name is Target thanks to his aim and the fact that he’s made some folks a good bundle of money. Target always hits a mark. See you at four.” She smiled and walked away, stunning him when she walked into a shop with a bouquet-shaped shingle that read “Monsieur Unmatchmaker. Premier Unmatchmaking Service.”

Was the whole town backward? Off its collective rocker?

It was none of his business why Mackenzie would need an unmatchmaking service. Ugh.

The unforgiving rodeo circuit had been more sane than this town.

Still, he’d been serious about getting a grand tour from Mackenzie, though she obviously hadn’t thought he’d meant it. How better to learn about Bridesmaids Creek than from one of the town’s favorite daughters?

He glanced toward the unmatchmaking service, seeing that next door to Monsieur Unmatchmaker’s dove-gray-painted shop was a pink store with a cheery window and painted scrolling letters that read, “Madame Matchmaker. Premier Matchmaking Service. Where love comes true.”

He laughed out loud, startling some passersby. Suddenly he understood why Ty had worked so hard to sell him on this town: the whole place was set up on gigs. Sleights of hand. Fairy tales. From the rumored special steer with excellent aim to The Wedding Diner with the fortune-teller owner to the matchmaking–unmatchmaking rivals— everybody had a gig.

So did Mackenzie, now that he thought about it. Her parents had run a successful haunted house for years, and, according to the talkative fellow at the feed store, parents from miles around had brought their very young kiddies to enjoy the place. No real spooky stuff was allowed. Just down-home bobbing-for-apples fun. Puppet shows, piñatas, a parade with characters.

Until a local murder near Mackenzie’s place had spooked folks. That year, attendance had gone way down. So far down they’d had to close the haunted house. They’d been virtually bankrupted, or so the story went.

“You still here?” Mackenzie asked, shaking him out of his reverie.

He snapped his gaze to hers. “Yeah. Your errand was fast.”

Mackenzie nodded. “I just wanted to check in on Monsieur Lafleur. He had gall bladder surgery recently.”

“Rough.”

“It was rough.” She started walking and he followed, more out of a desire to be with her than to hear about Mr. Lafleur’s funky gall bladder. “It was gangrenous and they couldn’t get to it laparoscopically, so they had to do it the old-fashioned way. Not much fun.”

He felt a little sympathy for Mr. Lafleur after all.

“But his wife is wonderful and she took good care of him. They bicker like crazy, but they’ve been married for fifty years and love blooms in spite of the bickering.” She looked up at him, and Justin felt something hit him somewhere near his gall bladder—not his heart—that felt suspiciously like something bordering on attraction.

All this talk of wonky gall bladders was stirring up his desire to eat. That was all it was. He glanced toward The Wedding Diner, wondering if it was safe to go inside and eat without prognostications of marital bliss being preached at him.

“Madame Lafleur runs the matchmaking service,” Mackenzie said, snapping his attention back to her and away from the people filing inside the diner.

“The Lafleurs run rival businesses?”

“Complementary businesses. Some people want love, and some people want relationships ended. Monsieur Lafleur doesn’t get as many clients as his wife, of course, so he teaches French at the high school and tutors privately in his shop.”

“If the divorce rate is around fifty percent, how is it that Monsieur Lafleur has to supplement with teaching and tutoring and his wife doesn’t?”

“Because this is Bridesmaids Creek. When matchmaking occurs here—and it occurs often—the relationships tend to stick. Madame Lafleur takes great pride in her ability to bring people together who are perfect soul mates.”

He idly wondered if Mackenzie had utilized the services of Madame Lafleur. If so, she didn't seem bothered by the irony of her marriage not lasting. He looked away for a moment, trying to shake off the charm of the town. His rational side said it was just all so ludicrous, and the first chance he got he was going to tell Ty that he'd sent him to a place where people were clearly just one car short of a crazy train.

“Can I buy you a snack? Seems a shame not to take my boss to get a soda and a slice of pie, or whatever is served in The Wedding Diner.”

“Sure.” She looked at him curiously. “You realize you'll be setting yourself up for the gossip mill.”

“Putting myself right in the line of fire.” He opened the door for her. “After you.”

[Chapter Three](#)

Mackenzie and Justin were greeted warmly by the proprietress of The Wedding Diner, an amply shaped woman with a big smile.

“Jane Chatham,” Mackenzie said, “I'd like to introduce you to Justin Morant. He's been helping out at my place.”

Jane's smile widened as she swept them over to a bright white booth inside the diner. “Welcome, Justin. Those four darlings running you off your boots over there?”

He removed his hat and took the seat she indicated. “It's a nice place.”

“Sure it is.” Jane laughed. She looked at Mackenzie with a fond smile. “I'm sure you're happy for the help.”

“You have no idea.”

Justin felt a slow warmth steal up the back of his neck. It was just a job like any job. He rubbed his knee surreptitiously under the table, glad it wasn't aching much today. It wouldn't matter if Mackenzie had twelve kids—he was glad for the work.

And the chance to work for himself. Under a blue sky with no one talking to him.

“Still thinking about selling the place?” Jane asked Mackenzie, and Justin listened hard in spite of himself.

“We'll see what happens,” Mackenzie murmured. “In the meantime, can we talk you out of some of that delicious pie I smell?” She looked at Justin, and he felt a tiny zap hit him around his chest cavity again. Really weird, because he'd never been much of a heartburn sufferer.

He told himself he'd grab some antacids later.

“You order what you like,” Mackenzie told him, “but I'm not about to pass up that blackberry pie.”

“I'll have a slice.”

“Two, please,” Mackenzie said, and Jane ambled off with a pleased nod.

“You didn't mention you were selling your ranch,” Justin said, so startled by the news he forgot he'd intended to mind his own business.

She nodded. “It would probably be best. It's hard for me to keep up with on my own, to be honest, and since I'm not working, I need to keep my savings for my daughters.” She smiled. “Selling the Hanging H would mean college educations and a few other things comfortably. I'd like to not stay awake at night worrying about money.”

He cleared his throat. “Your ex doesn't pay any child support?”

She shook her head. “Hard to squeeze blood out of a turnip, especially a turnip that stays on the move to avoid child support.”

Ouch. Justin sipped the coffee Jane brought over, glad for the dark steaming brew. He then busied himself with the flaky, rich blackberry pie, delicious enough to draw a sigh of pleasure from him if he weren't so caught by Mackenzie's story.

Her plans made total sense. A woman with four brand-new babies, who'd been born with some challenges, was going to need cash. A lot of cash. She was being wise, had clearly given her situation a lot of thought. It was what he'd do were he in her boots.

Seemed a shame to sell a family home, though. He thought about his childhood home, and how much it had hurt when it was gone. He and his rowdy brothers had grown up there, enjoyed the benefits of living and working on a family ranch. When his father had taken up with another woman, scandalizing the town, his mother had booted him out of the house and sold the family ranch—her right as it was the home she'd grown up in. Though his father had tried to make amends, Dana Morant was made of sterner stuff. She'd taken her boys to Montana to be near her sister, and life had changed forever. Mainly for the better but always with the lingering shadows of what might have been. Jensen Morant now lived on a thousand acres of rich Montana ranchland. Justin didn't go near the place.

He looked at Mackenzie's soft hair and gentle smile.

"You were way far away," she said.

He took another bite of pie, sipped his coffee. "Let me know what I can do to help."

"You have already. I can put the ranch on the market now, thanks to the wonderful shape you're getting it in. I really appreciate it."

A sudden pound on his back had him looking over his shoulder. "Ty!"

"Me in the flesh." Ty slapped him on the back again and nodded at Mackenzie. "Jade told me I'd find this devil here."

"I have things to discuss with you, Ty," Mackenzie said, and he grinned.

"You can thank me later for sending you this guy," Ty said.

"That's just it," Mackenzie said. "You really shouldn't have."

"Getting attached to him?" Ty teased, and Justin decided the conversation had gone far enough.

"Join us," Justin said.

"No. No time." Ty looked at him. "I'm in town for one thing and one thing only. And that's to help you back to the rodeo circuit."

Justin frowned. "How am I going to do that? I'm a bit physically challenged at the moment."

"In a different capacity than riding," Ty said. "You and I are going to travel the country recruiting talent."

"Talent for what?" Justin didn't like the idea of that at all. Correction: once upon a time he might have jumped on it enthusiastically. Traveling the country with one of his best buddies, seeing his friends on the rodeo circuit, giving back to the sport he loved so much—dream-come-true stuff.

His gaze slid to Mackenzie, who watched him with gently smiling eyes as she listened to Ty go on and on with his plans. Justin couldn't work up the same excitement.

He felt like he had plenty to do here in Bridesmaids Creek that was important. Mackenzie smiled at him, a slow, sweet smile. Her big eyes were looking at him, so trusting, and that heartburn he'd been experiencing felt more like his heart was melting into a big soupy puddle.

Dang. This was new. Different.

Maybe hitting the road with Ty was the right idea.

He looked at his friend. "Why don't you stop by the house later and tell me about this harebrained plan of yours?"

Ty looked at Mackenzie. "Would you mind? I know you've got a lot going on over there."

"You're welcome anytime." Mackenzie got up. "Just know that if you take my cowboy, who has become indispensable to me, I'm going to offer you up as a candidate for the Best Man's Fork run. All in the name of charity, of course." She winked at Justin. "I'm going to talk to Jane for a moment."

She headed toward Jane at the cash register. Ty studied his friend.

“You’ve got the strangest look on your face,” Ty said as Justin returned his gaze to Mackenzie. He just couldn’t seem to get enough of looking at her. “I’d say you have indigestion, except you’re smiling.”

Justin relaxed his mouth so the smile would disappear. He had been smiling, because his muscles ached a bit. Like he’d been smiling a long time—watching Mackenzie walk and chatter with some friends who came over to talk to her.

“I’m not smiling, but I may have indigestion.”

Ty snorted. “I see what’s going on here.”

“Do you.” He made the comment as flat as possible. His buddy’s opinion didn’t really matter. Ty had no idea what was going on, because Justin had no idea.

“You’re tired,” Ty said. “Being around those babies and that falling-down farm has worn you out. You better hit the road with me. You’ll be back to your old self in no time.”

“What was my old self?”

Ty put his hat on, prepared to leave, which was fine with Justin. Then he could go back to surreptitiously staring at Mackenzie. “Grumpy, cranky, annoying.”

Justin grunted. “Thought that was you.”

“Not me.” He peered at Justin. “I really hope this wasn’t too much for you, old buddy. I didn’t mean to bring you down. Figured some time in a small town with a real job would do you good.”

Justin put his hat on, too, because if he didn’t get out of there, people were going to notice that he couldn’t stop staring at his beautiful boss. “That’s what you get for thinking. See you at the house. Don’t get there too soon. I’m taking the boss lady shopping.”

Ty stared at him, stunned. “What’s happened to you?” he whispered. “You’re a shadow of your former self!”

Well, that was a question he didn’t care to ponder too much. Mackenzie came to stand beside him, smiling up into his face, and his poor stupid heart felt like it took the final dive into his stomach.

What had happened to him, indeed.

Mackenzie and four babies were happening to him, and they were going to require a great deal of consideration. This was a bad idea, this tiny woman with the big eyes and her sweet family. A very bad idea, because he wasn’t a family man; he wasn’t a staying man.

“You ready?” he asked Mackenzie, and she nodded.

“If you’re not going to chicken out,” she teased.

Oh, he might. He was thinking about it. Thinking about it hard.

But something told him he probably wouldn’t.

* * *

FOUR HOURS LATER, when Ty stopped by the house, Mackenzie wondered what her old friend was really up to. Ty had sent Justin to her, now he wanted him to hit the road?

It all seemed very convenient. As if Justin might have conned his buddy into helping him escape the Hanging H with a good reason.

“Anyway,” Ty said as the three of them sat at the wide wooden kitchen table, “the reason I stopped by is to get a game plan going with Mackenzie.”

“Game plan?” Mackenzie glanced at Justin. If Justin had been part of Ty’s game plan, she wasn’t sure she wanted to know what the next play was.

“I wouldn’t leave you here without backup,” Ty said. “I know that in spite of his knee—”

“My knee’s fine,” Justin said, clearly annoyed.

Mackenzie glanced at him. Occasionally she saw Justin favor his knee, but it did seem as if he’d been limping less since he’d arrived at the Hanging H. The doctor in town had given him a soft knee brace, which he wore without hesitation. Now there were days when Justin walked like he wasn’t in any discomfort at all.

"I know your knee's getting better," Ty said. "I'm just saying that in spite of your knee, you've been a big help here. I can see a lot of improvement." Ty shook his head. "Still, I wouldn't leave Mackenzie in the lurch, so I was wondering if you mind, Mackenzie, if I swap cowboys on you."

Mackenzie hesitated. "Swap cowboys?"

"Replace Justin, in a manner of speaking," Ty said. His words ceased entirely when the kitchen door opened and Jade walked in.

"Howdy," Ty said. He stood up to greet the tall, sexy redhead, removing his hat for a moment. "Jade Harper, long time, no see...and clearly I've been missing out."

Jade laughed. "No sweet talk from you, Ty." She gave him a hug and he might have tried to pinch her bottom, but Jade was too fast for him. "Hi, Justin. Mackenzie, who are the three hunky guys who just pulled up in the black truck outside?"

Mackenzie got up to look out the window.

"That's the game plan," Ty said with a glance at Justin. "I don't want you to miss my buddy Justin when I take him with me, so I thought I'd trade you, three for one."

"Wow," Jade said. "Grab this deal, is my advice, Mackenzie." She laughed at Justin's smirk.

"Ty, I don't know if I need three—" Mackenzie began.

"You need help out here," Ty said.

Justin didn't say anything, and a bit of unease began to hit Mackenzie. Did he want to leave? Maybe he'd told Ty that he wanted to. She looked at his face, hazel eyes giving away nothing, his dark hair awry as he ran a hand through it. He looked distinctly uncomfortable.

As Ty had noted, Justin's knee was better—not well enough to ride or run a fast race, maybe, but better—and the last place he wanted to be was stuck here with her and four little baby girls.

"I'll get that," Mackenzie said when knocking erupted on the front door. "Might as well give the candidates a grand tour, let them know what they're getting themselves into."

Justin glanced at her, his eyes widening like he was surprised by her comment. She went through the den, checking the babies quickly—still sound asleep, as was Mrs. Harper in the corner chair—and opened the front door.

Whoa. So much testosterone, so many muscles. "Hi," Mackenzie said, a little startled by all the masculinity crowded on the front porch.

They took off their hats.

"Ty sent us," the tallest one said with a rascally grin. "He said the Haunted H was looking for help to get ready for the county's biggest haunted house and pumpkin patch for miles around."

Mackenzie blinked. What had Ty meant by that? She was selling the place, not going back into business.

"Hello, fellows," Justin said from behind her. "If you're looking for Ty, you'll find him in the side paddock."

"Thanks."

They tipped their hats to Mackenzie and left the porch. Mackenzie turned to look at Justin.

"I don't want to get in the middle of things," Justin said, "but if you want me to leave, just say the word."

"I don't want you to leave." That was the last thing she wanted. "Do you want to go?"

"No. Not if you don't want me to." He shrugged as if he could go either way, whatever she decided. Still, she had the feeling her answers mattered. "I'm not going to say that I know everything about your town or your ranch. But so far things have been working pretty smooth. Or at least I thought they were."

"Ty seems to think he needs you with him." Mackenzie stepped off the porch.

"I'll make that decision." Justin followed her. "Or you will."

Something about this whole thing felt like a setup. Ty's story to the three hunks who'd come riding into town in their big black pickup, that she needed to restart the old family business, felt

fishy. Never had she mentioned breathing life back into the haunted house to anyone. It was a dream she'd kept buried, knowing it wasn't practical. She couldn't run that kind of people-intensive business herself, and especially not with four newborns. The small remaining funds she had needed to go into their care—not the vague hope of bringing back the Haunted H.

And yet she had to admit restoring all her family traditions would be a wonderful way to raise her girls. She had had a storied childhood, full of wonder and magic and fairy tales.

But for a fairy tale, one needed a prince.

She looked at the five men leaning against the corral, studying her, waiting for something, some signal. Big, strong, handsome men. They all had rugged appeal, Justin most of all, in her opinion.

A prince had no reason to stay in Bridesmaids Creek—not unless there was a quest, something to make him stay and fight.

“So, Ty,” Mackenzie said slowly as Jade came to put her arm through hers for support, “maybe you'd like to explain why you're offering me three cowboys for the price of the one I've already got?”

[Chapter Four](#)

“These fellows here,” Ty said, grandly waving his arm to indicate his friends, “go by the names of Sam Barr, Squint Mathison and Frog Grant.”

“I'm sorry.” Mackenzie stared at the last big man who'd been introduced. He was a broad-shouldered man with bright blue eyes and a shock of saddle-brown hair that wouldn't lay flat even if he used molasses on it. “Frog?”

The men laughed. “Gets 'em every time,” he said, not minding the attention. “That's not my real name.”

“We call him Frog because he looks like he's hopping around like a frog on the back of a bronc.” Ty slapped the man on the back. “Anyway, he kind of looks like an amphibian, so it fits.”

“I don't see any frog about him,” Jade said, and silently Mackenzie agreed.

“These gentlemen have come to apply for the position of hanny,” Ty said, delighted to have a stage to sell his snake oil from.

“Hanny?” Mackenzie tried not to laugh. “Is that what you call a working hand now?”

“It means, Miss Mackenzie,” Squint said, his brown eyes earnest, “that Ty tells us you need hands to work this place and sometimes some occasional babysitting.”

“Oh, a manny,” Jade said.

“No.” Ty shook his head. “A manny is a male nanny. These men are hands. They're also willing to help out with Mackenzie's munchkins.”

“That wouldn't be necessary—” Mackenzie began, but Ty shook his head.

“These men haven't seen the inside of a home in so long that a little babysitting would make them happy as clams.” He looked at his friends. “And they don't have any problems cleaning up stuff.”

“Stuff?” Mackenzie echoed.

“Oh,” Jade said. “You promised you wouldn't mention what I told you on the phone, Ty.”

Mackenzie glanced at Justin, who shrugged, his whole demeanor screaming, I had nothing to do with this.

“Baby spit,” Ty said helpfully.

“Upchuck,” Squint elaborated.

“Hurl,” Sam said.

“Giveback,” Frog said, and Mackenzie held up a hand.

“Thank you, but I have it under control,” she said with a glance at Jade.

Jade looked guilty. “She handles poo just fine. It's the other that gives her a little trouble.”

Embarrassment swept Mackenzie. She couldn't meet Justin's gaze, though she could feel him looking at her. “It was tough in the beginning, but I'm fine now. Anyway, I don't need help with my children.”

“And I'm not going anywhere,” Justin said.

Mackenzie glanced at him. "You don't have to stay if you need to go with Ty. I'll totally understand. But I haven't got a need for three hands, fellows. Sorry."

"Darn," Jade said. "I wish I'd known that all I had to do to get three handsome hunks to show up in their black truck was have babies. I'd have given that a shot."

The three newcomers seemed to appreciate Jade's comment. Some of the bravado had gone out of them at Mackenzie's refusal of their services, but at Jade's words their air of jauntiness returned.

"You could always give us a free trial," Frog said.

Mackenzie shook her head. "I don't need any help. But come into the kitchen. Let me at least feed you lunch before you go."

"That's an offer I won't refuse," Sam said.

All three gentlemen grouped close around her as she turned to walk to the house.

She looked at them. "I'm okay, guys, really I am."

"You should be resting," Squint said.

"We'll take care of you," Frog told her.

"Guess you're stuck with me, beautiful," Ty told Jade. He put his hand around Jade's arm as they walked.

"I've got some work to do," Justin said, and Mackenzie turned.

"Lunch first. Then you can work all you like." She didn't want him leaving her with Ty. His buddy was working on a plan—maybe big plans—and anyone from Bridesmaids Creek knew that when plans were afoot, you'd better have backup around.

Justin was really handsome backup.

"Sure. I'll come along."

She flashed him a grateful smile. The group went inside, crowding the kitchen, and Mrs. Harper smiled at them.

"Are these the hands Ty was telling me about?" she asked. "I'm Jade's mother, Betty Harper. It'll be nice having more help around here. Now sit down and eat before Mackenzie puts you to work."

Mackenzie started to say that she wasn't hiring anyone, but Jade gave her arm a light pinch.

"What?" Mackenzie said.

"Don't send them away yet," Jade whispered.

"It's not fair to keep them here when I don't have work for them!"

"You have work for them. You could hire a dozen of them and it wouldn't be enough."

Mackenzie looked at the five strong, large men sucking down huge quantities of food. "If I hire these hannies—really harebrained idea of Ty's, by the way—I'd have to pay them. And that's not in my budget."

"We'll figure something out. An idea will come to you," Jade said, comforting her.

"No, it won't." She went into the den to check on her babies, who were all asleep except Hope, who was gazing at the mobile over her playpen. Mackenzie picked her up. "If I had spare money, I'd be putting it away for college educations. Besides, I'm selling the Hanging H."

"Don't be so hasty." Jade took Hope from her. "Give Justin and Ty a chance to help you."

Mackenzie watched as Mrs. Harper fed the big men seated on the wooden barstools around the island. Her gaze wandered to Justin. "If I thought there was a way, I might give it a shot."

"You don't want to get rid of the family home, do you? Wouldn't you like the girls to grow up here?"

"It's just me and four babies," Mackenzie said. "I have to be practical. My folks were a team, and they only had me for many years before my sister was born. My focus needs to be on my children, not running a business and a ranch." She knew from experience that good times could be few and far between when it came to running what amounted to an amusement park.

"You're overlooking one small detail," Jade said. "According to Ty—"

"And that reminds me, you seem to be getting chatty with Ty."

“Not chatty. We talked once. I let slip about the baby spit-up bothering you. Sorry about that.”

“I’m past that now,” Mackenzie said. “I don’t get queasy anymore. I think it just scared me because Hope did it so often.”

“The thing you might not be aware of is that these men are looking for a place to stay,” Jade said, glancing at the muscled hunks at the kitchen island. “Ty told them they had to pay rent. You’d essentially be a landlord. In other words, money coming in right away. They’d throw in some ranch work, some babysitting, for their meals.”

Mackenzie looked at her. “Why is Ty so involved in my business?”

“He says you need help. He needs help. They need help.” Jade went to the counter, then returned with two pieces of pumpkin spice cake in one hand and a baby in the other arm. She handed a plate to Mackenzie. “Ty says that if you sell, some developer is going to grab this place and cut it up into tiny lots for houses. I’m pretty sure he’s right. You’re sitting on five hundred acres, Mackenzie. If each house is put even on a large one-acre lot, that’s five hundred homes. A thousand homes if they built smaller.”

“Is that a bad thing? More housing for Bridesmaids Creek?” She got the image Jade was trying to draw.

“Not necessarily. You think about whether that’s what you think should happen in our small, friendly community.”

“We don’t know that would happen.” Mackenzie took a bite of the cake. As always, Mrs. Harper’s cake was scrumptious. “The land might go to a hospital, or we could use a new elementary school. Something more beneficial than the Retirement Home for Beat-Up Riders Ty seems to have in mind.” She studied the cowboys. Fit, handsome, hunky. But definitely not young enough to keep up on the circuit. And that’s what this was really all about. “Justin says he’s not going anywhere. So this is all really moot. I don’t need help with the babies, and I don’t need any more help than Justin.” If he was planning on staying.

“Are you counting on him too much?” Jade asked.

Her gaze slid to Justin. She was startled to find his eyes on her. “I don’t know,” she murmured. “Maybe.”

Jade had a good point. It was a mistake to count too much on another person. Witness her ex. She couldn’t allow herself to get overly comfortable again.

She heard a motorcycle roar outside, glanced at Ty. Was he having yet another buddy come by? She looked at the cowboys having a great time eating Mrs. Harper’s food and regaling her with rodeo stories. Maybe one couldn’t have too much of a good thing.

A knock on the paned window of the back door sounded above the laughter. Jade opened the door and Daisy Donovan sashayed in, long brown hair spilling from her helmet, short black leather skirt swinging, black cowboy boots showing off shapely legs even Mackenzie had to admire.

Daisy Donovan had always had radar for hot guys.

“Hello, fellows,” Daisy practically cooed. She basked in the sudden stares from the hunks. Ty’s buddies had ceased eating, ceased talking and maybe ceased breathing, stunned by the wild-child vision that was Daisy Donovan.

“I brought you a baby gift, Mackenzie,” she said, handing her a pink-and-silver wrapped box she pulled from the band of her skirt. The men’s gazes never left her. “Hello, Mrs. Harper. Jade.”

The guys jumped off their stools to allow Daisy to sit. She smiled and went to stand beside Justin. “I’d love a piece of your delicious cake, Mrs. Harper,” Daisy said, her eyes on Justin. She then made certain every man in the room got the full benefit of her smile. Mackenzie was astonished that they all didn’t faint from the feminine firepower launched at them.

“Thank you for the gift, Daisy,” Mackenzie said. She unwrapped it to find four engraved silver teething rings. A very nice gift, indeed—for a woman who had never really been her friend. Daisy was a natural-born competitor for the male eye, and guys adored her.

“It’s just a little something for those sweet babies of yours,” Daisy said, smiling at the men. She took a bite of her cake, Marilyn Monroe–sexy, and Mackenzie imagined she heard hearts popping in the kitchen.

“Wonder what the Diva of Destruction wants?” Jade muttered under her breath.

The answer to that was obvious. Daisy was manhunting. And by the looks of how she was staking her claim, she appeared to be hunting Justin.

Mackenzie told herself it didn’t matter if Daisy was hunting Justin or not.

She didn’t quite convince herself.

* * *

“WHAT ARE YOU up to, buddy?” Justin had managed to catch Ty in an unguarded moment in the barn, where he was showing the three new guys the layout of the Hanging H. “It’s time you share the plans that are buzzing around in that brain of yours.”

“The plans are for you and me to hit the road,” Ty said, giving him a genial thump on the back. “I told you—we’re going to hunt up recruits.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t say what we’re going to be recruiting talent for.” Justin glanced toward Sam, Squint and Frog. “Did those guys make your recruitment list?”

Ty laughed. “Them? No way. They’re just replacing you, which I think is fair, considering I brought you here. I couldn’t leave Mackenzie without help.”

Justin leaned against a post, crossed his arms. “Why are you so interested in Mackenzie’s welfare?”

“It’s not just her. It’s you, too. And Bridesmaids Creek, if you really want to know.”

“You’re trying to bring men into Bridesmaids Creek.” Justin shook his head. “They have a matchmaker here, you know. Aren’t you kind of bumping the competition?”

“Just giving the matchmaker some material to work with.”

“Why?” Justin’s curiosity was getting the best of him.

“You’d had to have grown up here to understand.” Ty shrugged. “The Haunted H was a great draw. Lots of jobs were lost when the Hawthornes had to close it down.”

“That’s what this is all about? Bringing jobs back to your hometown?”

“Not exactly.” Ty wouldn’t meet his gaze.

“Oh, I get it.” Justin thought he suddenly saw into the cracks of his buddy’s mercurial brain. “You’re trying to find a man for Mackenzie.”

Ty shrugged. “It’s complicated.”

“Not that complicated.” Justin snorted. “When did you decide to play guardian angel to Mackenzie?”

“Since I was the guy with the not-too-swift idea of setting her up with her ex. My onetime good buddy, who turned out to be a weasel of epic proportions.”

Justin stared at his friend. “Have you ever considered that maybe Mackenzie doesn’t want another husband?”

Ty snorted. “Don’t be silly. She’s a woman. A woman needs a husband to feel complete.”

“I’m not sure I ever saw this chauvinistic side of you before.”

“Yes, you did. You just didn’t recognize it, because you and I were thinking alike.” Ty laughed. “Don’t worry, good buddy. I’m not including you in my plan. Just the opposite. I’m clearing you out to make room for some cowboys who don’t wear the rebel badge as enthusiastically as you do.”

If being a hard-baked bachelor earned him that honor, he supposed he’d go with the rebel badge. “And that’s why I’m being dragged on a recruiting tour? You want me out of the way so your matchmaking has a better chance of succeeding?”

“Look. The idea came to me after I’d sent you here.” Ty looked at him patiently. “I realized that Mackenzie didn’t just need help bringing back the old place—she needs a husband and a father to those children. I’m the man who fixed her up with the loser, so I’m going to put it right.”

“Why don’t you just put your own neck into the marriage noose and save everybody some agony if you feel so guilt-ridden?”

Ty put up his hands as if to ward off the very idea. “My conscience is guilty but not stupid.”

Justin stared at his friend. It was true. Ty wasn’t husband material.

Neither was he.

Justin sighed heavily. “I think you’re nuts. But whatever. It’s not my town. Nor are these my friends.”

Ty brightened. “So you’ll do it? The lead stallion agrees to head off and leave the pen to the lesser junior stallions?”

“You make it sound like Mackenzie’s ever looked my way twice in a romantic way, which I can assure you she hasn’t. We haven’t spoken that much since I’ve been here.”

“Call it a hunch. Clearing out the pen, as they say. The ladies always want the one they can’t have. Mysterious types seem romantic. Like Zorro.”

Justin shrugged. “I think you took one too many falls off the mechanical bull, Ty, but whatever. I’ll go with you,” he said, “but you better hope Mackenzie never finds out what you’re up to. I have the feeling that little lady doesn’t think she needs any man to rescue her.”

“Mechanical bull! I was no dime-store cowboy,” Ty said, following Justin as he headed back to work. Justin couldn’t stand around examining the holes in his friend’s head any longer. Mackenzie hadn’t given one signal that she might be interested in him in more than a foreman–boss lady relationship.

Still, he had a slightly uneasy feeling about leaving her to the romancing of the Three Dating Daddies—a thought that totally brought him up short.

That’s what one of those men might become: a dad to Mackenzie’s four little girls.

Maybe the most troubling thought of all.

Chapter Five

“You’re going to have to keep an eye on Daisy,” Jade told her as Mackenzie settled her daughters down for an afternoon nap. Late-day sun filtered through the windows of the family room, twilight just arriving at nearly seven o’clock. Mackenzie loved summer days when there was so much cheery sunshine.

She couldn’t be bothered to think about Daisy Donovan.

“I’m not going to keep an eye on Daisy. I don’t care what she does.”

“You do care. All of Bridesmaids Creek cares. Her and her band of rowdies are bent on making certain this town drops off the map for families. That way Daisy’s father can keep buying up the land around here in his quest for mineral rights and selling huge land parcels to the government. Or worse.” Jade flopped down onto a flowered sofa, fanning herself. “As our town bad girl, Daisy lives for herself. My guess is she didn’t come here today to bring you a gift, but to check out the new foreman. Everyone in town has been chattering about the hot guy you’ve got working the place.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not even going to think about Daisy’s shenanigans. Even if Justin decided to hop on the back of her motorcycle and roar off into the sunset, I wouldn’t think about Daisy.”

Jade laughed. “Methinks you protest a bit too much. So what did you think about the three new guys?”

“That Ty and I are going to have to talk. The men are welcome to stay here and bunk in the bunkhouse, but I don’t know if I have enough work here for three more men.”

“Not unless you reopen the haunted house.”

“Which I’m not going to do.”

“It’s August. We have plenty of time until October,” Jade said.

“I know. But my only priority right now is my babies. We’ll do fine living in a small cottage in town.”

"There might be a miracle. You never know." Jade got up to stare out the window. "She bugs me—I swear she does. Why are men always so blinded by Daisy?"

"Because she's beautiful and has a wild streak. There's nothing blinding about it. It's human nature." Mackenzie smiled at her babies. "You girls, however, must promise your mother to grow up to be teachers, nurses and librarians. No motorcycles for you!"

"My goddaughters won't be Daisies," Jade said, laughing. "However, I think Daisy may be about to kiss a frog."

"Not Frog?" Mackenzie hurried to the window. "Poor Frog! Of all of the new cowboys, I'm pretty sure he's the least suited to Daisy's charms."

"Hate to watch a good man fall." Jade walked away from the window. "In fact, I can't look."

"Can't look at what?" Justin asked, entering the room.

Mackenzie glanced over her shoulder, struck again by how handsome Justin was. She'd gotten a little used to him at the Hanging H, even if she wouldn't share that with a soul. Still, if he wanted to move on with Ty, she'd understand. She'd be sorry—but she'd understand. "We're spying."

"I can see that." He joined her at the window, and Mackenzie was shaken by the sudden warmth of proximity. Almost intimate, their arms nearly touching. She smelled spicy cologne and strong male, felt body heat and strange sensations sweep over her.

She was awfully glad it wasn't Justin out there getting far too close to Daisy Donovan's heart-shaped lips.

* * *

"I'LL TAKE THE night shift," Justin told Mackenzie as she finished bathing the girls. She put them into soft nighties and touched a towel gently to the light fuzz atop their heads. A little baby oil for the dry spots, and they were like angels ready to be tucked in for the night.

"You don't have to," Mackenzie said. "But thank you, Justin. Babysitting isn't part of your job description."

"I've been thinking about my job description." He carried Hope and Holly down the hall, so Mackenzie picked up Heather and Haven and followed. She watched the big man settle her daughters ever so gently into their white-ruffled cribs. "This business of Ty bringing on hannies for you, for example."

"Ty is nuts, and there'll be no hannies around here, nor mannies. Silliest thing I've ever heard." Mackenzie covered her daughters with light pink blankets and kissed each of them. "Ty doesn't want to bring those cowboys here to help me as much as he's looking for a place for some of his buddies to work. I'll ask around town, see if anybody needs a couple of hands."

"You know I'm leaving with Ty. Probably day after tomorrow."

She felt a slight prick at that news. "Then I'll only need one of the men. Maybe Frog. He seems pretty harmless." She sighed to herself. And maybe if he were here he'd be less likely to fall into Daisy's clutches.

"Frog, is it?"

"I can't get used to a grown man being called Frog."

"Hiring him on here isn't going to save him from Daisy."

She looked at Justin. "Who says I want to?"

"I know something about the female mind. And I heard you and Jade talking about saving him."

"Jade was talking about it. I personally think Frog can probably take care of himself just fine."

She didn't look at Justin directly. Just too much sex appeal, too much closeness.

It was the babies. She loved the way he took care of her daughters, handling them like they were delicate treasures.

He moved a strand of hair away from her face, and she tucked it up into her ponytail. "I should catch a shower while they're down. We've hit the four-hour mark at night now, and I take full advantage of those four hours."

Justin moved away, sat in the rocker. “Go. Get some rest. I’ll keep an eye on them.”

“There’s no need,” she said quickly. “The monitor is on, and I’ll hear them—”

He waved a hand at her to leave. “You need four hours to yourself. I’ll wake you when they start looking for dinner.” A smile tugged at his lips. “Better take me up on my offer. Ty’s taking me out of here tomorrow or the next day.”

“Oh. Okay. Thank you.” She backed up slowly, then turned to hurry down the hall. He was actually leaving. She’d always known he would, and yet she’d hoped— Well, it didn’t matter what she’d hoped.

The fact was, she’d gotten used to Justin being around. But it was more than that, and she knew it. Something about the big man made her feel safe and protected and happy. They weren’t a family, but they’d gotten into a groove that worked, and she’d come to rely on that comfort. Rely on him.

Maybe Jade’s right with that protesting too much stuff. I’ve got a major thing going for this cowboy. I was just trying to ignore it because I knew he’d leave one day.

And now it seemed that day had come.

* * *

JUSTIN SLEPT OFF and on, dozing in the room with the babies. It was weird how much he found himself enjoying taking care of them. As a man who’d never been interested in having children—not one bit—he was surprised by how Mackenzie’s four little daughters tugged on his heartstrings.

He hated the idea of leaving them—all of them. And, somehow, he even hated the idea of Frog staying behind to take his place. Or any of the three men Ty was bringing on to replace him, for that matter.

The only reason he was leaving with Ty was because Ty had brought him here in the first place. He owed it to him out of a sense of brotherhood. Ty wouldn’t ask him if he didn’t need him. Mackenzie didn’t really need him—not like Ty did.

He needed to talk to Ty a bit more, dig into the mission to settle the questions in his mind. But the thing that unsettled his mind the most was how much he hated the idea of three men he didn’t know all that well roaming around the Hanging H and falling for Mackenzie and the girls.

Just as he was beginning to fall for them.

Whether he liked it or not, that was the truth. Justin closed his eyes as he rocked in the chair. The tiny night-light sent a soft glow over the room. An occasional baby snuffle or sigh reached him, the sound somehow comforting and not intimidating at all, not the way he’d thought it would be. During his wilder, crazier rodeo days, the idea of a family had been distinctly unappealing.

Mackenzie was recently divorced. No doubt the last thing she wanted was another man in her life. He couldn’t blame her if that was the way she felt.

At dawn, when Betty Harper appeared in the nursery, Justin felt strangely rested. He smiled at Jade’s mother. “Good morning.”

“Go get some rest. I’ll take over from here. Mackenzie said the babies didn’t even move last night.”

He felt like he hadn’t, either. In fact, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so relaxed. “I thought I was awake all night. I didn’t even realize Mackenzie came in the nursery.”

Betty smiled. “I checked on you at five. Everybody was sound asleep, which is a first for the girls. They probably feel comforted with a man’s presence around. Babies do that sometimes. You have a nice deep voice with is probably soothing to them.”

She disappeared from the room. Justin rose and stretched. Haven peered up at him from her blanket, and he had the uncanny notion that she was watching him. Did babies see anything at this tender age?

“Hello, little one,” he said, approaching her crib. Gently he picked her up, held her close. “Good morning to you, too.”

He kissed the top of her head, breathed in the sweet baby freshness of her skin, the scent of baby powder.

“Hi,” Mackenzie said, her voice soft.

He turned and saw she was wide-awake and looking refreshed. “You’re up bright and early.”

“I got a lot more sleep than I have since before I became pregnant.” She came to take Haven from him, and he smelled an entirely different smell: strawberry shampoo, delicate floral soap, sexy woman.

His heart did one of those funny flip-flops he’d gotten used to feeling around her.

“Thanks for watching them last night.” She gazed up at him. “I think I slept so well because I knew you were standing guard.”

Oh, boy. There went the heart. “It was no problem. Part of the job.”

“Not part of the job I hired you to do.” She looked at him funny.

He backed up a step when he realized he was staring at her pink, glossy lips. “It’s the job Frog and Fellows are applying for.”

“That’s Ty’s bright idea. And by now, you know Ty can be a bit of a squirrel.” She smiled. “Babysitting isn’t part of your job description. But thank you.”

Warmth expanded in his chest at her smile. He wondered if he’d ever met a woman he was so blindingly attracted to—and decided in a hurry that was a terrible thought to have about his boss. Definitely a dead end. There was no way on this planet he had any business being attracted to her.

“I’m going to get some coffee. You want a cup?”

“No, thank you. You go on.”

He nodded and turned to leave.

Turned back around, met her gaze. Started to say that sitting up with her daughters hadn’t been work; he hadn’t done it because of Frog and Friends. He’d done it because he’d wanted to. Wanted to make her happy, help her out.

But it was a bad idea to make such a confession. No purpose to it at all, and he didn’t do anything unless he knew the purpose.

Shutting his stupid yap tight before it could say weird, mushy things, he left.

[Chapter Six](#)

“Hello, handsome,” Justin heard as he got out of his truck, which he’d parked right in front of Madame Matchmaker’s small shop.

He turned, found Daisy Donovan just about too close for comfort, chest-high, tiny and dangerous. The brunette was dressed in a short denim skirt, brown cowboy boots and a white halter top. She smiled at him mischievously. All the sex appeal being aimed at him had warning bells ringing like mad inside his head.

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